

The Political Dimension of Dambudzo Marechera's *Black Sunlight*

Hervé Mitoumba Tindy

Introduction

The reception of Dambudzo Marechera's *Black Sunlight* was mixed.¹ In this essay I want to focus on the political dimension of the novel, particularly since some of the criticisms of *Black Sunlight* faulted the novel for what the critics considered variously as its idiosyncrasy, its lack of any discernible theme and relevance to African issues and its lack of the forms of African conceptions of the world. These views about *Black Sunlight* seem to me too limited and extrinsic to the novel itself.

Black Sunlight, in my view, deals with the power of fiction in offering alternatives to apprehending political change and its implications, particularly for the individual; it does so largely in the context of Zimbabwe on the threshold of independence. As a work of fiction, *Black Sunlight* shows the interconnectedness between politics and poetics. One of the consequences of this dimension of the novel is that readers are compelled to consider the issues that are structured by the discourse of politics as issues of *writing* as well. Thus, for instance, the West/Africa opposition that informs much of the criticism of *Black Sunlight* as Euro-centric, is answered in the novel's implicit and, at times, explicit, argument that modernity and modernisation in Africa cannot be appreciated independently of the contradictions of Western Enlightenment. Thus, *Black Sunlight* provides

¹ Flora Veit-Wild documents many of the readers' responses prior to and after the publication of the novel, in *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work* (1992).

new ways of perceiving the self in modern Zimbabwean society, a society characterised in the novel by the alienation of the individual from the body politic. Thus, the topic of this essay creates the space which allows me to argue that the language play in *Black Sunlight* constitutes a new and creative approach to politics; that is, the use of language is a starting point in the questioning of the significance of the Zimbabwean struggle for independence against the backdrop of the artistic censorship of alternative expression that prevailed at the time that the novel was published.

In placing the primary instrument of meaning production on the agenda of its examination of what the struggle signifies, namely language and its vicissitudes, *Black Sunlight* turns what is conventionally a formal question into a thematic one. Because the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole never spelled out what was envisaged after the struggle, beyond the generalities of the terms 'liberation' and/or 'freedom' from colonial 'oppression', the analytical import of this approach to the *meaning* of independence in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole, springs from the novel's positioning of itself between pre- and post-independence. Owing to this strategic self location, the novel endeavours not only to demythologise and de-romanticise the Zimbabwean past but, also, to offer a critique of the legacy of Enlightenment in the Zimbabwean modernity by showing that roughly the same devices of power operate in both situations.

In this essay, I shall establish the political dimension of *Black Sunlight*. My argument will begin with the discussion of the framing of the novel's subject-matter and the role of the writer in this framing, the colonial encounter as the novel re-imagines it and its multiple implications, the relationship between history and aesthetic. I shall then consider the novel's implicit—on one occasion explicit—view that, whereas traditional forms of power are violent and spectacular, negotiated and/or rehabilitative forms of social regulation are no less violent. *Black Sunlight* adapts the Althusserian model of the operation of power by recasting it as a basis for reading the ruses of realism. Thus, the appearance of the modern bureaucratic systems in the course of the novel—the church, the school, the prison and the psychiatric asylum—and the manner in which these systems are shown to be woven into the fabric of the lives of the novel's subjects, constitute the political thrust of *Black Sunlight*.

The Politics of Writing/ The Writing of Politics

Drew Shaw (Veit-Wild & Chennells 1999:4f) provides an illustration of the status of realism in Zimbabwe as the 'predominant model for the assessment of contemporary writing' and Marechera's subsequent marginalisation for rejecting realism and for being an 'individualist'². Indeed, Marechera 'renounces all three criteria of realism': the truthful and plain telling of the story, the featuring of ordinary characters and the reproduction of these characters under real circumstances. The rejection of these three criteria results in Marechera's productive detachment from both the rhetoric of nationalism and the new tendencies to bureaucratise the arts in the mould of the Rhodesia Literature Bureau. David Pattison observes in regard to the Rhodesia Literature:

... [The Rhodesia Literature Bureau] had been established in order to prevent the emergence of critical political literature. All submissions to the Literature Bureau were closely vetted by the Native Commissioners who rejected all political or religious subject matter ... (Pattison 2001:74).

The closing sentence of the above quotation highlights the grounds on which *Black Sunlight* was banned on 23 October 1981 by the Censorship Board of the newly independent Zimbabwe. Indeed, the Censorship Board declared *Black Sunlight* an 'undesirable publication' allegedly because it was 'offensive' by its recurrent use of 'obscene language' (Veit-Wild 1992:290f). However, the un-banning of *Black Sunlight* by the same Censorship Board on 23 February 1982, as the result of appeals by people other than Marechera, is undeniable proof that the ban had been unfairly announced. Importantly, however, the banning of *Black Sunlight* reinforces my view that it is a thoroughly political novel. As a matter of fact, Stein points out that:

² Even though from the point of view of historical materialism this designation would raise serious objections, it is not in the sense of solipsistic 'individualism' that Shaw uses the term. Rather, it is as a marker of strategic alienation.

... writing is by its very nature a political and revolutionary activity, he [Marechera] goes as far as claiming that the 'entire history of Russian terrorism can be summed up in the struggle of a handful of intellectuals to abolish tyranny, against a background of a silent populace' (Veit-Wild 1992: 373).

To this end, for Marechera politics and revolution need the language of literature if they are to avoid falling into the non-critical apathy of post-independence stasis. Thus, if Marechera appears irresponsible to politics or subject-matter, it is because *Black Sunlight* resists the dialectical terminus that is installed in advance between literature and politics. In *Black Sunlight*, the relation of literature to politics and vice versa is one in which the power to name the 'real' is contested, rather than settled in the disarming rhetoric of the collective organisation of the 'real'.

Black Sunlight's opening chapter is an allegory of the European encounter with Africa. This encounter is occasioned by the sighting of a white woman, Blanche Goodfather (1980:1), bathing in a stream 'by the Blunt Rock Falls' near the chief's court. It turns out that Goodfather is a published anthropologist. At any rate, the narrator, at this stage only known as the court jester, couches the penetration of Africa by the West not in the conventional masculine or militaristic terms but, rather, as occurring more pervasively, because not immediately visible. Thus, hidden in what appears to be a less threatening figure of the woman anthropologist, is not only her name that betrays her origins, that is, Blanche (white) Goodfather (emblematic of the paternalism of the grand but, decidedly self-aggrandising, colonialism) but, also, the (anthropological) book as the new instrument for a new conquest. Beyond the sexual surface, the chief's 'erection', after the jester tells him about the presence of Goodfather in his domain, and about the untold pleasure of having a white woman sexually, speaks conceptually of the dangerous seduction that colonialism by the book occasions. If anything, *Black Sunlight* is a novel in which the book or, more precisely, the word, is where colonial battles are fought. Blanche Goodfather is the deceiving and treacherous figure, and the fact that she is an anthropologist shows European penetration of Africa to be subtle and pervasive, thus requiring a similarly subtle critical vigilance.

Blanche Goodfather's anthropological research is of the nature of

Orpheus's descent into the underworld in the quest for Eurydice (Blanchot [1955] 1982:171-76), a metaphor for the European encounter with an Africa which, in the former's colonial imagination, attracts as much as it repels. The jester (whose name the novel later establishes as Christian), an avid reader of her anthropological works, muses:

This intrepid seeker after the ideal human society I had avidly read her books. On life among headhunters. Life among skinheads, screwballs, dossers, down and outs, tarts, the shitheads of skidrow. Life among cannibals. She was a moth fiercely attracted to the lights of the savage, the earthy, the primitive. And how she roamed the earth—how she too searched—ferreted out the few bits and pieces of authentic people reducing them to meticulous combinations of the English alphabet (Marechera 1980:4).

Christian, as the jester, is aware of his implication in the 'alphabets' that have exercised their influence on his identity. 'Swinging. Backwards and forwards' in the chicken-yard, after he is dismissed from the chief's court for 'insult[ing] our [the chief's people's] most central traditions', the jester observes that, after his extensive travels before he lands up in the court of the chief as jester:

Europe was in my head, crammed together with Africa, Asia and America Those years of my travels. Years of innocence and experience In search of my true people. Yes, in search of my true people. But wherever I went I did not find people but caricatures of people who insisted on being taken seriously as people. Perhaps I was on the wrong planet.
In the wrong skin.
And sometimes all the time. You know. In the wrong skin.
This black skin (Marechera 1980:3f).

The above quotation sets the scene for what in *Black Sunlight* will become a view of history that calls for strategic subjectivity. As having been a chronicler for the magazine called Precision, prior to serving at the chief's court—a chronicler of Africa's history and in search of his 'true people'—

Christian is condemned by that very history to trace it indirectly, that is, via the routes that he and, to a significant extent this history, has taken. Thus, he concedes, Africa's history is also Europe's history, Asia's history, America's history and, in fact, the history of all the (dis)locations that have exercised political and cultural influence over his 'people'. Given this view, Christian cannot be said to be overstating the consequences of this political and cultural influence when he says that after cross-political and cultural contact, one can no longer speak of 'my true people', but 'caricatures' (Marechera 1980:10). Moreover, Christian speaks not of historical erasure but, rather, of its rendering honest. In this last connection, he writes:

History's idiosyncrasy. This desire to expose the wounds of an undecided innocence. No more were nocturnal insights reclusive treasures to be savoured in the secrecy of poems and stories; they were to be the inspiring spark to set reality's façade on fire. (Marechera 1980:113)

Christian contends that stories and poems have the insight that a certain historical blindness lacks. According to the logic of the above quotation, history, considered as a record, rather than as a trace of the past, fails because in speaking of the past, it mistakenly presumes its coincidence with it. By contrast, stories and poems declare themselves as interpretations of the past, 'nocturnal insights reclusive treasures' that, while conventionally meant 'to be savoured in secrecy', increasingly 'set reality's façade on fire'. Thus, the word 'insights' defines the status of the past in the present or in history in terms of the intervention of interpretation. According to Paul de Man (1983:106),

[t]he insight exists only for a [writer] in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right ... and so being able to distinguish between statement and meaning.

Indeed, Christian considers stories and poems to inhabit the 'privileged position' of which de Man speaks.

Christian resolves to abandon the search for his 'true people' which is bound to fail owing to the multiple legacies of European, Asian and

American cultural-political influences. Whereas for Blanche Goodfather the English alphabet is the ultimate template onto which the complex lives that she tracks in her work can be grafted, for Christian such a reductionism belies the subjective status of anthropological/ethnographic account and conceals in its claims to authenticity a thoroughly subjective *and* colonial intention.

It is tempting to read off the jester's account of his fall from grace as the chief's favourite entertainer a literal commentary on the barbarism of pre-colonial African societies. Yet this reading misses a crucial point, namely that in the entire episode, which spans a mere ten pages, specific terms arise which one cannot afford to collapse with the deliberately grotesque irony that attends the chief's description.³ For instance, after the jester laughs at the chief's 'erection', the chief promptly censures him for daring to 'insult our most central traditions!' However, at the jester's commendation of the chief's 'ornament', and that as 'Our great chief' the chief cannot possibly be a 'sodomite', the jester observes that the chief 'oiled his eyes with orthodoxy' (Marechera 1980:3). Thus, the point in this brief episode is not so much that readers are given a tour of the 'real' court of the traditional African chief, as the argument that power, whether traditional or modern, craves appeasement. Indeed, perhaps without even knowing it, the great chief nonetheless makes an apt observation when he says to the jester, 'You could bind a man with long ropes of words he did not understand' (Marechera 1980:3). Here, reference is to the jester's pacification of the chief, which he does by saying that he is a great chief and not a 'buggerer' or a 'sodomite', thus priming the chief's virility which the jester nonetheless knows is on the wane. However, it is the metaphorical, rather than the literal, import of this episode that seems to me particularly significant. If at being laughed at for his 'erection' the chief responds by calling for the jester's censure, but at being called 'Our great chief' he 'oiled himself with orthodoxy', then surely the point is that notions such as 'our most central traditions' are orthodoxies that are only sustained by continuous

³ Attentive readers will recognize in the narrator's description of the chief the standard comical reconstruction of the colonial fantasy of a massive African chief who is ready to throw his detractors in a huge boiling cauldron. It seems to me that *Black Sunlight* is simply sending this fantasy up.

uncritical appeasement and censure. Thus, when the jester avers while swinging 'Backwards and forwards' in the chicken yard where he is hanged 'upside down' as punishment for daring to insult 'our most central traditions', more than just meets the eye obtains in this surreal episode:

As I swung gently by my heels in the thick fat fucking breeze of sheer humidity, I had a clear view of the court and could see and hear all that went on there. So this is humankind. Swinging. Backwards and forwards. Swinging through history. These are my people. I am their people too (Marechera 1980:3).

Far from being simply punishment, to the jester the hanging is a productive 'vantage point' (Marechera 1980:7) which offers 'a clear view of the court and ... all that went on there'. Viewed from his vantage position, the court and the 'central traditions' over which the chief presides, become less central and collective. This is buttressed by the bitter irony that subtends the jester's realisation that his punishment sits ill with the fact that 'These are my people. I am their people too'. The same irony underscores the relationship between the jester and Blanche Goodfather whom, as it turns out, he had met during his time at Oxford as a fellow student and sometime bedfellow. Indeed, re-surfacing in the African 'jungle' of his incarceration, Blanche Goodfather becomes 'the Tarzan to rescue [him] from [his] plight' (Marechera 1980:7). Needless to say, Goodfather's is the same centring that fails to convince the jester about the 'central traditions' of which the great chief speaks.

When Christian escapes from his punishment in the chicken yard, and after Goodfather gives him his 'back payments' (Marechera 1980:13) for his articles in *Precision*, he visits a place called Devil's end, which is the hideout for the oppositional organisation that calls itself the Black Sunlight Organisation. The BSO, as the Organisation is also called, draws its membership from the ranks of those who have 'a price on [their] head[s]', that is, those who are sought by the secret police for their subversive ideas. With this visit, he hopes to revive *Precision* by documenting alternative voices in a country where there is no

difference between the chief on his skull-carpentered throne and the

The Political Dimension of Dambudzo Marechera's Black Sunlight

general who even now had grappled all power to himself in our new and twentieth-century image (Marechera 1980:13).

His visit takes place also after Blanche Goodfather

had given me a long list of those killed behind the barricades, those summarily executed, those detained, those who had escaped into yet another soul-destroying exile (Marechera 1980:13).

The first indication that his visit would yield insights into the architecture of power is his description of Devil's End that simultaneously offers readers a vantage point that he enjoys:

Devil's End looked like the name implied. Jagged rock, granite outcrops, stony valleys, sharp flinty peaks and running through them, underground, a network of caves and interlocking tunnels, natural and man-made Within its caves and tunnels were the prisoners' quarters, the Jade Chamber and the Black Hall (Marechera 1980:52).

Chris, one of members of the BSO, keeps a ledger in which he makes entries of even the minutest details of what goes on inside Devil's End. It turns out that Devil's End is run with ransom money obtained by kidnapping members of the Rhodesian security personnel. It is also a sort of bizarre torture and death camp for those for whom ransom is not paid. Following Chris as they walk to meet the leader of the opposition, Christian observes:

We passed through huge rooms in which vague human figures were poised in very excruciating postures. Some dangled from chains fixed to the roof. (One hung upside down and dangled by his testicles.) Some were on a redhot treadmill. Some were transfixed upside down by huge nails driven into the rock passing through their ankles or their knees (Marechera 1980:53).

'Disloyalty here', Chris informs him after they pass the huge rooms, 'is a capital offence' (Marechera 1980:54). When Christian almost salutes after

responding to a bizarre question that Chris asks him about Susan's sexual prowess, Chris enlightens him on another Devil's End condition:

You can salute if you want to but you know that's not in this outfit because it's undemocratic and smirks of military totalitarianism.

And another:

NO! NO! NO! Nobody smokes tobacco here. You have to smoke what we smoke. Here's your ration. If you smoke different that's undemocratic and upsetting. It smirks of individualistic opportunism. You know. Not that I don't know different (Marechera 1980:54).

The above represent a crucial statement that *Black Sunlight* makes about the pervasive nature of power, particularly the fact that resistance/opposition very often mobilises the tactics of the power it resists/opposes. Capitulation to a form of containment made spectacular by the contradiction between intention (to resist/oppose enslavement and torture) and practice (enslaving and torturing one's persecutor), as the above examples from Christian's observations at Devil's End illustrate, is what in *Black Sunlight* dogs not only the Black Sunlight Organisation but, as I have shown, also the chief and, no less spectacular, the ethnography of Blanche Goodfather.⁴ Aside from the evidence that attends the narrator's framing of these particular cases of containment, the three forms of containment that I have highlighted can also be considered as part of the broad framework in which they are understood by the narrator to collaborate with more established apparatuses of power. Against this background, the premise of the argument that I want to develop takes on board Paul Rabinow's view that for Michel Foucault

the real political task [of writing] in a society ... is to criticize the

⁴ It may be that Goodfather's 'renown' rests on the presumed generosity of her intentions to give off her time and resources to record autochthonous societies, but the manner in which she goes about it renders her generosity spectacularly at odds with the reductionism of her methodology.

The Political Dimension of Dambudzo Marechera's Black Sunlight

working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked (Rabinow 1984:6).

Recall that for Susan, one of the members of the Black Sunlight Organisation:

All the forces of social and national man have been levelled against that tiny spark within us and seek to snuff it out with types of religion, education, legislation, codes and in the last resort, jails and lunatic asylums. The mass of men live underneath the hand of these forces (Marechera 1980:66).

I spoke about the manner in which *Black Sunlight* adapts Althusser's theory of power as manifesting itself in the form of persuasion (negotiation and/or rehabilitation) and coercion (punishment). I want to consider some of the ways in which *Black Sunlight* re-writes the terms whereby the church, the school, the prison and the asylum conceal their will to power in their characteristic rhetoric.

In his influential essay, entitled 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', Louis Althusser points out two apparatuses or ways in which subjectivity is produced in ideology. One is through persuasion and another through coercion. Furthermore, Althusser argues that the most pervasive of these apparatuses is persuasion, by which he means that as subjects we are called to the places which the ideology of the state has already created for us. In this sense, what subjectivity is, is the product of a certain kind of (ideological) 'hailing' (quoted in Rice, Philip & Patricia Waugh 1992:60); by 'hailing' Althusser means invitation to participate in the terms of the one who sends out the invitation, in the case of his context, the state. Althusser's theory implies that the target of ideology will, from time to time, reject the invitation. It is in this last connection that *Black Sunlight* makes its important intervention.

At stake in *Black Sunlight's* treatment of religion, is the contradiction between Christianity's claim to the personal and the reality of its institutional standing. From the point of view of writing, *Black Sunlight*

may be said to proffer a critique of the consequences of religion's vertical explanation of the world—God, then Man and, lastly, all the other terrestrial creatures or species—against the backdrop of the shift towards an horizontal explanation in modern artistic and philosophical movements, according to which God is the creation of the human mind.⁵ In the scheme of the horizontal explanation, imagination is the essence of Man and constitutes Man's godly power, so that Man and God essentially share the same limitations. For instance, hanging upside down in the chicken yard, Christian avers:

Crucified upside down by my heels. My Golgotha a chickenyard.
Father! Father! Why the fucking shit did you conceive me? You
have no meaning. I have no meaning. The meaning is in the
swinging. And that is ridiculous. Absurd (Marechera 1980:3).

In essence, the above is a proclamation of the impotence of both God and Man. The parody of Christ's crucifixion is a form of heightened mimesis, that is, the imitation or reproduction of that historical and religious event, the better for Christian to enter the social debate about the condition of the human in modern times.

Julia Kristeva (1984:61) writes that

... poetic language and mimesis may appear as an argument
complicitous with dogma ... but they may also set in motion what
dogma represses.

What dogma represses is the critical spirit. This is precisely the point that Marechera is making throughout his discussion of the erasure of the individual in dogma. The complicity of the church in this erasure finds its expression in the play on what has become a marxisant commonplace; Christian enters the church and muses:

I was in the opium of the people. The huge cross dangled from
chains fixed to the roof.

⁵ Nietzsche's famous assertion that for modern Man God is dead.

I stood looking at the crucified Christ He looked like I felt. That was the connection He hung there like one in dire need of a cigarette

Why had I come? I always came to watch Him whenever the soullessness was too much for me. It always ended with the same humiliated ridiculousness of becoming aware that I was staring at a man-made statue expecting a miracle to take place (Marechera 1980:28f).

The above quotation speaks of a failed personal relationship with the human dimension of 'Christ' with an emphasis on the ambivalence between Christian's awareness of the Christ's basic humanity which mirrors his own and of the Christ figure as unduly elevated in the systematic church mythology of miracles. Foucault writes of this ambivalence thus:

... all Western Catholics have been obliged to admit their sexuality, their sins against the flesh and all their sins in this area ... one can hardly say that the discourse on sexuality has been simply prohibited or repressed. The discourse on sexuality was organised in a particular way, in terms of a number of codes, and I would even go so far as to say that ... there has been a very strong incitement to speak of sexuality (in Kritzman 1988:102).

The difference is that Christian gives free reign to the 'discourse on sexuality' and on 'the flesh', so that the ultimately guarded generosity of the system of confession, which prescribes the codes while seeming to provide a platform for a freedom to speak on sexuality and on the flesh, is confronted by what it fears, namely that someone might actually find confession cause for more discourse, rather than the closure of repentance. According to Foucault, the Catholic Church does not repress discourse on the 'sins against the flesh' (Marechera 1980:102) and on sexuality as such. Rather, it uses the practice of confession to control its multiple implications beyond the ecclesiastical limitation on which the idea of confession is founded. By entering the mindscape of the confessor, the confessee or the Catholic priest hopes to render the secular as a threat no longer excessive beyond the confessor-confessee relation.

However, the foremost interest of the above passage from *Black Sunlight* is in its exemplification of Christian's horizontal view of the world. This conceptual move establishes a continuum on which both Christian and the crucifix occupy the same position, rather than the elevated position on which the crucifix is placed. The nature of the connection between Christ and Christian probably explains why Christian chooses a moment when the church is empty to visit. The cumulative use of the personal pronoun 'I' indicates a radical selfhood that is also drawn to the possibility of spiritual transcendence in the figure of Christ. Indeed, as Christian enters the church, his attention is drawn towards the 'huge cross ... fixed to the roof' (Marechera 1980:28). The elevated position of the cross mirrors the ideology that Christian seeks to deconstruct, namely, one in which the Christ is inaccessible by means other than the church. Thus, for Christian to establish a personal relationship with the Christ behind the symbolism of the crucifix, he must demythologise the ideology that elevates the crucifix beyond reach of any personal encounter.

It is interesting to note that the connection that Christian establishes with the Christ behind the crucifix is purely biological. It is constituted by Christian's projection onto or reflection of himself in the image of the crucified Christ. Subsequently, what appears to be blasphemous and debasing, namely, a view of Christ in earthly terms as someone who is not above human cravings, turns out to be a more productive view in which Christ reclaims the humanity that the institutionalisation or canonisation of Christianity disavows.

One of the main implications of this demythologisation of the Christ is certainly the flattening of the terrain between Christian and Christ as exemplified by the cross falling from its elevated position above Christian and crashing 'at [his] feet' (Marechera 1980:30). This obliteration of the crucifix as it falls from the roof that engenders doubt which serves to mirror the disappointment in the ideology that elevates Christ in the first place; what comes crashing is not so much Christ the man with whom Christian establishes a human relationship but, rather, Christ the ideological/institutional cipher.

If institutionalised religion participates in the erasure of the individual by rendering the self an inevitable appendage of a religious system that nonetheless ignores the self's specificity, Christian, in retrospect,

sees his school education in Rhodesia as having been no less complicitous with this erasure. Consider the following:

'One! Two! Three! Four! ...Eleven! Twelve! Go back to your seat!' I was hot with resentment and pain. So that was school. From all the sides my head was being jammed with facts On the loan, however, were these prisoners dressed in khakhi. Over them stood an armed guard who also carried a rawhide whip. The prisoners were weeding the lawn with an intentness that made getting those weeds out the most significant thing in the whole universe (Marechera 1980:7).

This seems to come straight from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* or Mrs. Ghent's comment in *Great Expectations* about the de-animation of the human in the modern machine. There is something poignant in the coexistence of the mechanical education that the narrator describes and the prisoners whom he describes as working mechanically at the most insignificant routine under the armed guard. The choice of exact sciences to make the point about the consequences on the individual of a mechanically administered polity is apt, particularly against the background of the military metaphor which ties learning to military discipline. However, because it is from the vantage point of a participant-observer that readers experience the alienating effect of this kind of setting, there is a certain critical distance/detachment from its consequences that is achieved.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), Paulo Freire writes of the conventional teaching and learning situation as the prototype of the vertical reading of the social in terms of which the teacher relates to the students as the omniscient narrator of the conventional realist novel—the 'narrating Subject'—relates to his 'listening objects'. In this scheme, 'The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable' (Marechera 1980:52). Thus, Christian recalls his geography lesson:

When the teacher came in he spread across the blackboard a large map of the whole world Hours later, my head had become all the things on the map and it was days before I could scrub them out and

let the dirty water gurgle out of the sink (Marechera 1980:18).

What clearly emerges from this passage is the idea that the alternative to the reduction of the world to mathematical doxa or absolute/pure rationality is the mapping of the world onto a natural landscape that is also conceived in pure form that excludes the vagaries of unpredictable sociality, much less the vagaries of the radical subjectivity of *Black Sunlight*'s modernist approach. The map is no longer the representation of the world but the world itself. Indeed, one of Christian's school mates, Stephen, cultivates a corresponding attitude: 'He read a lot, as I did, but he read encyclopaedias, manuals, factual matter whereas I rigidly stuck to all kinds of fiction' (Marechera 1980:19). Confronted with the formidable combination of the apparatuses of consent and coercion, it is to 'all kinds of fiction' that the young Christian turns and, like Stephen to his facts, it is to fiction that he 'rigidly' sticks.⁶ As an experimental novel, *Black Sunlight* seeks precisely to erect itself as a deconstruction of the mechanical education. As a deconstruction, the novel strives for an awareness of the co-optation of education by the hegemonic apparatus, in which the school serves the interests of those who seek to reinforce this hegemony.

Whereas in *Black Sunlight* the church and the school already constitute a formidable metaphor of incarceration, there is nevertheless explicit treatment of the traditional prison as a total institution. The prison is founded on the contradiction between coercion (punishment) and the manufacture of consent (rehabilitation). However, in *Black Sunlight*, the latter is represented as farcical at best and, at worst without foundation. Recalling his time as a schoolboy, Christian informs us about the prisoners who worked in their schoolyard:

'On the lawn, however, were these prisoners dressed in khaki. Over them stood an armed guard who also carried a rawhide whip. The prisoners were weeding the lawn with an intentness that made getting those weeds out the most significant thing in the whole universe [T]hey were a faded picture from a faded planet on

⁶ It would seem that the play on 'rigid' is intended as a productive, rather than reductive, satire.

which I found myself (Marechera 1980:17).

Imprisonment appears as a fundamentally administrative and directly hegemonic enterprise. In *Black Sunlight*, the prison is run along the lines of Foucault's notion of punishment whereby consent is first and foremost elicited by marking the prisoner's body. Foucault continues to argue that what is called ideology is a symptom of a brutal form that underscores and/or compliments consent. In this connection, the whip, with which the guard is armed, inaugurates a much subtler system that is nonetheless dependent on the constant presence of the threat of brutal punishment.

Nevertheless, in *Black Sunlight*, readers are never taken into the prison itself in the same way that they are taken into the classroom. But there is enough evidence that the prison, like the classroom, is satisfied to produce a prisoner who would respond to the world in the mechanical manner in which Stephen responds to the kind of education that is similarly mechanical. In the same way that Stephen reacts to his education by reading 'encyclopaedias, manuals [and] factual matter', the prisoners react to their 'education' by 'weeding the lawn with an intentness that made getting those weeds out the most significant thing in the universe'. In an interview with Colin Gordon, which appeared in *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault (1980:42) informs us that:

[From] the late 1830s, it became clear that in fact the aim was not to retrain delinquents, to make them virtuous, but to regroup them within a clearly demarcated, card-indexed milieu which could serve as a tool for economic or political ends.

Even though Foucault is talking about a different context to that of *Black Sunlight*, there is nonetheless a striking similarity between the idea of imprisonment that he describes and the fact that the prisoners in *Black Sunlight* are not being taught anything, the better for the system that keeps them in prison to ensure that 'they could do nothing when they [come] out of prison' (Foucault 1980:42).

What reinforces the idea of prison as a place of conformity is that those who try to exist outside of the conformed state are thrown in jail. We read that after the banning of *Precision*, and when the 'editor tried to defy

the ruling' he ended up 'cooling his heels in jail' (Marechera 1980:12). This conformity is also captured by what Christian tells us about the social in its entirety as prison-like. Pondering what it would be like to be free as he hangs upside down in the chicken-yard, it is not to a different scenario that his imagination takes him but, rather, to other images of confinement:

Eating sadza and beans, sadza and sugar in jail. In boarding school, in college. Sadza, that supposed cornerstone of my authentic image. That icon of African greatness, my great chief, snoring in thought (Marechera 1980:7).

Marechera's conceptual view of the notion of prison and of imprisonment is already discernible in the last sentence of the above quotation. The transformation of sadza from its being the 'icon of African greatness' into being the icon of prison diet is similar to the transformation of tobacco into the icon of conformity at Devil's End, allegedly the icon of the struggle against conformity to the state's design. Like sadza in prison, at Devil's End it is tobacco which is rationed. Indeed, Devil's End is a prototype of a prison. Like the prisoners at Christian's school, who are marked by their khaki uniforms, the inmates of Devil's End are marked by their 'denims and cotton with bare toes and beads'. Again, vodka is the preferred drink, so that wherever Christian goes he is offered either tobacco or vodka. There is a subtle comment that the novel appears to be making regarding the organisation of Devil's End around communist stereotypes such as sharing and equality, which nonetheless conceal the fact that Devil's End in its entirety is a stereotype.

Now, let us consider what is taking place outside Devil's End. We learn that: 'The jails were full. There were executions. Nick was never identified and was buried as an unknown' (Marechera 1980:28). Except for the elaborate description of the execution room at Devil's End, there is not much of a difference between Devil's End and the manner in which the state treats its detractors. In fact, the leader of the opposition at Devil's End, Christian, observes about the place:

It's this place, a sort of labyrinth. All the ones you meet are as lost as yourself and after a while you cease to take any human thing

The Political Dimension of Dambudzo Marechera's Black Sunlight

seriously. You just think of how long ago you had it in you to want to look for the way out of it all. To escape. I suppose you haven't thought of trying to get out of here? It's all the same really (Marechera 1980:61).

In the above quotation can be found all that one associates with prison and prison life: Devil's End is described as 'a sort of labyrinth', it dehumanises, so that, as Christian says, 'you cease to take any human thing seriously'. In this scheme of things, it would appear that as an alternative to the devices of the state, Devil's End is not as alternative as it appears to be. The only viable alternative is literature itself and only if it is able to reflect on its own limits. Indeed, *Black Sunlight* is such an attempt to reflect on the limits and the possibilities of literature. Nonetheless, people whom the various oppositional and state institutions like the church, the school and the prison fail to transform are considered mad and confined in asylums.

Asylums, as Foucault argues, are a product of a discourse about madness (psychiatry), rather than products of madness as such. Indeed, Foucault argues that psychiatry is a permanent function of social order and makes use of the asylums, which suggests that one cannot speak of madness as such.

In *Black Sunlight*, Marechera takes up this idea of madness as a fabrication of psychiatry to some interesting extent. It is Chris, we are told, who goes to the madhouse after *Precision* is banned and Devil's End is captured. In the novel, Chris serves to illustrate the critical pressure under which Marechera places the notion of madness. Chris is by all accounts mad, at least if we take Susan's word for it, which is that his obsession with women's underwear results from the fact that he had 'a lousy childhood in a motherfucking environment ...' (Marechera 1980:40). However, let me consider this 'madness' and there work out the novel's argument as I have framed it above. It is interesting to note that we first find out about Chris's 'madness' from a conversation between Katherine and Susan. For his part, Chris believes that 'You are only mad when there are other people around you, but never when you are on your own'. He also believes that 'It's people who manufacture all kinds of craziness' (Marechera 1980:71).

The Black Sunlight Organisation, in which Chris appears to hold an important administrative position, altogether appears as a cluster of

renegades who, taken separately, exemplify various aspects of what I would call a 'psychic disorder'. As I will show in the analysis of Franz's brother and Chris, these two members of the Black Sunlight Organisation are, to a certain extent, depicted as evincing a psychic disorder, not because it is in fact the case but, rather, for Marechera to test the assumptions that circulate madness as a self-evident condition against the implicit view that madness does not exist until we call it. The novel does this by establishing a chaotic social order in which no position exists from which to oppose sanity to insanity except that which mirrors the chaos or 'madness' of the social order itself.

If Devil's End reflects the general social and political 'madness' that has driven its inmates into a pariah state, then it is interesting that Franz's brother would say about himself that 'I am what the great cunt wants me to be. A kind of one-slogan agitator whose very obsession is the proof of his tolerated madness' (Marechera 1980:70). Needless to say, the 'Great Cunt' is the sum total of all that which is not only one-dimensional but, also, renders all in its sway one-dimensional as well. As Franz's brother elaborates:

'It's inside you. It's everything you are. It's the soul that's inside you looking out into the world. It's everything outside yourself that looks inside you. That's the great cunt. ... Do you see what I mean? Do you? You are not there and in great darkness and all at once you find you weren't there at all but in some great big womb that's going to shit you out after nine month (Marechera 1980:70).

Thus, according to Franz's brother, the real madness is to surrender one's mind to the dictates of the society that has become inseparable from the 'Great Cunt'; hence the way in which he not only defines the 'Great Cunt' but, also, the way in which he shouts the slogan 'DOWN WITH THE GREAT CUNT!' (Marechera 1980:64). For his part, Chris introduces into the Black Sunlight Organisation's 'unwritten constitution' (Marechera 1980:69) an apparently inane question, 'how is Susan in bed?' which turns out to serve the same purpose as Franz's brother's slogan 'down with the great cunt'.

However, besides his obsession with women's underwear, Chris's

'madness' is also conveyed by Katherine:

... Kathy [Katherine], have you got any clean underwear I can borrow?

It's out on the line, somewhere. Unless Chris has been at it again.

Didn't he [Chris] go see that analyst?

Katherine nodded.

She nodded very meaningfully.

Susan gaped. She slit her throat with a forefinger gesture:

You mean ...?

Yes, Katherine said (Marechera 1980:40).

In the above quotation, particularly in the part where Kathy says 'Unless Chris has been at it again,' the idea of Chris's habit of stealing women's underwear is reinforced. In effect, this means that Chris's first degree of madness manifests itself as a sexual disorder. Let me go back to the source of this first degree of Chris's madness which Susan locates in his 'lousy childhood in a motherfucking environment' (Marechera 1980:40). I want to illustrate the effect of Chris's childhood as described by Susan on his adulthood. It would seem that the expression that Susan uses to contextualise Chris's madness, 'a lousy childhood in a motherfucking environment' is an allusion to Christian's own childhood. Christian informs us that, 'Susan [his mother] was in there with another client. We were eating the proceeds from her last but one client' (Marechera 1980:5). Therefore, the impression that Susan's expression creates is that Chris's mother, like Christian's, also earned a living from prostituting herself; hence '*motherfucking environment*'. From this perspective Chris is right to say that those who think that he is mad, because of his obsession with women's underwear will think so even if they knew the source of his obsession and that his obsession may not be a sign of madness after all.

The second degree of Chris's alleged madness comes up in the part of the conversation between Katherine and Susan, in which Susan implies by her gesture that Chris may have murdered the (psycho-)analyst. I want to insist, as Foucault argues, that maybe killing the psychiatrist was not a bad thing after all. In fact, in an interview that Christian conducts with the opposition leader at Devil's End, the issue of 'killing' the system that

alienates the workers, rather than seek accommodation with it, is the way to go. Needless to say, the psychiatrist that Chris kills is part of the system that defines madness and, by doing so, reinforces social order.

Finally, that Chris's madness is used as a device to interrogate the mainstream conception of madness is further illustrated by Franz's brother, the political propagandist of the Black Sunlight Organisation, who does not consider himself mad, despite evincing what in the mainstream view of madness would be a symptom of madness. Explaining his attitude, Franz's brother claims that 'I am what the great cunt wants me to be. A kind of one-slogan agitator whose very obsession is the proof of his tolerated madness' (Marechera 1980:70). I have already highlighted Franz's brother's view that madness is surrendering to the 'great cunt', and it should suffice to say that it is a greater madness that is at stake in *Black Sunlight*.

Conclusion

The questions that *Black Sunlight* asks speak of what it means to live inside and/or outside of institutional knowledge: what it means to be an *historical subject* inside and/or outside the institutional organisation of historical subjectivity, what it means to be a *sexual being* inside and/or outside the institutional organisation of sexuality, and what it means to *know* inside and/or outside of the organisation of knowledge in the school system, the asylum and/or in certain forms of systemic incarceration/imprisonment. Proceeding from the commonplace critique of Marechera's writing as eccentric, individualistic and, as such, without any bearing on any recognisable subject or issue, I proposed the view that *Black Sunlight* appears not to have a recognisable subject-matter because its subject matter is the process whereby a work of literature arrives at its subject-matter in the first place.

What I have argued in this essay, is the manner in which *Black Sunlight* attempts to re-read Althusser's influential, but ultimately limited, understanding of the 'behaviour' of the superstructure which, in classical Marxism, is not given the attention that Marechera gives it in *Black Sunlight*. Whereas Althusser sought to repair the Marxist limitation by situating discourse on the Marxist agenda, in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation' he retained Marxism's most

problematic presumption, namely, that power is negative. I have shown how *Black Sunlight* rejects this view, by arguing instead that power is productive of other sites of power, or, to use Antonio Gramsci's term, hegemonic. As such, again to invoke Foucault's idea of the productive force of power, there is no singular position from which the subject is 'hailed'. Indeed, that Christian is able to reject the collective purchase of the chief's 'our', of Blanche Goodfather's anthropology and of the self-aggrandizing marginality of the Black Sunlight Organisation, testifies to a far more complex view of power and contestation that *Black Sunlight* presupposes.

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Hervé Mitoumba Tindy

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Postgraduate Student
University of Johannesburg