

Marechera Postmodernism: Mocking the Bad Joke of “African Modernity”

Annie Gagiano

Summary

This discussion begins by setting up a critique of the modernisation project of the West as closely entwined with territorial expansionism and the development of racial arrogance – with reference to a range of theorists. The role of modernism (in literature) is recognised as simultaneously an exposure of territorial and racial power factors at work in the European modernisation project, *and* as (to some extent) complicit in them. The text used here to exemplify the paradoxical role of European modernism is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Since Marechera in carnivalesque fashion parodies Conrad's novella in the opening pages of his novel *Black Sunlight*, discussing this text introduces the topic of Marechera's particular kind of postmodernism with its focus on the modernisation project, in the African context, as a form of betrayal. The rest of the essay examines *The Black Insider* – a novel of debate in which the displacement of African intellectuals is addressed in a similar style of grotesque mockery blended with lamentation – and (briefly) *The House of Hunger* – where Kafkaesque perspectives are used to effect cultural-political analysis of a colonised society. The essay concludes by citing Gertrude Stein's sarcastic exposure of the type of art that supports Western complacency and power validation. Notes illustrate and expand a number of the arguments in the essay.

Opsomming

In hierdie stuk word eerstens kritiese kommentaar uitgespreek op die Westerse modernisasieprojek; 'n projek wat gelees word as nou verstrengel met territoriale uitbreiding en die ontwikkeling van rasse-arrogansie – met verwysing na 'n reeks teoretici. Die rol van die modernisme (in letterkunde) word herken as gelyktydig 'n blootstelling van die territoriale en rasse-magsfaktore van die modernisasieprojek *en* as (in 'n mate) vasgevang daardeur. Die teks wat hier gebruik word om die dubbelslagtige rol van Europese modernisme te illustreer is *Heart of Darkness* van Joseph Conrad. Omdat Marechera Conrad se novelle op karnavalagtige manier parodieer in die openingsbladsye van sy roman *Black Sunlight*, introduceer die bespreking van laasgenoemde teks die onderwerp van Marechera se eiesoortige tipe postmodernisme – wat fokus op die modernisasieprojek, binne die Afrika-konteks, as 'n vorm van verraad. Die res van die artikel ondersoek *The Black Insider* – 'n roman as

debat, waarin die verplasing van Afrika-intellektuele aangespreek word in 'n soortgelyke styl van groteske spot, vermeng met beklaging – asook (kortliks) *House of Hunger* – waarin Kafka-aanse perspektiewe gebruik word om 'n kultureel-politiese analise van 'n gekoloniseerde samelewing te bewerkstellig. Die artikel sluit af met 'n aanhaling van Gertrude Stein waarin sy die tipe kunswerk wat Westerse self-genoegsaamheid en magsvalidasie ondersteun, beskryf. Notas illustreer en verbreed 'n aantal van die argumente in hierdie artikel.

*When the other speaks, he or she becomes another subject,
which must be consciously registered as a problem by the
imperial or metropolitan subject.*

(Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism")

If I may add one more generalisation to those that have been broadly accepted concerning the European Enlightenment, it would be this: that the pronouncements on colonised peoples and phenotypes made by the most authoritative thinkers of the *Aufklärung* are characterised by an almost uniformly complacent, confident solemnity. Perhaps such authoritative racial arrogance is the inevitable expression of European internal consolidation and external expansionism. To illustrate the point, here are some examples:

The superabundance of the iron particles, which are present in all human blood, and which are precipitated in the reticular substance through evaporation of the acids of phosphorus (which makes all Negroes stink) cause the blackness that shines through the superficial skin; and the high iron content of the blood seems also necessary in order to forestall a slackening of all parts. The oil of the skin which weakens the nutrient mucus that is requisite for hair growth, has permitted hardly even the production of a woolly covering for the head. Besides all this, damp heat promotes strong growth in animals in general; in short, the Negro is produced, well suited to his climate; that is, strong, fleshy, supple, but in the midst of the bountiful provision of this motherland lazy, soft and dawdling.

(Kant 1975: 22)

Africa is in general a closed land, and it maintains this fundamental character. It is characteristic of the blacks that their consciousness has not yet even arrived at the intuition of any objectivity, as for example, of God or the law, in which humanity relates to the world and intuits its essence. He [the black person] is a human being in the rough

Africa does not properly have a history.

(Hegel quoted by Dussel 1995: 22)

By a dialectic which is appropriate for surpassing itself, in the first place, [European] society is driven to look *beyond* itself to new consumers. Therefore it seeks its means of subsistence among other people which are inferior to it with respect to the resources which it has in excess, such as those of industry. This expansion of relations also makes possible that colonization to which, under

systematic or sporadic form, a fully established civil society is impelled. Colonization permits it that one part of its population, located on the new territory, returns to the principle of family property and, at the same time, procures for itself a new possibility and field of labor.

(Hegel quoted by Dussel 1995: 25)

Against the absolute right of that people who actually are the carriers of the world Spirit, the spirit of other peoples *has no other right (rechtlos)*.

(Hegel quoted by Dussel 1995: 24)

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or *five* different kinds) to be naturally *inferior* to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no science. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will startup amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for *very* slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

(Hume 1979: 252n)

The link between this powerful, totalising discourse (illustrated in the above examples) and the need to validate the great surges of colonisation that emanated from Europe has often been pointed out – indeed, a persuasive reading of Enlightenment thought as perhaps primarily if unconsciously a mode of validation of European expansionism has gained considerable currency, as may be illustrated in more contemporary pronouncements such as the following:

Truth is, in other words, a *social relation* (like *power, ownership or freedom*): an aspect of a hierarchy built of superiority-inferiority units; more precisely, an aspect of the hegemonic form of domination or of a bid for domination-through-hegemony. Modernity was, from its inception, such a form and such a bid. The part of the world that adopted modern civilization as its structural principle and constitutional value was bent on dominating the rest of the world by dissolving its alterity and assimilating the product of dissolution. The persevering alterity could not but be treated as a temporary nuisance; as an error, sooner or later bound to be supplanted by the war of truth against error on the plane of

consciousness. The order bound to be installed and made universal was a *rational* order; the truth bound to be made triumphant was the *universal* (hence apodictic and obligatory) truth. Together, political order and true knowledge blended into a design for *certainty*. The rational-universal world of order and truth would know of no contingency and no ambivalence. The target of certainty and absolute truth was indistinguishable from the crusading spirit and the project of domination.

(Bauman 1991: 232-33)

The categorization of the three worlds is, of course, a consequence of Enlightenment philosophy, implicitly grading civilizational progress through the standards of northern Europe and America. Modernity in the Third World is necessarily the economic, cultural and political imposition on non-European societies of the European Enlightenment that in this century has been exposed to radical critique.

(Lee 1994: 40)

That modernism is itself an ideological expression of capitalism, and in particular, of the latter's reification of daily life, may be granted a local validity Viewed in this way, then, modernism can be seen as a late stage in the bourgeois cultural revolution, as a final and extremely specialized phase of the immense process of superstructural transformation whereby the inhabitants of older social formations are culturally and psychologically retrained for life in the market system.

(Jameson 1981: 236)

The quotation below nevertheless illustrates the persistence with which the upsurge of Euro/Western prosperity (which we label "modernity") has continued to mask the extent to which it rested on, took advantage of, or simply ignored the "Third World" or colonised countries' misery.¹ The following pronouncements are by the influential philosopher/ anthropologist Ernest Gellner:

I mean, there are two things to be said in favour of modernity. One, it's inevitable and second, it's good. And it's not good because it's inevitable, but it's good on top of being inevitable. But it is very important that it is inevitable. I mean, mankind first of all has now got hooked on a style of living to which he would like to get accustomed and simply will not, freely, without the most appalling political disasters, accept some kind of reverse policy and a serious romantic rejection of the modern world. You know, that particular programme is just unthinkable, incidentally would involve the elimination of vast numbers of people who simply wouldn't then be able to survive. So it's simply not a remotely realistic alternative. But on top of that, I mean it seems to me positively good that we should have overcome scarcity, that economic and political conflicts in society should have ceased to be a zero sum game, that it would be

possible to avoid unnecessary physical suffering. I think on all that we can agree.

(Gellner 1987: 36)

In the last section of the Gellner quote, the use of the plural pronoun "we" is particularly striking. To this reader, at least, it seems to signal simultaneously an unconscious exclusiveness and a complacent arrogance or triumphalism that stands in the direct line of inheritance of the Enlightenment philosophers.² Given Gellner's considerable standing in Western academia it can be taken as an index of the enduring power of the self-legitimising narrative of modernity as the heir to, or extension of the Enlightenment. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979), Adorno and Horkheimer detect a sort of "protes[ting] too much" element in the apparently celebratory discourse of Enlightenment. They describe it as "mythic fear turned radical" because of its claim to inclusivity: "Nothing at all may remain outside because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear" (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979: 16). They are in tune with the liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel when they declare that what modern men

want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness.

(Adorno & Horkheimer 1979: 40)

Dussel criticises philosophers like Habermas for describing modernity as a purely European event by arguing that "while modernity is undoubtedly a European occurrence [originating in "this history of world domination"], it also originates in a dialectical relation with non-Europe" (Dussel 1995: 9).³ The nature of that relation is, however, of a peculiar kind. According to Dussel

[t]he *ego cogito* (of Descartes from 1636) was not the original philosophical expression of modernity. Before, the *ego conquiro* ("I conquer," in first place with Hernán Cortés in 1519 in Mexico) had to undergo the practical experience of Europe's "centrality", of its superiority

(Dussel 1996: 217)⁴

In conquering the territories and cultures which it invaded, argues Dussel, "Europe never discovered (*descubierto*) this Other as Other but covered over (*encubierto*) the Other as part of the Same, i.e. Europe" (Dussel 1995: 12). This point accords with Adorno and Horkheimer's, above. Dussel uses two expressions, "the myth of modernity" (the pattern of thought that declares "the suffering of the conquered and colonised people ... as a necessary sacrifice and the inevitable price of modernisation" (p. 64)), and the "fallacy of develop-

ment” (the idea of a route or evolution towards modernisation⁵ along which the colonised region will have to follow the colonising economy (pp. 53, 64)) – in order to indicate how Europe/the West justifies and explains the brutalities of conquest to itself.

C.E. Pletch has with subtle sarcasm described the profound, resultant split into the three “worlds” of the “globalised” twentieth century:

The third world is the world of tradition, culture, religion, irrationality, underdevelopment, overpopulation, political chaos, and so on. The second world is *modern*, technologically sophisticated, rational to a degree, but authoritarian (or totalitarian) and repressive, and ultimately inefficient and impoverished by contamination with ideological preoccupations and burdened with an ideologically motivated socialist elite. The first world is *purely modern*, a haven of science and utilitarian decision making, technological, efficient, democratic, free – in short, a natural society unfettered by religion or ideology.

(Pletch 1981: 574; my italics)

A central distinction necessary to this discussion (“modernity” vs “modernism”) is usefully delineated in the quotation below. It helps to move the present discussion into the realm of cultural responses to the modernisation process. In a lengthy footnote from his *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Sygmunt Bauman writes:

The definitional discord is made particularly difficult to disentangle by the fact of historical coexistence of what Matei Calinescu called “two distinct and bitterly conflicting modernities”. More sharply than most other authors, Calinescu portrays the “irreversible” split between “modernity as a stage in the history of Western Civilization – a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism – and modernity as an aesthetic concept”. The latter (better to be called *modernism* to avoid the all too frequent confusion) militated against everything the first stood for: “what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion” (*Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, pp. 4, 42)); this is in blatant opposition to the previous, mostly laudatory and enthusiastic portrayal of the attitude and achievement of modernity

I call “modernity” a historical period that began in Western Europe with a series of profound social-structural and intellectual transformations of the seventeenth century and achieved its maturity: (1) as a cultural project – with the growth of Enlightenment; (2) as a socially accomplished form of life – with the growth of industrial (capitalist, and later also communist) society. Hence *modernity*, as I use the term, is in no way identical with *modernism*. The latter is an intellectual (philosophical, literary, artistic) trend that – though traceable

back to many individual intellectual events of the previous era – reached its full swing by the beginning of the current century, and which in retrospect can be seen (by analogy with the Enlightenment) as a “project” of *postmodernity* or a prodromal stage of the postmodern condition. In modernism, modernity turned its gaze upon itself and attempted to attain the clear-sightedness and self-awareness which would eventually disclose its impossibility, thus paving the way to the postmodern reassessment.

(Bauman 1991: 3-4)

I want to look briefly now at Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* as an archetypal European modernist text – using it as a hinge towards a discussion of the writings of the Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera. In agreement with Bauman (above), I see Conrad’s European modernist novel as manifesting the beginnings of an expression of doubt concerning the adequacy or completeness of knowledge of the European expansionist undertaking, along with the dawning but insistent recognition of its doubtful legitimacy.⁶ Conrad does, unmistakably, in this text expose *and* subject to a profoundly felt moral indignation both the “fallacy of development” and the “myth of modernity” that Dussel mentions (see above, and compare: “If modernity is about the production of order then ambivalence is *the waste of modernity*” (Bauman 1991: 15)). Yet Achebe’s well-known critique of the Conradian text as *simultaneously* anti-imperialist and racist is hard to fault (cf his essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (Achebe 1989:1-20)). If one prefers to avoid the tendentious term “racist” – and there is a strong tradition of readings of the Conradian text that include the frame-narrator Marlow in its author’s ironic gaze, rather than conceiving of Conrad as simply using this figure to ventriloquise authorial convictions – a central problem in accounting for the nature and effect of this text remains its depiction of the African area and its inhabitants. What Conrad portrays – in a description such as the following,

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of the monster, but there – there you could look at a thing *monstrous* and free. It was unearthly, and the men were –. No, they were *not inhuman*. Well, you know, that was *the worst* of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made *horrid* faces [Marlow’s description is presumably of an African dance, or ritual]; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this *wild* and passionate *uproar*. *Ugly*. Yes, it was *ugly* enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the *terrible* frankness of that *noise*, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from *the night of first ages* – could comprehend. And why not? The

mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, *all the past* as well as all the future.

(Conrad 1961: 96; my italics)

or in Marlow's reference to "the sunlit face of the land" as masking "the lurking death, ... the hidden evil, ... the profound darkness of *its* heart" (Conrad 1961: 92; my italics) – ascribes to both the region and its people *simultaneously* a quality of unknowability to or by the European subject ("impenetrable" being one of Marlow's favourite adjectives), *and* a conviction or certainty of its/their evil (the words "horrid", "ugly", and "terrible frankness" presumably indicating the observer Marlow's shuddering and shamefaced sense that the Africans' dance is an unashamed revelation of the basest instincts of man).

The currently prevalent reading of *Heart of Darkness* that takes the text as a cunning expression of Conrad's insight (revealed through the figure of Kurtz) that "enlightenment is a form of barbarism, that the West's Other is the West itself" (During 1993: 452) is not invalid. It does, however, overlook the extent to which Conrad employs and (I would contend) endorses the ancient and persistent European stereotype of "Africa" as representing, in the present, the past of the "developed" West. The expressions "the night of [the] first ages" and "all the past" confirm this: *even as* Marlow is rebuking a European sense of ethnic difference and superiority, he is thus re-endorsing the notion of "primitive", unrestrained evil passions as an inherently African condition.

One can link this to the following questions: do the very expressions "modernity" and "modernism", as applied to "Western" conditions (whether sociopolitical and economic, or cultural and aesthetic) not claim for *a part of* the world, the command of an *entire* time-frame? Is there not in the "logic" of the very discourse of modernism, a strong trace of the "developmental fallacy" and the "myth of modernity" – to use Dussel's terminology? Are the different parts of the world at different "stages of development" – or should we recognise that we are trapped in a power hierarchy of monumental proportions that has (predictably) not budged an inch since the conquests of other territories by Westerners? As I read Marechera (more fully discussed further on) these challenging questions are among those to which his text implicitly subjects European ideas of modernity as well as notions of modernism.

Heart of Darkness is indeed a massively scornful critique of (particularly) the Belgian colonial enterprise, subtly yet recognisably played off by Conrad against the (implicitly validated) "superior" British "civilising mission". It is *also* a text in the tradition of the effacement of Africa (regions and peoples), of the reduction of these "dark" presences to a mere backdrop to the activities (admirable and culpable) of Europeans (cf my essay contrasting Ngugi wa Thiongo's and Karen Blixen's renditions of Kenya (Gagiano 1995)). Perhaps,

despite its author's undoubted concern for the plight of colonised people, Conrad's text is thus another expression of the "mythic fear" (quoted above) to which Adorno and Horkheimer refer. The very title *Heart of Darkness*, even though most intelligent readings apply the expression to Kurtz's own "horror" (first inflicted; later felt), has remained as an expression in the "Western" vocabulary; a dismissive catchphrase⁷ for referring to social collapse, power abuse and other disasters manifested in African societies – with little or no recognition of the extent to which these failures are interlinked to continuing (neocolonial) exploitation by European and other Western power centres, both political and economic.

As a critique of modernity and the modernisation process, the modernist novel – as exemplified by *Heart of Darkness* – can thus be described as implicated in or compromised by the system which it criticises (and which produced it). In his extensive comments on Conrad's novella, Andrew Gibson refers to the "totalising discourse" employed by all its European characters, reading this tendency as indicating the "triumph of Western metaphysics as it is ensured by and properly indistinguishable from the triumph of Western power" (Gibson 1999: 60). Although he reads the Marlow figure as "projec[ting his] own drive to totalisation" onto Kurtz, Gibson also sees "Marlovian discourse" as "pervade[d by] ... a sense of epistemological dead-end ... [in] the amazed encounter with alterity – an alterity that will subsequently be brusquely subdued". This "baffl[ing]" encounter, writes Gibson, "lies at the very roots of the European experience" (of this period, presumably) (p. 62).

The ideas in the above citations fit in with the distinction drawn by Bauman between modernism and postmodernism (and, for the purposes of this essay, between a modernist text such as Conrad's and the writing of an African (post)modernist such as Marechera). "Pretences of knowledge", writes Bauman, can be doubted in two ways: *either* one points out that there are events for which the "available knowledge" does not have a convincing or universally accepted narrative (and this, he says, is modernism), *or* one notes that the narrative offered by this knowledge system is not the only, or the best, or the most reliable account possible (and this, according to Bauman, is post-modernism). There is not actually a chronological succession, since both kinds of doubt have manifested themselves "as long as science itself" and between them, as a "co-presence", Bauman suggests, produced "that modern culture which prodded modernity on its road to postmodernity" (Bauman 1991: 238). Now an African postmodernist⁸ would of course notice the partiality (to make that term a pun) of European modernism in ways significantly different from the way a "Western" writer would – and would need to articulate such a "doubt" (to use Bauman's term), or recognition of irony, in a manner sensitive to the realities of power distribution ("cultural" as much as political) of his or

her time. In his novel, *Saints and Scholars*, the British Marxist Terry Eagleton writes: “A colonial territory was a land where nothing happened, where you reacted to the narrative of your rulers rather than created one of your own” (Eagleton 1987: 104). In a recent essay Rasheed Araeen refers to “art which is produced within the historical space of modernism”, making the following points:

As this space is controlled institutionally, some works are legitimated and are placed within a historical genealogy while others are ignored or suppressed. This historicisation, however, is not based on the nature of the work but on the racial, ethnic or cultural background of the artist; which thus excludes the modernist or avantgardist work of artists from cultures other than of European origin on the basis that modernism is ontologically a European phenomenon. In other words, the eurocentricity of modernism is constructed and maintained largely on racial grounds by which the supremacy of the white subject is maintained.
(Araeen 2001: 77)

There is probably a broad truth in this accusation of “Western” myopia, given how ghettoised studies of African writing, even of novels in the Europhone languages, remain. In his introduction to the essay collection *Modernism/-Postmodernism*, Peter Brooker (who edits this text) observes that

[a] map which shows the South of England, the Eastern seaboard of North America, and which marks in Paris, Trieste, perhaps Berlin and Vienna but not Moscow, Petrograd or Milan is not an acceptable map of “the” world, but might be the map of a certain cultural mentality, and is, as it turns out, the “map” of an Anglo-American construction of modernism. The same general point applies to postmodernism. However internally different its main versions, their common geography stretches to the American West, Canada and Australia, and until recently would show little else, even of Europe, beyond Paris and Frankfurt.
(Brooker 1992: 4)

A brilliant avantgardist such as Marechera, after (co-) winning the fiction prize of *The Guardian* in Britain in 1979 for his first substantial publication, was allowed subsequently more or less to disappear from public view (cf. Veit-Wild 1992a: 185-378). His problem was certainly in part that of the category-jumper, the “unclassifiable” writer: highly sophisticated in employing post-modernist techniques, yet writing of African experiences and settings and (*tout court*) exemplifying the supposed paradox: an African intellectual utterly proficient in the whole gamut of “Western” cultural and academic discourse. Marechera during the ten years of his major writing was, one might say, considered both too African for Europe and too European for Africa. His own,

oft-quoted comment (in this regard) remains the most eloquent expression of this dilemma:

I have been an outsider in my own biography, in my country's history, in the world's terrifying possibilities. It is, therefore, quite natural for me to respond with the pleasure of familiar horror to that section of European literature which reflects this.

(Marechera quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 364)

Marechera thought of identity as "an act of faith, impossible to verify" and regretted the

paradox that modernism has been from the start identified with difficulties and, on a continent still barely literate, modernism has, therefore, been condemned as being irrelevant on African soil.

(Marechera quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 370)

Marechera noted approvingly Achebe's use of a Yeats quotation in titling *Things Fall Apart*. In his own case, he had to deal with considerable objection from African critics for being "Euro-modernist" (cf Shaw 1999: 6-9; Gagliano 2000: 206, 250 (Note 25)). Even the influential critic Simon Gikandi who has recently stated approvingly that "Marechera's subjects ... took the existence of this African literature [Achebe et al.] for granted ... [as much as] the idea of ... a Pan-African culture" (Gikandi 2001: 6), had stated over two decades earlier, in his 1979 reader's report for Heinemann (Nairobi), that

[w]here to place Marechera's novel, is the seminal question in trying to make a decision whether to publish or not "Black Sunlight" is an absurdist novel – Beckettian in style and approach. It is a novel without any relatives in African creative writing. There is no plot as we know it. The story-line here reminds one of James Joyce. But this is the kind of writing that has not had any appeal in this part of the world and can easily go unnoticed.

(Gikandi quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 214)

Black Sunlight, one of the Marechera texts I mainly deal with in this essay, was in fact initially banned in Zimbabwe for alleged "obscenity" as much as for its "difficultness" (to use Marechera's own term). It is a novel which could be described as using postmodernity as both a political and a philosophical critique of sham modernity⁹ and the sham(e) of enforced, late modernisation – as well as being an expression of devastating mockery of, *and* the existential angst resulting from, being black in the "white" twentieth century (cf Marechera 1990: 73, 87, 105). One commentator has written: "If Marechera looks unAfrican at times it is because any opposition as radical as his is

literally unlike anything which has preceded it in Europe or Africa” (Volk 1999: 310). The modulations of tone and theme in *Black Sunlight* are brilliantly deployed and it opens, in one of the most unforgettable comic scenes in Anglophone African writing, on a passage overtly and devastatingly parodying *Heart of Darkness* (Marechera 1980: 1–13) (for a different perspective on this scene cf Stein 1999: 61). The postmodern effect is discernible in the narrator’s reference to the scene as a “view” and the initial Conradian echo is clear in the description of this “view” as comprising “gigantic humid trees shutting out the sun” (Marechera 1980: 1).¹⁰ Equally noticeable is the author’s use of *Verfremdungseffekt* in making the entire narrative one that blows in through “the open window ... that fucking window of fiction” (Marechera 1980: 1). In this reference he rings the changes simultaneously on Henry James’s “house of fiction” image and, I would suggest, on Virginia Woolf’s ideal private retreat – the well-known “room of one’s own” of the (privileged) female writer.

The audacity, the immensely sophisticated joking going on here also utilises the perspective on an African “chief, black as human beginnings” as he considers the mere thought of “White meat ... White cunts. White arses ...” – sufficient to produce a “gigantic erection” (Marechera 1980: 1, 2), in comic contrast with (Conrad’s) Marlow’s fastidious withdrawal from the idea of even remote “kinship” with African frolickings (cf the passage quoted earlier). An essay of the present length is too short to investigate all the different dimensions merely of the widely allusive, multilayered opening scene of *Black Sunlight*. Simultaneously with its outrageously hilarious effects (such as the reference to the narrator’s view, once he has been strung up, head down, in the chief’s chicken yard for his disrespectful remarks, of the African scene as a “mirage ... becom[ing] some long ago bestiality ... cleaning its jaws with toothbrushes made of hairy men” (Marechera 1980: 7),¹¹ Marechera’s Rabelaisian or sardonic humour does not sell out to or cater for “Western” racial contempt; it mocks or exposes it. Hence, the anthropologist symbolically named Blanche Goodfather, the narrator’s former lover, is described as “roam[ing] the earth ... ferret[ing] out the few bits and pieces of authentic people reducing them to meticulous combinations of the English alphabet” (Marechera 1980: 4; cf Stein 1990, Chennells 1990). This naive and clearly reductive kind of (re)search is contrasted with the black narrator’s “insecurity, in search of [his] true people”¹² but finding only ““Mere/ Cari/Cat/URES” (Marechera 1980: 4; 10). He knows he is “sometimes all the time. In the wrong skin. This black skin” (Marechera 1980: 4).

In passages such as the final citation above the reader can discern that, woven into the teasing fun of the opening scene, Marechera twists some profoundly felt, melancholic and eventually tragic recognitions of the exclusionary, contemptuous, dismissive effects of “European” racism towards

Africans. Like the naked Blanche Goodfather¹³ (in Oxford, or in Africa), it will join in the sexual "experiments" that explore "the lurid sunken depths ... in *our* bodies" (Marechera 1980: 5; my italics), but it will without warning "[erase]" the memories of a yearlong relationship, reducing the narrator to a "stain of horror ... an inky blackness" and a "terrified ghostly shape, cringing into the trees" (Marechera 1980: 81). Even an Oxford degree, the apex of "European" accomplishment (under Western eyes, no doubt), may have the effect of "making the monkey monkier" (Marechera 1980: 77), i.e. result in the continuing denigration of the African intellectual as subhuman.

It is in the complexity – as much an emotional as an intellectual, philosophical *range* of awareness – of Marechera's considerations of the dimensions of *existenz* and experience in our time that he in my opinion outpaces what I earlier referred to as the solemnities of the major Enlightenment philosophers, or the modernist author's *angst*. Utterly unfrivolous, even his most blatantly comic writing sounds out profound existential concerns and modulates into issues of tragic import and moral questioning. In *Black Sunlight*, particularly, this author confronts (in post-modern style) the problem that "the development of social and national and international man is one long denial of" what he calls "the very life within us The spark that sets creation on fire." And so, "the more we 'progress', the more we think as that progress demands and the less we think and feel as the life within us demands" (Marechera 1980: 65, 66). Not only is the "spark" to which Marechera's narrator refers our "primitive" or non-modern, elemental energies and impulses, but it also contains what Marechera terms our "humane considerations" (Marechera 1980: 62, 68 – cf 30, 74). His anguished, complex response to "progress" or modernity is, I suggest, the sign of his "post-modernity", read here as an advance in thought on such examples of political and philosophical "modernity" as the passages from Gellner and Conrad quoted earlier in this essay.

Which is not to suggest that Marechera had anything like a comfortable, let alone a complacent, sense of himself or his thought as "superior" – indeed, he was all too aware of many African intellectuals' probable rejection of his writing. He seems (almost uncannily) to have forestalled the banning of *Black Sunlight* itself by writing in this novel of a character very similar to the author having his poems "objected to [for] the 'vulgar words', the unintelligibility"; the African student audience he addresses asserting that "workers did not understand him and his modernistic European manner" (Marechera 1980: 110). Moreover, Marechera faces and acknowledges the pertinence of the accusation of nonparticipation and elitism directed at the artist-writer (in contrast with the political activist) when he puts in the following parenthesis close to the conclusion of *Black Sunlight*: "Steve Biko died while I was blind drunk in

London. Soweto burned while I was sunk in deep thought about an editor's rejection slip" (Marechera 1980: 114).

To introduce the discussion of *The Black Insider* as another, though very different kind of postmodernist Marecheran text, a citation in which Marechera uses a critic's points to describe texts resembling his own is pertinent:

The critic and lecturer Neil McEwan, in his book *Africa and the Novel*, argues that, far from imitating the practice of past generations of European writers, African novelists have extended the possibilities and uses of fiction. He notes that the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin has offered a category of narrative whose unifying factor is a "carnival" attitude to the world. This category includes writers from different backgrounds. They range from Aristophanes, Lucian and Apuleius (the first African novelist, perhaps) to Dostoevsky by way of Rabelais and Dean Swift. I add John Fowles and Günter Grass, and the Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, in *The Interpreters*. *Don Quixote* is quite at home. The world of such novels, says McEwan, is complex, unstable, comic, satirical, fantastic, poetical and committed to the pursuit of truth. The hero can travel anywhere in this world and beyond. Fantasy and symbolism are combined with low-life naturalism. Odd vantage points offer changes of scale. Heaven and hell are close and may be visited. Madness, dreams and day-dreams, abnormal states of mind and all kinds of erratic inclinations are explored. Scandalous and eccentric behaviour disrupts "the seemly course of human affairs" and provides a new view of "the integrity of the world". Society is unpredictable; roles can quickly change. Current affairs are treated with a satirical, journalistic interest. Genres are mixed. Stories, speeches, dramatic sketches, poetry and parody exist side by side. This category of novel is called the menippean. It is no longer necessary to speak of the African novel or the European novel: there is only the menippean novel.

(Marechera quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 363-364)

To which Marechera added:

I do not like this century, past or future. I do not like to live under the backside of a medieval god or a nuclear bomb, which amounts to the same thing. I am no mystic, yet no materialist either. I believe in nature but refuse to live with it in the same room.

(Marechera quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 364)

In *The Black Insider* Marechera debates, essentially, issues of African postmodernist identity. The discussions that make up the substance of the novel's "events" are simultaneously philosophical (sometimes to the point of absurdity or pedantry), and of agonising intensity. The setting of the conversations and long monologues being armageddon-like (since both the plague, a bomb, and hordes of warmongers conspire to wipe out all the participants at the end of the text, and these forms of destruction are imminent throughout),

this creates the sense of the mocking irrelevance as well as the extreme urgency of the questions that are discussed throughout. Early in the text the narrator refers to his own position:

Cool eyes seethe with reading and gaze out of the window on to a war-paralysed city where multitudes each day succumb to the despair of hunger, disease and homelessness.

(Marechera 1990: 32)

This is both phantasmagorical and a merely realistic description of conditions in many African countries such as Zimbabwe. In the eyes of the narrator, even the "ability to read and write" allows "endoparasites" such as "culture, tradition, history or civilisation" (Marechera 1990: 33) into our minds. Considering the spread of the "Indo-European group of languages" and their role in "colonisation, trade, conquest", Marechera's narrator laments the global brainwashing process (to extend his image likening language to water) which causes "your thoughts [to] think of themselves in the words you have been taught to read and write" (Marechera 1990: 37).

This text, too, is laced with (albeit corrosive) humour, such as the narrator's remark that he "fear[s] death by drowning in one of T.S. Eliot's poems" (Marechera 1990: 47), cleverly maintaining his central image of flooding to represent mental and cultural colonisation. It is in *The Black Insider* that Marechera deploys the following (now fairly well-known) mocking catalogue of types of African writers, which of course exposes the "Western" classificatory, "anthropologising" and finally reductive approach to the products of this continent:

"I've never met any black writers. Are you angry and polemic or are you grim and nocturnal or are you realistic and quavering or are you indifferent and European? Those are the categories, I think", she said and neat creases delicately bracketed her wide mouth.

"I write as best I can", I replied, at a loss for words.

(Marechera 1990: 49)

One of the small cast of characters (or discussants) in this novel is named Otolith, referred to as a "black Hamlet", who in his "Elizabethan costume ... could fancifully have been the horror which Kurtz saw at the *Heart of Darkness* Brussels suburbia ... the real noble savage" and "a burnt-out case clutching Africanity in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other" (Marechera 1990: 56). For all its absurdist weirdness, this description is noticeably full of scathing digs indicating how modernisation has harmed gifted Africans (like Marechera) with its false promises of acceptance. Over and over again Marechera returns to the point of the inappropriateness of

“development” that is “applied” from outside, to others’ benefit, rather than a growth from within. One example is his narrator’s reference to “subjects and jobs ... steeped with Graeco-Roman thinking which ha[s] nothing to do with the dusty townships we had come from” (Marechera 1990: 63). To live in the twentieth century, Otolith asserts, is to be “born black in a white environment” (Marechera 1990: 87).

Despite the accusations and lamentations subtly interwoven into this sophisticated text, Marechera here, too, maintains the type of cool “distance” that escapes all three of the limiting categories to which white academics such as Liz (in the passage from page 49, quoted above) would relegate African writing. And in its evident confidence, sophistication, robustness and wry humour, we see Marechera the consummate postmodernist quietly exposing the inappropriateness of the diagnoses of certain commentators (the voice being that of the character Marechera names, in another clever intertextual reference, the African Schweik):

Some psychiatrists today diagnose disenchantment with social structures as a disease and proceed to inflict a cure on the patient. Some of our greatest writing [he then adds in the next breath, without pointing the irony by means of a “Yet” or a “But”] comes from writers in a state of mind of disillusion, disenchantment and dismay.

(Marechera 1990: 94)

Even though the alliteration in the last three nouns, above, adds a further self-teasing effect, this text, too, is not finally, primarily comic in its *effect*, although it makes use of that mode. For the narrator, who uses the simple, patriotic expression “my country”, reflects also how others, “brilliant students” (like the author himself, a pointed allusion) feel as if “[their] country nourishes [them] solely in order to break their spirit on the anvil of crude racial antagonism”, their only other option being “the bitter and inconsolable experience of losing [their] nation” (Marechera 1990: 104). For here Marechera scathingly rejects what “the machine of the nation-state gave the citizen [:] a prefabricated identity and consciousness made up of the rouge and lipstick of the struggle and the revolution” (Marechera 1990: 105). What is conveyed by these seemingly insouciant statements is that African modernity enforces a bitter choice between a crude, fervently nationalistic posturing, or rejection and alienation from one’s people – “the sense of having lost our nation was indivisible from the feeling of the nation having lost us” (Marechera 1990: 105).

It is interesting that a writer with such a strong reputation for avantgardism and intertextuality nevertheless insists that, more than by any other author, he was “influenced to a point of desperation by the dogged though brutalised

humanity of those among whom [he] grew up" in Vengere township (Marechera quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 1). This point should be borne in mind when such a spectacularly postmodern text¹⁴ as Marechera's earliest publication, *The House of Hunger* (Marechera 1978), is examined. Marechera puts modernist perspectives to local, political use, likening the exclusionary effects of racist colonial social structures to Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (Veit-Wild 1992a: 10). In an important interview he said that he had taken the form of this novella from reading the German nineteenth-century novella, especially from Kleist (Veit-Wild 1992a: 26). Referring to the text he produced after his own return (from Britain) to what had become Zimbabwe, he found that what he considered his task here, to "write like Franz Kafka or James Joyce or explore the subconscious of our new society" (Marechera quoted by Veit-Wild 1992a: 39) was frowned upon by the new powers-that-be.

Yet he persisted. In *Mindblast*, perhaps his most popular text in Zimbabwe, Marechera paradoxically wanted both to help heal the "fragment[ation]" of Zimbabwean society because of its colonial/racist past and to give expression to the "many voices", even "contradictory" ones, that he heard around him (Veit-Wild 1992a: 311). Toni Morrison has written that African-American women "had to deal with 'postmodern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier [because of] ... certain kinds of dissolution, the loss and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability" (Morrison quoted by Brooker 1992: 213). Marechera in 1986 said in a public address that his "task as a writer was to take the veins of modernism, symbolism, futurism that had developed in poetry and transfer them to the language of prose" (Veit-Wild 1992a: 367). This was a belief he held, and expressed, with intense passion and a political as much as an aesthetic commitment. "Write the poem, the song, the anthem, from that within you / Fused goals with guns and created citizens instead of slaves. // Do not scream quietly" read three memorable lines from one of his poems (Marechera 1992: 195). The unique achievements of this author, and the way his large range of writings develops our notions of postmodernism and our understanding of the ironies of African modernity, need far greater recognition than they have so far been accorded. African scholars need to work hard to focus more attention on the intellectual productivity of this continent, whereas many Western scholars need to make more effort not only to make the acquaintance, but to pay sufficient attention to African authors in order to respect and understand their insights and their art. The alternative, Eurocentric, closed circle was succinctly described by Gertrude Stein in a lecture (scathingly?) titled "What Is English Literature":

If you live a daily life and it is all yours, and you come to own everything outside your daily life besides and it is all yours, you naturally begin to explain. You naturally continue describing your daily life which is all yours, and you

naturally begin to explain how you own everything besides. You naturally begin to explain that to yourself and you naturally begin to explain it to those living your daily life who own it with you, everything outside, and you naturally explain in a kind of way to some of those whom you own.

(Stein 1985: 41)

Notes

1. The ambiguity of the realization of modernity, on the part of the “open society” of *late* capitalism, finds itself limited by what we call the developmentalist fallacy. That is, it would like to extrapolate, to impose the model (and the philosophy that derives from it) of late and central capitalism, in the very same straight line of development without discontinuity, on peripheral capitalism (of Africa, Asia and Latin America; or in other words, to more than eighty per cent of global capitalism, if we take its population numerically), underdeveloped and, as is said in such developmentalist ideology, “delayed”. The “delay” of peripheral capitalism is a “before” with respect to the “after” of “late” capitalism. What is not taken into account, in this eurocentric ideology, is that there is no such “before”. Since 1492, the periphery is not a “before”, but an “underneath”: the exploited, the dominated, the origin of stolen wealth, accumulated in the dominating, exploiting “center”. We repeat: the developmentalist fallacy thinks that the “slave” is a “free lord” in his youthful stage, and like a child (“crude or barbarian”). It does not understand that the slave is the dialectical “other face” of domination: the as-always, the “other-part” of the exploitative relation. The peripheral world will never be able to be “developed”, nor “center”, nor “late”. Its path is another. Its alternative is different. Liberation Philosophy gives expression to this “distinction” (Dussel 1996: 5).
2. In a much earlier publication, Gellner had stated the point even more bluntly: “if a doctrine conflicts with the acceptance of the superiority of scientific-industrial societies over others, then it really is out” (Gellner 1968: 405). It is this *rhetoric* of superiority (illustrated clearly also in the above quoted examples) that is so striking and widespread.
In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said in a comment on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* mentions that “in telling the story of his African journey Marlow repeats and confirms Kurtz’s action: restoring Africa to European hegemony by historicizing and narrating its strangeness” (Said 1994: 198).
3. Dussel writes: “A European definition of modernity, such as Habermas’s, overlooks how *European* modernity constitutes all other cultures as its *periphery*” (Dussel 1995: 32-33). Compare Dussel’s reference to “the traditional Eurocentric thesis, flourishing in the United States, modernity’s culmination, [which] is that modernity expanded to the barbarian cultures of the South undoubtedly in need of modernization” (Dussel 1995: 10).

4. Compare also: "The experience not only of discovery, but especially of the conquest, is *essential* to the constitution of the modern ego, not only as a subjectivity, but as subjectivity that takes itself to be the center or end of history" (Dussel 1995: 25).

Dussel also writes the following (in an endnote): "Germán Marquinez Argote defended a thesis, the *Interpretación del "Cogito" cartesiano como modelo de hermenéutica latinoamericana* (Bogotá: University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, 1980), in which he compares the "I conquer" with the "I think". He provides cogent texts showing the awareness Descartes had that his world had actually discovered a new world" (Dussel 1995: 148).

5. The sociologist Raymond Lee (University of Malaysia) points out some of the attendant ironies in the following two quotations:

Thus, it is plausible to say that modernisation in the developing world, with its frenetic drive to develop and consume, cannot occur without the political manipulation of ethnic and nationalist sentiments. Different groups of people, separated by space and time but brought together by the fiat of colonialism and independence, must now forge an ideal of national community in order to catch up with the modern standards of the developed world. There is a belief that nation-building in the developing world predicated on Western notions of modern selfhood and self-determinism can result in the creation of national wholes with minimal emphasis on cultural heterogeneity and increased integration of diverse population units. That this notion has universal application is ... nothing but a fallacious assumption accepted by many people in the developing world.

(Lee 1994: 35)

Thus, the industrial nationalism of the developing world *makes* both the authoritarian strategy by which industrialisation is introduced as a development package of modernity, and the ethnic or subethnic inequalities that ensue from the asymmetrical distribution of privilege in a socially stratified and culturally diverse system.

(Lee 1994: 36; my italics)

6. Lee writes that "[m]odernism in this sense suggests a type of consciousness emerging from the very process of modernization itself to react politically and culturally upon the system that promotes it" (Lee 1994: 54).
7. Compare: "Up until the 1950s, the education of Africans was predicated on their relocation from the darkness associated with the 'tribal' to the sweetness and light of colonial institutions" (Gikandi 2001: 7).

In another book the same author writes: "if the ideals of modern bourgeois society were framed and justified within the theater of colonialism, colonial society was often written as the space deprived of, or undeserving of, such values as individualism and citizenship" (Gikandi 1996: 7).

8. Buuck makes the point that “[i]n the contemporary period, Western critiques of the grand metanarratives of history have begun to take hold within the post-colonial world as well as in the metropole ... [but adds that] within the realm of autobiographical fiction, only Breytenbach, Head, and Marechera have seriously focused on the self and the construction of identity while also challenging conventional narrative form” (Buuck 1997: 119). His list might be extended with the addition of names such as Henry Lopes, Mia Couto and Yvonne Vera.
 Klopper states that Marechera raises “the problem ... whether there is a role at all for postmodernist poetry in the postcolonial state” (Klopper 1999: 126). According to Chennells, Marechera was “acutely conscious of the trap within protest literature: an imperial/anti-imperialism exchange, a contestation between a metropolitan authentic and an authentic which reveals itself once imperialism is out of the way both guarantee that the debate is being conducted in the terms imperialism has laid down” (Chennells & Veit-Wild 1999: 49).
9. Although in the essay I deploy an argument that Marechera’s is a post-modernism “of a special type”, Hassan’s well-known checklist of salient qualities of postmodernism (“versus” modernism) tallies remarkably well with the features of Marechera’s writings (Hassan quoted by Brooker 1992: 11-12). Compare also Riemenschneider (1989: 407) and Veit-Wild (1992b: 261) on Marecheran postmodernism.
10. Marechera in an interview stated unequivocally that *Black Sunlight* was set in Zimbabwe (Veit-Wild 1992a: 220), but the scenery here is evidently that of Conrad’s Congo rather than of Marechera’s country of origin. Gikandi writes that “the most prominent insignia of Africanness in modernism is the forest. The African forest would hence appear to negate the ideals of culture and civilization” (Gikandi 1996: 169). It is this kind of assumption that Marechera is mocking here by means of his *Heart of Darkness* parody.
11. Compare the *Heart of Darkness* echo in another passage: “I willed my heart to stop wheezing horror-horror” (Marechera 1980: 9).
12. Note nevertheless that in closely proximate sentences, the narrator declares, first, “These are my people. I am their people too” and “Europe was in my head, crammed together with Africa, Asia and America” (Marechera 1980: 3-4).
13. In another passage, Marechera tellingly contrasts a black and a white body – for instance, he endows his description of the chief’s black body with such grotesqueries as the following: “everywhere tufts of hair sprouted out of the sweaty swamp of flesh. The fantastic physiognomy of my great chief suggested sudden and barbaric impulses, crude and insatiable appetites, dark and grim events”; whereas the adventurous British anthropologist (Blanche Goodfather),

even though she is an isolated white woman "bathing nude", does so both elegantly and powerfully because she is (even in Africa) swimming "in the tanned and glittering glory of her European tradition" (Marechera 1980: 6). But the parodic (Conrad-style) description of the chief's body is offset by other, respectful remarks, such as the narrator's comments that the chief "in his heyday, [was] a mighty wrestler, a casanova, a fair and just man" (Marechera 1980: 6).

14. Isabel Hofmeyr has said of the "folktale" passage in *The House of Hunger* (Marechera 1978: 79-80) that although "oral narrative [is] a form often assumed to be traditional in theme, *premodern* in literary style, and order-affirming in its ethical orientation[,] the type of narrative we see here is in fact *postmodern*, grotesque, and subversive" (Hofmeyr 1996: 88, my italics).

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