

Dambudzo Marechera in His Own Exile:

The Love Song of a Subversive Poet

Dambudzo Marechera saját száműzetésében:

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Table of contents:

1. <u>Introduction: "...an overwhelming question":</u>	3.
2. <u>"And how should I presume?": Authorship and Authority</u>	5.
2.1. <u>The Author</u>	5.
2.2. <u>Issues of Authorship</u>	12.
2.3. <u>The Authority</u>	15.
3. <u>"Do I Dare?' and, 'Do I Dare?'"': The Poem and its Crisis</u>	19.
3.1. <u>Translation and Transformation</u>	19.
3.2. <u>Suspension and Subversion</u>	24.
4. <u>Conclusion: "And would have been worth it, after all..."</u>	31.
5. <u>Appendix</u>	32.
6. <u>Bibliography</u>	35.

1. "...an overwhelming question": Introduction

I am against everything
Against war and those against
War. Against whatever diminishes
Th'individual's blind impulse.¹

I propose the quotation above as a motto for the exploration that follows, as it may serve to highlight and contextualize the most significant and conspicuous aspects of the individual, the poet, and the author Dambudzo Marechera, in the poem and through the poem discussed. Charles William Dambudzo Marechera (1952-1987) was indeed against everything; his writing and his life defy literary and biographical analysis at every turn, as its methodology doubtlessly diminishes the individual's blind impulse, an impulse which the author found diminished by cultural and worldly authorities in colonial Rhodesia, England, and independent Zimbabwe. Simultaneously, it also eludes definition what in turn could or might comprise the blind impulse of an individual, the individual as an author, and the author as individual: an African author, a black author, a writer, an articulator of poetry. Or indeed, to rephrase my enquiry by reinterpreting Michel Foucault's overwhelming question: what, then, is Marechera, the author?

It is not the purpose of this paper to answer that question. It is to explore and examine the *how* and the *why* by which the author questions any authoritative power threatening his blind impulse in one of the most sensitive periods of his lifetime, the return to independent Zimbabwe in 1982 after eight years of semi-voluntary exile, and in one of the most salient elements of his literary output at the time: the poem "Hooked A-Gallop".² For this end, I propose and follow a twofold methodology: first a theoretical approach to the manifestations of cultural and worldly authorities in Marechera's life and literary career and second, an in-depth exploration of the poem itself and the themes of translation, acculturation, appropriation of language via poetic discourse, performativity, and the suspension caused by the appearance of T. S. Eliot, Prufrock, and "the overwhelming question" in the text itself.

This I will attempt in line with the ever-present trajectory of the binary oppositions between white and black, the cultural and worldly characteristics of colonization, and finally T. S. Eliot and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as points of reference, as well as

¹ First stanza of "The Bar-Stool Edible Worm" in Veit-Wild, Flora ed. *Cemetery of Mind*, Africa World Press, 1999: 59. This stanza serves as a motto or a preamble, and do not comprise part of the poem that is to be analysed. All poems taken from "Buddy's Selected Poems", chapter IV. in the source above. For the full text of all the poems of the author discussed and quoted see Appendix.

² Ibid., 70., see Appendix for full text. The will be quoted in its entirety only chapter 3.

creating a three-layered palimpsest from the body of the poem, the theoretical works to be used, and the interviews with Marechera, to give voice to the author, and to witness how he manages to subvert cultural and worldly authority. I will attempt to formulate and contextualize the Barthesian and Foucaultian concepts of authorship and authority through Harold Bloom's revisionary ratios of poetic influence. Ultimately, and with Eliot as my ever-present guide I will attempt to traverse the various textual depths, spatial and temporal dimensions of the poem in every plausible and relevant context: to explore the possibility of the love song of Dambudzo Marechera, the articulation of the love song, the poetic 'I' in poetry.

How, then, should I begin?

2. “And how should I presume?”: Authorship and Authority

2.1. The Author

Born the third son out of nine children in his family, the individual who later became known as Dambudzo Marechera was named Tambu (short for Tambudzai) by his parents, a name that in the Shona language means “the one who brings trouble”.³ This he did, in his private, public and literary life as well. The various sorts of *trouble* brought by this *individual* and his blind impulse differ in their nature and their consequence: petty theft culminating in imprisonment,⁴ participation in student protest, general misbehavior and attempt at arson which brought about his expulsion from the University of Rhodesia⁵ and then New College in Oxford,⁶ as well as the publication of his novel *Black Sunlight* which was first banned in his home country, the now-independent Zimbabwe. However, the clash with, disapproval of, and mutual misunderstanding with various authorities, be they worldly, literary, or both, seem to form the stem of his *troubles* and conflicts, as well as the issue discussed in the poem at hand. To gain a better perspective and understanding of the author’s views on authority, I will attempt to draw a schematic of his connection and confrontation with English studies, literary canon and history, and to see why his choice ultimately fell on T.S. Eliot as a symbol of authority, and the language of the colonizers to put his writing on paper.

The choice of English as conveyor, the literary medium from author to reader is in itself problematic. The choice of language determines the audience, therefore opting for English instead of Shona, the author’s native language is already a symbolic and performative act, by which the author consciously excludes a significant part of his native society. Paradoxically, writing in English is inclusive as well, by reaching a much larger and wider target audience: foreign readers, and the intelligentsia abroad as well as that of the native country. Through this, writing in the foreign language of the ex-colonisers is, perhaps, the best way to reconnect with a varied and diverse cultural background and civilization.⁷ However, Marechera’s case is somewhat different.

For a *black* author to write in *white* English is to oppose and subvert the very cultural oppression of the “civilizing nation”. Pertinent to my argument is the manner in which Franz Fanon defined the black man’s attitude towards white language: mastery of the language is a

³ Veit-Wild, Flora, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on His Life and Work*, Africa World Press, 2004: 49. [in the following referred to as *Source Book*]

⁴ See for instance Marechera’s letter to James Currey, Cardiff Prison, 9. Dec. 1997 in *ibid.* 192-194.

⁵ *Ibid.* 124-125.

⁶ *Ibid.* 160.

⁷ Gérard, Albert, *Research in African Literatures*, Indiana University Press, 1970: 284.

remarkable power, as the black man is judged by his ability to use it.⁸ This leads to the rising inferiority complex among the most educated blacks, as they do nothing else apart from “proving the existence of a black civilization to the white world” by the very usage of the white language.⁹ To use the language against itself, as I will argue that Marechera did, is to “turn against the master”¹⁰ intellectually, to turn the weapon of the authority against itself.

In the early 1980s, just as many post-colonial countries following their independence, Zimbabwe promoted “nationalist” literature versus “internationalist”, and the use of the native languages Shona and Ndebele. Faced with inquiries regarding the choice of language, symbolism, the use of mythology and the target audience, Marechera reflected poignantly: “I can never give an honest answer to that because it immediately strikes at the roots of my education’s irrelevance to myself and to the new Zimbabwe”. Latin and Greek he was taught and he studied on his own volition: English is only his second language, a “problem for any educated in this country after Independence. Your own mind is against you, and if you write in English the very language from the start is against you”¹¹. Education, in this sense, meant both a blessing and a curse for the author.

In terms of cultural clash and methods of expression, English education was a curse, but as a way of advancement socially and intellectually, it was rather a blessing. Through the sordid conditions of his childhood and youth in an impoverished township in Rusape, Marechera became gradually distanced and alienated from his family and his cultural roots. *The House of Hunger*, his first prose work to be published and arguably the critically most acclaimed and anthologized work of his oeuvre gives a testimony of those times.¹² The only possible and plausible *escape* from the house of hunger meant education.

Along with many of Zimbabwe’s later leading politicians and intellectuals, Dambudzo Marechera attended St. Augustine’s school (from 1966 to 1971). The process of a European and Christian-based education and the subsequent acculturation further alienated the pupils from their parent culture, though the strict confines and safe lodgings of the school also provided asylum and safety from the pupils’ often troubled family background, as in the case of the author.¹³ This, combined with the increasingly tense atmosphere due to the

⁸ ‘Fanon, Franz: “Negro and Language”’ in Lodge, David & Wood, Nigel, eds., *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 3rd. ed., Haslow, United Kingdom, 2008: 127.

⁹ Ibid. 131, 135.

¹⁰ Ibid. 136.

¹¹ Interview with Marechera on *Mindblast*, and his views on language and audience in *Source Book*: 310.

¹² First published in Heinemann African Writers Series in 1979.

¹³ *Source Book*: 61.

growing enmity between the liberation forces and the strict regime of Ian Smith, created the feeling of being “mentally colonized” by the very system their compatriots were fighting against, and proved to be one of the major incentives for future Zimbabwean writers.¹⁴ The grave and evident discrepancy between the subject matter that would have sparked the interest of most black students (such as African liberation movements and contemporary African literature) and the actual contents of the English studies syllabus in history and literature proved to be another point of confrontation between Marechera, his classmates and his teachers.¹⁵

The years the author spent at St. Augustine’s contributed significantly to the broadening of his literary perspective. Beside his compulsory readings he became acquainted with the Heinemann African Writers Series. Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child* was the first novel written by an African writer that he read which spurred him to become a writer, and to write in English.¹⁶ A “keen accomplice in his own mental colonization”, ambiguously Marechera used the English language, a foreign syntactical and semantic body, its alien phraseology “as a duck takes to water”.¹⁷

The entity, the alien body that is the English language is therefore not only the means for acculturation and cultural oppression, but the very opposite: claiming the language as a mediator, means become the end and vice versa, to struggle and fight with written language, just as to fight and struggle with the spoken word: “... there was the unease, the shock of being suddenly struck by stuttering, of being deserted by the very medium I was to use in all my art”,¹⁸ an art not restrained by nationality or language. I follow Stewart Crehan’s argument concerning Marechera’s *writing*, that is both an occupation and “what theory calls *écriture*: that which defiles generic or national boundaries”, is subject and home to endless interrelations and intertextuality, as opposed to institutionalized *literature* and *canon* in the academic sense.¹⁹ Language choice in this sense is subversive of the author’s identity as African, Zimbabwean, black, just as *writing* is subversive of the nation. By this Marechera

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Commentary by Tafataona Mahoso, Marechera’s classmate and Father Daniel Pearce in *ibid.* 63-64.

¹⁶ “Escape from the “House of Hunger”: Marechera Talks about His Life” in *ibid.* 3.

¹⁷ Ibid. 4.

¹⁸ Marechera had a strong stammer which he managed to control in his later years, but it predominated his youth at Rusape and at St. Augustine’s. Ibid.

¹⁹ ‘Stewart Crehan: “Down and Out in London and Harare: Marechera’s Subversion of “African Literature”” in Veit-Wild, Flora & Chennelles, Anthony, eds. *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*, Africa World Press, 1999: 268.

started the process to claim English as his own, the means for the “security he needed”,²⁰ an intellectual property which were to become the “nearest thing to stability”²¹ he would ever get. The alien entity became familiar, second language a second nature.

The roots of what can be called as “subversion of nationality and authority”, a major element in Marechera’s writing and attitude can be traced back to his studies at the University of Rhodesia, now University of Zimbabwe. However, the one year²² he spent there before being expelled had a twofold effect on his later views on worldly and literary authority, both in word and act. Due to the intensifying armed struggle for independence and the alleged support it received from black students, the University came under heavy criticism by various magazines, which in turn led to restrictive measures by the government. Unhappy with the answers and actions of the university principal Robert Craig, the students took action and organized a protest, which culminated in disciplinary proceedings and the expulsion of six students, including Marechera.²³ This act caused much outrage among the students, who literally stormed the University and caused significant damage to property before being chased off by the police.²⁴ The riot turned into a rout. Many of the participants were later to become leading figures in independent Zimbabwe’s politics and culture. At the time, some of them had to flee across the border illegally while others, like Marechera, obtained passports and left the country. Feeling persecuted by the white government, this only strengthened Marechera’s later resentment against the independent black government, which he felt was little better than its oppressive white predecessor, especially as many a former classmate could be found there after the country’s independence.

Another and probably just as important factor in the development of Marechera as author were his literary influences at the time. A preoccupation seemed to prevail among black students in the English Department concerning early 20th century literature, especially those authors who depicted the individual’s struggle in and against a not necessarily hostile but somehow incomprehensible modern society, such as D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, and T. S. Eliot.²⁵ Eliot and Ezra Pound were reportedly a major influence on the poetry of the author at this time; he participated in various creative writing courses at this

²⁰ Commentary by Father Prosser of St. Augustine’s in *Source Book*: 69.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Marechera was accepted in March 1972 and expelled in August 1973 after the student protests at the University. Ibid. 95.

²³ Ibid. 124-125.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. 120.

period. His first poems were published in *Two Tone* magazine:²⁶ the first official publication of his poetry and work in general.

A final significant and recurring element in the author's stay at various centers of education throughout his life is the fact that due to his social background he always had to rely on grants and benefits to finance his studies. State grants provided for his secondary education at St. Augustine's as well as his English Honours Course at the University of Rhodesia. After leaving the country he was granted political asylum in Britain and a Junior Common Room scholarship at New College, Oxford, which was sponsored by money raised from Oxford undergraduates to support "Third World students selected by the British Council".²⁷ This ever-present sense of dependence caused much psychological pressure on all the black students, even those who lacked the constant and vehement resentment of officialdom and authority as did Marechera. At this point the primary concern the author found himself faced with, along with many of his compatriots, was to "survive mentally, to hospitalize ourselves in a country where police dogs and other sorts of brutalization were not a day-to-day affair". However, he also recalls the lingering feeling of himself and his generation of exiles being "mentally raped and that like any rape case we would never really recover from the psychological consequences".²⁸ His overall impression of scholarly studies, intercultural and interracial relations in New College and their effect on the mindset of a young, impoverished black student surrounded by walls which "reflect impressively and imposingly centuries of English academic tradition"²⁹ could be described by the author's own realization of forcibly being formulated as an "intellectual Uncle Tom", of "being mentally raped"³⁰.

Subject to mental oppression, alienation, and being unable to cope with his surroundings, Marechera managed to turn frustration into inspiration, at least as far as his future writing is concerned, especially *The House of Hunger*, which was written and compiled during the author's Oxford years and after his eventual expulsion on 15 March 1976. Marechera was desperate to stay at Oxford and not being forced to return to Rhodesia, but his increasingly erratic and hostile behavior towards lecturers, fellow students, and college staff

²⁶ This took place in 1972-1973. Six of these poems have been preserved and can still be found in *Cemetery of Mind*. Editor's note concerning publication dates of earliest preserved poems by the author in *Cemetery of Mind*: 219.

²⁷ *Source Book*: 154.

²⁸ Taken from an interview with Marechera by Fiona Lloyd, 14 May 1986 in *ibid.* 152.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Taken from an interview with Marechera by John Gambanga, "Writing with a cockroach eye-view of life", 1983 in *ibid.*

resulted in a psychiatric examination, which in turn was received as a grave insult by the author: being labeled mentally ill by the same authoritative society he considered ill in itself:³¹ “when someone says you are insane, don’t think you are insane, you are the only sane guy in the whole world”.³² Nevertheless, his stay at the college had its long-lasting effect, which was in part due to the sheer amount of literary works read, and criticism received by the author from lecturers for his lack of objectivity in academic essays, the resentment of “the objective way for looking at poetry, at a play or at a novel”, for “treasuring more and more the personal response rather than the response full of footnotes”.³³ No matter how contradictory they might have been, insane authoritative society seems to have had its benefits after all, in developing the author’s own methodology of a literary response that is both personal and full of footnotes, an issue that will become crucial when analyzing the poem.

Despite these ambiguous benefits Marechera managed to stay on the borderline of society, social and literary acceptability, as well as nationality and internationality: it was due to his disdain and mistrust of various manifestations of the representatives of these authorities that he spent his nights in parks and on benches; that he made a public scandal out of the Guardian Fiction Prize he received for *The House of Hunger*;³⁴ that he managed to get himself banned from the Africa Centre in London, perhaps the best refuge to African intelligentsia-in-exile in Britain,³⁵ and that he returned to independent Zimbabwe with less than a clear conception of his future, which eventually led to his bleak disappointment with his home-country.

Marechera’s own writing reflects this subversion of identity, nationality, and authority, and his tendency to bite the hand that feeds in what he describes as intellectual anarchism, which is “full of contradictions in the sense that it can never achieve its goals.” It essentially ceases to be anarchism if it achieves any goals, thus one has to be in a “perpetual state of change”,³⁶ a contradiction on a metonymic level. This same contradiction-riddled anarchism reinforced his “total hatred for a job which includes organizing human beings”,³⁷

³¹ There is a great discrepancy between the author’s version of the events surrounding his expulsion and the facts obtained from various sources. Due to the perceived insult, later he chose to narrate the story as if he were forced to choose between being treated as mentally ill or being sent away, out of which he chose the latter. See *Source Book*: 160 and ‘Escape from the “House of Hunger”: Marechera Talks about His Life’ in *ibid.* 30.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.* 24.

³⁴ *Source Book*: 188.

³⁵ Marechera was banned from the center by its director Alastair Niven after smashing its front windows in a fit of anger when he wanted to stay in the building overnight. *Ibid.* 238.

³⁶ ‘Escape from the “House of Hunger”: Marechera Talks about His Life’ in *ibid.* 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 33.

be it socio-cultural or literary authority, the bureaucratic machine that is the modern state with its ideological, juridical, legislative, censoring, and religious apparatus, coercive and oppressive for the individual.³⁸ It is in this light that I examine the author's questioning of literary, worldly, and cultural authority.

³⁸ 'Down and Out in London and Harare' in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*: 270.

2.2. Issues of Authorship

Pursuing the answer to the *overwhelming question* I stumble upon the author as authority. The nature of Dambudzo Marechera as *author* eludes definition. Just as his continuous refusal to yield to the limitations of movement and thinking posed on him by worldly powers, so is his existence as a writer, the nature of his very authorship difficult, if not impossible, to pin down, to characterize, to analyze by conventional literary methods. His writing supports and discourages such attempts at the same time as they stand well enough on their own as pieces of literary works, yet simultaneously seem inseparably linked to the person of the author. Here I will attempt the nigh-impossible.

What is Marechera and what is his writing? Not yet the performative act of poetic articulation that is to be discussed at a later point, but the notion of writing and its relation to its author: the notion or function of writing in Foucault's sense, which gives rise to the "transcendental anonymity" of the Author-God beyond corporeal limitations. It is a writing that combines the "transcendental hidden meaning" as well as a possibility for critical approach, for deciphering "implicit significations".³⁹ Foucault arbitrarily narrows down his scrutiny to the level of discourse, and it is the discourse between Marechera and the subject of his question that I examine. This leads from the writing function to the author function that is appropriative, and forms a significant part of the institution that legitimizes, articulates, and contextualizes literary discourse.⁴⁰ It is also important that the author function does not necessarily point out one single individual, nor does it simply refer to the very specific entity of the Author-God, but to several possible selves and identities, which might come to encompass and signify not so much a person or identity but rather an idea, a concept of authority.⁴¹ It is this authority that presides over literature and literary canon and legitimizes the rise of the problematic terms *black* and *African* literature.

Writing, in the context Barthes gives to it, is more preferable a term than literature, as it denotes the body of the text itself as well as the act of writing, performative in nature as it disembodies, separates, dislocates author and text, author from text, the text from ownership.⁴² Identity is replaced by the identity of the body of writing itself, the author dies to give birth to the text as a piece of writing, independent from its creator, a writing that is no

³⁹ I use Foucault's own terminology to outline the parameters of the Author-God concerning Marechera and his subversion of literary authority. 'Foucault, Michel: "What is an Author?"' in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 283.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 285-286.

⁴² 'Barthes, Roland: "The Death of the Author"' in *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1977: 147.

longer in the shadow of the author, an extension of his / her corporeal and literary existence.⁴³ Yet in Marechera's case it is not simply for the birth of the reader that a dislocation of the author is required. It is for the birth of the author as a writer, free from the shackles of his own writing being constantly under the shadow of literary criticism and literary history as authority as well as such incarcerating terms as *postcolonial* and *African literature*. The very term *literature* contextualizes and narrativizes *writing* to pin it down, to define it, to explain it. It sets geographical, social, and cultural limits to both writing and writer. It is this authoritative methodology that Marechera refused to bow to, contemptuously dismissing the label *African writer*: "if you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you".⁴⁴

It may not be necessary, or indeed desirable, to define Marechera or his writing according to these terms, for he managed to do that himself. "For my pains, I am a writer" were the first words with which Marechera introduced himself to Stewart Crehan who recalls the author having a "natural talent for fictionalizing his life", feeling he was "playing a role that had been played before: that of the nonconformist avant-garde writer", a "writer (...) out of his time".⁴⁵ Indeed, Marechera *acted out* the role of the writer, defying definition and living up to it at the same time. In this sense the way he subverted his own nationality and blackness is equal in both means and impact to his subversion of the myth of the Author-God. What Barthes managed to demystify, Marechera managed to re-mystify. Writing, so Barthes says, is always performative, the voice and body of the author are nullified in the moment of saying and creating, the act of writing is an oblique, negative space which gives birth to the text, as a dislocated body.⁴⁶ Marechera took up this role deliberately, simply to deny any opportunity to define him by any other parameters than his own writing. He became Barthes's Author-God on purpose.

For Marechera tricking the Author-God by impersonating it is tricking and defying criticism, explanation, and the fate of being catalogued. The critic, the literary authority, achieves victory when the text is explained, and the text is best explained by giving name to the daemon that is the author, framing him and his constituents: his history, family, psyche, and in Marechera's case, culture and nationality.⁴⁷ "For me, a writer is a writer" was the author's response for being criticized for refusing the title *African writer* in favor of a

⁴³ Ibid. 142.

⁴⁴ "Down and Out in London and Harare" in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*: 268.

⁴⁵ Reminiscences by Stewart Crehan, Veit.-Wild, *Source Book*, 234-235.

⁴⁶ "The Death of the Author": 142.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 147.

European one.⁴⁸ Returning to independent Zimbabwe strengthened the notion of internationality, the loss of nationality, and the overpowering sense of not belonging anywhere. It was partly due to the irrelevance of his profession and vocation as a writer, because a developing country “needs teachers, it needs development officers, it needs people who will help to build a better future”, as well as his constant and ever-present distrust of institutionalized nationhood: “When politicians talk about culture, one had better pack one’s rucksack and run, because it means the beginning of unofficial censorship”.⁴⁹ This attitude adopted by his own country abhorred Marechera, as for him the “heavy emphasis on developing cultural values” is inextricably linked with the “products of your own mind (...) being segregated into official and unofficial categories”.⁵⁰

Here I return to Crehan’s argument and Marechera’s subversion of “African” literature and nationality, and through it the subversion of authority. For the author, the replacement of imperialism and neocolonialism with post-colonialism, national cultural censorship is merely the “replacement of white faces with black faces”,⁵¹ the whole coercive apparatus of the modern state that is intolerable, as it suppresses the individual, gives definition, explains, places one into a catalogue of names. *African literature* is merely the literary, ideological apparatus parallel to state power, both of which are antithetic to the role of the writer as a writer in Marechera’s sense. That is how the responsibility Marechera has as a writer is “not so much to society but to my voice”, holding a power much like a sort 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 whatever, for having that talent”.⁵² It is by this turning against the master in Fanon’s sense and the application of intellectual anarchism in written word, spoken word, and act that Marechera succeeded in subverting the label of *African* writer and his blackness in a European and post-colonial literary and political context, and managed to reenact the role of the Author-God from his own writing. Out of this it is poetic language, the liminal space between written word and spoken word that I will deal with, and the questioning and subversion of literary authority. The means and the end: poetic discourse and T. S. Eliot.

⁴⁸ ““Escape from the “House of Hunger”: Marechera Talks about His Life’ in *Source Book*: 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Down and Out in London and Harare” in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*: 270.

⁵² ““Escape from the “House of Hunger”: Marechera Talks about His Life’ in *Source Book*: 41-42.

2.3. The Authority

Before dealing with the temporal and spatial issues the poem “Hooked A-Gallop” itself raises in matters of language and discourse, I will take a theoretical approach towards the literary authority in question: T. S. Eliot and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. My purpose is not so much a comprehensive analysis of what poet and poem stand for, how they correlate with one another, but rather searching for what they might communicate to posterity in addition to what aspect of poem and poet managed to urge Dambudzo Marechera to raise his *overwhelming question*.

After having inquired what Marechera was or is (with no definite answer) I am obliged to ask: what is Eliot? Returning to Foucault’s argument, as far as Eliot is an author, his name is a proper name. It is not a mere reference or an indicating gesture: it is “the equivalent of a description”.⁵³ The name *T. S. Eliot* in this sense signifies more than the individual, the author of certain works in literary criticism and poetic discourse, but it is also transdiscursive: author of a theory and a tradition of poetry. In Eliot the categories of transdiscursivity and those authors whom Foucault calls as “founders of discursivity” are somewhat blurred, as Eliot is responsible for the principles of poetic textual formation, an “endless possibility of discourse”,⁵⁴ that is poetic discourse, poetic language and allusions across spatial and temporal distances. It is this method with which the names *Eliot* and *Prufrock* are used by Marechera in his overwhelming question, and it is primarily in this regard that I treat Eliot as *authority*.

Just as in the case of the facts concerning Marechera’s life and his own subsequent narration thereof, there is a great discrepancy between the image Eliot produced as poet and critic and the image that was reproduced of him, both in his own lifetime and posthumously. His myth ranges from being “the most influential man of letters” in the twentieth century, to refusing to play only the “role of the Poet” and forming the “nucleus of an insidious authoritarian conspiracy” as well as a “sick, suffering and defeated personality”.⁵⁵ Ignoring the fact that most of this could well have been said of Marechera, Eliot’s influence and authority is nonetheless hard to ignore or indeed, to live up to. Eliot’s literary authority can be traced, however sporadically, in his own essays on criticism and poetry, at least in the sense Dambudzo Marechera treats him in his poem.

⁵³ “What is an Author?” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 284.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁵⁵ Kenner, Hugh, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, Mcdowell, New York, 1959: ix-x (preface).

There is a binary opposition between critic and reader as Eliot says: “the critic must not coerce, and he must not make judgments of worse and better. He must simply elucidate; the reader will form the correct judgment for himself.”⁵⁶ This is true as far as the birth of the reader is concerned according to Barthes’s definition,⁵⁷ but what does it say about the author as reader; reader and critic of authors before his time? Eliot might or might not have a post-colonial narrative of poetry in mind along with a more *traditional* one, but Marechera certainly has, as his poetry is not only written in English, but it is English poetry as well as African, black, Zimbabwean etc. Moreover, the use of English as a second language by the author, his studies at the University of Rhodesia and Oxford, his “remarkable degree of sensitiveness, erudition, sense of fact and sense of history, and generalizing power” made it possible, in Eliot’s sense, for the “poetic critic (...) to criticize poetry in order to create poetry”:⁵⁸ to talk (write) back via poetic discourse. However, the author’s origin, blackness, subverted nationality, and intellectual anarchism again seem to complicate matters.

Poetry, unbridled, in Marechera’s view is “an attempt to put into words what is inside a person emotionally, intellectually, imaginatively. The poet’s job is to find the equivalent, the verbal correlative of a particular feeling. This idea is from T. S. Eliot. The only difficulty is that there are no words for what you are feeling”.⁵⁹ A definition is given, a source is acknowledged, Eliot’s own objective correlative is reiterated and transformed. A second, narrower definition of *African* poetry and its unique stance in world literature is that its writers, especially the younger ones “have got that universal experience of other people’s literatures”, as well as a note of conviction that “what we call African literature will be the poorer if we ignore the influences from other countries”.⁶⁰ At another point, the author replied to an inquiry about his literary influences that he finds “the question oblique, not to the point. It assumes a writer *has* to be influenced by other writers, has to be influenced by what he reads. This may be so.”⁶¹

It is possible to trace the intellectual anarchist in the author’s ambiguous views on literary influences: “I wrote my essays and tried to insult (privately) English Literature by crossing the Channel on a translation ferry to continental Europe”.⁶² Continental European

⁵⁶ ‘Eliot, T. S.: “The Perfect Critic”’ in *The Sacred Wood*, Faber & Faber, London, 1997: 10.

⁵⁷ See sub-chapter 2.2.

⁵⁸ “The Perfect Critic” in *The Sacred Wood*: 12.

⁵⁹ Interview with the author by Flora Veit-Wild in *Cemetery of Mind*: 209.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 212.

⁶¹ “Escape from the “House of Hunger”: Marechera Talks about His Life” in *Source Book*: 1.

⁶² “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature” in *ibid.* 361.

literature, via translation, is clearly placed in contrast with English literature, which constitutes the central problem concerning Marechera's influences, his acknowledgement, and his subsequent criticism and questioning of authority, literary canon and his place in it. Here I link the author and his question back to Eliot and his claim about the living and the dead in literature, that an author is best compared to his predecessors, under their shadow, that examining the living poet among that dead "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously".⁶³ But can Marechera's erudition, his experience, and his knowledge and use of the language as a form of rebellion mean that Eliot, the individual and the poet, becomes his *literary and poetic ancestor*, as author? In a sense yes, it can.

To further my examination and to form a link of theory between author and authority I use Harold Bloom's methodology in *The Anxiety of Influence* concerning the creative mind's melancholic insistence upon priority,⁶⁴ to prioritize his own literary construct and define its relation with the parent poem along with his own, as a son, an ephebe, with his predecessor.⁶⁵ Bloom's revisionary ratios form a template by which the links between the two poems and poets, across space and time, can be maintained and severed.

One poet misreading another to "clear imaginative space"⁶⁶ is the basic theoretical assumption and its nature varies by the "strength" of the poet. Bloom differentiates "strong" and "weaker" talents, as his concern is only with "major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves".⁶⁷ It is, of course, beyond my means and purposes to place Marechera in either of the critic's categories. Instead it is fruitful and indeed crucial to examine the author in Eliot's "historical sense", with meaning alone, when the author as poet and his poem endures the crucible of "judgement by comparison", not to estimate its value according to the author's "strength" or "weakness", but rather as "its fitting in is a test of its value". This fitting in is in turn juxtaposed to the author's "self-sacrifice" and "extinction of personality",⁶⁸ whereby he creates the temporal-spatial bridge through second nationality and second language by means of poetic discourse.

⁶³ "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood*: 26.

⁶⁴ Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd. ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 1997: 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ I apply the terminology from Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

Apart from his acknowledgment quoted above and his poetry, there is little evidence or proof why Marechera chose Eliot as his uncanny yet fitting Virgil; whether from a particularly strong interest or resentment, it cannot be ascertained. But he did manage to create and pen a particular misreading of Eliot and “Prufrock”, to set up (propose?) an antithesis without completing the original poem, and forming a discontinuity with the parent poem by placing his own as a (black) footnote at the bottom of a (black) critical edition.⁶⁹ Bloom’s revisionary ratios form a defense mechanism in Marechera and his poem but, and here I must swerve from Bloom’s original methodology,⁷⁰ it cannot be narrowed down to merely poetic influence.

Marechera reflected on the issue of non-poetical influences in a manner pertinent to Eliot’s distinction and definition of *tradition* and *individual* in poetry: “Poetic commitment works in two ways. On the one side, exposure of the individual’s thought is a commitment to one’s total individuality; on the other, exposure to social, political causes comes from a different kind of commitment which is outside yourself”.⁷¹ Bloom discusses only what he calls the *poet in a poet*, the aboriginal poetic self:⁷² his argument concerns only poetic influences. Yet the two, social and individual, are inseparably linked in Marechera’s case: his subversion of African and Zimbabwean national identity is equivalent to his subversion and rejection of the label *African writer*. I must treat the two together, just as Marechera identifies and treats Eliot as a representative of literary and worldly authority, and thereby questions the validity of these terms. I will apply the methodology outlined above when examining the poem proper.

⁶⁹ Here I use Bloom’s terminology in describing the various revisionary ratios. Ibid. 14-15.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 13.

⁷¹ Interview with the author by Flora Veit-Wild in *Cemetery of Mind*: 211.

⁷² *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 11.

3. “‘Do I Dare?’ and, ‘Do I Dare?’”: The Poem and its Crisis

3.1. Translation and Transformation

It is beyond my means and purposes to examine the full extent of the effect European and English literature in particular had on Marechera, or to point out the numerous stylistic and structural allusions the author makes to Eliot and “Prufrock” in his poem. Instead, I explore the author’s struggle for priority and imaginative space he manages, or indeed fails to clear for himself.⁷³ This I do by examining the anxiety the author displays and gives voice to through the poem and in the poem, and the approach I take is twofold: first the presence of translation and transformation in the text and second, the subversion of authority through the function of the text as a nonsense poem, and the suspension of the *overwhelming question*. Here I present the poem in its entirety:

“Hooked A-Gallop”

Translate the shocking pain
Into words brain rains.
Translate the vein of terror
Into mainland tribal error.

The clock standing still
Or the bed dreams kill
Chimes the cruel hour
Into painful recesses of power.

The sapphire fish in the Suffolk basket
Plead fiery attire, pledge Prufrock's musket.
Were Eliot African and mermaids dusky grasses
Would the verse weaken and our flesh respond to
irresponsible passes?⁷⁴

Before tracing down Eliot and where he *asserts his immortality most vigorously* in the poem, I look at the same poem, the utterance, the verbal correlative of Marechera as a performative act in invoicing his anxiety. Concerning the refutable terms *African*, *black*, and *literature*, the author himself asserted that if one is already labeled by the terms above, then how can one possibly write “as if that Black Frenchman, Franz Fanon, never existed”, the very same “Fanon of *Black Skin, White Mask*”.⁷⁵ Indeed, one cannot.

⁷³ *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 5, 13.

⁷⁴ It is the original form of the poem, as it first appeared in print in *Mindblast*, 1984, one of the few publications of the author’s poetry in his lifetime. I take the text from “Buddy’s Selected Poems” in *Cemetery of Mind*: 70.

⁷⁵ “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature” in *Source Book*: 363.

Bearing in mind Eliot's *historical sense* and *fitting in as a test of value*, I view the poem as a performative speech act first, and a manifestation of poetic discourse second. But what is Marechera's performative act? It is to re-act, as the "approval of the negro" is always in the context of his assimilation, his mastery of the language of the parent culture.⁷⁶ Fanon's "turning against the master"⁷⁷ is intermixed with the anxiety of national and cultural influence and the insistence on priority in the poem. This reaction is the kernel as well as the starting point of the performative act that is the poem, and it is directed towards the literary and worldly authority, culminating in a question concerning Eliot and "Prufrock", addressed seemingly to no one in particular.

The author however, as an ephebe, addresses his performative re-action in the first stanza of the poem not yet as a question, but a notice. It is also where translation appears literally, albeit in the accusative form: "Translate" at the beginning of the first and third lines, and "Into" in the following ones. Here the accusative form serves as an invocation. It is where the author mirrors Eliot's invocation in "Prufrock": "Let us go then, you and I". Eliot is invoked as Virgil, to help the author to *translate*, and to descend to the depths of where the act of translation will lead to, the "recesses of power" in line eight, and to the depths of the poem itself. This invocation is the beginning of misprision of the parent poem as a medium of authoritative power, a "deliberate misinterpretation"⁷⁸ by the author through the very act of translation. *Let us translate then*, as the act of transferring a text from one culture to another, from one language to another, even if it is from Eliot's English to Marechera's English, inexorably entails a loss, a swerve, of meaning, just as Rhodesia was *translated* into Zimbabwe. It is in this aspect of translation where *clinamen*⁷⁹ asserts its presence most vigorously, where Marechera, in Eliot's sense, criticizes poetry to create poetry.

Thus Marechera begins the poem by biting the hand that feeds. From this point on the critic, in Barthes's wording, cannot succeed in pinning down the poem and explaining it by naming the author, as Marechera keeps the poem structurally as well as thematically in a state of transformation. For what is there to translate? Authoritative cultural influence, the literary canon, and the determining and cataloguing label of *African* writer in Crehan's sense, as part of the oppressive apparatus of the modern state: the "vein of terror". "Mainland"

⁷⁶ "Negro and Language" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 136-137.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 43.

⁷⁹ *Clinamen*, the semi-arbitrary misinterpretation of a poem that manifests itself in the poetic swerve, or the poet swerving away from the parent poem and poet. Ibid., 42-43.

Africa as opposed to the *island* of Britain, and the “tribe” as opposed to *civilization*: in a colonial context, translation metaphorically epitomizes acculturation and the assimilating properties of the black man. The same process of assimilation into and appropriation of the parent culture is shocking and painful in the first line: to assimilate them is to gain “remarkable power” in mastering the language.⁸⁰ Translate the pain into words.

The difficulty of mastering the language and translating from one language to another evaporates as the “brain rains” the words, almost involuntarily, as it is not the idea, the concept, but always the words the author starts with: “Never with an idea. I always start with the first line. Once I have got the first line, the rest of the poem will come out of there.”⁸¹ It is the verbal correlative in (re)action, as Marechera stammers out the pain-become-words, in what Fanon called “exploding into dialect” by returning to speaking a “pidgin-nigger”,⁸² which is always a linguistic sign of alienation for the “negro”, no matter how deeply he managed to master the language. Yet for Marechera it is not a pidgin, but his “pronounced, rather affected Oxford accent”⁸³ in word, and his mastery of the poetic language he explodes into voluntarily in writing, thus subverting the linguistic aspect of the traditional binary opposition of white-black acculturation.

The poem signifies the author’s fixation on translation and transformation. It was penned around 1982/83, when Marechera returned to independent Zimbabwe after eight years of exile: a period of transition to the author, and it was first included in his single largest collection of published poetry in his lifetime, as part of his last prose piece, *Mindblast*.⁸⁴ The poem also appears among “Buddy’s Selected Poems” in the posthumous poetry collection of the author, *Cemetery of Mind*.⁸⁵

This same collection and “Buddy’s Selected Poems” in particular contain several conspicuous examples of translation-become-transformation in poetry from the same period in the life of the author, most notably “Oracle of the Povo”,⁸⁶ where the author addresses the issue of young veterans of the liberation war who became destitute, mere robbers and highwaymen, as the newly independent state could not provide for them, “Who yesterday a

⁸⁰ “Negro and Language” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 127.

⁸¹ Interview with the author by Flora Veit-Wild in *Cemetery of Mind*: 213.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸³ Reminiscence by Stewart Crehan in *Source Book*: 234.

⁸⁴ Editor’s note in *Cemetery of Mind*: 219.

⁸⁵ Chapter IV. in *ibid.*, 59-79. For the full text of the poem see Appendix.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

country won / And today poverty tasted”.⁸⁷ Their transformation from heroes to unwanted criminals is metaphorically linked to the metonymical juxtaposition of the ancient Greek “oracle”, the prophet to the “povo”, a Portuguese term for the “people” used extensively during the liberation struggle. This uncanny “vision” in the first line is then transformed into a whoring of the oracle’s talents metaphorically and prostitution literally: “selling the last / Bits and pieces of her soured vision.”⁸⁸ The performative act of articulating a vision becomes the physical act of selling the body. Pain translated into words, then words into pain.⁸⁹

While the above poem traces the discrepancies of worldly power and its relation to socio-cultural transformation, “The Poem Semantics (after Rainer Maria Rilke)”⁹⁰ exemplifies and problematizes the author’s own transformation as an ephebe, this time with an acknowledged source in the sub-title of the poem. The verbalized visionary aspect of the “oracle” reappears in metaphorically visualizing the tree and its spatial context as the poem: “Not the tree but the space (within / The eye) which contains the tree”.⁹¹ Seeing “Not the tree / But the poem of the tree”⁹² enables the spatial trajectory to be verbalized, to stammer out the words which the *brain rains* involuntarily, though not as an invocation, but a senseless cry: “Daddy! / Daddy!”⁹³ where the father-poet of the ephebe is transformed into the lost father figure⁹⁴ by the act of *translating* the *shocking pain* into a *rain of words*. It is in this process of verbalized transformation where the roots of physical transformation lie, which occurs in the last stanza: the poet becoming the tree, captured in mid-transformation while articulating the poem. It is the semantics of poetry and writing that problematizes *African literature*, as the author and his compatriots are never “at the beginning” nor “at the end”, but always “at the mid-point of the scream, the eye of the storm”.⁹⁵

However, suspension of self-translation occurs symbolically in the second stanza of “Hooked A-Gallop”, as the mid-point of the scream, and the poem: as opposed to the two examples above, here transformation is incomplete. “The clock standing still” in the fifth line

⁸⁷ Ibid., lines 3-4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., lines 20-21.

⁸⁹ For an extensive analysis of the poem see ‘Veit-Wild, Flora: “Carnival and Hybridity”’ in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*: 96-97.

⁹⁰ *Cemetery of Mind*: 68. For the full text of the poem see Appendix

⁹¹ Ibid., lines 1-2.

⁹² Ibid., lines 4-5.

⁹³ Ibid., lines 8-9.

⁹⁴ One of the most significant and shocking events of Marechera’s childhood was the death of his father and subsequently facing the body in the mortuary, causing great trauma to the boy who just turned 13. Sources and comments vary, even those made by the author, but this experience is one of the most plausible reasons for his stammer. *Source Book*: 51.

⁹⁵ “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature” in *ibid.*, 363.

paradoxically marks the beginning of suspension. Spatial and temporal anomalies occur, as the articulation of the poem is halted, “killed” by the “dreams” with the “bed”, the nighttime rest, transition from one day to the next is suspended at night by the standing clock, the “cruel hour” of translating the “shocking pain” and the “vein of terror”. The temporal suspension is linked to the act of translation as the eighth line begins with “Into”, repeating the already repetitive performative act of the first stanza: the twofold translation of authoritative power into acculturation as well as physical and mental trauma into stammered poetic articulation. Yet the articulation is not *translated* by the author *into* poetry, but *chimed*, as an oxymoron, by the “clock standing still” “Into painful recesses of power” in line eight. The *shocking pain* is *chimed* back *into* pain once again. The notice of the first stanza is *transformed* into a warning.

The author goes round in circles in his presumably nocturnal vigil, repeatedly attempting to translate, to articulate, to give voice to poetic discourse, yet he is hooked in the crisis of the poem: suspended in a “recess of power” by the very attempt to translate, to act performatively, by the overwhelming weight and magnitude of cultural and worldly authorities, by being *African, black*, an articulator of *literature*, without any apparent sense of belonging. Translating the pain into words and transforming into the tree-as-poem is suspended as the *standing clock chimes*, seemingly proving Eliot and Prufrock right in their omnipresent “There will be time”: a time that never comes. Hence the *hook* of the poem: the suspension of transformation at the mid-point of the scream, the mid-point of the poem. At this point it is clear that the initial misprision and poetic swerve of translation is not enough: an antithesis is required to complete the process,⁹⁶ to arouse the poet and poem from the overwhelming anxiety, the “recess of power”. This the author does by becoming a *critic*, naming his daemon the Author-God just as Barthes warned, and raising his, or rather their mutual *overwhelming question*.

⁹⁶ Bloom’s second and presently most pertinent revisionary ratio, *Tessera*. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 15.

3.2. Suspension and Subversion

“Be like me but unlike me” is the authoritative message the ephebe receives from the precursor and the predecessor-poem,⁹⁷ and it is in this paradox that Marechera and his poem are suspended: contextualized and problematized by the last stanza and the *overwhelming question*. It is here that the transcendental anonymity of the author function is verbalized and addressed to Eliot and “Prufrock”, the proper names that bespeak of modern English literary authority by means of poetic discourse, and under its shadow the author questions the validity and the very existence of post-colonial post-modernism. He does so formally and thematically: subverting poetic discourse by appropriating mastery of language. Here I examine the golden ratio of the last stanza to the whole poem, as compared to the poem to the proper names Eliot and “Prufrock”. In other words, what happened to the suspended translation-become-transformation, how can the process be completed, what answer can the author find to his *overwhelming question*, and if the proper names are the theses of poetic discourse, then what could constitute a possible antithesis?⁹⁸

Translation and transformation appear in the poem on a linguistic as well as a thematic level, in what Julia Kristeva called a “social code for the transformation of logical sequences”,⁹⁹ among which the linguistics of poetry are the most appropriate for historical discourse, being the most personal, subjected to the erected poetic ‘I’.¹⁰⁰ Here the poet’s “eternal struggle against the sun”¹⁰¹ is inextricably linked to Eliot, the founder of discursivity in Foucault’s sense, and his author function. If, in Fanon’s sense, appropriating and utilizing linguistic skills are means to “exist absolutely for the other”,¹⁰² then for Marechera historical-poetic discourse is the medium for inter- and intra-cultural translation, for the subversion authority, acculturation, and blackness.

Structurally the poem is a peculiar one among “Buddy’s Selected Poems”, a nonsense poem as it were, as it is the only one with a seemingly clear, rigid rhyme scheme. Couplets follow one-another in a clear pattern of couplets, broken only by two conspicuous factors. The first is “pain / rains”, the only slant rhyme in the poem, where “pain” is juxtaposed to “brain” through an internal rhyme leading on to the third line with “vein”. Thus

⁹⁷ *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 70.

⁹⁸ Completion of the parent poem in Bloom’s sense. *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁹ Kristeva’s definition of language per se. ‘Kristeva, Julia: “The Ethics of Linguistics”’ in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 349-357.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁰² “Negro and Language” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 127.

the brain-pain trajectory (vein) is established, the pain of translation or the inability thereof, along with the slant rhyme, the formal manifestation of the initial swerve of translation, the beginning of misprision. The second factor is the irregular stress and the radical overflow of the number of syllables in the last stanza, where the author arbitrarily destroys his own poetic creation, thus paradoxically displaying his re-action, his poetic (in)competence. Considering his mastery of English, it would seem to make no sense for Marechera to write such a poem: it is nonsensical because formally it makes perfect sense, a demonstration of the *black* man's mastery of *white* language.

If the "mastery of language is a remarkable power",¹⁰³ it is an almost vulgar display of poetic and linguistic power on the part of the author to apply such constructive deconstruction, thus defying poetic convention and appropriating its discourse by proving his ability to compose, to articulate in such a manner: the author is in the process of transforming, of performatively "putting on the white world".¹⁰⁴ The first two stanzas are relatively intact in this respect, whereas the third one verbally stammers, or indeed linguistically and poetically gallops out of formation. Hence the *gallop* of the poem: the poetic movement of speech in the liminal space between spoken word and written word. This process culminates in the orphan line "irresponsible passes", paradoxically an arbitrarily irresponsible breach of poetic and typographic protocol. While the orphan line is a much-used formula in the author's poetry, clear, rhymed couplets are not. This formal protest serves here to subvert and defy Bloom's assertion, that "a poet's stance, his Word, his imaginative identity, his whole being, *must* be unique to him".¹⁰⁵ The rhyme scheme employed is not unique to Marechera nor is it his *Word*, yet simultaneously its very presence and deconstructed form questions the author's stance, his imaginative identity, and indeed his whole being as, by alluding, by pointing the accusative finger at the proper names via the verb "translate", the author arbitrarily, almost authoritatively submits himself to the influence of Eliot and "Prufrock": the conscious and willing anxiety of the ephebe, the formal protest that gives sense to the nonsense poem.

The term *nonsense poem* is problematic precisely because the poem makes perfect sense, a paradox which uncannily coincides with the author's view on linguistic composition and stammered poetic discourse: "Poetry is the arrangement of sounds and words at random, not a conscious effort. In other words, you dissociate your mind from language and let

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 136.

¹⁰⁵ *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 71.

language by chance and pure randomness rearrange itself in newer and newer patterns. The problem then is that there is no difference between that and pure gibberish.”¹⁰⁶ Along with Bloom’s definition previously, Marechera defies his own assertion as the nonsense poem, the “pure gibberish” is an acutely ordered, if stammered flow of words, the verbal correlative of linguistic randomness seemingly antithetical to the mastery of language.

This linguistic and poetic paradox is verbalized in the poem through the monotonous acoustic flow of *vein of brain-pain* with the droning effect of the first stanza and its overwhelmingly closed and mid vowels. The second couplet “terror / error” breaks the flow: here the slow but steady pace comes to a halt as the *error in translation* leads to the second stanza, where the suspension becomes evident. The whole stanza is one sentence, whereas the two couplets form two separate sentences in the other stanzas. There are numerous internal consonances here: “standing still” in line five, “clock” and “cruel” in lines five and seven, “dreams” and “chimes” in lines six and seven. Scattered among the lines, the stanza is full of plosive consonants, which almost onomatopoeically imitate the chiming of the clock, albeit it is standing still. The *still kill* suspension is not yet relieved, but *transformed into the hour of the recess of power*. The second couplet with the co-articulated ‘w’ of the rhyme, neither consonant nor vowel but suspended in between, together with the acoustically and visibly longer line eight form the bridge to the final stanza.

It is here where the cruel hour of the suspended translation-become-transformation is resolved, and the poem completed in light of its predecessor: both poet and poem. Paradoxically the predecessor remains in authoritative transcendental anonymity, yet he is pinned down with his proper name by the transforming Marechera, the author-become-critic, criticizing poetry to create poetry.¹⁰⁷ It is also here that the non-sense starts making sense with the introduction of the proper names and the theme of the “manfish”.¹⁰⁸ It is a traditional Shona trope that is juxtaposed to English literary imagery in line nine, the manfish and the mermaid: “The sapphire fish in the Suffolk basket”, the Shona manfish trapped, captured, suspended in mid-transformation, in his losing struggle against the sun, as it culminates in

¹⁰⁶ Interview with the author by Flora Veit-Wild in *Cemetery of Mind*: 210.

¹⁰⁷ See sub-chapter 2.3.

¹⁰⁸ The “manfish” or njuzu is a recurring image in Shona belief which the author uses extensively in his writing, most notably in *The House of Hunger*. In this application the natural, geographical, and economic drought is compared to spiritual and cultural drought of the Shona people due to colonization and later independence, whereas the pool where the njuzu resides is the ground for recreation, renewal, and transformation, though for the author this process often becomes menacing in an intercultural context, as is the case in the poem at hand. For an extensive analysis of the manfish in the author’s oeuvre see ‘Lilford, Grant: “Traces of Tradition: The Propability of the Marecheran Manfish” in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*: 283-297.

pleading a fiery attire in line ten. “Plead” and “pledge” are the signifiers of the performativity of the act itself, of translating and articulating, of the author standing for trial, and the poem’s fitting in as a test of value. The “basket / musket” rhyme echoes the transition from a traditionally rural setting to a more violent, urban one with the *civilizing*, authoritative effect of “Prufrock”, as if he were holding the musket.

The thematic and symbolic transformation is verbalized linguistically through the acoustic properties of the two lines. The three pairs of coronal and labiodental fricatives in line nine, “sapphire”, “fish”, and “Suffolk” are replaced, transformed into the labial and coronal plosives of line ten: “Plead”, “pledge”, and “Prufrock”, the last occupying a liminal position in terms of its acoustic properties, while “fiery attire” maintains the sound of the previous line. The sapphire manfish wears fiery attire, mirroring on its scales the muzzle fire of *Prufrock’s musket*: a metaphoric parallel to the performative re-action of the *negro*, who was previously lying inert in the basket, and transformed, *translated* into fiery action due to the literal introduction of the proper name, thus beginning its “absolute existence for the other”, and “putting on the white world” through its *fiery attire*.¹⁰⁹

Line ten ends with a full stop: the transition from here to the question of the last couplet is where the author resolves the poem and its crisis. Being aroused by pledging the proper name of the predecessor poem, the author comes full circle with the first stanza, and once again invokes the Author-God by his own proper name in a structurally inverted question in line eleven: “Were Eliot African (...)”? The invocation is followed by an immediate subversion. Apart from problematizing the impossibility of Eliot’s subverted blackness, the Author-God’s very own anxiety of influence is questioned, through invoking the binary opposition between the respective muses of the predecessor and the ephebe: “(were) mermaids dusky grasses (?)”. The mermaids of Prufrock and through him of Eliot are juxtaposed to the manfish of Marechera and the “dusky grasses”, the elusive muses of both authors, the incentives of poetic transformation, whereby the author swerves from the imagery of the predecessor poem, completes it, and muses on the possibility of a black Author-God. This in itself would serve as a working antithesis in Bloom’s sense, yet the essence of the *overwhelming question* lies in the last line.

The initial notice of *Let us translate then* was transformed into a warning, chimed by the still clock at the cruel hour of the second stanza. Here it is rephrased as a question. In other words, would it have been worth it, if Eliot were African and his mermaids dusky

¹⁰⁹ “Negro and Language” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 127, 136.

grasses? The mermaids and the manfish, the two mutually alien creatures are indeed familiar in their semi-human faculty: their suspense in mid-transformation, at the mid-point of the scream. The punctuation mark at the end and the orphan line constitute the pivotal point of the crisis. In the final couplet Eliot's own proper name is let loose, it is allowed to assert his immortality most vigorously, as did his poem earlier. It is given room to exert its influence over the poetic discourse at hand, to shape the performative re-action of the author, to acculturate, to force him to criticize. Yet the founder of discursivity is faced with an obstacle: Marechera does not confront him, but suspends his influence with the question. The author allows Eliot to intrude the poem, then swerves from his influence with the verbal overflow of the question, stands aside and awaits an answer, the reaction to his re-action.

"Would the verse weaken"? Does the author "idealize", or does he "appropriate for himself"?¹¹⁰ As stated before, Bloom's initial claim applies only partially, as cultural and worldly authority are inseparably linked in Marechera's inquiry, as poetic influence is juxtaposed to acculturation, the coercive and oppressive apparatus of the modern state.¹¹¹ Thus Marechera does not criticize poetry only to create poetry and to clear imaginative space,¹¹² but to subvert the *traditional white* notion of *African, black, and literature*, precisely because the proper name *T. S. Eliot* is transdiscursive in Foucault's sense; this he manages by subverting the proper names Eliot and "Prufrock" via the performative act of posing the question, thus phrasing his antithesis, in the Bloomean sense, by consciously subjecting himself to the anxiety of influence. However, defying Eliot coincides with defying Bloom, as the antithesis of the author-as-ephebe deliberately fails to *complete* the father poem: completion is suspended.

The very act of questioning leaves the poem open. If Eliot worded the thesis of poetic discourse, and Marechera proposed and translated his antithesis in the last stanza as discussed above, then where is the synthesis? It is eluded in the present; it is postponed by the act of questioning to "an impossible time-to-come".¹¹³ The completion anticipated by Bloom is continually postponed by the open ending; translation-become-transformation in the poem is suspended in Kristeva's future anterior.¹¹⁴ The possibility of a completed transformation is there, yet it is suspended by the paradox of the question: if Eliot were African and mermaids

¹¹⁰ *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 5.

¹¹¹ See Stewart Crehan's argument discussed and contextualized in sub-chapters 2.1. and 2.3.

¹¹² *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 5.

¹¹³ "The Ethics of Linguistics" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 356.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

dusky grasses, what would happen to this poem and indeed to the author? “Would our flesh respond to / irresponsible passes?”¹¹⁵ Would transformation become possible? Would the suspension be relieved? Could the *vein of brain-pain* be translated at last?

In line with the paradox of the poem, the author chooses to address this problem with a *personal response*, this time transformed into “the response full of footnotes”.¹¹⁶ Composed in the same period, “The Footnote to Hamlet”¹¹⁷ addresses the same temporal-spatial paradox: “The moment demands decision. My whole / history is unequal to it. Let me be!”¹¹⁸ the inability to come to terms with and re-act to cultural and worldly authority, identified as *Hamlet*, to master and appropriate the language. Being suspended in mid-translation is a recurring issue, as “Now or never is here again”,¹¹⁹ where the only viable solution the author can articulate is a further suspension: “Perhaps / Th’impatient problem will lose heart at my / Expert vacillation.”¹²⁰ Synthesis with the parent culture is suspended, along with the ending of the poem, in future anterior. But the poem itself is a footnote. It is a reaction in itself.

“Hooked A-Gallop” epitomizes this *response full of footnotes*, as it is translated as *The Footnote to Prufrock* or rather *The Footnote to Eliot*. Moreover it is a black footnote, if not a *traditionally* or a *characteristically* black one, as it appropriates the same social linguistic codes and utilizes the same poetic discourse as the parent poem. The ephebe does not rebel or criticize, he merely questions. The final paradox of the poem, where after the vicissitudes of translation the transformation of the body itself are problematized with the “flesh” being subject to “passes”, the issue of personal response and footnoting arises: the (im)possible aspect of reacting, “respond / to irresponsible” in line twelve and the orphan line, as a grammatical signifier of suspension. The author is hooked in transformation just as the completion of the poem is suspended in future anterior.

Thus Marechera utilizes the principle of intellectual anarchism, the paradox of continuous state of flux, of perpetual change which makes it impossible for the critic, in Barthes’s sense, to “explain the author”. If “a society can only be stabilized if it excludes poetic discourse”,¹²¹ then poetic discourse and performative articulation of poetry is indeed antithetical to the apparatus of the modern state in Crehan’s sense: it is this apparatus that

¹¹⁵ *Cemetery of Mind*: 70, lines 12-13.

¹¹⁶ ‘Escape from the “House of Hunger”’: Marechera Talks about His Life’ in *Source Book*: 24.

¹¹⁷ *Cemetery of Mind*: 60. For the full text of the poem see Appendix.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 3-4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, line 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 7-9.

¹²¹ “The Ethics of Linguistics” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 355.

Marechera protests against, towards what he frames his footnote, by articulating non-authoritative and un-national poetry, while the poem and the possibility for transformation to be completed remain open in future anterior. But to reach all this, the author had to swerve from Bloom's authoritative revisionary ratio.¹²² Just as he subverted Hamlet by crying "Let me be!",¹²³ so did he propose his own translation of Eliot's opening line: for Marechera, it is no longer "Let us go then, you and I". It is rather a request articulated as a wish, addressed to all authorities, with an acknowledged source, a humble submission to influence, but never to authority: *Then let us go*.

¹²² *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: 12-14.

¹²³ *Cemetery of Mind*: 60, line 4.

4. Conclusion: “And would it have been worth it, after all...”

The poem as text, the text as poem and an articulation of the primordial poetic ‘I’ remains open, poses a question, a poetic, an overwhelming one. Yet the question remains unanswered, which in turn allows the articulator, the primordial ‘I’ to remain suspended and open in itself, and paving the way to an endless possibility of discourse: an un-national, non-authoritative, open discourse of, about, and through poetry.

Yet it is indeed this same suspension that allows Marechera to subvert authority: to immerse himself in appropriating language, in articulating poetic discourse, in translating himself and emerge on the other side. Awoken by human voices, the author does not drown but remains suspended. A goal is achieved in suspension, yet simultaneously it is not achieved: the poem remains incomplete, the overwhelming question unanswered; the paradox of intellectual anarchism translated into poetics. Still, its nonsense makes perfect sense in writing, the performative and appropriative *écriture* of Foucault, as Franz Fanon, after Jean-Paul Sartre, articulated the essence of *négritude*: “a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end”.¹²⁴ Marechera and his transformation remain continuously suspended in future anterior, yet anything that might diminish the individual’s blind impulse is subverted in its authoritative stance; a continuously suspended question mark for literary and worldly authorities and for that, it would seem, it was worth it after all. Hence the eternal paradox of the *hook* of the poem: the continuous suspension of completion; the completion of the love song of Dambudzo Marechera.

The poem, however, remains open. What, then, is the answer to the *overwhelming question*? The author of this paper has no definite answer, but he suspects that the question is indeed rather a means to a continuously suspended end: a transition and not a conclusion.

¹²⁴ “Negro and Language” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*: 127.

Appendix

All poems taken from “Buddy’s Selected Poems” in *Cemetery of Mind*, presented here in their original form and order of appearance in the text.

“The Bar-Stool Edible Worm”

I am against everything
Against war and those against
War. Against whatever diminishes
Th’individual’s blind impulse.

Shake the peaches down from
The summer poem, Rake in ripe
Luminosity; dust; taste. Lunchtime
News – pass the Castor Oil, Alice.

“Hooked A-Gallop”

Translate the shocking pain
Into words brain rains.
Translate the vein of terror
Into mainland tribal error.

The clock standing still
Or the bed dreams kill
Chimes the cruel hour
Into painful recesses of power.

The sapphire fish in the Suffolk basket
Plead fiery attire, pledge Prufrock's musket.
Were Eliot African and mermaids dusky grasses
Would the verse weaken and our flesh respond to
irresponsible passes?

“Oracle of the Povo”

Her vision’s scrubland
Of out-of-work heroes
Who yesterday a country won
And today poverty tasted.

And some to the hills hurried their thirst
And others to arson and blasphemy
Waving down tourists and buses
Unleashing a havoc no tongue can tell –
Her vision’s Droughstricken acres
Of lean harried squatters
And fat pompous armed overlords
Touching to torch the makeshift shelters
Heading to magistrate and village court
The most vulnerable and hungry if citizens –
Her vision’s Drought Relief graintrucks
Vanished into thin air between departure point
And expectant destination –
In despair, she is found in beerhalls
And shebeens, by the roadside
And in brothels; selling the last
Bits and pieces of her soured vision.

“The Poems Semantics
(after Rainer Maria Rilke)”

Not the tree but the space (within
The eye) which contains the tree; the retina’s
All-encircling trajectory when I see
Not the tree
But the poem of the tree.

I looked again and again
Each time more fiercely –

Daddy!
Daddy!

The hollow vibration cast a brilliant green
On the aura of all I touched –
My arms had hardened, turned
Into branches, the fingers shoots and twigs,
My dreadlocks long windlispings leaves.

“The Footnote to Hamlet”

Now or never is here again. Must I
Look in the face of the moon’s other side?

The moment demands decision. My whole
History is unequal to it – Let me be!

I read all day, walk all night. I have
No end but this; no resources but books.

Thus again I dawdle and dither. Perhaps
Th’impatient problem will lose heart at my
Expert vacillation.

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