

**Anglophone African Representations
in Dambudzo Marechera's *The Black Insider*.**

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Dambudzo Marechera's life and work were inextricably linked, both reflecting what seems to be a pathological refusal to conform to the social and literary conventions, respectively, of a society he criticized and rejected. He was born in 1952 in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia as it was then. He saw during his brief lifetime the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Rhodesian Whites in 1965, a year after Northern Rhodesia had obtained its independence as Zambia.

The Rhodesian Whites, led by Ian Smith, decided to break away from the British yoke before the same happened in their country, determined not to yield to Black majority rule. The Smith regime was closer to the Apartheid regime in South Africa, with its policies of racial preference, than to any independent democratic African country. Although the Apartheid system of racial classification, segregation and oppression was not officially institutionalised, the daily life of Black Rhodesians was subject to stringent authoritarian limitations and all the humiliations and injustices of domination by a White racist élite minority.

Nevertheless, all Black children were entitled to free primary school education in the English language, a policy continued and improved upon by the Mugabe regime from 1980 on, which no doubt laid the foundations for the far higher literacy rate in present-day Zimbabwe as compared to the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa (90% as compared to less than 60% in most countries).¹ Marechera died in Harare in 1987 at the age of 35.

Marechera benefited from a sound primary education, in the rural mixed-tribe ghetto of Rusape where he spent his childhood. His parents were extremely poor, though literate, with nine children to raise, Dambudzo being the third. They set great store on educating their children. He claimed to have found his first books on the rubbish tip, on the Whites' side of town. His mother worked as a Nanny in a White family, neglecting her own children out of the need to provide for them, and his father was a lorry-driver, amongst other manual jobs. His father was killed by a passing military car one night as he walked home after work, and shortly afterwards his mother lost her job, leaving the family destitute.

Unable to pay the rent, mother and children were forced to leave their shack and move into a sordid corrugated-iron shelter in the shanty-town when Dambudzo was 13. Since neither his two elder brothers nor himself were willing to give up their

¹ See UNESCO Institute for Statistics <http://www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/EN/EDU/countryProfile>

schooling, their only hope of getting out of abject poverty, their mother was forced into prostitution to feed her brood, leading to an emotional rift with her sons.

Marechera won a scholarship to a Mission school where he was a boarder. His school records show that he was exceptionally brilliant but apt to be eccentric with occasional bouts of wild behaviour. He enjoyed a privileged relationship with several teachers who gave him access to their private libraries and he devoured books voraciously. In 1972 he went up to University in what was then Salisbury, but was thrown out in 1973 after taking part in demonstrations against racial discrimination.

There too, he is remembered for both his outstanding brilliance and his flamboyantly erratic behaviour. He then got political asylum in the U.K., and a scholarship at New College, Oxford, where they put up with his disturbed behaviour from 1974 until 1976, when he was finally sent down after numerous attempts to help him. Again, records describe him as brilliant, somehow loveable, yet impossible.

He then began a life-pattern of prolific writing coupled with vagrancy and self-neglect which lasted until his premature death in 1987 - living in squats, in the street, in parks, brief stays with friends which usually soured due to his erratic anti-social behaviour, always with his type-writer in his rucksack, he would get it out and type away at all hours of the day or night. In those days he drank too much, took drugs, spent time in prison, had a number of relationships with women. He claimed that he never wrote drunk.

His first book was published by Heinemann in 1978 - a novella and some short stories entitled *The House of Hunger* - and awarded the Guardian Fiction Prize jointly with Neil Jordan. At the award ceremony he was loquacious where Jordan had been tongue-tied, but caused mayhem by throwing crockery and breaking a chandelier, and had to be escorted away.

His publishers had trouble in persuading him to write in forms which they could sell - they wanted a full-length novel. Time and again he submitted drafts which did not conform to their requirements. Heinemann's readers' reports reproached him with lack of structure, lack of perceptible plot, opacity, too many literary allusions... and constantly asked him to rewrite with more respect for conventions.

A further criticism, from Heinemann's Nairobi reader this time, was that it was elitist and inaccessible to African readers: one could not expect Kenyan peasants to understand all those references to classical literature, or to struggle with his experimental style and genre. Marechera decided fairly early on that he could not accept the restrictions imposed on him as an African writer, and was particularly scathing in his response to the Nairobi reader's remarks.

The following is a telling extract from the letter he wrote to James Currey at Heinemann on 12th December 1978 in answer to the readers' reports on *The Black Insider*:

All this means that I have a clear choice between writing House of Hunger style or writing as I wrote. The latter of course is of no commercial use to you

but it is the way I have been writing for the past ten months and I think that any revision of the work of those ten months may also end up broken on the rocks of the charges of elitism, etc. I am therefore quite skinned to the bone even before I have finished doing the revision of *Black Insider* which I myself think will be the best I have done so far: I can see the Kenyan branch of your firm still insisting that the work be more simplified and be more broadly - socially - based, etc., as well as pruned of all allusions to literatures and persons which a peasant or worker does not understand. I no longer in my private life indulge in anything remotely political: it nauseates me now because I know it is blood and brains spattered over grit. To have hypocrites like that lording it over the revised *Black Insider* will certainly reinforce my own isolation. (in Veit-Wald, 59)

Moreover, the themes he chose were not proper "African" themes, in the eyes of the publishers. At that time (the late seventies) African writers were expected to write about Africa, with a politically correct, clearly anti-colonial stance. Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS) relied on sales to schools in Africa so the books needed to be easily accessible with an appeal to a wide African reading public. It is relevant to mention here that the AWS, and African publishing in general, are suffering acutely at the moment from the drop in sales resulting from cuts in public spending throughout heavily indebted African countries as they apply the notorious Structural Adjustment Policies imposed upon them by the International Financial Institutions.

After much discussion, a second book was nevertheless published in 1979, *Black Sunlight*, a novel which in fact grew out of the reworking of *The Black Insider*, to be something quite different, though still experimental in form and not really what they had wanted him to write. The original manuscript of *The Black Insider* was not published until three years after his death, in 1990.

It is interesting to note that the Kenyan reader did give Marechera some credit for the universal human insights of *The Black Insider* as can be seen in the following extract from the report:

Unlike many works dealing with racism in England, Marechera gets the credit of realistically showing that it is not a question of whites hating blacks and Asians. The Asian and African peoples have their own rebel racists who hate them and ally with the whites in maltreating the other races. Wealth and not colour is the issue at stake (Veit-Wald, 59)

In 1979 he was also invited to the African Writers' Conference in Berlin where he was delighted to meet several great African writers whose work he knew: Bessie Head herself, Soyinka, Achebe, and others. After two more years of London and a short spell as Writer in Residence at Sheffield University, he allowed himself to be tempted back to Harare in 1982 with the project of a film to be based on *The House of Hunger*, and remained there until his death in 1987. During that time he published a collection of prose and poems entitled *Mindblast or the Definitive Buddy* in 1984. *The Black Insider*, as mentioned, was not published until 1990. Several collections of his writings have been published posthumously, including a collection of his poetry, *Cemetery of Mind*, and more are on the way.

As we have seen, despite being widely acclaimed for his undeniable and highly original talent, Marechera was repeatedly criticized for his unconventional approach to writing - first by the publishers whose main concern was saleability, then later when he returned to Zimbabwe, by the authorities who reproached him with not writing "useful" African literature, accused him of being un-African, not politically engaged. In August 1981 they banned his novel *Black Sunlight* (published in 1979) because it had "no relevance to the development of the Zimbabwean nation" (Veit-Wald, 39) and censured his poetry on grounds of obscenity.

At a time when other Zimbabwean writers accepted the constraints of government interference, Marechera tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Writers' Union to add a clause to their constitution guaranteeing freedom of expression. When he failed, he walked out, and remained isolated and rebellious, again living as a vagrant, preferring the company of the down-and-outs to that of his peers. Again, when one considers the present state of censorship in Zimbabwe, it seems he was clearer-sighted than his fellow writers.

In my view, Dambudzo Marechera stands out from most other African writers of his time. His qualities as a writer – he was extremely widely read and artistically creative, and had exceptional, sometimes almost prophetic vision - combined with his extreme sensitivity, that had no doubt been exacerbated by the trauma and wretchedness of his childhood, to produce a unique, powerful, poetic voice which, though subversive and often (deliberately) shocking, rings with the pain and anger of outraged humanity.

This is particularly the case of *The Black Insider*. John Wyllie, another Heinemann reader, declared it to be "in a different league to the other books I have received from AWS. (It) unquestionably belongs in Division One". In the same report, responding to Marechera's self-criticism, "I cannot say a thing without striking an attitude" Wyllie wrote "It, in fact, puts him in the company of Malraux, Waugh, Ellison and hundreds of other notable writers. Some of his "attitudes" towards Africa and Africans are not only original but are so highly charged and red hot that they will brand the flesh of any sensitive reader." (*BI*, 201)²

In Marechera's writing - and in *The Black Insider* in particular - there is a disturbing entwining of his life and his writing. Although *The Black Insider* has often been described as autobiographical, and although it certainly mirrors his own life and experiences, nevertheless, the setting and the plot of the novel are so blatantly unrealistic that we can only take the first-person narrator as representing the protagonist in a fictional or even theatrical construct. There is a deliberate, sometimes playful, sometimes cynical, ambivalence, a cat-and-mouse game going on between the author and his narrator, the narrator and his readers, and between Dambudzo Marechera and all of those thinking entities.

The setting, an Arts Faculty in an unnamed town in an unnamed country, seems to be a combination of the University of Rhodesia where he had lived through the

² All references in the novel are from the Lawrence Wishart Press edition (London 1992)

police repression of anti-racist protests, and the squat in Tolmers Square, London, where he was living at the time of writing. Its labyrinthine design, full of corridors and doors and rooms, is also presented as a metaphor or an allegory for his own mind.

The Faculty itself is quite small when seen from the outside; but inside it is stupendously labyrinthine with its infinite ramifications of little nooks of rooms, some of which are bricked up to isolate forever the rotting corpses within. (*BI*, 35) Outside the house, which is occasionally shaken by the war raging "in the country", "the cities were rotting, becoming tiny pockets of plague outbreaks" (*BI*, 36). From the beginning the reader's usual expectations are confounded, with a dizzying dance between credible description of the war interspersed with more unlikely passages, some of which suggest a mocking sense of humour, but never for long enough to laugh, some simply incongruous, such as, in the following extract, the razor coming in the midst of all the implements of modern warfare, or the reference to "time", meaning "drinking-up time" in a British public bar, and the clearly satirical allusion to using the television to blot out reality:

Now and then a horrid THUMP and CRUMP shook the house and chipped off the plaster. I heard screams too, not of pain but apparently of an inside hilarity. Sometimes they (I mean "they") sang gabbled versions of incredible national anthems and punctuated them with cowboy and Indian games of BANG-BANG YOU'RE DEAD NO I'M NOT. But most of the time they credibly recollected themselves and really got down to the business of pummelling each other with napalm, rockets, machine guns, booby traps, land mines, and the trusty shaving razor. They also had fighter planes on each side which occasionally strafed my roof because some fucking joker had painted a bull's eye on it. However, the TV was still working and I could still turn it up real loud if things got out of hand like they did sometimes when everyone knew it was almost time. (*BI*, 37)

The keys in this passage to Marechera's authorial stance are the words "inside" ("an inside hilarity") and "credibly". Despite their obvious ambiguities, they give the clue to the receding levels of consciousness brought into play. "Inside" is a term used as a metaphor for the narrator's mind, as well as for the protagonist's place of refuge from the physical danger outside, but it also carries the sense of the obverse side of exclusion, as in an "inside joke", where only those who are party to certain knowledge or secrets can understand.

The narrator's heavy insistence on distancing himself from "they" by adding inverted commas and mentioning explicitly that he does so, throws the notion of the narrator being inside, so recently established by the narrative, into doubt. Are "they" in the house too? This rectified impression is instantly dismantled in turn by the following sentence, where "they" are seen to get down to their "napalm, rockets" etc. making it quite clear that they are outside... so in what or whom is the "inside hilarity", after all? In this case as in many, many more throughout the novel the reader is forced to accept the co-existence of several possible interpretations and the impossibility of justifying one over any other.

To the reader who has become familiar with the Marechera idiom and his preoccupations, (that is, to the insider!), there is certainly a bitterly satirical allusion to post-independence African nation-building. At the time of writing, Marechera was living in London and frequented the Africa Centre where he came into contact with other Black Rhodesian exiles. But far from sharing their hopes and optimism, he was too aware of the conflicts and corruption and persisting injustice for the majority in other young nations such as Nigeria, Kenya or Zaire. He even had to be forcibly ejected on one occasion for heckling Robert Mugabe, a guest there! This proved prophetic (or perhaps only exceptionally lucid), as he was to find on returning to the newly-founded Zimbabwe in 1982, when all those fellow-exiles and his educated peers were enjoying, and often abusing, the perks and power of top government positions.

This explains too the "inside joke" about "incredible" national anthems and "they credibly recollected themselves", suggesting that once the independence euphoria was over, the cowboy and Indian games soon degenerated into out-and-out civil war... the credibility being a reference to the extra-textual Marechera's beliefs and opinions, once again playing with the notions of insider and outsider. That he is referring to Third World independence becomes clearer in the next paragraph:

(...) at one stage it was us blacks against the whites. But somehow things had become more complicated and it was no longer a black against white chess game. It was more like a kaleidoscope in which every little chink of colour in the shaken picture was fighting every other little chink. News agencies could not keep track of the alliances and counter-alliances, the neutrals and the non-aligned, the ferocious and the hyper-feral, etc. (*BI*, 34)

The narrator continues to play cat-and mouse with the reader by frequent serious and verifiable autobiographical remarks, identifying the protagonist as the writer, Marechera:

Since my short stories were published I have optimistically dragged my typewriter into every nasty little situation I got myself in. I could not get it into prison though, and had to spend three months twiddling my thumbs in a Welsh jail... (*BI*,35)

(NB Marechera was imprisoned in Wales from November 1977 until January 1978.)

Sheltering in the house with him are various other characters, a colourful and unconventional miscellany of people such as might have been his fellow-squatters in Tolmers Square. They pass the time by talking and telling stories, and the playful author cannot resist a dig at the demands of his publishers in a reference to the genre, which serves as well to put across his own conception of this art:

We could pass the time like that. I mean the *Decameron's* structure is an almost natural way of combining grim reality with the art of story-telling. There is the plague outside and the storytellers inside. When Chaucer adapted that form to his own specific needs in *The Canterbury Tales* he really was taking over a genre which unlike the novel is most suited to the oral tradition here in Africa. There is

the same irreverent zestful treatment of values, institutions and beliefs; the same go-getting specificity say in the Wife of Bath's Prologue" and putting the devil back in hell.(...) The ridicule and absurdity which society weaves into our lives is exactly magnified, as is the phoneyism of literary and art-with-a-capital-A attitudes. (*BI*, 201)

The novel is little more than a one-act play in which the action and the characters are all subsidiary to the discussions and arguments. This is another feature which irritated some of the readers, who saw it as an artistic flaw. Yet great themes such as Life, Love, War, Writing, Nation-building, the African image, are brilliantly treated. Whichever character serves as mouthpiece, they all share the gifts of expression and erudition of the protagonist, and his skill in playing with words, and yet all in the service of his meaning which despite the sleight of hand is deadly serious.

What I hope I have managed to suggest in this rather sketchy outline of one of his works is that although Marechera does not treat the usual African themes in the usual way, those who rejected his work on the grounds that it was non-political, unconventional, un-African were missing the essential Marechera completely. His vision was such that he saw through the orthodoxies that had served their time in reaction against colonialism and imperial attitudes. Negritude and Black consciousness belonged to the discourse of racial difference, and as such risked perpetuating the very conflicts they purported to overcome. The anti-colonial discourse which was considered proper in African writing after decolonisation had become for him the hollow incantations of corrupt or repressive neocolonial regimes.

Through his refusal to compromise at every level, Marechera was busy trying to invent a counter-hegemonic discourse. One might conclude that the dominant discourse got him in the end, since his uncompromising lifestyle led to such an early grave, but after all, he left us considerable food for thought. Let us finish with a nourishing nugget on Africanness - or not :

The idea of personality moulded by the cultural artefacts outside us and the sense of identity with a specific time and place, as though the human being is as rooted in his own kind of soil as any weed, is what creates for us the emperor's new clothes. And it is quite easy inflexibly to deceive ourselves that we are fully clothed and not naked. (*BI*, 35)