



Write or Go Mad

by Flora Veit-Wild

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Handshakes here, slaps on the shoulder there. They all know him, the security guard at the entrance to the hotel, the porter, the waiter, many of the guests. 'Hi, what are you up to? How's the writing going?', 'Your new book is great! Why do you describe everything so negatively?' 'Hey man, don't you remember me, we were at Oxford together!'. Greetings, innuendos, banalities dog him wherever he goes. Sometimes this suits him; he thrives on it and begins to brag, talking expansively with a pompous ringing tone about the highly important and controversial things he is allegedly writing. At other times he wants nothing to do with anyone and scares everyone off with the foulest of language. Hunching his head between his shoulders in a constantly defensive pose, arms dangling down as if they were no part of his body, he makes his way clumsily towards a table to wallow quietly in his drink. He shortsightedly scans the immediate vicinity. Distance means nothing to him; the glasses he once wore were thrown away years ago. He refuses to see his surrounding. He lives in his head. He knows countless people but he is always alone.

Dambudzo Marechera, Zimbabwe's best known writer, well recognized and admired in Europe, is in his own country, where he is in the main unrecognized, ridiculed and reviled. 'He's mad', many people say, because he will not comply with commonly accepted norms, because he never misses an opportunity to attack and publicly insult politicians, fellow-writers and others in authority, at the same time making himself

grotesquely conspicuous; because he'll embrace a friend and drink with him peacefully one day and revile him the next, wounding and insulting him mercilessly; and because he believes that everybody is against him and consequently curses and swears at everyone and everything.

Yet, conversations with him can be very interesting and amusing. He perceives things clearly and can give them a name, he tells a good story. Then he is charming and loveable; his face is beautiful and soft, open, smiling or pensive — and very, very young. How surprising it is therefore, if one does not know him, to meet him some other time and find him 'bombed', given over to off-handedness, bombastic rhetoric or else childlike helplessness. Then his eyes become wide and round like saucers and the dark-brown centres begin to stare at you from a white background as if he wants to hypnotise you, pouting like a sulky child.

Madness? What goes on in this head, what hides behind this vacillating face, behind this 'black mask' as he so often refers to it in his stories, is a permanent storm, a battle of contradictions which threaten to blast his mind. 'Mindblast' is what he has called his latest book, which illustrates this explosion of mind, soul, senses, concepts and reason.

Marechera lies between the worlds of Africa and Europe, between the experience of physical poverty and cultural wealth, between colonialism and racism and the rebellion against them.

Further, he is caught between the idea of pure, true love and the loathing of earthiness and sensuality impressed upon him for so long at his mission school on the one hand and the day-to-day experience of that crude, brutal sexuality of the townships and the cities and the needs of his own body on the other. The conflict leads to problems in his relationships with women. He finds his longing for closeness, tenderness

and security incompatible with his physical desires; and his extreme narcissism makes him quite incapable of relating to other people. Instead of finding comfort and warmth he again ends up lonely.

Against everyday life and its demands he adopts a posture of refusal. When he has money, he drinks it away and when he has none, he lets others pay the bill. In the three years that he has been back in Zimbabwe he has sometimes found refuge in various homes and at other times slept on park benches and in house entrances until friends (there are a few who stand by him) found him a small flat. He would rather go to the dogs than tackle practical problems. He has the fixed idea that the world owes him a living. This is why many people consider him to be an insolent parasite. In the following poem he expresses his own reluctance to make decisions:

The Footnote To Hamlet

*Now or never is here again. Must I
Look in the face 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 vacillations.*

Dambudzo Marechera may seem inconsiderate and self-satisfied. But in the end he feels a strong sense of his own failure in the face of reality, before other people, and he is plagued by the greatest self-doubts. He tries to escape from these by drowning them in alcohol. Drink makes him forget; it takes away his feelings of guilt and inferiority from him but at the same time creates new ones.

His world is fragmented, shattered into many pieces which he cannot put together. The split severs him. This motif one finds frequently in his work, especially in the *House of Hunger*. His own distorted mirror-image stares back at him like a jeering monkey. Or his personality is actually split into twin brothers, one of whom does and says things which the other finds very embarrassing and beyond his control.

*Have you ever seen a face imprinted in empty air? Those dark spots
multiplied and swarmed about, and swooped into my face and shot out
suddenly with the very matter of my brains. And when, the pain of that
flashing cleared a little I looked and saw my own face staring coldly at
me. I started involuntarily. It was insane, but I pulled myself together
and put out my hand to touch it. And drew back with horror! That
horrible discovery! It pulled the skin of my face out, clear out, by the
roots. It revealed me to myself. And before I knew it I had heaved the
table on to its side, dragged all the books from their shelves onto the*

*floor and begun to hammer my fists on the walls. I heard myself
screaming and the very veins were pulsing hotly through that voice. I
was cold. A band of ice had wound itself tightly around my loins and
around my chest and around my neck. Strangulation. Or drowning.
Both, I suppose, but they were infinitely preferable to that invisible band
of ice. Anything but that again. And through it all the person, I mean my
face, was coldly observing me as though I was a distant, slightly
interesting experiment.²*

Schizophrenia, a persecution complex, self-destruction — inability to live in harmony with the world. The only thing that makes him survive is his writing. Through his writing he wards off the explosion of his soul and his mind, exorcising by the written word all the incompatibilities which overwhelm, harass and threaten to crush him. Accordingly his writing is disparate, without homogeneousness, full of contradictions and paradoxes. Marechera's writing disturbs the mind, it disrupts realities and patterns of thought so far taken for granted. At the same time it creates pictures of striking beauty and lucidity, opening new horizons and dimensions of feeling, of grasping, of sensing life, which distinguish him from all other African writers and give him a special role and significance in modern African literature.

Genius and madness — an 'idiom' in European cultural history, new for the African? The hypersensitive artist who fails and cracks up in the face of reality, who either has to find fulfillment in art or give way to madness: Hölderlin, Schumann, Kafka... Such lives are a constant balancing act. They can enrich other lives and hand down spiritual wealth to posterity, but they themselves cannot withstand in the long run the permanent pressure their own existence imposes on them, the permanent struggle against insanity; they are driven towards their own destruction. It might be suicide as in the case of Kleist, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath; or descent into a lunatic state of mind like Hölderlin; or sinking and drowning in a mindless hedonistic existence like Villon and Rimbaud.

Dambudzo Marechera does not care about his life, and yet he lives in constant fear of death, of nothingness and of total annihilation:

Desert Crossing

*Sharp howling winds scattering grit
Crack and roar like creatures of the pit:
The heart is a desert place, and earth of piercing heat.*

*The burning sky above is fixed,
The consuming grave at our feet baffles the priest;
Day after day the sand-dunes of living shift about,
Creeping forever across the desert's immense minute.³*

Notes:

- 1 Dambudzo Marechera, *Mindblast*, College Press, Harare, 1984, p. 97.
- 2 D.M., *The House of Hunger*, 1978, pp100/101.
- 3 *Ibid* p. 126.