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# Not in the African Image: Utopia, Dystopia and the Politics of Destitution in the Fiction of Dambudzo Marechera



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*"Where nothing is, everything is a deal."*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Unhoused Condition of the Contemporary African Writer

African literary criticism today is a minefield of complex attitudes and opinions, a no-go area for every critic anxious to contribute to an exciting debate affecting at least two generations of committed writers. One of the major battles fought in this area has involved the clash between a traditionalist or *realist* view of African literature and one that subscribes to an experimental and open approach, highlighting notions such as the carnivalesque and the grotesque (see Veit-Wild, 1997, 2005) and techniques foregrounding the value of openness, hybridity and radical "aesthetic distancing" (Bhabha, 1994: 147). The conflict has been sifted through a series of renewals and setbacks and may still be regarded as unresolved. Many critics of African writing today seek to evade the strict polarizations of the previous generation along with the ideological and aesthetic limitations of a debate they regard as forced upon them by a mentality no longer their own.

The case of Marechera is interesting for the new impetus it has afforded the cultural debates in this respect. His works have come to indicate the power and the plight of a new literary art in Africa that finds itself stumbled upon a 'rhizomatic<sup>2</sup> cultural connectivity – an art that has divested itself of the unifying "African image" (Marechera, 1990: 84) talking the masses into a restrictive ideology of ethnic nationalism. Not every observer of the African literary scene was pleased with the mannerisms Marechera

introduced into literature, however. According to one critic, his writing merely yielded “dwarfish, confused, morally sapped fictional absurdities [...] forged from the creative imaginations of European novels, depicting lives spiritually exhausted by their insatiable, morally barren cultures” (V. G. Chivaura, quoted in Primorac 2006: 41). Even after his early death in 1987, his works were criticized for their ‘Euromodernism’ and their lack of a more affirmative or partisan understanding of the efforts in the African ‘postcolony’ (see Mbembe, 2001) to come to terms with the structural problems incurred during decades of (post)colonial violence.

A common denominator in all these assessments of a difficult writer is that they refuse to consider the utopian dimension at work in his fiction. Marechera’s power to ‘desacralize’ uniformly folkloric images of Africa is acknowledged but never seen as pertaining to a distinct tradition of utopian remodelling inspired by post-independence literature in Africa.<sup>3</sup> It will be my task here, therefore, to associate Marechera’s literary powers with the idea of a ‘parasitic’ utopian art – an art of writing that differs considerably from conventional explorations of a ‘country in the mind’, breaking through the one-way-road of utopian or speculative extrapolation and fabulation, the pattern of the world as it is and the world as it might be. In fact, its potential lies precisely in its capacity to “interrupt” a given “system of exchange” (Harari & Bell, 1982: xxvi) and in the intensification created by new, as yet untried relations and combinations taking place in a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas and meanings. Two related concepts will come in handy to make a case for a particular brand of utopian writing formed under conditions of prolonged suffering and privation. First, the concept of *destitution*, commonly defined in terms of an extreme want of resources or the means of subsistence. This concept may be employed to elucidate Marechera’s complex ways of gathering a large variety of sign and discourse patterns into a permanently unstable fictional context. Following Steven Connor, who defines destitution within the frame of a cultural philosophy of “doing without” (Connor, 2000), a state of precariousness or ‘non-membership’, I shall analyse the framing circumstances shaping the encounter of disparate worlds in the African writer’s experimental fiction. How does he turn the supposedly ‘neutral’ space or medium of the written text into a symbolically rich yet also

disruptive communicative channel, and in what respect can this intervention be considered utopian?

Cast in the terminology of French science historian Michel Serres, Marechera is a cultural parasite<sup>4</sup> or “interceptor” (Serres, 1982: 11), an alien or demon, the “fly in the ointment” (Connor, 2002) making possible communication between Africa and the west. Here the second concept comes into effect. Many current models of interculturality involve a rather static configuration of ends and connections, and frequently take as a starting point the idea of a dialogue between discrete stations or positions. In Serres’s model, what lies between or frames the elements of the communicative situation is itself asymmetrical and volatile, however, an unstable ground or milieu enabled to block or hamper the free flow of information. His focus is thus on the text or medium as a kind of *third- or interspace*, a concrete milieu rendering possible but also impinging on the actual exchange between cultures, codes and meanings.

In Marechera’s writing, the cultures or codes in question couldn’t be more different: the one producing and processing and pretending to give and provide, the other depleted and indigent, a site of paralysis and decomposition left to bleed dry by despotic rulers ancient and new. Marechera seems to draw a perverse yet stimulating kind of gratification from his role as parasitic messenger between these systems. His narratives are shot through with images, modes and aesthetic effects developed or found elsewhere and transformed en route through a highly fluent and eventful literary medium – western art, existential philosophy, Beat literature, and much more; ideas and modes he adopted when starting his career as a black émigré student in Oxford and London. For Marechera, these modes and ideas appear to be like bodies “without organs” (Deleuze/Guattari, 1984/2004: 9) – arrays of meanings that confront the binary terms of the situation they are set in by constantly randomizing them. Renouncing any fixed indigenous or oral-folkloric resource-base, his narratives connect freely to other textual ‘bodies’, tapping other cultures’ and traditions’ ‘organs’ and parasiting off their circulatory systems. The aesthetic achievement of Marechera’s multiply shifting texts is thus built, paradoxically, on the experience of lack *and* the acknowledgement of it within a ‘potent’ destituting movement. Such a concept of writing is utopian in that it is productive and volatile beyond common expectation; it puts into effect meaningful options beyond the narrative

exploration of future worlds shaped by either violence or peace because it is totally ignorant of the direction or outcome of its speculations. It merely takes and accepts or utilizes what it happens to find or hit upon: ‘where nothing is, everything is a deal.’ Structurally dependent on a state of lack or “being without” (Connor, 2000), it plunges into the unknown, indicating the desire for a new multitudinousness and a form of connectivity and textuality tempting in its almost complete lack of ideological closure and organization.

## **2. *Black Sunlight* or, the End of the Parasitic Chain**

Marechera’s work is post-national and post-western in almost every sense of the word. He disengages himself from the sterile gesture of African nationalism and its mythopoeic cultural framework; he acknowledges poverty and loss as formative power or agency but is quick to make clear there is no negative experience which can be counted on to stay put as forever limiting him or his writing.<sup>5</sup> Every single one is free to commence productive relations with its actual environment, other (negative) forces, modules or systems; each contains multitudes within, is structurally “full of itself” (Connor, 2000). Christian, the protagonist of Marechera’s novel *Black Sunlight*, at one point observes how music “atomised the emotions, and rearranged them in strange haunting patterns” (Marechera, 1980/2009: 27). During a violent attack of the state police he thinks of “all those shop windows. A mere brick would shape them into beautiful random patterns” (107). Quite obviously, the reader is meant to recognize in him a character who perceives opportunities where others identify only subtraction or shortfalls. Christian regards humans as “furnaces of an eternal present” (72), their bodies rendering every touch or injury in terms of other areas of human experience. As writer and photographer, he “engraves” pictures through a “panorama of multitudes spontaneously disintegrating, igniting each other” (59). He argues it is “not the other side” that he wants “but only the process towards it” (72). “To write as though only one kind of reality subsists in the world,” he concedes, “is to act out a mentally retarded mime, for a mentally deficient audience” (79). In short, Christian is mainly interested in employing the *noise*, the annoying sounds – the clamour, disturbance and tumult – produced in any given system of exchange or communication.

It would understate the case if one remarked that clamour and tumult are in no short supply. *Black Sunlight* is set in an unidentified African state of the near future, in a post-independence dystopia of murder, violence and death.<sup>6</sup> Events are presented in a stream-of-consciousness technique of narration, which makes for a very original and worthwhile reading. Very often a flick or spontaneous notion, created on the spur of the moment, is sufficient for a new narrative course to be taken: like a book opened at random, with the finger pointing to a particular word or phrase. The sudden thought or notional flash thus produced interrupts the one-way-relation between host and parasite (i.e. between producer and produced, donor and beggar, oppressor and victim, writer and recipient, etc.), breaking into strange bits the overall mental or perceptive norms and patterns many readers have grown accustomed to. The medium or text, meant to arrange and simplify, to bring random events into a consecutive and linear order or argument, proves inert and harnesses linear communication instead.

A critical analysis of the organizing conceptual image of ‘black sunlight’ may help clarify the novel’s technique of shaping forms or instances of creative parasitic communication. As I understand it, the oxymoron is a correspondent part of Joseph Conrad’s notorious metaphor of alienation, ‘heart of darkness’. The first-person narrator in *Black Sunlight* refers to it several times: “I willed my heart of darkness to stop wheezing horror – horror. It was too quiet. [...] It was hot and sick and thorny” (11).<sup>7</sup> The choice of words is more than apt: for what else could one expect to find at the centre, deep in the *heart* of darkness, if not black sunlight? Something is needed to illuminate even this gloomy private cavern, a small or “random element” that “transforms one system or one order into another” (Serres, 1982: 21). But there is more to it. As metaphor, ‘black sunlight’ distinctly mediates a western *and* African frame of referentiality. Conrad’s metaphorical heart of darkness is cramped, molar, self-involved and self-consuming. Where others may hope to find a site of emotional rescue, its creator sees only a small, cold, black knot – the vicious colonizer’s fist. Marechera’s image is more congenial, gaining its power from the African experience of sunlight galore. It sets a space-filling and rampant presence against Conrad’s experience of passive acquiescence, the utter bleakness in the hearts and minds of his characters (“...black sunlight reminded me of the sudden and huge meals which I would, after bouts of starvation, stuff greedily

into my system...,” Marechera, 1980/2009: 8). It is also a remarkably powerful and impressive anti-type – a complementary symbol at once contradictory and rich in implications; it forces into a context, along with the terms, the various imperialist connotations accompanying them and thus shapes an ambiguous trope in which the different associations “need one another to complete their meaning” (Empson, 1930/1947: 5). Moreover, it epitomizes a stunning interplay of sparkling rays of meaning instead of a gloomily persistent and inward sense of the terrors of imperialist claustrophobia. It illuminates the site, which is the text, from within; it is no end point. Black sunlight tracks erratically through the chapters, reappearing in different contexts and thus representing what might be called a critical disjunction across different semantic layers. In some cases, the trope is used to refer the reader to the narrator-protagonist’s confused or ‘paranoiac’ state of mind (Marechera, 1980/2009: 7, 91, 129), in others it refers to a madly violent African chief (8) or dubious revolutionary alliance calling itself the “Black Sunlight Organisation” (118) responsible for terrorist action.

Whether or not a fixed or unified meaning is imaginable at all, the text refuses to lay bare. In a central passage, however, the image is appropriated to describe the narrator’s complex emotional relationship with his life partner Marie, blind from birth. Simple dyadic terms, such as self/other, inside/outside and light/dark are transcended by the writer laboriously translating them into a new narrative paradigm and the ‘shared’ intersubjective milieu of the polyphonic text coming with it:

There were days when I knew that all my feeling for her was bound up with that fragile shell of blindness, that fragile, unseeing self-contained dome. And I knew then that were I to wake up and find myself at last in that dark rotunda, crucified, dangling from chains and chords fixed to the uppermost sightlessness in her, then – I would be free. Free of sunlight and the nights, free of all the senses, free of all the thoughts, the vision of a visceral fate. (41)

For Christian, to be thus in the dark, without illumination, is somehow to get rid of the bonds of race, culture and education, the whole binary system of meaning-making. He does not seem to be aware at first of the fact that he depends on the paradoxical image of black sunlight to articulate the very idea of absence and silence. The readers, as it were, are left in the dark as well, for the text’s variously scattered meanings are difficult to collect and make sense of. But it is not quite the same. Acknowledging Christian’s sense of embitterment and hopelessness, they may still recognize in the work the intervention

of textuality as a relational third, the deeply felt need for a cognitive framework that collapses the one-sided and dismal relation between dark/light, inside/outside and enables fresh contact and exchange between disparate factions to take place. Christian and Marie's stressed-out life involves transgressive erotic bedroom games that strike the reader as at once uncanny and liberating; in these, they try to upset the categories and norms inherited from the preceding generation:

The first night, I had put out the light but she slipped from my grasp and escaped from the bed. It was pitch dark. [...] I groped for the light switch . [...] This was her game. This was her own kind of basic experiment. [...] Where was she?

'Marie?'

I shivered. She was in her own black sunlight. (42)

Representation alone enables the coming-into-being of a third space. The accredited one-way-relation, according to which the one is inside, participating, sharing the pleasures of light, comfort and warmth, and the other remains outside, disempowered on a bleak and desolate heath like King Lear, is not validated by this piece of writing, surreal and violent, in which the signifiers work as messengers or interceptors disrupting the never-ending chain of binary relationships. Or, put another way: given the density of the narrator's play with words and the various shades and hues of meaning, it is next to impossible to determine who is inside and who not, or what the opposition black/white is supposed to express in this context anyway. Marie's blindness appears to bestow upon her a kind of inverted power, a sense of selfhood and integrity the protagonist, himself a black African (or so one is invited to suppose), is desperately in need of. The many different versions of 'black sunlight' he encounters, the true 'essence' of destitute post-independence Africa, refuse to be appropriated and turned into a meaningful whole: "As if I had become astonishingly blind and Marie had begun to radiate with unseen insights" (55).

Eventually, the semiotic disruption is made complete by the text's many references to western literary sources. Thus, the relation between the two protagonists is depicted as a "marriage between heaven and hell [...] a fusion of darkness and light" (42) that serves to intensify the Blakean 'hellish' affirmation of otherness at stake here. In view of the broad canvas of images appropriated and reused, one could go so far as to say that Marechera sucks, quite deliberately, the host culture's textual legacy like a vampire. Almost



frivolously, he palters with the subversive notion of the parasite or joker – it can be found everywhere in his writing.<sup>8</sup> But as the above scene also shows, his characters very frequently do not ‘share’ their author’s simple enthusiasm. Christian would like nothing better than to simply disappear and be silent, but the text always returns him to the many-layered world he inhabits. New and demanding relations never cease to invade his private space and time, and Tennyson’s ambiguous image of revolutionary power – the famous “Kraken” – is brought to the fore to explore the protagonist’s fears and hesitations:

That exquisite refutation – how I hoped for it! But then I would turn and toss and see another shameless dawn rise from the east and know that such an overturning, such a providence, however close to the surface it lay would never, like the kraken, creep out of the sea into my life. (41)

As an individual Christian cannot act; like Eliot’s timid Prufrock, he is ensnared, captured by the violence and stagnation of the social machinery around him. The Kraken rising from its depth could change all this; turning the inside out, it would show that everything in life has a “reality in excess of that of which it is deficient” (Connor, 2000). Of this, however, Christian wishes to know nothing. Black sunlight, for him, means to be shut out, to be in the paradoxical situation of an “insider, silhouetted against the black blinding sunlight” (129).

Yet for the reader the metaphor has come to represent something different, has in fact become a perfect instance of semiotic relationality as such, a manner of connecting, across semantic levels, various meanings. The metaphor no longer has a fixed or single meaning, therefore, a meaning the narrator-protagonist could claim to be in control of. In the words of the philosopher of science, it is now an “operator,” not a “monad” (Serres, 1982: 224). It is effective in the “plural” (21) and abounds with semantic features activated in different circumstances; it freely connects to every single scene, every detailed, depicted action. (The trope is indeed used at least once in every chapter.) “Black sunlight,” then, is a powerful and radiating symbol – its broken, inconsistent logic embodies light in its function as medium and milieu, a bright and dazzling force, moving about freely, being in the third position everywhere it reaches, above and beyond the objects it mediates. Sunlight, in the physical world, has the power to relate objects; it makes the viewers or interlocutors involved perceive the things they talk about in the first



place. Black light, then, is a rare yet volatile medium bringing to mind the fact that what facilitates communication frequently can become an obstacle to it as well.

### 3. Textual Aleatorics: Parasitic écriture in Marechera's *Black Insider*

This may sound half-baked or difficult to grasp at first. But then so is the problem: how can a postcolonial writer escape the totalizing epistemology of the binary, the logic of oppositions, of always being either host (= master) or guest, i.e. slave to his environment? "It seems to be a permanent condition of my state," Christian says, "that I should periodically attach and detach myself to the wandering humanity out there and call each attachment a profound and living thing" (Marechera, 1980/2009: 130). Marechera's protagonist is a parasite himself, and well he knows; he "plays a game of mimicry" (202), plays not at being another but at being the same. *The Black Insider*, one of three narrative precursors of *Black Sunlight*,<sup>9</sup> and only published posthumously, recounts the story of how the African writer discovered his exclusion and aspired to escape this fate by becoming a nomad who pitches his camp directly among the enemy's frontlines, by making his environment, step by step, identical to the cultural 'tissue' of his host.

*Black Sunlight* was written at the suggestion of a publisher who wished the African *enfant terrible* to produce something more conventional and appealing to the global readership. In fact, he wished a novel firmly on the side of the host's interests, i.e. the book market, the audience paying for literature, the publisher's net income. Contrary to that, *Black Insider* has remained a peripheral and hieroglyphic text, rough, unfinished, and madly driven to act the part of a parasite slowing and deflecting the intercourse between the 'host'/'guests', masters/slaves, etc. Like its successor, the short novel is set in an indeterminate future "cindered by the shock and concussion of the comet that blasted us in that old twentieth century" (Marechera, 1990: 31). Its place of action is a former Faculty of Arts building in Africa now offering refuge for a group of intellectuals and artists who seek to escape from an unspecified war going on outside. Their various conversations center on the issue of African identity and the nature of art, with the protagonist arguing that the African image is merely a mask, a trite and superfluous symbol of chauvinistic authority. In formal terms, the narrative is modeled on

Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (1349–53), with “the plague outside and the storytellers inside” (89). The narrator, a young academic, clarifies the case:

All I know is that at one stage it was us blacks against the whites. But somehow or other things had suddenly become 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 hyperferal, etc. Meanwhile, the cities were rotting, becoming mass graves in which there were tiny pockets of plague outbreak. (24)<sup>10</sup>

What the reader encounters at this point is a characteristic feature of the parasitic chain, with two parties bound in an asymmetrical situation, a tie or stalemate. Masters, in this violent place, have bred counter-masters, producing local crowds of supporters. Blurred boundaries, irregularities and multiply mobile poles, interests and moral directives, are the consequence; they dominate the text, cutting across simplified structurings of discrete parts and solids.

Like swamp or minefield text and narrator-protagonist lie between irreconcilable systems, with whole chains of signifiers thrown into the “whirlpool of the aleatory” (Serres, 1982: 233). It is curious to note that Marechera somehow appears to be indebted to the French philosopher's ideas for he develops his own theory of the intercepting third in a late or neo-colonial context which parasites off the thinker's intuitions and endows them with a new purpose. Thus he writes, commenting another literary work: “‘There is nothing here but illusion, and one calamity after another.’ The experience is not unlike that of one *organism* living on and at the expense of another” (Marechera, 1990: 33). And, in more detail:

The parasite is entirely dependent for food upon our minds. [...] Apart from such ectoparasites as bugs, like fleas, mosquitoes, leeches, and vampire bats [...] there are endoparasites which actually live permanently in our minds. The latter are also known collectively as ‘culture’, ‘tradition’, ‘history’ or ‘civilization’. There is a definite degree of tolerance established between host and parasite; each becomes adapted to the other. It is not to the advantage of a parasite to cause serious harm to its host, as thus it is likely to suffer itself. (33)

In a next and related step, Marechera introduces the issue of language. More forcefully now, his narrative ventures to drive a wedge into the literary system it parasites off, deviating from the western norm of linear representation. Since many passages are entirely unrelated in terms of logical or symbolic coherence, parading events, digressions,

speeches, etc. with no visible connection to the main narrative, one might easily argue that *The Black Insider* moves rather freely along the “graph of substitution” (Serres, 1982: 226). It establishes its very own chain or mode of signification and connection, and along this symbolic chain isles of meaning, relation and continuity appear one hasn’t perceived before:

Language is like water. You can drink it. [...] You can flow to the sea in it. You can evaporate and become invisible with it. [...] The height of sophistication is actually to channel your water through a system of pipes right into your own lavatory where you shake the hand of a machine and your shit and filthy manners disappear in a roaring of water. Being water you can spread diseases like bilharzia [sic! *bilharziosis*] and thought. (Marechera, 1990: 34)

Water makes another marvellous parasite, a unique milieu framing a form of existence and yet shaping and impinging on it in its very own way. In this respect, it is like language indeed, the powerful “web of words.” Language flows into fiction, breeding heterogeneous contexts and formats, setting the erstwhile roots in motion, transplanting forms, images, and practices, etc. The only certain thing about fiction, Marechera writes, is the “damage” it does, the “devastation” words “bring to the minds of men and children.” Random interventions, we understand, the *fluidum* of interrelation, can change whole worlds: “One good scratch and the sky bleeds visions” (36).

It is getting clearer now that Marechera is looking for a new strategy of intervening in the given channels of post-colonial and post-exilic discourse; and Serres’s *Parasite* provides a viable and excitingly fresh model for this venture.<sup>11</sup> Like the eternal intermediary or interceptor in Serres’s study, *The Black Insider* operates on various levels, always working towards the ultimate linkage of structure, text and experience by randomizing patterns of thought and ensembles of meaning. The host’s milieu (i.e. its major productions, the English language, English literature, etc.) constitutes the environment and provides niches for the parasite’s survival. Here he collects and admires his booty, the results of his incessant pillaging and scavenging. Disrupting the found system of exchange and equivalences, he constantly forces it to new levels of complexity and interaction. What the narrative thus amounts to is a strong plea for parasitism as a survival strategy for the ‘new’ African, rejecting any kind of fixed territorial or ideological assignment, any firm station or even sociocultural “locus of enunciation” (Bouriaud 34):

Oh, black insider! We should have turned at that corner where the crucified man pointed the way. At that corner where Chaka washed his hands in blood. At that corner where the road to Kampala leads to Buchenwald. At that corner where black learned man in disgrace sink their differences with the rest. But we will drive through to the independent countries where lucid minds shatter thick through windscreens. Where original thoughts veer and crash into ancient lamp-posts. (Marechera 1990: 74)

The cautious note of hope and confidence given in the “independent countries” is shattered in the defeatism of the subsequent terms. But the thread is resumed again later on, having passed through several stations in the graph of substitution and troubling or transcoding the messages passing unimpeded between different maps and domains. And so it continues; sending and giving around, receiving and passing on, always appearing to ask: “what things are between whom” (Serres, 1982: 229)? Meaning in the *Black Insider* always fluctuates, turning the text into an intermediary who first charts and then digs over entirely the terrain between mutually hostile or exclusive parties. Nothing is left as it is: if language and the existing code systems can indeed be thought of as “circulating quanta of energy” (Connor, 2000), then Marechera’s style of writing must indeed be seen as a very effective interruption of blocked circulation in intercultural discourse: it dares indulge the dream of a “paradise of participations between host and parasite, inhabitant and milieu” (*ibid.*), rendering a viable alternative for the lives of social multitudes, a way of the world in which error and distortion are not seen as faults but as opportunities, destituting moments containing multitudes of chance surprise. *The Black Insider*, in this respect at least, is a postcolonial utopia (Pordzik, 2001); it injects turbulent new perspectives and formulas, freely intercepting *all* the relations between *all* the linguistic and experiential spaces. It never stops, never dares reduce cultural or racial otherness to simple contradiction. It captures all the flows, infests the invariant ground of model-making and abstraction with its own scenario of interchange and agitation.

#### **4. The Parasite as Postcolonial Utopist**

Science historian Michel Serres comments on the ideal condition of utopia, the “poverty of the system of harmony,” in the following way: “I fear that harmony is only a heavy fol-de-rol for minds that crave only repetitions. [...] If our work and sciences were exchanges, they would leave masterpieces in the world at the height and splendour of their intelligence” (Serres, 1982: 127, 217). It does not automatically follow from this

that we need no longer meddle with utopia as a concept or political strategy. But maybe the utopian is to be looked for in different places, in other epistemologies: “The world around us, in us, victoriously defends itself against this stupidity [the utopian, i.e.] with the miraculous torrent of the unexpected.” Or: “Noise destroys and horrifies. But order and flat repetition are in the vicinity of death” (127). This means we must learn to prefer the noise, the crossover passage or path itself, to the established fact – the stable spot or locus, the end of the series. In this view, the ideal zone of the utopian is only a neutral, un-demarcated space to be filled with life and meaning, a spectre, an either/or, master/slave, provider/receiver relation where free-floating desire constantly needs to be educated (cf. Levitas, 1990: 7) in order to produce workable results. But in a place where no steady state is imaginable, where the viscosity of exchange processes can be used to inject new formulas and modulate the cultural flow, utopia may indeed be achieved in a different way – as a cluster of intermediate forms, a “pathological growth” of “flights, losses, holes” (Serres, 1982: 12) inspiring the desire to carry on, to multiply affect, fluctuation, disorder. It may be produced as people (or messages) go along, with interceptors trying hard to divert whatever is carried along the beaten tracks of utopian idealism.

This, naively remonstrative or ‘altermodern’<sup>12</sup> as it may sound as first, holds particularly true for the African postcolony where far too many of these unifying processes have proved faulty or fatally deficient in some way in the past. Marechera, representing a younger generation, wishes to preserve Africa as a zone of semiotic activity and reconfiguration instead of a “silence-divining wasteland” (Marechera, 1990: 103). His target is different, though, from writers such as Ben Okri and Kojo Laing who seek to counter western clichés of Africa on the basis of a sustained dialogic engagement with the legacies of their indigenous cultures. He is not a utopian reformer but a parasite, trickster or cyborg; he partakes of the host’s meal, as it were, consumes the ‘rotten fruit’ from the colonizer’s table. It is not a stigma, though: the words moving to and fro between him and his host’s culture mark the shape of interrelations he wishes to secure. It is a relation of parasitic exchange and randomization, one active despite the “greater Western optic” (Jamal, 2010: 16) it is subject to, governed by “writers in a state of mind of disillusion, disenchantment and dismay” and violently rejecting the nation-state’s

“irrational fear of contamination” (Marechera, 1990: 94, 95). Darko Suvin, I remember, once highlighted utopia as being simply a “verbal construction” (Suvin, 1979; quoted in Sargent 2010: 6). This means that utopia isn’t that far away at all – as the African poet was quick to point out himself: “Suddenly the other side of the world is only an alphabet away” (Marechera, 1990: 36).

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## Notes



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<sup>1</sup> I came across this aphorism – translated from the German – in a memorable article addressing the political troubles in newly founded South Sudan. The actual source is unknown but it was used as a caption in a glossy brochure that came with the German weekly *Die Zeit* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> The term is Deleuze and Guattari's; they describe the rhizome as a structure that establishes “connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles” (Deleuze / Guattari, 1987: 8). For the issue under examination here, it is important to understand that the rhizome has no specific origin, genesis or centre, that it resists the idea of a beginning and end and ceaselessly opens itself towards new available spaces.

<sup>3</sup> On the place and function of utopia in the African literary context see Simonse (1982), Nnolim (1983) and Pordzik (2001: 144–53, 161–63). The issue of utopia has come to the fore only recently, as the following statement by Charles Nnolim shows very clearly. “The issue is that, because of the way we were enslaved and colonised, we are too timid to write about others; we are too timid to talk about the future. The white man writes what we call fortuitous literature and science literature. We don't have science literature in Africa. Science literature projects time in the future and starts out to solve the problem.[...] But what African writers do is to look backwards to when our grandfathers were this and that, all the Timbuktu greatness, and we have not been able to look into the future; and it is affecting our governmental plans, because if you don't look into the future, you won't reach out” (quoted in Akubuiro 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The term may appear awkward at first but it has to be kept in mind that the concept of noise or static in modern information theory is translated as *parasite* in French.

<sup>5</sup> African intellectuals overrate the power of the avant-garde movements of the 1950s and 60s when they argue “it [i.e. independence] was there. We were not deceived about that” (Armah, 1968/1988: 85). The experience of uneven social and economic development on the continent gives the lie to this proposition. The intellectual elites never prevailed over the depredations and dispossessions of the colonial past; they never arrived ‘anywhere’. Marechera is very clear about this: “I caught myself thinking how can we and the likes of us ever presume to lead the multitudes out there, thousands of miles away, who day by day eke out a sordid existence [...] Whatever we did would always be scraggy at the seams” (Marechera 1990: 63). But Marechera's tragic case also shows why this failure to prevail may now be converted into a vantage on behalf of the younger generation: since they never arrived in the post-independence dreamland, they will not have to suffer the same paralyzing trauma of being contained by the ideological mantraps of a uniformly realized version or promise of the ‘ideal life’. Never seriously called upon to represent their respective communities beyond the artificial public spaces of their neo-colonial law-givers, they cannot go astray in their appropriation of the patterns and meanings circulating in the worldwide arena of discourses and the media. It may sound naïve or even cynical at first sight but it is fair to argue that destitution, in this context, need no longer be regarded as the state of being ‘short of’ some or other object, commodity or sign, but as a new condition of ‘freedom’ that substitutes for the initial one, opening into a domain of connectivity and exchange no longer defined by the lack or loss ordinarily assigned to it.

<sup>6</sup> *Black Sunlight* is not the first dystopia to be published in Africa, however; similar works began to appear in the 1970s already. Several of these can be classified as dystopian on account of the ways in which they imagine fictional or future dictatorships that are mostly veiled representations of real nations. Texts in the genre include Wole Soyinka's civil war novel *Season of Anomy* (1973) and Nurrudin Farah's trilogy *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1983). All three are set in a fictional dystopian Somalia in the 1970s ruled by a fictitious General based on Dictator Siad Barre (1919–95). Some novels are sensitive to cultural perspectives derived from African mythology; one of them is Ali Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971) which is set in the afterworld, called After-Africa, and is centered on the tragedy of the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo who died in the Biafra war. Magical realist or carnivalesque reworkings of the topic can be found in Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* (1996) and Kojo Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992). For a reading of these see Pordzik 2001: 144–52, 161–2.

<sup>7</sup> For other passages referring to Conrad, e.g. in the earlier *House of Hunger*, see Marechera (1978/2009), 37, 41, 48–49, 74–75. It is crucial to note that Marechera's novels are consistently marked by wordplay involving the fragility and artificially exclusive oppositionality of white/black imagery.



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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the following passages: “Darwin noted that elongation of the growing apex of either a shoot, or a root, did not take place in a straight line but pursued a spiral course” (132); “... as Menander said, chance decides matters better than ourselves” (134).

<sup>9</sup> The other two versions, both of them missing, are entitled *A Bowl for Shadows* and *The Black Heretic*; for details see Veit-Wild (1990: 11).

<sup>10</sup> The commentary refers to Thomas Middleton’s play *A Game at Chess* (1624), characters of which include a “White” and a “Black King,” representing the colonial powers of Spain and England, respectively. The play addresses the negotiations over the proposed marriage of English Prince Charles with the Spanish *Infanta* Maria, i.e. it dramatizes the issues of fusion and synthesis underpinned by ideological separation – a parallel that can hardly have escaped Marechera.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately I have not been able to find any evidence for a direct influence on Marechera’s works of Serres’s philosophy. Written in 1980, Serre’s *Parasite* was first translated into German in 1981; an English version followed in 1982. *The Black Insider* was written in 1979, however. It remains a possibility, though, that Marechera came into contact with Serres’s earlier and related philosophy through other sources during his stays in London and Oxford.

<sup>12</sup> The term is Bourriaud’s; life in the postmodern matrix, he argues, has turned all individuals into outcasts, “semionauts” subject to a global exilic condition (Bourriaud, 2009: 53). His alternative centres on the model of the ‘radicant’, a term derived from biology. It refers to roots ‘in motion’, their being planted in multiple and varied environments. Radicants are able to divest themselves of their original roots without taking damage. Transferred to the discourse of art and cultural exchange, the metaphor implies the denying the origin any absolute value, subscribing instead to the constant transplanting of experiences, forms and sets of codes.