

BOOK REVIEWS

Dambudzo Marechera, 4 June 1952 — 18 August 1987: Pictures, Poems, Prose, Tributes [cover title: **Dambudzo Marechera, 1952–1987**] *Compiled and edited by Flora Veit-Wild and Ernst Schade*. Harare, Baobab Books, 1988, 36 pp., illus., ISBN 0-7974-0838-X, Z\$8.80.

This slim book is an interesting tribute to the controversial Zimbabwean writer, Dambudzo Marechera. It is a collection of poems, extracts from the author's prose, tributes from fellow Zimbabwean writers and European critics. The book is attractively presented, with a number of excellent black and white photographs of Marechera, in different poses and contexts. What emerges from this tribute is a moving picture of a social misfit — a man who was determined to live out a romantic image of the writer in exile from his own people and community.

Marechera's paranoia is clearly evident in his writing. His pungent wit is evident in, for example, the poem 'Identify the Identity Parade'. His mastery of the English language is economically conveyed in the extract from the unpublished work, *The Concentration Camp*, entitled 'What's Wrong with a Cockroach Anyway?' (pp. 4–5).

The most striking section of this book is entitled 'Dambudzo Marechera interviews himself' (pp. 6–8). In it, the principal motivating factors in his life, with regard to his writing, are revealed, in particular, his hatred of his own background: — 'In my own case I have been influenced to a point of desperation by the dogged though brutalized humanity of those among whom I grew up' (p. 6). Indeed, the grossness of urban ghettos pervades *The House of Hunger* and *Black Sunlight*. His description of his early years in Rusape is very moving.

Perhaps the most fascinating comments Marechera makes relate to the whole question of language. The untimely death of his father in a traffic accident and the family's subsequent eviction led to his overwhelming sense of insecurity.

What did it mean that father was dead? What did it mean not to have a home? It was the beginning of my physical and mental insecurity — I began to stammer horribly. It was terrible. Even speech, language, was deserting me. I stammered hideously for three years. Agony (p. 7).

Marechera rejected Shona because it 'was part of the ghetto daemon I was trying to escape'. He continues:

Shona had been placed within the context of a degraded, mind-wrenching experience from which apparently the only escape was into the English language and education. The English language was automatically connected with the plush and seeming splendour of the white side of town. As far as expressing the creative turmoil within my head was concerned, I took to the English language as a duck takes to water. I was therefore a keen accomplice and student of my own mental colonisation (p. 7).

To redress this imbalance, like some of the writers of the *négritude* movement (Césaire in particular), Marechera exacted his revenge on the language of the colonizer, when he speaks of 'brutalizing it into a more malleable shape for my own purposes'. His wry humour emerges when he asserts,

For a black writer the language is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duals [*sic*] with the language before you can make it do all that you want it to do. It is so for the feminists. English is very male. Hence feminist writers also adopt the same tactics. This may mean discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within, beating the drum and cymbals of rhythm, developing torture chambers of irony and sarcasm, gas ovens of limitless black resonance. For me this is the impossible, the exciting, the voluptuous blackening image that commits me totally to writing (pp. 7-8).

Marechera's choice of symbols and imagery reflects his own tortured existence.

Dambudzo Marechera, 1952-87 provides some fascinating insights into the style and nature of Zimbabwe's most problematic writer, both from within and without. It is, therefore, a welcome addition to the corpus of Zimbabwean literature. What is, however, regrettable is the number of elementary spelling and grammatical mistakes in it — for example 'my hands shoots up' (p. 7); 'T. S. Elliot' (p. 15); 'The heart is a desert place, and the earth of piercing heat' (p. 29); and 'Day-to-day reality is therefore itself any [i.e. an] illusion created by the mass of our needs . . .' (p. 36). Nevertheless, Flora Veit-Wild, Ernst Schade and Baobab Books are to be congratulated for the overall quality of the book.

It is also encouraging to note the establishment of a publishing house which, in addition to the University, can offer academics an outlet for the publication of their scholarly works.

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Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe By Flora [Veit-]Wild. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1988, viii, 152 pp., illus., ISBN 0-86922-432-8, Z\$10.00 (p/b).

Flora Wild's recently published book, *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, is a useful addition to the study of Zimbabwean poetry written in English, blending, as it does, some criticism, interviews with some of the younger Black Zimbabwean poets, and a selection of their poetry, some of which has not been published before.

Mrs Wild's introductory essay is conveniently subdivided, with separate sections on each of the seven poets she interviewed, namely, Chenjerai Hove, Musaemura Zimunya, Charles Mungoshi, Hopewell Seyaseya, Kristina Rungano, Albert Chimedza and Dambudzo Marechera. Her evaluation of the poets is neatly summarized in the following quotation:

Their weaknesses which I attempted to point out in detail earlier on, lie in their unsatisfactory craftsmanship, in the lack of poetical elaboration due to a certain lack of artistic competence and experience. They mostly fail to create a piece of writing which goes beyond the writer's personal feelings, intentions or sufferings (p. 28).

The author does point out — and, indeed, this is borne out by the interviews themselves — that part of the problem stems from the lack of a poetic tradition within which, or from which, the poet can define himself or herself. The historical reasons for this are well spelt out in the book.

The graver problem, however, that of artistic incompetence is, sadly, borne out in a large number of the poems given in the text. Charles Mungoshi, a noted