

Vindicating Dambudzo Marechera: Features of Cultic Remembering

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ABSTRACT

The article approaches the ongoing cultic phenomenon around the Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera from the viewpoint of cultic remembrance. The diverse text corpus concerned with the writer is marked by nuances of regret and loss. These affects reveal a sense of guilt that envelops the author's memory, as well as a willingness to compensate the past wrongdoings to which Marechera is seen to become subjected. The sadness around Marechera's memory seems to spring from the conception that Marechera was misunderstood during his lifetime. Currently, however, he is seen to have been ahead of his time, a postcolonial writer *avant la lettre*, and a talent wasted in a hostile environment. What adds to Marechera's "tragedy" is that he is interpreted to have predicted the Zimbabwe crisis. Today, Marechera is seen to haunt the world of the living in a ghostly manner, which indicates a melancholic unwillingness to accept the writer's loss.

Keywords: *authorial image, cult, cultural memory, Dambudzo Marechera, Zimbabwe*

1. INTRODUCTION

Representations of the life story of the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera (1952–1987) are shaded by sadness. He died at the age of 35, or "in his prime", as it is frequently expressed in texts dealing with his legacy. The works¹ of the author, repeatedly described as controversial, had a polarized reception: he was both celebrated as an award-winning literary genius and condemned for betraying his people and had one of his novels banned in Zimbabwe. Marechera was sort of a celebrity already during his lifetime, although it is his early death that generated the celebrative phenomenon. Marechera has obtained the status of a cult author, or, rather, a cult figure, as the writer's fame appears to be founded more on his person than on his literary achievements (see for instance Pattison 2001a: 354).

Marechera is currently in vogue: Beaven Tapureta (2009) speaks of "Marecheranism", although a more suitable term for this phenomenon—with all

¹ Before his death, Marechera had published *The House of Hunger* (1978), *Black Sunlight* (1980) and *Mindblast or the Definitive Buddy* (1984). *The Black Insider* (1990), *Cemetery of Mind* (1992) and *Scrapiron Blues* (1994) appeared posthumously.

the concern for the writer's persona—might be “dambudzoism”.² The manifestations of the phenomenon can be identified in several commemorations or cultural events and productions inspired by, or dedicated to, the writer.³ One can find a Marechera fan site on Facebook. In the academic world, Marechera has also gained a cult status among certain scholars. Stephen Chan (2003: 182) comments on the writer's academic popularity and defines the phenomenon as “Marechera industry”, which according to him, is “sometimes facile”. David Caute (2009: 149) is also concerned about the academic industry as a part of the cult phenomenon: “Marechera is nowadays in some danger of becoming essentially a figure for the academies, for thesis and postmodern critical acrobatics.”

Dambudzoism has generated a wide text corpus discussing Marechera's complex public persona and the subversiveness of his poetics. In this article, however, the emphasis is on analyzing the cultural phenomenon around the author's legacy from the viewpoint of cultic remembrance. This shifts the focus from literary analysis onto the ways of remembering the author, asking how his cultic memory is constructed discursively. There seems to be a special need to remember Marechera—and to remember him in a particular way: he is represented as an outspoken rebellious visionary, a postcolonial writer *avant la lettre*, and a tragically wasted talent. What interests me in the writings on Marechera are the nuances of regret and loss that motivate the diverse text corpus concerned with the writer, and that relate to the affect of guilt which envelops his memory. A reader of Marechera's biographical accounts is frequently reminded of the matter that the writer died a lonely, unhappy man, whose work had been deemed irrelevant to the Zimbabwean nation. This “tragic end” continues to reverberate to the contemporary discussions on Marechera, forming the basis for an affect of guilt that almost elevates the writer to the position of a martyr.⁴ There is an endeavor to compensate the past wrongdoings by giving Marechera the appreciation he, so to speak, would have deserved during his life time.

² “Dambudzoism” is my adaptation of Roland Barthes' “*marcellisme*”. *Marcellisme* refers to the audience's curiosity for Marcel Proust's biography and it differs from *proustisme* which signals an interest directed mainly at the author's production. (Barthes 1984: 319.)

³ In 2009, a multi-media festival entitled *Dambudzo Marechera: A Celebration* was organized in Oxford. The event was motivated by the need “to recuperate the memory of the author in the place where his writing first emerged and that is imprinted on a number of his early texts” (Cairnie & Bucherova 2009: 19). In 2012, a book with audio-visual component based on that festival was published. While the volume is beyond the scope of the present analysis, its cultic motivation is acknowledged.

⁴ György Tverdota (1994) has discussed the aspect of martyrdom in guilt-motivated cults, and observes that the life of the cult object is represented as a continuous, hopeless struggle; a feature that informs the Marechera cult, too.

2. CULTS: PRACTICES OF SENSE-MAKING

As Péter Dávidházi (1998: 7) and Matt Hills (2002: xi) have observed, to give the concept of cult one all encompassing definition is not only hard, but also useless, since every cult phenomenon should be scrutinized in its own, specific context. While I agree on this, I find Michel Contat's (1994: 123–124) definition of a literary cult illuminating in respect of the Marechera phenomenon, where the boundary between the writer's person and his works is constantly wavering:

When a writer becomes an object of cult, the literary text ... tends to take the function of a source book on the writer and, the other way around, the cult writer becomes a hero, or even a role model; he becomes a fictional character. A literary cult thus disturbs the boundaries between history and literature (my translation).

In addition to this, some other central elements of cultic phenomena can be pointed out. The concept has primarily to do with “devoted following” (Whissen 1992: xv). Besides the important aspect of devotedness, if not fanaticism⁵, cults often have a subcultural dimension⁶, meaning that the cult objects provide the followers with a means of distinction from the hegemonic culture. The aspects of community and identity are important in cultic phenomena as the cult object opens up a source of identification. The cult object can function as a uniting factor that generates a sense of belonging to a specific community. (Saresma and Kovala 2003: 9–14.)

Cult objects are always constructs whose coming into being requires acceptance and investment on the part of the audience. In the process of cult construction, the cult object is made to bear the meanings that the followers invest in it. There are no intrinsic meanings in the cult objects; their meanings are constructed in a specific context and by a certain audience. (Grossberg 1995: 52–53; Whissen 1992: xii.) The identity function of cults is also a question of authorization, as the cult object is invested with the authority to be the followers' representative (Grossbeg 1995: 59). It is noteworthy that besides the positive identity-function typical of cult phenomena, cults can also be motivated by guilt. What is emblematic to guilt-motivated cults is that there is a need to compensate earlier wrongdoings the cult object is seen to have been subjected to. “Tragic” destiny of an artist—due to a premature death, for instance—creates a fertile breeding ground for a guilt-motivated cult. (Lahdelma 2004: 325.)

⁵ The origins of the term “fan” are closely connected to those of “fanatic”. This connection implies that, in common language, fans are often caricaturized as obsessed and hysterical crowds acting “abnormally”. (Jenson 1992: 9–13.)

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *cultural capital* embodies the notion of taste as a means of distinction.

The practices of cult construction take discursive and non-discursive forms. The latter include rituals, celebrations, pilgrimages⁷, relic worship, erection of monuments, and so on (Dávidházi 1998). Here, as I am mainly interested in the discursive dimension of cult construction, introducing the concept of *cultic discourse* or *cultic speech* is useful. Dávidházi (1998: 17–19) has analyzed cultic uses of language, arguing that cultic discourse manifests itself in quasi-transcendental “glorifying statements” and “unconditional admiration” which tend to escape critical scrutiny. Hence, when observing the features of a cultic discourse, the question of “truth-value” should be set aside and the main focus placed on the discourse’s motivations (Dávidházi 1998: 19). Adopting Dávidházi’s approach, I dismiss the question of whether the claims on Marechera’s greatness hold “true”. Marechera’s greatness is seen to be constructed discursively; it is not taken as the “natural property” of the writer (see Herschberg-Pierrot 1994: 114–115).

As Dávidházi’s (1998) work on the Shakespeare cult demonstrates, this particular cult made use of romanticism’s central notions of artistic creation, such as ingenuity. When it comes to Marechera, it is obvious that the cultic discourses around his memory draw some of their main elements from the romantic imagery: besides the frequent understanding of the writer as a genius, notions such as suffering, alienation, misunderstanding, and authenticity essentially contribute to Marechera’s authorial image (Toivanen 2009). Dying young is a central element in the notion of a romantic artist-hero, and the cultic speech on Marechera is motivated by his untimely death. While the untimely death of an artist does not automatically lead to a cult status, it can bring the cult object into an enigmatic light (Hills 2002: 142) and influence the ways of speaking about it (Söderholm 1990: 100).

The concept of social memory emphasizes the constructed and communal nature of remembrance. Memories are not seen as passive objects, but as results of an active creation (Lambek 1996: 237–239). Through remembering the past is kept alive: “Collective memory becomes the creative imagining of the past on service of the present and an imagined future” (Ben-Amos 1999: 299). In order for something to be remembered, there has to be a specific need for the memory in the present context. The estimation of what is important to remember takes place in a specific social context, meaning that memories are prone to become sites of struggle. The aspects of identity and sense-making are equally central to the cult construction as they are to the practices of social remembering.

⁷ Pilgrimage is a central cultic practice, also visible in the Marechera phenomenon: the Marechera celebration organized in Oxford in May 2009 included a “Marechera Memory Tour of Oxford”. On the Marechera site on Facebook, fans are informed of the location of Marechera’s grave: “If any fan of DM goes to Harare, Zimbabwe, and wants to pay their respects to DM’s grave, he is buried in the Warren Hills Cemetery, Section E, No: 1237” (Facebook).

3. COMPENSATING PAST WRONGDOINGS

Marechera's reception in Zimbabwe was not always welcoming. The writer was accused of not contributing to the nation-building project with his "decadent" and "anti-African" writing.⁸ Marechera stated that his only commitment was to writing and that Zimbabwe simply was not ready for his vision (Reddy 1984: 64). The writer was aware of the discrepancy between his poetics and the political agenda of the new Zimbabwean nation-state and expressed his disappointment with the local publishers who, according to him, were silencing him out of the fear of publishing non-patriotic texts ("Censorship—Does it clean the Mind":6; Reddy 1984: 64). Later on Marechera's conception of being silenced and misunderstood in Zimbabwe has been adopted and frequently highlighted.⁹ What is common to texts discussing Marechera's negative reception is that they often have the tendency to maintain that the earlier crushing critique was based on flawed arguments, on the basis of which the writer got so unfairly judged.

An interestingly broad example of the attempts to give Marechera the "attention that he would have deserved" is the volume of compiled essays, *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera* (1999). The volume consists of more than twenty texts discussing Marechera, including academic articles, non-scientific essays, and even fictional texts, being thus a strong statement on Marechera's importance. At the time of its publication, the volume was one of a kind: there were no accounts on any other Zimbabwean writer to compete in scale with this one (Primorac 2006: 42). In his preface to the volume, Dennis Brutus (1999: ix) articulates the motive implicitly shared by the essays by stating that, "This book may well mark the turning point in [Marechera's] critical reputation." The volume's editorial introduction sets as its starting point the interrogation of the idea of Marechera's anti-Africanness. The introduction is entitled "The Man Who Betrayed Africa?"; a question that gets its explicit answer at the end of the chapter: "To say Marechera betrayed Africa is *of course* absurd" (Chennels and Veit-Wild 1999: xi, xix, emphasis mine). As the cogent *of course* suggests, there is no reason to question Marechera's ends or to represent him as a traitor. The antecedent unwelcoming critiques are vitiated by judging them as simply "absurd". The introduction captures the core of the current critical approach to Marechera by arguing that the writer was misunderstood because ahead of his time (Chennels and Veit-Wild 1999: xii). The lack of success is represented as an error from the part of the reception, failing to appreciate Marechera's talent. At large, the volume manifests an effort to rectify

⁸ For accounts on how Marechera was critiqued by his contemporaries see Gaylard (1993); Pattison (2001b: 9–40); Shaw (1999); and Veit-Wild (2004: 176–188, 281–312).

⁹ See e.g. Buuck (1997); Foster (1992); Gaylard (1993); Pattison (1994); Manus (2004); Shaw (1999); Veit-Wild (2006); Wylie (1991).

the former “misreading” and to compensate this devaluation by adopting Marechera into the postcolonial literary canon. The introduction articulates this effort as follows:

One of the many *sad* aspects of Marechera’s life was that he died before emergence of a sufficiently flexible literary and cultural theory which would recognize that the seeming difficulties of his writing with their loose structure and obscurity were not perverse, but grew out of the inevitable contradictions attendant upon a postcolonial world. The reception and criticism of Marechera’s work deserves an important place in the canon of postcolonial theory. (Chennels and Veit-Wild 1999: xiii; emphasis added.)

Marechera was, as it is maintained here, a postcolonial writer *avant la lettre* whose writing can only be understood within a suitable paradigm. “Sadly”, to echo the register of the previous citation, it is only now that Marechera can receive the comprehension of which he was deprived during his life. The tone of this train of thought is shaded by an affect of loss; Marechera’s vision and talent went lost in a hostile context: “We wasted a talent”, as a writer of a fan letter puts it (in Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 12). As a whole, *Emerging Perspectives* makes an effort to compensate the past wrongdoings and to vindicate Marechera. The volume can be seen to be motivated by a cultic impulse. From the viewpoint of remembering, the volume promotes new ways to remember the author: the memory of a traitor and a literary elitist is replaced with a memory of a great postcolonial writer whose work has proven not to be irrelevant as it was judged earlier, but, on the contrary, “too relevant” (see Shaw 1999: 17).

Emerging Perspectives is not a unique example of Marechera’s vindication: several academic texts share the motives of apologizing and compensation. David Buuck’s (1997) article highlights the conception of Marechera being marginalized in Zimbabwe. Buuck (1997: 118) points out that Marechera was writing about issues that have only afterwards been grouped under the banner of postcolonialism. What is interesting in Buuck’s text is the suggestion that Marechera has also been marginalized in the field of postcolonial literary studies, which Buuck interprets to be resulting from the writer’s class position (Buuck 1997: 129–130). The article’s concluding words articulate the need to give Marechera the attention he was earlier deprived of: “We would do great service to Dambudzo Marechera to give him our fresh appreciation and rapt attention” (Buuck 1997: 130). In a similar vein, Gerald Gaylard’s (1993) article on Marechera and nationalist criticism represents an apologia of Marechera’s postcolonial poetics, Gaylard’s main argument being that the writer’s negative reception resulted from a hostile cultural and political environment. Gaylard (1993: 89) endorses the notion of Marechera being ahead of his time. A chapter of its own in the project of cherishing Marechera’s memory is Veit-Wild’s (2004) Marechera biography *Dambudzo Marechera. A Source Book on his Life and Work*. The *Source Book* has played an important role in providing the cult

construction with biographical material.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, the goal of the *Source Book*, according to Veit-Wild (2004: xiii), is to “demystify the Marechera myth.” The outcome of the project, however, as Pauline Dodgson (1993: 622) has argued, is quite the contrary; the book further adds to the Marechera mythology. Another obviously cult-motivated example worth mentioning is a tribute booklet published soon after the writer’s death, which seems to be tailor-made to “excite even further our interest in Dambudzo and his work” (Oguibe 1988: 1120). This commemorative work, edited by Veit-Wild and Schade (1988), includes poems, photos, interviews, tributes, and Marechera’s personal documents, as well as excerpts from the writer’s handwritten manuscripts, which create a special feeling of presence and intimacy, and which, according to Olu Oguibe (1988, 1120) “will most certainly interest many.” More recently, reissuing David Caute’s *Marechera and the Colonel* (1986/2009) signals a continuing interest in Marechera. In the introduction Caute (2009: 1) classifies the text as a “report”, which “is certainly not fiction”, but “a hybrid version of ‘contemporary history’.” Caute (2009: 2) connects the reissue of the work closely to the Zimbabwe crisis, stating that “‘Marechera and the Colonel’ remains ... uncannily too contemporary.” *Marechera and the Colonel* interweaves the authoritarian post-independence politics and Marechera’s unwelcoming reception, emphasizing that the writer was indeed persecuted in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe (Caute 2009: 146). In so doing the work represents Marechera as a tragic hero-victim, through whose figure the nation’s plight can be narrated. The text also contributes to the Marechera biography and myth construction.

4. BETRAYED SEER

Marechera was accused of having betrayed “his country and people”. The theme of betrayal, although from a somewhat different angle, is intertwined with one specific element upon which Marechera’s artistic image is constructed, namely his being a visionary. The notion of Marechera’s propheticity stems from the critical position he adopted towards the post-independence regime. Marechera’s writing can be located in the tradition of disillusionment literature; it articulates disappointment with the unclaimed promises of a better future and rejecting the nationalist agenda (see Lazarus 1990). As such, disillusionment can be interpreted as a kind of an “honest insight” into the realities of the independent postcolony. In authorial interviews, Marechera intertwines his personal experiences with his literary production: the brutal realities of his works are based on his own experiences. Marechera states: “I know the poverty here. I know the house of hunger here, in the ghettos, in the rural areas” and that

¹⁰ Biographies are central in myth construction (Herschberg-Pierrot 1994: 112; Söderholm 1990: 93; Tverdota 1994: 190).

Mindblast is “actually based on Harare” (Veit-Wild 2004: 35). The writer has claimed that “I merely state exactly what the *House of Hunger*, Zimbabwe, is like” (in Foster 1992: 58). Marechera has even made explicit statements on his position as a seer and a visionary. In an interview dealing with *Black Sunlight*, Marechera asserts that the novel was banned because it was an unpleasant representation of the situation of the country, and that the characters represented “prototypes of dissidents in Zimbabwe”: “It was my projection into the future of my country” (Veit-Wild 2004: 220). In another interview Marechera discusses his authorial commitments and draws an analogy between himself and Cassandra, the misunderstood prophet from the Greek mythology:

I tend to see the writer as a kind of Cassandra figure with all this enormous talent to actually analyze, officialize intensively people’s destinies, only to be cursed by censorship, by persecution, by what ever, for having that talent. But precisely because you got that talent, you must continually activate it, in spite of any opposition from any quarter. If I am a committed writer, that’s what I am committed to. A vision like that transcends any political programme. This is one of the difficulties I have in writing because here in Zimbabwe people try to analyse everything from the particular contemporary political view. (Veit-Wild 2004: 41–42.)

This notion of prophesy was later widely adopted in different contexts. In August 2007, the 20th anniversary of Marechera’s death was celebrated in Harare. In an article discussing this event, “a keen follower of Marechera’s work”, Takura Zhangazha, describes the writer’s meaning as follows:

Marechera had the ability to look beyond the façade of what was Zimbabwe’s 1980’s. He saw the state censorship and the destruction of freedom of expressing ideas. His major strength is that he was a prophetic writer ... Marechera wrote not for political reasons or to be politically correct or wrong. He wrote for generations so that they could come to terms with how Zimbabwe had evolved as a country. He was a rebel with a cause, he was a prophetic writer and sought to speak through his writings. (Kwenda 2007.)

Marechera’s “visionary character” has been emphasized by other writers, too. Helon Habila (2006: 259) claims that the writer had a clear vision of what was going on in the new Zimbabwean nation: “He could see clearly through the fog of independence euphoria that it was not about the person in office, it was about power.” Khombe M. Mangwanda (2004: 37) believes that the value of Marechera’s work stems from his way of seeing: “Marechera occupies a privileged point from which to provide a representation of his nation”. Vicki Briault Manus (2004: 20) joins the chorus:

Far from betraying Africa, Marechera was gifted with a greater vision than his critics, and saw in the ideology of post-independence Africa

nationalism simply another permutation of the oppressive modern state that he had hated in colonial Rhodesia, then in Britain.

While David Cauter (2009: 2) regards interpretations of Marechera as a prophet with certain reservedness, stating that “We should ... be wary of investing our heavy drinking young egoist with the role of seer and prophet”, he nevertheless claims that Marechera possessed “the true writer’s instinct for sniffing out hypocrisy and corruption—the truth about things.” Veit-Wild’s (2006: 60–63) analysis on Marechera’s “[e]xtraordinary powers of insight” reflects the problematic side of holding the position of prophet, that is, the community’s refusal to believe the seer’s message. Veit-Wild (2006: 63) refers to the Cassandra analogy:

These statements taken from an interview in 1986 are indeed prophetic and ring with a *sadly ironic* historical truth. ... Today, eighteen years later, the Mugabe regime has turned black majority rule into political farce, and Marechera’s voice has long been recognised as truly that of a Cassandra (emphasis mine).

As Veit-Wild puts it above, there is an element of sadness in the rejection of Marechera’s visions during the writer’s lifetime. The “irony” and “sadness” lay in the fact that the writer, whose dystopic visions have become materialized, was accused of betrayal. In current discussions the question whether Marechera “betrayed Africa” is no longer the issue: Marechera is no more remembered as the one betraying, but the one who got betrayed.

5. UNCLAIMED PROSPECT AND HAUNTING SPIRIT

During his lifetime Marechera published three works; the other three, partly or entirely rejected by publishers, were published posthumously after the editorial work of Flora Veit-Wild. The documents compiled on the pages of the *Source Book* tell that Marechera’s debut novel *The House of Hunger* had a positive reception internationally: it was seen to represent “a new trend in African writing”, with Marechera becoming the new promise of African literature (Veit-Wild 2004: 187–188). The *Source Book* includes reader reports on Marechera’s manuscripts, some of which are emblematic in how they celebrate this emerging African literary star. Henry Chakava writes: “If this is Marechera’s first effort, then he has a great future as a writer” (in Veit-Wild 2004: 182). Doris Lessing (in Veit-Wild 2004: 191) agrees with him on Marechera’s promising talent: “If this is his first book, what may we not hope from his next...and his next?” What becomes clear from the *Source Book*, however, is that these high hopes of a great literary career were to be given up later: Marechera was unable to claim the promises that *The House of Hunger* had risen. John Wyllie’s reports articulate a tension between the hopes and the actual delivery. Wyllie (in Veit-

Wild 2004: 204) maintains that “The young man is a genius but a badly handicapped one,” and that,

The pity is, I think, that he is, now, incapable of drawing the essence out of the tragic circumstances of being black in a too white world and producing a book, backed by the great force of his sensitivity and intelligence, that will consistently savage and enthrall his readers ...

Marechera’s second novel, *Black Sunlight*, was not a success to be compared to his debut novella. Marechera’s publisher James Currey from Heinemann’s African Writers Series hoped that he could achieve a novel set in Zimbabwe. *Black Sunlight* was not quite what Currey was expecting, but he decided to publish the book: “I have decided that we ought to accept ‘Black Sunlight’ ... This is because I hope it will remove a psychological block and that he will get down to finishing the Zimbabwean novel.” (Veit-Wild 2004: 215.) The publisher’s expectations went unfulfilled and *Black Sunlight* remained Marechera’s last novel in Heinemann’s African Writers Series.

After the writer’s death a sense of sadness, concerning his early demise and the unfulfilled hopes, has been expressed. Wole Soyinka (1999: 251–252) laments that Marechera’s “evident potential [was] sadly under-fulfilled”, and that “it is sad, very sad, that we will never partake of the fullness of this feast, and must console ourselves with its tantalizing promise.” David Pattison (2001b) has discussed Marechera’s flawed literary career widely in his book *No Room for Cowardice*, and it is symptomatic how often the word “sad” keeps recurring in his text. In Pattison’s work the aspect of “sadness” refers not just to Marechera’s tragic life, but also to the fact that the writer was never able to fulfill the high hopes set in him:

The House of Hunger ... remains his best work. As it was praised largely on the grounds of the potential ability of the writer ... an overview of the Marechera corpus concludes that that potential was only partially realized. (Pattison 2001b: 38.)

Pattison goes on to discuss one of Marechera’s posthumously published works: There is a certain sadness about the final collection of work, *Scrapiron Blues*, not only because the writer continues to circle irresolutely around the familiar themes and issues first raised in *The House of Hunger*, but also due to the extreme shortness of some of the pieces which seem to indicate Marechera’s failure to sustain his undoubted ability as a writer (Pattison 2001b: 39).

Marechera’s work suffered from structural problems, which according to Pattison (2001b: 48), ultimately stemmed from his lived experience. Although, as Pattison (2001b: 193) claims, many of Marechera’s “ills ... were of his own making”, the political and intellectual context of the independent Zimbabwe can also be blamed for Marechera’s difficulties in blossoming as a writer:

It was Marechera's great misfortune to find himself in an environment that, busy with establishing a new country, had neither time nor the inclination to empathize with one who wanted to march to the tune of a different drum (Pattison 2001b: 193).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1988: 6) concurs with Pattison on the tragic consequences of Marechera's living environment:

Marechera's life style did not indicate that he would live in this world to a ripe old age. He grew up in Zimbabwe at a time when the country was in the turmoil of colonial rule. The reality of socio-political events thus contributed in moulding his character into a rebel. ... Marechera ... became both a victim of historical contradictions and a victim of social circumstances.

The notion of an unfulfilled potential leads to speculations on what Marechera *might have* produced in more favorable circumstances. Sully Abu's (1987: 77) words are illustrative of this line of thought:

Brilliant but often unfocused, his mind may yet have spawned great literary successes. He was known to be working on a fourth book. Would that book have launched him on a different literary course, heralding a maturity which his public attitude denied him?

That Marechera is considered as a wasted talent is of course already a big loss.

What makes the loss even more tragic is the fact that there is no certainty of what exactly was lost in him. Marechera's career ended before it had truly started, the readers left with an uncertainty about his potential outputs. This sense of uncertainty is typical of melancholic loss, which, according to Freud (2005: 160), remains partially subconscious. When the object of loss is partly a mystery, getting over it becomes harder, which, consequently, may lead to a refusal to accept the loss (Freud 2005: 163–164). What is symptomatic in Marechera's case from the melancholic point of view is that his legacy is seen to keep haunting the living world in a ghostly manner, a presence that indicates an unwillingness to accept the writer's final loss. Drew Shaw (2006: 274) has stated that: "Marechera ... continues to haunt Zimbabwean literature and culture with his profound identity questions, his exposure of uncomfortable truths, his exploration of the unconscious, his radical non-conformity." Robert Fraser (in Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 15) goes even further by welcoming the writer's haunting presence: "May his spirit and his courage long continue to haunt us all." Writers of fan letters are out of hand denying their loss: "Dambudzo Marechera is not Dead" or "I know you are living" (Veit-Wild 2004: 388–389). Closely related to the idea of the author's haunting presence is the preoccupation with how Marechera would react to some contemporary phenomena. As Robert Muponde (in Palmberg 2004) so felicitously puts it, "What would he have

said?’ is a question that is often asked these days about Dambudzo Marechera.” In an obituary published in the *MOTO Magazine* (Marechera – Flash of Lightning 1987: 22) an anonymous writer discusses the common speculations on whether Marechera was insane or not and concludes: “I would say they missed an important point here and the spirit of Marechera will not forgive them for that.” More recently, Tinashe Mushakavanhu (2008) has been concerned with the question of how the author would react if he saw what is happening in Zimbabwe, asserting that “Marechera would be turning in his grave, disappointed with us, the lot who call ourselves writers, for betraying the spirit of truth that the vocation demands.” Speculations on Marechera’s intentions go as far as commenting on other scholars’ work on the author. Preben Kaarsholm’s (1994: 331) review of Veit-Wild’s *Source Book* concludes as follows:

What would he have said to the idea of being resurrected and gentrified by what Wild [sic], in a Freudian slip of the keyboard, calls ‘the government of the Federal Government of Germany’? Sadly, he does not have the chance to let us know.

Veit-Wild’s contribution to the “Marechera industry” is also discussed by David Caute (2009: 143): “If Dambudzo could be brought back to life, would he thank her for her posthumous work ... on his behalf?” These comments are interesting because they reveal questions related to authority as to how and by whom Marechera should be studied and celebrated, or, who has the authority to claim the “ownership” of his memory and his intentions.

The imagery of Marechera “haunting”, together with the overflowing tones of “sadness”, point towards an interpretation that there is some uneasiness in the relation to Marechera, and that the cult is shaded by a sense of collective guilt. While I would not argue that the reason Marechera has become a cult icon stems *uniquely* from the feeling of guilt, it, nonetheless, forms a significant part of the cult by motivating the vindicative efforts.

6. SCAPEGOATING AND CONTEXTS OF REMEMBRANCE

As demonstrated earlier, the glorifying surface of the Marechera cult conceals affects of guilt. In guilt-motivated cults, there is a need for a scapegoat; often this role is given to the cult object’s spouse, parents, a hostile reviewer, an institution, or even an entire community (Tverdota 1994: 190). Who, then, is to blame for the wrongdoings Marechera got subjected to? As the documents on his failures to produce a body of work of uniform quality suggest, his life style could be the cause of his hardships. However, what is also suggested is that Marechera’s life style resulted from his difficulties to bear the harsh colonial and post-colonial realities and thus his anarchic-bohemian attitude was not, in the end, a matter of choice. This mindset frees Marechera from the allegations of

being himself the culprit for his failures and puts the blame on the difficult circumstances he lived in. Further, an anonymous group of hostile critics and other uncomprehending contemporaries are also pointed at as scapegoats. A quote from a fan letter puts this mindset into words: “During his living times, did Zimbabwe and its institutions realise the genius full of potential? Did those in high places responsible for our literary works afford him the right atmosphere to bloom?” (in Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 12.) Robert Fraser (1993: 2042) discusses Marechera’s capacity to “peer beyond the clothes”, noting that, “There is something about the example, much about the work, that continues still to shame us.” In a similar vein, an undefined collectivity takes the blame on itself in Olu Oguibe’s (1988: 1120) text: “We made and destroyed Dambudzo Marechera.” While a sense of guilt may not be a straightforwardly empowering aspect in the cult phenomena, it must, nevertheless, be seen as a means of distinction that signals an *awareness* that wrongs have been committed and that they require rectification. Moreover, as the use of the first person plural suggests, individual writers include themselves into an imagined guilty community that supposedly shares the esteem and sense of loss for Marechera.

Remembering in a social context never “just happens”: it is an intentional activity, serving specific ends. When considering the needs motivating the Marechera cult, it is rather obvious that the Zimbabwe crisis has contributed to its emergence. The author did not receive understanding from his Zimbabwean contemporaries and was announced as the enemy of the post-colonial nation. Today, in contrast, it is emphasized how “veracious” Marechera’s dystopic views on the rulers of the post-colonial state were. Identifying with Marechera provides the followers with a means of distinction, an act of disassociating oneself from the hegemonic discourses of the rulers: as Munoda Mararike (in Veit-Wild 2004: 391) puts it, “we could not commemorate Marechera’s anniversary without criticizing the government.” The narrative of Marechera’s Zimbabwe is not one of a heroic nation: it is a narrative of a nation whose foundation was set on the legacy of colonial, authoritarian vision of power. Through the sad memory of Marechera, this less heroic story of the Zimbabwean nation is unveiled. It is interesting that, paradoxically, Marechera is remembered both as a victim and a hero: on the one hand, he is represented as the victim of a misunderstanding environment, whereas on the other hand, his uncompromising unwillingness to conform to the rules set for an artist in that particular context has contributed to his public image as a rebel and an icon of resistance. Currently, the discourse of resistance-heroism seems to be the overriding one, although the notions of victimhood and betrayal echo beneath the glorifying surface. Besides the Zimbabwe crisis, another important factor contributing to the Marechera phenomenon can be seen in the rise of the postcolonial paradigm in the academic world, which has made it possible to celebrate Marechera’s literary legacy by setting anew the context of interpretation for his work.

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I have identified some central features of the discursive construction of the Marechera phenomenon. Marechera's memory is marked by feelings of regret, which ultimately reveal an affect of guilt that motivates the willingness to compensate the past wrongdoings to which Marechera is seen to have become subjected. Today, Marechera's spirit is actively kept alive and he is seen to haunt the living world, which is illustrative of the uneasiness to accept his loss. The phenomenon around Marechera bespeaks the fact that the author represents a relevant site of sense-making in the present.

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