

R.S.
10/20/92

(Sander)

dlb1257 mphahlele
ts ps/kf Master
10-7
ed.

Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele

(17 December 1919 -)

Ursula A. Barnett

- BOOKS: *Man Must Live, and other Stories* (African Bookman, 1946);
- Down Second Avenue* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959; Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1971);
- The Living and Dead, And Other Stories* (Ibadan: Ministry of Education, 1961);
- The African Image* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962; New York: Praeger, 1962; revised, London: Faber & Faber, 1974; New York: Praeger, 1974);
- A Guide to Creative Writing* (Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1966);
- In Corner B* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967);
- The Wanderers* (New York: Macmillan, 1971; London: Macmillan, 1972; Cape Town: Africasouth, 1984);
- Voices in the Whirlwind, and Other Essays* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972; London: Macmillan, 1973; Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1973);
- Chirundu* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1979; Walton-on-Thames, U.K.: Nelson, 1980; Westport, Conn.: Hill, 1981);
- Let's Write a Novel* (Cape Town: Miller, 1981);
- The Unbroken Song: Selected Writings* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981);
- Afrika My Music* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984);
- Father Come Home* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984);
- Let's Talk Writing: Prose* (Johannesburg: African Writers' Association & Council for Black Education and Research, 1985);
- Let's Talk Writing: Poetry* (Johannesburg: African Writers' Association & Council for Black Education and Research, 1986);
- Poetry and Humanism* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1986);

o |

a |

~~And as a result~~

place of publication?
Cape Town?
See p. 4
(bottom)

: |

Echoes of African Art (Braamfontein, South Africa: Skotaville, 1987);
Renewal Time (London & Columbia, La.: Readers International, 1988);
Mandela: Echoes of an Era (London & New York: Penguin, 1990).

OTHER: *Modern African Stories*, edited by Ellis Ayitey Komey (London: Faber & Faber 1964);
African Writing Today, edited by Mphahlele (Harmondsworth U.K.: Penguin, 1967);
 Bernard B. Dadié, *Climbié*, translated by Karen C. Chapman, foreword by Mphahlele (London & Ibadan: Heinemann, 1971);
 → *Night of My Blood*, (Kofi Awoonor), introduction by Mphahlele (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—
 UNCOLLECTED: "Out of Africa," *Encounter* (April 1960): 61-63;
 "Black and White," *New Statesman* (10 September 1960): 342-346;
 "Travels on an Extra-Mural Donkey," *Transition*, 3 (November 1963): 46-50;
 "The Tyranny of Place," *New Letters*, 40, No. 1 (1973): 69-84;
 "Why I Teach My Discipline," *Denver Quarterly*, 8 (Spring 1973): 32-43;
 "Portrait of a Man Who Lives in a Glass House," *Era*, 12 (Spring 1976): 4-7;
 "The Voice of Prophecy in African Poetry," *English in Africa*, 6 (March 1979): 33-44;
 "Oganda's Journey" [play], *Staffrider*, 2 (July-August 1979): 38-47;
 "The Tyranny of Place and Aesthetics: The South African Case," *English Academy Review* (1981): 1-12;
 "South African Literature vs. Political Morality," *English Academy Review*, 1 (1983): 8-26;
 "Women and Their Men," *Classic*, 2, no. 1 (1983): 3-5;
 "Literature: A Necessity or a Public Nuisance," *Classic*, 3, no. 1 (1984): 14-16;
 "Mongane Serote's *Odyssey*: The Path that Breaks the Heels," *English Academy Review*, 3 (1985): 65-79.

Es'kia (born Ezekiel) Mphahlele has been involved in almost every phase of English-language literature, either as a participant or commentator. His importance lies in the bold and clear for-

and Mphahlele | (?)
 I assume that if a play/story by Mphahlele is in this book, it ~~should be underlined~~ otherwise this entry makes no sense.
 M | 2
 3 |

u | 1 | 2
 3 | the of play: italics
 any details: issue, month?

Rev! this does not exist.

mulation of his ideas on African humanism, a view of life in which humankind is an expression and extension of the supreme force, in harmony with the environment. Against a dual background of Western culture and African tradition, his writing and the direction he has given his life illuminates the courage with which people survive oppression. He has a vision of a liberated land in South Africa where every human life is valued.

Mphahlele's father, Moses, who worked as a messenger, came to Pretoria from the district of Sekhukhuneland, where his forefathers of the Mphahlele (tribe) had been chiefs and headman. Mphahlele's origin is of concern to students of his writing in view of the contention of some of his critics that his social and educational background was purely a Western one.

Mphahlele was born in Pretoria on 17 December 1919, but from the age of five till he was thirteen, he lived in the village of Maupaneng with his paternal grandmother. In one of his earliest works, the story "Tomorrow You Shall Reap," in *Man Must Live*, (1946) he describes nostalgically the beautiful mountains, the sparkling rivers, and the song of the birds in his early surroundings. But as the circumstances of his life became more bitter, so the scenery of his early childhood seemed to grow, the mountains more ominous, and the river more chaotic. The feeling of terror remained with him until he went there in the 1980s and allowed the nightmares to "shrink into a manageable world" in his adult mind.

At age thirteen Mphahlele joined his parents in Marabastad, ~~or~~ a township in Pretoria and they lived on Second Avenue—thus the title of his first autobiography (1959). His father habitually treated his mother badly and after a ghastly attack on her with a pot of boiling stew, Moses Mphahlele was arrested. The parents were divorced and the young Mphahlele never saw his father again. His mother, Eva Mogale Mphahlele, supported her children by doing domestic work. Marabastad was a typical township slum, with overcrowded homes, streets full of rubble and dirt, and nights of frightening sounds, but Mphahlele lived in a close-knit community; it was there, mainly from the strong women in his family—his mother, maternal grandmother, and his Aunt Dora—that he learned about survival. *Man Must Live* was consequently the title of his first collection of short stories.

By the time the book was published (in 1946), Mphahlele was teaching high school in Or-

term? e/

re

re o/

e/

re o/

lando Township. On her meager earnings his mother had put him through a leading high school (Saint Peter's) and a private mission institution (Adams Teachers Training College in Natal), where he gained a teaching diploma in 1940. He felt insufficiently educated to teach, though he first took a clerical post at an institute for the blind and continued to study. In 1945 he married Rebecca Mochadibane who was then a student teacher at a Johannesburg training college and later became a social worker. They have five children.

From his first years on Second Avenue, Mphahlele had been an avid reader. In a small, one-room tin shack, which served as a reading room, he read anything from cookbooks and astrology to *Don Quixote*: "I went through the whole lot like a termite," he says in his autobiography *Afrika My Music* (1984). "But Cervantes was to stand out in my mind, forever." He was also fascinated by the silent films of Charlie Chaplin. In Mphahlele's school days, however, the British classics by Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, John Milton, William Makepeace Thackeray, and others—with the settings so remote from an African township—had little meaning for him. It was only when he himself was teaching that he learned to appreciate Charles Dickens, the American writers William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, the Russian writers, and ancient Greek drama, which he found close to African life. Later Rabindranath Tagore, the black American writers Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, and South African writers William Plomer, Nadine Gordimer, Alex La Guma, and others had a significant effect on him.

Mphahlele spoke Northern Sotho at home, and the language of the neighborhood was a mixture of Southern Sotho and Afrikaans. The medium of instruction at school was English, in which he soon became proficient. Then, he says, "Something strange happened to me as I studied by candle-light listening to the throb out there. I found myself writing a short story. I know I had been burning with an urge to say something in writing." The African Bookman in Cape Town, which had been publishing monographs on political and social subjects, ventured into producing *Man Must Live*, comprising five of Mphahlele's stories. All seven hundred copies of the book were soon sold.

The stories describe the experiences of characters involved in an often losing battle against cir-

c |

a |

2) ~~scribble~~ cc b |

m |

cumstances, characters who come to realize that they must survive as individuals by strictly adhering to a moral code. This code is not necessarily identical with the morals accepted by the community in which they live. Courage, for example, does not have to mean facing the common enemy but rather maintaining the truth as you see it. One of the stories takes place in a period of history when black congregations were resenting white supervision of their churches. The Reverend Katsane Melato in Mphahlele's story "The Leaves Were Falling" cannot agree with the method employed by his congregation in protesting against raised fees. Like a leaf falling from a sapless twig destined to decay, Melato removes himself from the conflict.

Zungu, the hero of the title story, makes a cult of survival but misunderstands the philosophy he has chosen, in that he relies on the "machine," the system in the form of the railway organization for which he works as a policeman, for survival at the expense of the men and women over whose lives he holds sway. Except for "Man Must Live", which he has included in a later collection (*In Corner B*, 1967), Mphahlele has virtually disowned his first collection as escapist. Yet, although the stories do not overtly blame the social system for the dramas and tragedies of the lives they describe, most of them portray the struggles of the black man to survive in a segregated society. This is certainly how most reviewers in the white South African press saw them. The reviews were mainly favorable but expressed surprise that a black man should be able to write. On the other hand the critic for the *Guardian*, a Marxist-oriented newspaper, took Mphahlele to task for not making his characters complain about the pass laws, pick-up vans, or the insolence of the white man, and accused Mphahlele of allowing the gods of his father to be exorcised by the white man. Criticism of escapism in these stories was disputed many years later by Siphso Sepamla, one of the leading African critics of the 1970s and 1980's, who had read the book in 1948 as a prescribed text at Orlando High School, where Mphahlele was teaching. In a 1976 article entitled "The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas," he says that even then the quality of self-consciousness or black consciousness was there in that Mphahlele was portraying the black experience.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s Mphahlele began concentrating on teaching,

Ben,
this sentence
needs revision.

)

which, right from the beginning, he has always loved. Teaching gives him an opportunity to share his passion for literature with others. There has always been an intense rapport between him and his students, and former students have described him as a man dedicated to his profession. Although he disliked politics, Mphahlele was drawn into educational politics because of his ability and fearlessness in expressing his convictions. As general secretary of the Transvaal African Teacher's Association, he, with others, led the opposition against the Eiselen Commission's Report, which eventually led to the Bantu Education Act and total apartheid in education with an inferior education for the black child. Shortly after a paper voicing his opposition was published, in 1952, he received a letter from the Transvaal Education Department dismissing him from the teaching profession in government schools in South Africa. Pupils decided to stay out of school in protest, and as a result he and two others were arrested on charges of inciting a boycott and public violence. They were subsequently acquitted.

There followed a period during which he taught in Lesotho (then Basutoland) and at his old school, Saint Peter's. But Saint Peter's refused to accept the new educational provisions and was compelled to close down. (Adams Teachers Training College was taken over by the government and eventually also went out of existence.)

In 1955 Mphahlele entered a brief and unhappy career as a journalist, when he accepted a position as reporter and literary editor of the journal *Drum*. He also became a leading contributor of fiction. The idea of this journal for black readers in English was conceived by Bob Crisp, a white journalist and broadcaster, who persuaded Jim Bailey, son of a gold millionaire, to finance him. It began as a publication of what whites imagined blacks would want to read—ethnic stories and articles; installments of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948); features about religion, farming, sports, and famous men; and strip cartoons about Gulliver and Saint Paul. Under subsequent editors Anthony Sampson, Tom Hopkinson, and Sylvester Sreini, and Mphahlele, *Drum* attempted to become a "people's paper." It became known for its fearless investigative journalism, and although it vied for black readership with the *Daily Mirror* in providing pinups, crime, and romance, it also represented African literature in South Africa for almost a decade.

Mphahlele hated his journalistic assignments on the magazine, yet they provided the raw material for much of his later writing. He covered most of the important events of the period: a boycott of the buses against raised fares, the march of twenty thousand women to the government buildings in Pretoria to protest against passes for women, and finally his swansong assignment for *Drum*, a trial of 156 men and women for treason.

As literary editor Mphahlele was able to help publish works by young, talented writers, such as Nimrod Mkele, Richard Rive, Peter Clarke (writing as Peter Kumalo) and James Matthews, many of whom became well known later. Some of Mphahlele's own best early work appeared in *Drum* between 1953 and 1959. For instance, his series about the Lesanes, a fictional family in Newclare Township, was published between 1956 and 1957. Although there is rollicking fun at times in that series, it is the stark, grim realism of the life of the people, the desperate day-to-day struggle to survive, that makes up most of the action. What hope is there for the Lesane family, housed in two rooms, which Ma-Lesane desperately but unsuccessfully tries to keep clean? The father, discharged from the mines because of ill health, is afraid of his wife and takes out his frustrations on his teenaged daughter, Diketso, by beating her. The young boys eat their supper secretly so that they need not feel obliged to invite their friends to share their meager meal. The daughter realizes that she is hurting her family and herself by going to live with her lover, but it is the only way she can vent her frustration at having to leave school because her parents can no longer afford to keep her there. But Diketso has not given up all hope and aspirations. There must be a future for her, she feels, and even the present has some happy moments: unexpectedly her lover gives her a gift on her birthday. Toward the end of the series, though, there seems to be less and less hope. The series was written at one of the most devastating periods of Mphahlele's life, when he first considered exiling himself from South Africa. Yet there is always a note of optimism expressed in the toughness of the people, who refuse to submit to circumstances.

In 1949 Mphahlele had earned a B.A. at the University of South Africa, and in December 1956 he presented his master's thesis, "The Non-European Character in South African English Fiction," to the University of South Africa and was

X |

7 |

Character as Characters?

awarded his M.A. with distinction in a segregated ceremony. He joined the Orlando Study Circle and became interested in helping organize cultural and extramural educational activities, a pursuit to which he has devoted himself intermittently throughout his life. Among his colleagues on the staff of *Drum* and its sister publication *Golden City Post*, who formed a close coterie in Sophiatown, he was treated with respect, although he rarely joined in their sessions of discussing culture and drinking alcoholic beverages.

At the beginning of 1957 his gradual conviction that he would have to leave South Africa came to a head. Like the character Timi in Mphahlele's autobiographical novel *The Wanderers* (1971), he had known that eventually he would "have to decide whether to stay and try to survive; or stay and pit my heroism against the machine and bear the consequences if I remained alive; or stay and shrivel up with bitterness; or face my cowardice, reason with it and leave." Just as later they would try to stop him from returning, friends attempted to dissuade him from leaving. As he writes in *Down Second Avenue*, "Stay on in the struggle," they kept saying; "I'm contributing nothing, I told them. I can't teach and I want to teach, I can't write here and I want to write." In September 1957 he exiled himself and his family, as he put it, in Lagos, Nigeria.

There he completed *Down Second Avenue*. It was accepted almost immediately and published in 1959, to be followed by a spate of autobiographies by other black South Africans. *Drum* had ceased to be an outlet for serious fiction, there was no other in South Africa, and the writers had a great deal left to say. They needed to confirm a sense of identity, and they found publishers abroad for the stories of their lives, because their experiences were far more exciting than anything they could invent. Moreover the black American writers whom they admired, such as James Baldwin and Richard Wright, had all written about themselves.

Mphahlele describes himself in his 1959 book as sitting on the verandah of a shop in Marastab: "If you were alone, you were in a position to view critically what you considered to be the whole world passing down Barber Street, half detached, half committed." From this point of view he looks at his life and that of those around him. Life is harsh on Second Avenue, and it was there that Mphahlele learned that one must live and make the most of circumstances. Readers watch Mphahlele's world deteriorate politically

of the |

not italics

to | (?)

and socially and his own tension mount; they follow him to school and college and watch him gain honor and distinction, followed by defeat and disillusionment.

edit out

In *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele sought to give an account of himself at a time when he desperately needed to take stock. But the work also goes beyond that. The story of Mphahlele's early life is typical in many ways of that of all black South Africans, and so, perhaps unconsciously, he speaks on their behalf, too. Mphahlele found it difficult to speak of private matters, but as the self-expression of an articulate, sensitive, and perceptive black man in South Africa, the book never falters. His search for an African identity had begun.

At the beginning *Down Second Avenue* is held together not so much by the chronology of Mphahlele's life as by the control and dramatization of his feelings. He applies his skill in storytelling and in building up events and feelings. The work vibrates with the active life around him. The graphic pictures portray bitterness, for instance, as something he can almost grasp with his hands, as when his bicycle, laden with the washing he has fetched from a white suburb crashes into a group of white boys riding abreast. They kick and curse him as he goes down, then they ride away leaving him "with the cold, the pain, the numbness, and a puncture and bent front wheel." Above all, the aliveness of the characters and their efforts to rise above circumstances distinguish this work and set it above the autobiographies of Mphahlele's contemporaries among black South African writers.

Once the young Mphahlele leaves Second Avenue, the work becomes more conventionally autobiographical. The interest for the reader begins to lie in admiration for Mphahlele's achievements and for his political stand. There is no longer the spontaneity and aliveness of the earlier chapters, and the narrative tends to ramble.

Between the chapters there are "interludes," in which Mphahlele stops the narrative to report his thoughts. For example, he mourns the passing of Marabastad, which he sees as symbolic of blacks always being on the move, and of poverty and despair. In another interlude, towards the end of the book, he tries to stand on top of a high mountain in Basutoland, but the writing becomes self-conscious and tends to hide rather than expose his feelings. The work regains its emotional impetus near the end when Mphahlele de-

scribes the most bitter period in his life, culminating in his voluntary exile.

In spite of some unevenness the total effect of *Down Second Avenue* is overwhelming. It is a social record and a moving human document, as relevant today as it was in 1959. Critics and the public alike approved of it. C. O. Gardner, in his laudation speech at the University of Natal at Pietermaritzburg, when presenting Mphahlele with an honorary doctorate in April 1983, said

Zeke Mphahlele (as he is commonly known) was born and bred in poverty and hardship. In this respect he was of course like most Africans in South Africa. One needs to begin with this point, because the earlier parts of his life—most memorably described in his autobiography *Down Second Avenue* are both unique and typical. And the element of typicality Zeke Mphahlele would wish to insist on, since he has always wanted to be associated with his fellow black South Africans. The words “poverty and hardship” do not adequately sum up the tone of the autobiography, however. The story is a complex one, and it is told with lively vividness and with terse irony—sometimes with quiet anger, sometimes with humour, never with self-pity.

The work was translated into eleven languages and innumerable extracts have appeared in anthologies. It is regarded as one of the few classics to emerge from South Africa.

Although he enjoyed freedom in Nigeria and felt that Africa had been given back to him, Mphahlele missed the sense of community living. He also felt that the “crutch” that had given one an identity at home—the anger and the bitterness—had been removed. And however much success he gained academically and with publications, what he missed everywhere was an emotional and intellectual commitment to place.

From 1957 to 1961 he served as a lecturer in the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University College of Ibadan, a job that entailed much traveling. In 1958 he attended the All-Africa People’s Conference in Accra as leader of the South African delegation, having promised Nelson Mandela to represent the African National Congress. It was his one foray into active politics.

In 1961 he received news that he was one of several writers listed by the South African government under the Suppression of Communism (later Internal Security) Act. The listing meant that none of his work could be circulated or

quoted by South Africans, for whom and about whom he was writing. "We would never know the reactions of those whose concerns we shared in South Africa," he writes in *Afrika My Music*. "We were indeed like disembodied voices crying out for a dimension that will give them meaning." The banning remained in force until after his return to South Africa in 1977, but, even now, several of his books remain banned individually under the Publications Act.

In the 1950s in Nigeria a literary renaissance was in full swing, and Mphahlele met many of its exponents, among them Kofi Awoonor (who became a lifelong friend), Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark, and Ama Ata Aidoo. He joined the editorial board of the journal *Black Orpheus*, became a contributor and eventually coeditor. In 1961 *Black Orpheus*, under sponsorship of the Ministry of Education, published a collection of his stories, *The Living and Dead, and Other Stories*. The stories were written in South Africa, all except one had previously been published in journals—*Drum*, *Africa South*, *Fighting Talk*, *New World Writing*, and *Black Orpheus*—and two are very similar to incidents in *Down Second Avenue*. Unlike his first collection, in the 1961 book black people are shown in relation to the white world around them and often in conflict with it.

The title story concerns a white official, Stoffel Visser, who almost comes to accept his servant Jackson as a human being. Stoffel has just completed a report to the government urging that servants should not be allowed to live on the premises of the white areas in which they work. A railway sweeper comes to him with a letter that seems to indicate that a man just killed by a train is Jackson. Stoffel is full of repentance about the way he has treated his servant, such sorrow and regret being comfortable feelings when no further steps need to be taken. When it turns out that Jackson is alive, and Stoffel thus has a second chance to rectify his attitude, he relapses and decides to let Jackson continue to be "a machine to work for him."

In "We'll Have Dinner at Eight" there is a confrontation between Miss Pringle—a do-gooder who asks Mzondi, a black man, to dinner in a conscious effort to win black friends—and the crippled Mzondi, who kills her in the mistaken belief that she wants to get him drunk in order to make him reveal where he has hidden stolen money. The spinster hides her sexual long-

* |
is this still the case, Jan?

2 |

3 |

ings behind a mask of good deeds, and the cripple believes anyone white represents an unjust law and therefore danger. Unfortunately there is neither tragedy nor pathos in the story, partly because of the poorly motivated murder—all Mzondi need to have done was stay away from the dinner—but more so because Mphahlele fails to raise any sympathy for or interest in either of the main characters.

In "The Master of Doornvlei" there is also a confrontation, but this time the labels are less distinct. Sarel Britz, the owner of a farm called Doornvlei, knows that it is necessary to establish a workable relationship with his laborers. Sarel is prepared to listen to them when they have complaints, but when their leader imposes an ultimatum on him to dismiss his foreman, he cannot tolerate this from a black man. He dismisses the worker and keeps the foreman. Ironically the confrontation that follows later is between Sarel and the foreman, who has taken advantage of the situation. The symbolic battle between the foreman's bull and Sarel's pedigree stallion is very effective. Although the bull gores the horse, Sarel triumphs when he gives the foreman the choice between killing his bull and leaving. But it is a Pyrrhic victory: Sarel is left in fear of his laborers.

The two stories based on incidents in *Down Second Avenue*, "The Woman" and "The Woman Walks Out," feature Ma-Lebona, called Madira in *The Living and Dead*, and are typical of the kind of writing that gives the autobiography so much of its appeal. They are compassionate and amusing sketches of a selfish and vain woman so clean that she often took meat out of boiling water to be rewashed.

"The Suitcase" is a well-constructed, ironic story about a man named Timi, unemployed and desperate, who is relying upon "sheer naked chance" to provide him with a present for his wife on New Year's Eve. He thinks he is in luck when a woman on a bus apparently forgets to take her suitcase. But he plays with fate and loses. Not only is he caught in the act of stealing, but the case contains a dead baby. The theme of the story is not the vagaries of fate but the choices humankind has. Timi makes the mistake of relying on an arbitrary provision by Providence. Some years before, Mphahlele had shown some of his unpublished writings to Nadine Gordimer, and she had liked this story particularly. She told him to submit it to *New World Writing*, where it appeared in the seventh Mentor Se-

h |
w |
) |
(?)
w |

lection in 1955, in company with works by Heinrich Böll, Dylan Thomas, and others.

"He and the Cat" the last story in the 1961 collection, is very different from any other fiction by Mphahlele. The reader is not told what the burden is that will be dropped off as soon as the narrator has spoken to the lawyer for whom he is waiting on a hot afternoon. The story is an impressionistic reflection of the narrator's self-centered thought processes, which lead him to the recognition that a nearby man with a fixed smile, who is interminably closing envelopes, is blind. The blind man's silent activity and his detachment, with the picture of the cat behind him, reveal to the narrator the temporal nature of day-to-day concerns.

Mphahlele enjoyed his teaching experiences in Nigeria and felt very much part of the intellectual life of the country. But he was disillusioned with the educational system. Although well qualified for a permanent position in the English department of the University of Ibadan, as an outsider without a British postgraduate degree, such a job denied him. He was offered a post as director of the African Program for the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris, which he accepted in 1961. The congress had been formed in the early 1950s with the purpose of maintaining and defending intellectual freedom. Mphahlele maintained a Paris home but also toured Africa as a part of his job. Together with Africanist Ulli Beier and Nigerian writers Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, and others, he formed the Mbari Writers Club in Ibadan. The name Mbari was symbolic of renewal. It was derived from an Igbo religious practice whereby a house, dedicated to Mbari, the earth goddess, is left to decay and a new house is built. The club held art exhibitions, concerts, dramatic performances, and writer's workshops, and the meeting place housed an African reference library. Mbari Publications was founded to publish African writing. Conferences on African culture and writing were held regularly, and other centers were set up in other parts of Nigeria. In Paris itself Mphahlele felt isolated and unhappy, finding he could not identify with French intellectual life. He enjoyed the visits of friends and described his home as a cross-roads for writers and artists from Africa.

In 1962 a collection of his essays was published—*The African Image*—in which he investigates "The African Personality," a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah at the All-African People's Con-

> |
I don't understand this sentence, gen. what does it mean?

was |

→ change one

e |

~

ference in Accra. Mphahlele identifies it as a "beacon on the battlefield, a thrust, an assertion of the African presence . . . a coming into consciousness. . . ." *The African Image* began as an exploration of the African image in literature but went on to include the sociopolitical sphere. It includes his master's thesis, "The Non-European Character in South African Fiction," and articles previously published in journals such as the *Twentieth Century*, *Transition*, *Encounter*, and the *New Statesman*. (Mphahlele revised *The African Image* for a second edition, published in 1974, and a further collection of essays was published under the title *Voices in the Whirlwind, and Other Essays* in 1972.)

italics |

In 1963 the Congress for Cultural Freedom sent Mphahlele to Kenya to establish a center like Mbari. Two months after his arrival, in October 1963, Kenya celebrated its independence. In Nairobi, Mphahlele was in charge of writing and theater at the new cultural center, called Chemchemi, Swahili for "fountain," and he also traveled to other districts to run writers' workshops and introduce his drama group.

|

In *Africa My Music* he says, "my soul was in the job," but toward the end the experience began to sour. There were quarrels with the Nairobi cultural group and a lack of support from the government. Furthermore, the Congress of Cultural Freedom had lost a great deal of its credibility when it became public knowledge that it was sponsored by the CIA through the Fairfield Foundation. He left in 1965, and as there was no one suitable to succeed him, the congress closed down the center.

K |

These frustrations during the mid 1960s were not conducive to producing literary work, and he wrote very little; however, some stories he had finished in Paris were ready to be prepared for publication. He did finish editing two anthologies, *African Writing Today* (1967) and (in collaboration with Ellis Ayitey Komey) *Modern Africa Stories* (1964).

|

The administrators of a girls' high school near Nairobi had asked him to write a play for its yearly drama festival. He turned a short story by the Kenyan writer Grace Ogot, "The Rain Came," into a verse drama with African music. "Oganda's Journey" was subsequently also produced in Tanzania and the United States, and published in the South African journal *Staffrider* (July-August 1979). Ogot had based the story on the traditions of her Luo people. It tells how two

n |

title of play: italics

young lovers cheat the gods who demand a human sacrifice to bring about rain. Mphahlele makes some changes to the story and introduces a chorus but retains the essence of a traditional tale simply told.

Mphahlele had long loved theater, writing, producing, and acting in some sketches while still in school. Later he wrote some verse plays; one, an ambitious effort about the life of Shaka Zulu, was unfortunately lost. While teaching at Orlando High School, he attended a private class in drama with Norah Taylor, a producer and teacher. She became his mentor, benefactor, and friend, helping him with early productions and encouraging his Syndicate of African Artists, which he ran with friends. It was a black community-based performing arts group at a time when most black drama was organized by whites, and it presented drama performances in the 1950s. Mphahlele dramatized Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and other classics, and various folktales. The syndicate failed in its efforts, mainly due to police harassment, and was forced to disband in 1956, but Mphahlele maintained his interest in African drama and encouraged it whenever he had an opportunity.

After his experiences in Kenya, Mphahlele was anxious to return to teaching. He was able to obtain a teaching fellowship at the University of Denver and arrived there in May 1966.

Mphahlele's next collection of short stories, *In Corner B*, was published in Nairobi in 1967. Several of the stories had appeared in such journals as *the Classic* and *Drum*, others in his earlier collections. Although Mphahlele had been away from South Africa for ten years, only two of the stories are not set there.

The best-known story, of almost novella length, is "Mrs. Plum." It concerns a liberal white widow who lives in a suburb with her daughter, Kate, her servants, and her dogs. Karabo, the female domestic who narrates the story, finds Mrs. Plum's liberalism puzzling but accepts it at first as one of the eccentricities of the white race: "my madam . . . loved dogs and Africans and said that everyone must follow the law even if it hurt. These were three big things in Madam's life." That is how the story opens. Relations between them deteriorate when there is trouble in the neighborhood. At first Mrs. Plum supports her servants against the police to the extent that she goes to jail. Karabo is impressed, but among her friends and at her home in Phokeng there is only

poverty and tragedy; suddenly she is sickened by the smell of the cosmetics she secretly shares with Mrs. Plum, and by the dogs and by Dick, the other servant, who cleans out the dirt of Madam's body from the bathtub. Dick is suspected of poisoning dogs in the neighborhood, and Mrs. Plum dismisses him. In protest Karabo leaves her employ. The story ends when Mrs. Plum visits Karabo in her home village and asks her to return. She tells Karabo that two pet dogs have died. Did this woman, Karabo wonders, come to ask her to return because she had lost two animals she loved? "You know, I like your people, Karabo, the Africans," Mrs. Plum says. Karabo wonders if Mrs. Plum likes her as an individual.

In the course of the story readers gradually realize that while Mrs. Plum's liberalism is quite genuine, unlike that of Miss Pringle in "We'll Have Dinner at Eight," it is completely impersonal. Mphahlele dislikes this type of liberalism intensely because it lacks the one characteristic that is his own ruling passion, a feeling of compassion for one's fellow human beings. By bringing into the story a historical character, the black leader Lillian Ngoyi, as teacher in a women's club Karabo attends, Mphahlele shows the white liberal as irrelevant to the education and maturity of a young black girl.

"Grieg on a Stolen Piano" is a strong condemnation of a society in which a black man of intellect and integrity can easily ~~can easily~~ founder. The main character goes through many harrowing experiences, some of them similar to Mphahlele's own. He rises to the position of school inspector. Like "Man Must Live," which precedes it in this collection, the story tells of deterioration, triggered by circumstances but intrinsically arising out of the man's character. Like Zungu, Uncle in "Grieg" never loses faith in survival as a necessity, but he is cynical in the way he applies this idea to his own life. The central plot is amusing. The uncle has a foolproof scheme for making money: he gets a pretty girl from the country and trains her for a beauty contest. The judges are bribed, but unfortunately it is decided that the winner shall be chosen by popular vote. The uncle is a likable and complicated character embodying a synthesis of traditional and Western civilization, a blend Mphahlele has discussed throughout his nonfiction writing. Sometimes Uncle plays music by Edvard Grieg on the piano he bought, which captures the idiom of popular speech, perhaps doing violence to standard En-

of her | (?)
k |

~

s |
~ | u |
~ | u |

glish and thus injecting it with a new vitality.

The stories selected from Mphahlele's previously published work include some of his best, such as "He and the Cat," "Man Must Live," "Down the Quiet Street," "The Coffee-Cart Girl," and "The Suitcase." In the story "In Corner B," township people live to the fullest. For them, even death is an occasion for eating, drinking, and laughing, while keeping a watchful eye on a mourning widow, Talita. The story also tells of the earlier relationship between Talita and her husband. It is a simple love story, tender but not sentimental. Talita, a lively and over-talkative but affectionate woman, loves her gentle and shy man. They have been married for nineteen years when she finds a love letter to her husband from another woman, Marta. After the husband's death Marta comes to the funeral and flings herself on his grave. Later she sends a semiliterate letter from which Talita learns that Marta was never "sweet chokolet of your man," that "he neva love me neva neva," and that he was only "nise leel bit nise to me." Talita's love is thus restored to her, and she feels "like a foot traveller after a good refreshing bath." The description of the funeral preparations and wake is perhaps Mphahlele's most successful scene of township life, and Marta's letter and a tender moment of love between husband and wife are the most touching. By contrast, "A Point of Identity," about a man of mixed blood who betrays the black community he has joined through marriage makes its political point but without capturing the imagination of the reader.

"The Barber of Barigo" and "A Ballad of Oyo" are the only stories in the book that have backgrounds set outside South Africa. The former is the story of a man who refuses to become emotionally and actively involved in the rich life around him. Mphahlele has no difficulty in absorbing the atmosphere of a new milieu, but the story under its theme of passivity, which is not illustrated dramatically.

Mphahlele calls his story about the Yoruba market of Oyo a ballad to emphasize the folktale element, and he uses various devices to create the illusion of a tale told by someone who has fallen under a spell. Mphahlele is obviously fascinated with the market but fails to make it an integral part of this story of a vegetable seller caught in a conflict between justice and tradition. The story foreshadows the novel *Chirundu* (1979), in which Mphahlele goes much more deeply into these con-

something missing
check original

c/

cerns.

In the later stories of the 1967 collection Mphahlele's creative skills have matured. There is an economy of words and a conciseness of imagery lacking before. They mark the height as well as the end of his creation of short fiction.

By the time *Voices in the Whirlwind* and the revised version of *The African Image* were published, Mphahlele had become known as a major author and a controversial critic. All his essays have a unity in that they express his ideas and ideals in the search for an African identity and for an African context for humankind's place in the universe. Again and again he comes back to the subject of exile, to the "tyranny of place," the pull of the place of one's early experiences—the comfort of being in a community with whose cultural goals and aspirations one can identify.

As a teacher of English he discusses subjects largely through the eyes of a literary critic. His research into South African literature began with his master's thesis and still continues. Besides his essays he contributes occasional reviews to newspapers such as the *Sowetan*, commenting on writers he admires, such as Njabulo Ndebele and Oswald Mtshali. His love for literature comes through clearly in his critical writing. Tradition in Africa, for instance, is not an academic subject for him but a living theme in literature. His lengthy quotations often seem selected not just to prove a point but to share with his readers his intensely personal reading.

All Mphahlele's critical writing as well as his other essays, and indeed his fiction and autobiographical writing, contribute toward formulating his philosophy of African humanism. He cherishes, he says in *Afrika My Music*, the African's belief in the supreme being as a vital force, a dynamic presence in all organic matter, in the elements, and in humankind. He has listed the ingredients of African humanism as being "the love of life for its own sake, while holding it sacred; belief in the interconnectedness of all forms of life, of all nature; our sense of community; our neighbourhood sense of collective responsibility; our desire to touch one another physically; family concern for protection of the old; our capacity to absorb influences from other cultures because of the openness of our traditional religious beliefs. . . ."

In *Afrika My Music* he claims that ghetto life in South Africa was fashioned "out of our own ghetto culture, out of the bits and pieces of what

this 91
needs
editing
The : italics

11

22

was available to us in Western culture, and the stubborn sediments of the indigenous that could still be stirred up from the depths of our collective personality. Thus when Mphahlele turned away from Christianity toward African religion and values, it did not mean a total rejection of the West. His theory of synthesis has often been misunderstood and interpreted as integration and compromise. Nothing could be further from the truth. The idealism he shared in the 1950's with the African National Congress, an idealism that advocated a nonracial society, died for him with the arrest and trials of its leaders and with the tragic events at Sharpeville. But because African humanism is inclusive, not exclusive, blacks must leave the door open for others to come in. However, "they must earn their entry," he says. "No longer can we . . . make ourselves available on the white man's terms."

For Mphahlele, synthesis is something inherent in African thinking. He says in his 1971 introduction to Kofi Awoonor's collection of poetry *Night of My Blood* that has a keen sense of relationship between phenomena, of interconnection. And so Mphahlele warns against the danger of completely dismissing the Western aesthetic out of sheer crusading zeal. He feels that there is no need for conflict in the critic's mind whether to adhere to Western values or to reject them. In *Voices in the Whirlwind* he explores African and black American poetry against a background of modern European thought, as represented mainly by the critical writings of Christopher Caudwell, I.A. Richards, and Laurence Lerner. A work of art, Mphahlele insists, must express the artist's personal emotions and communicate these to the reader. At the same time, it must integrate and unify his personal experience and the sum of experience of his fellow human beings.

Negritude, the early concept of black consciousness initiated in black French Africa and the Caribbean, Mphahlele initially rejected with vehemence because he regarded it as a pose, an artificial structure, a museum artifact. In South Africa, where black people face a fight against government efforts to legislate them back to their tribes, they do not look back with nostalgia. In the revised edition of *The African Image* he says that negritude can have meaning only "if one regards it as a social force, never static, a tension, a continuing movement that asserts the value of African culture and its constitutions." In September 1977, in an open letter to Léopold Sédar Senghor, Presi-

= |

something missing:
check original

. | . |

do |

ē |

dent of Senegal and a leading poet in the movement, Mphahlele revisits negritude and explains the effect Senghor's *Chants d'Ombre* (Songs of Shadow, 1945) had on him, how it entranced him, knocked him off balance, and helped to "measure the energy of Africa" in him, "the thing we had taken for granted in ghettos where you could never efface your blackness" (*The Unbroken Song*, 1981). Today Mphahlele feels comfortable with the successor to negritude, black consciousness, and with the related ideology, though not the politics, of Pan-Africanism. On his return to South Africa in 1977 he Africanized his first name to Es'kia.

In one of the essays in *Voices in the Whirlwind*, Mphahlele turns to the question of a writer's commitment to a political purpose. He found Jean-Paul Sartre's insistence on social and political programs too rigid. While Mphahlele feels that every writer "is committed to something beyond his art," to a statement of value not purely aesthetic, to a "criticism of life," he finds this functional meaning a dangerous tendency since it limits the author's vision. "Live and go out / Define and / medicate the whirlwind," he says, quoting the poem by Gwendolyn Brooks that gives the collection its title.

By 1968 Mphahlele had felt ready to write a novel. When he wrote *Down Second Avenue* and his short stories, he was an unknown black man turning to a mainly white readership in South Africa and Britain. Later he knew that he would be measured against novelists of the stature of Achebe.

Africa and its interaction with displaced authors is the theme of Mphahlele's *The Wanderers*. He told Cosmo Pieterse in an interview for the BBC (published in 1972) that it was the first time he had tried to give a panoramic view of Africa and the torments Africa was going through. "I wanted to bring out the life of exile and put myself as the central character at different points," he told Ursula A. Barnett. If *The Wanderers* says anything at all, it should . . . be a personal record of [a] search for place." Yet he insisted that it was more fiction than autobiography since it had an imaginary plot.

The story opens with the news of the death of Felang, Timi Tabane's eldest son. Along with twenty-six other black African nationalist freedom fighters, he had been captured by a commando group of white farmers on the borders of Zimbabwe and thrown to the crocodiles. The nar-

rative basically follows Mphahlele's experiences in South Africa, which Timi, as narrator, describes in the beginning of the book in a flashback to the time before the birth of Felang. This first of five parts is an account of Timi's life and hardships in the South African township in which he lives and of his work on the magazine *Bongo*; it closely follows Mphahlele's life during the same period, as does *Down Second Avenue*, depicting the people living there amid the misery and the violence who are trying to maintain their human dignity. Timi, like Mphahlele, frustrated in his work for the magazine, has to decide whether to leave the country. Timi's life intertwines with that of Steven Cartwright, editor of *Bongo*, who, in a country ruled by what he calls "white thugs and Nazi-headed hoodlums," battles constantly with a feeling of guilt.

|

In exile Timi's life continues more or less to follow the events in the life of Mphahlele. Readers learn of the problems Timi and his wife, Karobo, have with Felang, who is rebellious, will not apply himself to his schoolwork, and will not communicate with his parents—parallel to the relationship Mphahlele and his wife had with their oldest son, Anthony.

r |

When Timi leaves he must stay out until he is needed, until the "waspish imperialism" and the "mute arrogance" of the conservative Africans has been replaced. Then Africa would come into its own, "a land of theatre, gaiety, of hot humid days and grey harmattans, of warm rain showers. Cities with vibrant night life." He might return to Africa, but not soon. He has expected a "roar of triumph, the triumph of black rule." Instead, there has been the plaintive sound of defeat.

o.k.

Within the framework of his own life story and a loosely woven and rambling account of real and imaginary characters, their wanderings, and their relations with each other, Mphahlele uses this novel as a vehicle for all the themes that concerned him during his years of exile. He states his beliefs more clearly than in any of his earlier works. African humanism, in the novel, is seeking "harmony with other men, without letting anyone trample on you."

Youth is a strong theme for Mphahlele. Felang's life and his martyrdom and death are symbolic of young Africa's search for identity. Readers are given a further clue about the significance of the theme in Timi's recurring dream of terror: he is pursued, but the faces of the pursu-

ers elude him. Only toward the end of the story does he recognize them to be young, black South Africans. Timi/Mphahlele as father, narrator, individual, and a teacher, is burdened with an overwhelming sense of responsibility for future generations.

Mphahlele also shows Timi thinking deeply about the meaning of exile and trying to come to terms with bitterness. While investigating for *Bongo* the death of the husband of a young woman, Naledi, he has been rereading Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and wonders whether he, too, will continue to hate and curse and burn with the same anger. Timi discovers that exile is not the solution, for he has not reckoned with the all-encompassing feeling of guilt engendered by his departure from the scene of action.

The Wanderers is thus also about the tragedy and the hope of Africa. Mphahlele has tried to symbolize all this in a story about his wanderings and of the conflicts of those who will have to carry Africa's heritage. The novel fails because the tale is too diffuse, far too long and rambling. The work is often interesting, often poignant, but there is little coherence. As a symbolic relationship the one between Timi and his son lacks depth and motivating force. The themes are, however, presented consistently throughout. The search for a place in which a person can practice simple human ideals is expressed in the intertwining lives of Timi and Steven—black and white—and in the death of Felang. White people must break out their cruel heritage, and black people for whom self-fulfillment lies only in exile and death must learn actively to control their own destiny. Embodying this control is Naledi, who acquires it as a result of suffering. While helping the wounded during unrest in her parents' village, she becomes the victim of an attempted rape and sees her attacker, a policeman, receive a suspended sentence and remain on the force. As a symbol, she combines the traditional values of Africa with adaptation to what is useful in Western civilization: after her husband's death in Britain she remains there to study nutrition and will no doubt bring her skills back to Africa.

A strong-willed, maturing girl of charm and grace, Naledi stands a long way behind Karabo in "Mrs. Plum," Pinkie in "The Coffee-Cart Girl," and Diketso in the Lesane stories. The character of Karabo, on the other hand, comes through in successive glimpses that make up a convincing

of 1

whole. She is patient and loyal in following her husband, because she never questions her function as a traditional African wife. When it comes to others, however, she is capable of spirited and determined action. She will not take nonsense from anyone. To the doorman of a nightclub who will not admit a friend of hers without a tie she says, "Why all the fuss about ties anyhow? We didn't go about dangling rags round our necks before you whites came to Africa." Mphahlele, in his autobiographical writing before his return to South Africa, did not tell us much about his own wife, but it is clear that someone who had supported him in all his wanderings, who stood by his side in adversity and success, and who, in one of their ports of call, managed to study and acquire the new profession of social worker must be a woman of the same stamina, courage, and forthrightness that he successfully depicts in Karobo.

Mphahlele describes *The Wanderers* as a personal account of a search. One wonders why he chose to present it as fiction at all. Names of characters and places are sometimes changed and sometimes left intact. If one is acquainted with the lifestory of Mphahlele, it becomes an amusing game to find the key. Don Peck of *Bongo* is Jim Bailey, owner of *Drum*. Steven Cartwright is Sylvester Stein, the editor. Tom Hobson is Tom Hopkinson, his successor; Lazy is Casey Motsisi, one of the journalists on the magazine; Emil is Ulli Beier, and so forth. Awoonor's name is left unchanged. Felang's death and the story of Naledi seem to be almost the only additions to a nearly chronological account of Mphahlele's life. Yet he seems to have lost his skill in stirring up a lively interest in narrative episodes. The general effect is one of lack of movement. Most of the time nothing happens, and when it does, readers often know about it from hearsay. The story of the rape attempt on Naledi, for instance, reaches the reader thirdhand via her lawyer and the narrator. The story of Naledi's husband, a prisoner who has been abducted for slave labor on a farm, lacks the power of Henry Nxumalo's exposé about the notorious Bethal potato farms in *Drum* and, indeed, of Mphahlele's own reports in that journal. The mingling of fact and fiction neither enables readers to identify with the passion of the characters as in an imaginary story, nor to share the urgent indignation of a successful journalistic exposé. The only events that seem to happen before readers' eyes are those concern-

Beier
is it Karobo
or Karobo? (see bottom
p. 22 and
elsewhere)

ing Felang. He is seen arguing with his parents, misbehaving at school and at home, running away, and returning. Although Timi as narrator tells about the situation, the anguish of the three people concerned makes it real and immediate.

One gathers from Mphahlele's writing that his marriage to Rebecca, with him as the "thinker" and Rebecca as the "doer," has been an exceptionally happy one. Mphahlele took parenthood very seriously but there was a lack of communication with all the boys in the family. The heroic death of Felang in *The Wanderers* was not symbolic infanticide but rather a transferred attempt to give Mphahlele's purposeless son direction.

The Wanderers was widely reviewed throughout the United States. Most critics were disappointed, more so because Mphahlele had become an established writer and a first novel was a literary event. Many reviewers, however, found much that was good. James Olney, in his *Tell Me Africa* (1973) says the novel is "aimless and disjointed, an account of a simple, inert, mass wandering." But later, in a letter to Mphahlele included in N. Chabani Manganyi's *Exiles and Homecomings* (1983), Olney conceded "its many virtues," among which he includes the depth and intensity of thought at the end and the success in conveying the texture of experience. James R. Frakes, writing in the *Washington Post* (11 April 1971), felt that *The Wanderers* could have been one of the masterpieces in fiction if passionate involvement—anger, firsthand experience, outrage, compassion, and topicality—were enough. But he, like several other critics, found that a firm narrative line and full development of character were missing. The most scathing comment came from Lewis Nkosi, in his *Tasks and Masks* (1981): "Mphahlele seems to have given up the cool objectivity of his short stories." Nkosi describes the novel as a turgidly voluminous prose work without a creative purpose behind it.

As a student once again, and as a teacher, writer, and critic, Mphahlele had found his two years in Denver satisfactory. In 1968 he was awarded his Ph.D., having presented *The Wanderers* in lieu of a dissertation, in the Creative Writing Program of the English department. He was also elected to Phi Beta Kappa for academic excellence.

In 1968 he accepted a post as senior lecturer in the English department of the University of Zambia. He was ready to make a permanent

commitment to this country, the closest he could get to home. As usual he enjoyed teaching, both at the university and in the community, and he was happy to be among many fellow black South African exiles. But he was upset by some activities of the government, which sometimes evicted or jailed black South African and Zimbabwean refugees. Disillusioned once more, he left before his contract expired and joined the English department of the University of Denver as an associate professor in 1970.

His experiences in Zambia became the subject of *Chirundu*. This time, however, the only factual elements were the historical events, not his own personal experiences. *Chirundu* is the story of the fall from power of a cabinet minister, Chimba Chirundu, and of the dissolution of his marriage. Mphahlele explores the dynamics of power in relation to domestic life, sex, the African's attitude toward polygamy, and the modern woman's rejection of it. At the same time the novel is a study of African independence and its effects of hope and disillusionment.

Chirundu's wife Tirenje lays a charge of bigamy against him when he marries a sophisticated young woman named Monde. Chirundu contends that Bemba marriage laws, according to which he married Tirenje, look upon marriage as having ended if a wife leaves her husband and her family takes no steps to bring her back. Tirenje counters that the traditional marriage was subsequently registered under the old colonial ordinance, the divorce laws of which supersede the traditional ones. Since no divorce proceedings took place, Tirenje claims, her marriage still holds and Chirundu's marriage to Monde is bigamous. Chirundu does not expect to win the case but defends it nonetheless, so that when marriage laws are revised, traditional marriage will be recognized as something that cannot be superseded.

When independence came to Chirundu's (unnamed) country he was at the height of his power. Two years later, however, his fortune has changed. He has been demoted from minister of the interior to minister of transport and public works because he is thought to have been too tough when handling the more responsible portfolio. There is unrest in the country, and strikes occur in which Chirundu's nephew Moyo plays a leading role. Chirundu is found guilty of bigamy and is given a jail sentence. The house he built is burned down. There is a subplot concerning the

political prisoners Pitso and Chieza, who form a kind of chorus commenting on political developments. There is bitter humor in their explicit exchanges about the situation in the country. The South African Dr. Studs Letanka is a brilliant mathematician who has abandoned his post at the University of Fort Hare because it fell under the Bantu Education system and began to concentrate on African history.

One would expect a writer of the standing of Mphahlele to return to the novel form after an interval of several years only if he had something important to communicate. Yet at the beginning *Chirundu* seems almost trivial. It opens by introducing the cabinet minister Chirundu as having committed a crime so petty that even his fellow prisoners are unimpressed. They feel, however, that there must be something behind it, and obviously Mphahlele intended something deeper in the novel than displaying the chicaneries of the unprepossessing character of the title.

Chirundu, it appears, is a dirge for Africa, in which anguished disillusionment is the keynote. Hope for a "bright new day," the phrase with which the prison warder greets his charges each morning, and which was the original, satiric title of the novel, is dim indeed. But all is not gloom: there is a glimmer on the horizon, and for the new generation, exemplified by Moyo, there might yet be a bright new day. His house has not burned down; on the contrary, it has yet to be built. And its foundations will be solid. He has not lost touch with real tradition; his faith in the power of continuity, in his ancestors, remains strong.

Mphahlele sees the confrontation between Chirundu and Tirenje not as a clash between tradition and Western values. Rather he is investigating the impact of a foreign culture on an African one and the problem of how one should deal with the resulting conflicts. All Western culture should not be discarded, he says. Synthesis is still Mphahlele's answer, and Tirenje and Moyo are its representatives. In her schooldays Tirenje had fallen under the influence of a young female teacher who told her students to wake up and fend for themselves. Tirenje is contrasted with Monde, who has gained only a veneer of Western civilization.

For the South African refugees in the novel, exile has meant disillusionment. Letanka drinks too much and dies in a car crash. Pitso decides to return to South Africa, even though it is likely he

will be arrested as a terrorist. For black South Africa the message is clear: beware of the slogans and easy answers. Above all, beware of the abuse of power. As vehicles for all these themes, the events and characters are handled with skill. Tirenje is another of Mphahlele's forceful women. Moyo is a vibrant and attractive young man symbolizing young Africa, and the minor characters fulfill their functions well. But what of Chirundu himself? Are readers to admire and sympathize with this vain, power-hungry sexist character, and, if not, how can they care whether he triumphs or suffers defeat? In a seminar at Rand Afrikaans University, Mphahlele, in reply to the question of whether or not he saw Chirundu as a tragic hero, said that he simply thought of the character as a product of history, as a symbol of a people rather than as a hero. Chirundu never loses faith in himself, and after his downfall he feels sure he will make a comeback. One is reminded of Zungu in "Man Must Live." Has Mphahlele then come in a full circle, abandoning his search, to conclude that all one can do is cling tenaciously to one's faith and destiny? This conclusion would be understandable because Mphahlele, when he wrote *Chirundu* in the early 1970s, was still in exile, displaced, with hope of a return to the country of his destiny as remote as ever, and almost devoid of hope for Africa.

Chirundu is not easy to read. The many threads give an initial impression of confusion, but this is deceptive. The novel is carefully constructed, the themes holding together the stories (told from different perspectives) to a far greater extent than in *The Wanderers*. Mphahlele, in a 25 April 1977 letter to Barnett said that his structure is an attempt "to suggest, if not to adopt wholesale, folk narrative."

Although completed in 1974, *Chirundu* remained unpublished for several years, but in 1979 it became Mphahlele's first book-length work since *Man Must Live* to be published in South Africa. The banning order on him had been lifted, and Raven Press immediately availed itself of the opportunity to add the doyen of black South African writers to their growing list. Reviews in South Africa showed a certain bewilderment about the subject matter and about the author himself. Most white South African readers simply did not know this professor of English literature, doctor of philosophy, Nobel Prize candidate, and author of many books, who had been

banned from their libraries and bookshops for most of his writing life. However, among black readers his name had been kept alive.

Mphahlele taught at Denver, until 1974, when he joined the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, ~~in Philadelphia~~, as a full professor of English. He was happy in the United States when immersed in his work teaching of a variety of courses in African, Caribbean, Afro-American, American, and British literature. But within himself he says he always felt that he was an uncommitted outsider. He was not reaching the young people he wanted to teach. He was writing but outside the cultural milieu in which his work was relevant and without the feedback for which he yearned.

Since 1972 he had considered returning to South Africa. All he wanted was to claim his ancestral heritage and assert his simple role as a humanist. "I want to teach in a community whose cultural goal or aspirations I comprehend, because education is for me an agent of culture even as it is culture itself," he wrote in an article entitled "The Tyranny of Place" (1973). Exile had become for him "a ghetto of the mind." Once it became known that he was contemplating a return to South Africa, he became a figure of controversy. South African exiles felt that he was betraying the people's cause by applying to the regime for a visa and accepting it. There was also surprise and consternation that he should accept a post at Turfloop, the University of the North in Lebowa, which was a product of the educational system he abhorred. Mphahlele countered that he would teach African students wherever he found them. However, he never took the post. The South African government, which had granted him a visa on the condition that he confine himself to Lebowa, then proceeded to veto the unanimous decision of the university council to appoint him as head of the Department of English. He remained in Lebowa for some months in 1977 and 1978 as an inspector of schools, then, ironically, accepted a post at the mainly white University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. For a year he was a senior research fellow in the African Studies Institute; then he became an associate professor. In 1981 he was appointed a professor of African literature and awarded a tenured position at the university. Readers learn much of this information from Mphahlele's *Afrika My Music* and from the unusual biography by the clinical psychologist Manganyi, who casts

~
~
' | S |

~

Mphahlele as a first-person narrator uses taped interviews, letters, and dramatic conversations. Manganyi subsequently published a collection of Mphahlele's letters under the title *Bury Me at the Marketplace* (1984). In *Exiles and Homecomings* shows Mphahlele delving deeply into his soul, yet sometimes the gentle tolerance of the Mphahlele one knows from his other writing is lost in the biography, and one wonders whether it is a salutary experience for a writer to find his psyche dissected through words put in his mouth by a therapist. In both the biography and the second autobiography (*Afrika My Music*) readers lose something of the spontaneity of *Down Second Avenue*.

In the published letters, readers find a rather different Mphahlele from the man who muses about life in his autobiography. As a letter writer, he always has something specific to say, and he says it clearly without embellishment. It could be a request to a friend or mentor, an admonition to one of his children, a comment on something he has read or done, a progress report on a project, or a personal note to a friend telling what a recent visit has meant. "What a spiritual uplift it was," he once wrote to his lifelong friend, the musician Khabi Mngoma, "even though we had you but a day and a half. . . . In all the 18 years of exile, we hadn't experienced an occasion like our reunion and I mean it. We are grateful you came." To a friend who had sent him a monograph on William Faulkner, he wrote: "I enjoyed [it]. I find it stimulating, so balanced, so sane, so economically done, yet with so much intellectual toughness. I always wondered what to make of Faulkner's religious beliefs and moral stand. Now I think I see. Thanks for the illumination." There is less an obvious endeavor to put himself and his ideas across. Rather Mphahlele seems to have the confidence of releasing his words into the care of someone who will understand. The letters were not necessarily written on the spur of the moment. Writing to his daughter, Teresa Kefilwe, to tell her how much she had recently hurt her mother's feelings, he explained that it was his habit to wait until he found the right vocabulary to phrase his indignation, that he would do so only to someone he cared about, and that if he was unable to express himself the way he wanted, he would rather keep quiet.

Manganyi has done a splendid job in collecting and selecting the letters and providing explanatory notes and arranging them so that

and | (?)

or

as is something?

or

off

Mphahlele's professional and intellectual life, thoughts, ideals, friendships, and interests can be followed. A fresh and uncluttered picture of the man himself emerges: compassionate, tolerant, vibrant, patient, and optimistic, willing to impart and accept favors and knowledge. Yet his unhappiness in exile is almost tangible in letters to friends and in his letters to his daughter, the child to whom he was obviously closest, who shares his impulse to write, he pours out his hopes and fears for the family. To others he writes of his moral dilemma in accepting a post at a white university. Readers also learn a great deal about the background to his writing. His correspondence in the early years of his writing career with the drama teacher and producer Norah Taylor offers a rare testimony of friendship and a set of documents well worth preserving.

Afrika My Music takes up his life story where *Down Second Avenue* left off, and the greater part covers the years of exile. He tells of literary matters in African countries in which he played a role, all seen from the viewpoint of a newcomer to these regions. The word portraits of writers such as Camara Laye, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Kofi Awoonor, and others are too brief to be revealing, but they give thoughtful glimpses of the people he met. The South African section takes readers only as far as his work in Lebowa. Mphahlele calls the first chapter "The Sounds Begin Again," but the sounds are not the "siren in the night," the "thunder at the door," or the "wordless endless wail / only the unfree know," to which Dennis Brutus refers in his well-known poem "Sirens, Knuckles, Boots" (from the 1963 book of that name), the first line of which Mphahlele chose as the title of this second autobiography. Neither are the sounds the earthy, vibrant ones he records in *Down Second Avenue*. They are the thinner plaintive noises of a man whose homecoming was not a triumphant return to his roots. The picture he draws of modern South Africa is an impersonal one, which is available to readers in greater detail in many social documents.

Reviews of *Afrika My Music* in the black as well as the white press in South Africa were very favorable. Sol Makgabutlane in the *Star* (8 November 1984) wrote that the book lived up to the high standards set by Mphahlele's previous books and overflowed with taut, simple language. Lewis Nkosi, however, writing in the London-based *Third World Review* described it as a "self-

indulgent apologia for returning to South Africa."

The collection *The Unbroken Song*, published also in South Africa, is a reprint of short stories and poems almost all previously published elsewhere. (Some of these same stories were reprinted in *Renewal Time*, published in 1988.) Although the contents of *The Unbroken Song* are mostly not new, Mphahlele with his preface tries to put them into a fresh perspective. Nevertheless, one must remember that South African readers had not previously had an opportunity to read the stories, wellknown as many of them were now abroad. Although the banning order had been lifted much earlier, some of the individual works were still banned, and the rest were not readily available. Mphahlele therefore felt it necessary to explain in the preface how a barrier between black and white readers arose as a result of the rejection by whites of an African humanistic worldview of an undivided society. Both those who attempt to live outside history and those who insist that literature in South Africa must be placed within the struggle, are reminded that social concerns change and shift from time to time. In the unbroken music of black communal experience, revolution means renewal, and in every community "renewal has a cultural purpose, its own." All his best-known stories are included in the collection: "Mrs. Plum," "In Corner B," "Grieg on a Stolen Piano," "He and the Cat," "The Suitcase," "The Master of Doornvlei," and others.

Although Mphahlele's poems have been included in such anthologies as Langston Hughes's *Poems from Black Africa* (1969), Joseph Okapku's *New African Literature and the Arts* (1967), Paul Breman's *You Better Believe It* (1973), and Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor's *Voices from Within* (1982), they are rarely discussed in critical works, perhaps because they lack the lyrical or revolutionary fire of works by other poets in exile—such as Brutus, Arthur Nortje, and Mazisi Kunene, and the innovative vigor of the 1970's generation of South African poets, including Mongane Serote and others, who were drawing both on their immediate experience within the country and on oral tradition. Mphahlele's concerns throughout his poems have been the same as those of his prose: exile, the pull of place, and concern for the painful events in South Africa. In a prose poem, as he calls it, "Portrait of a Man/ Who Lives in Glass House," written in the United States and published in *Era* (Spring 1976), Mphahlele uses a met-

↳ His spelling correct, yes?

= |

aphor for the fear of forgetting one's origins while the storm around one rages: that of living in a house in which it would be easy to renew one's lease, to shut the door, and to coast along. But he feels he can never do such a thing because deep inside he "hears the bangs and clatter of the door in the storm of memory."

In *The Unbroken Song* "Death II" is based on John Keat's sonnet "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be," but Mphahlele's fear is that he will die in an alien land. Returning to South Africa shortly after the infamous killings of the Soweto children, he had an impulse, like that of most black poets in South Africa, to write a tribute to the children and give vent to his anger and bitterness. The result is a dramatic poem, "Fathers and Sons," about a fifteen-year-old imprisoned boy, whose father was at the time of the boy's birth. In "A Prayer," written after a brief visit to South Africa in 1976, Mphahlele speaks of having been "reconnected and / becoming renewed on this killing ground." When he speaks of his sorrow and guilt for being out of the fray, and refusing to be lulled into a false peace, he is writing in the mainstream of South African poetry in exile. But the sounds do not linger in the ear as do Brutus's, and Mphahlele's isolation in exile is less evocative than that of Nortje.

The Unbroken Song has not been published abroad, and the available reviews are South African. The white press tended to be patronizing, especially about the stories that have been anthologized again and again. *Charming* is hardly a term critics acquainted with Mphahlele's ideas would use in describing them, nor would anyone but a white South African see "Mrs. Plnm" as a cool but sympathetic picture of the troubles of a liberal white woman. Academics were better informed. Michael Chapman in *UNISA English Studies* (20 April 1982) found the perceptions and images of the poems acutely attuned to post-1976 South Africa.

Mphahlele's interest in traditional literature goes back to his student days when he won a prize at Adams College for the retelling of a folk-tale. It was in his play writing rather than in his poetry that he drew on traditional literature, but from early on he was aware of the importance of preserving every kind of traditional literature. His interest in traditional literature was never merely a search for artifacts. The first stage of a research project into African poetry resulted in a paper delivered at Rhodes University in April

something like: check original

1979 and published almost simultaneously as "The Voice of Prophecy in African Poetry." In it he relates the prophetic voice of oral poetry, with its resonance of organic unity in the universe, to the public voice in modern African poetry, which has to deal with new imperatives. Upon his return to South Africa, Mphahlele had almost immediately embarked on research into the oral poetry of the Venda, North Sotho, and Tsonga in the Northern Transvaal. He has plans to do English adaptations.

There is one more book-length work of fiction Mphahlele has written and published. *Father Come Home* is a historical novel for children that takes place in the early 1920's after the Native Law Act had been passed, driving Africans from large, fertile areas into small, arid reserves. As a consequence, men were forced to leave their families and work in mines. The story concerns the growth to independence of fourteen-year-old Maredi Tulamo, whose father has left the family and returns only many years later. Adventures occur when the boy goes off in search of his father, but he gets only as far as a farm where he remains to work. The white farmer is not an important character in the novel. White life has become the peripheral again, as it was in Mphahlele's earliest fiction. The man is neither unkind nor cruel: "he was simply in charge of their [the laborer's] fate." It is with life in the village that Mphahlele is primarily concerned, the suffering of the wives and mothers left behind and the hardships and values of the community. The narration is filled with folklore and includes epics about warriors, sung by the stranger Mashabela, a musician, poet, and healer, who moves into the village.

Mphahlele draws on his own life as a herd boy in the Northern Transvaal, where he suffered the pain of growing up without a father. There is psychological insight in the story of the boy whose life is ruled by a longing for his father, but when at last the father comes home, there is no fairy-tale ending. Maredi finds it difficult to relate to the man has to learn to adjust. The story is told in simple language for children, but the touching plot and the vividly depicted geographical and historical background appeal equally to adults. The work fills part of a great need in South Africa for a children's literature that is meaningful for black children.

Mphahlele's return to South Africa, on the surface, seems to have been a failure. He came

= |

s |

something missing
here: check original

ful |

back to the only place where he could find inspiration to write, yet his literary outpost has been small and disappointing. He came to teach black students and was employed to teach mainly whites. In some circles he has become a figure of controversy, sometimes even of scorn. His ideas have often been misunderstood both at home and abroad. Yet he is doing what he has struggled to do throughout his career, something that has given meaning to his life, and his writing establishing central base from which to spread African cultural values among the people of the land. In Nigeria, in the Mbari centers, he gloried in success. In Kenya he failed. It remains to be seen whether he can fully succeed in the country where it matters most to him and where the difficulties are likely the greatest.

In a graduation address at Witwatersrand University in 1980 Mphahlele criticized the university for putting off far too long any serious program for African education in the content and thrust of its disciplines. He would like to see the university establish community colleges in or near Soweto to meet the needs of the black population. Also in 1980 Mphahlele, with a Carnegie grant, founded in Johannesburg and became its director. The main purpose of the council is to create a climate for the education of black people instead of merely reacting to government policy. It works toward a formulation of educational theory that will reflect black aspirations for self-determination. The council is national in scope. It conducts programs of informal education in the form of lectures on a variety of interests and for various groups: students, teachers, and other groups of adults. These lectures are published periodically as *The Capricorn Papers*. The council also has an arts program. A fine-arts study section and drama and music centers are being contemplated. For this work in the council Mphahlele was awarded the 1985 Claude Harris Leon Foundation prize for outstanding community service.

In 1972, in a letter to John Wideman of the University of Pennsylvania recommending Mphahlele for a position there, Robert Richardson of the University of Denver called Mphahlele one of the half dozen distinguished African men of letters and said he regarded Mphahlele as the leading African figure then teaching in the United States. In most academic circles worldwide and in many writing, teaching, and student groups. Mphahlele is still recognized as a leader in the field of African literature, a writer and

?

something missing here:
check original

teacher who has devoted his life to the propagation of his ideals, and a man of compassion and integrity. He is much sought after as a visiting lecturer and public speaker and is an advisory editor for several publications.

Es'kia Mphahlele's vision of an African culture with a creative energy strong enough to survive and renew itself perpetually is responsible for his involvement in every phase of black life, literature, and education in South Africa. Because his vision is essentially a pan-African one, his legacy will survive the present regime in South Africa and will benefit future generations in his own country and beyond.

Letters:

N. Chabani Manganyi, ed., *Bury Me at the Marketplace: Selected Letters of Es'kia Mphahlele 1943-1980* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1984).

Interviews:

Lewis Nkosi, "Conversation with Ezekiel Mphahlele," *Africa Report*, 9, no. 7 (1964): 8-9;

Ian Munro, Richard Priebe, and Reinhard Sander, "An Interview with Ezekiel Mphahlele," in *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas*, edited by Bernth Lindfors, Munro, Priebe and Sander (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas at Austin, 1972), pp. 39-44;

Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., *African Writers Talking: A Collection of Radio Interviews* (London: Heinemann / New York: Africana, 1972), pp. 95-112;

Ossie Onuora Enekwe, "From an Interview with Ezekiel Mphahlele," *Greenfield Review*, 5, nos. 3-4 (1976-1977): 72-76;

Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, *Towards African Literary Independence: A Dialogue with Contemporary African Writers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980);

Noel Manganyi, "The Early Years. . . .," *Staffrider*, 3, no. 3 (1980): 45-46.

Bibliography:

Katherine Skinner and Gareth Cornwell, "Es'kia Mphahlele: A Checklist of Primary Sources," *English in Africa*, 13, no. 2 (1986): 89-103.

Biography:

N. Chabani Manganyi, *Exiles and Homecomings: A Biography of Es'kia Mphahlele* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983).

Reference:

- Samuel Omo Asein, "The Humanism of Ezekiel Mphahlele," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 15, no. 1 (1980): 38-49;
- Ursula A. Barnett, "Africa or the West? Cultural Synthesis in the Work of Es'kia Mphahlele," *Africa Insight*, 14, no. 1 (1984): 59-63;
- Barnett, "The Legend of Zeke Mphahlele," *Contrast*, 11, no. 2 (1977): 20-24;
- Barnett, *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914-1980)* (London: Sinclair Browne / Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983);
- 'Bayo Ogunjimi, "Mphahlele: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Alienation," *Présence Africaine*, 135 (1985): 120-128;
- Gerald Chapman, "Exile in Denver," *Denver Quarterly*, 21, no. 2 (1986): 120-154;
- Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings, and Don MacLennan, *Perspectives on South African Fiction* (Johannesburg: Donker, 1980);
- Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, *Black Writers, White Audience: A Critical Approach to African Literature* (Hicksville, N.Y.: Exposition, 1978);
- C. O. Gardner, "The Laudation Spoken by the University Orator, Professor C. O. Gardner, in Presenting Es'kia Mphahlele to the Chancellor at the Graduation Ceremony of the University of Natal Held in Pietermaritzburg on the 16th April, 1983," *English Academy Review*, 1 (1983): 131-134;
- R. Dorian Haarhoff, "The Southern African Setting of *Chirundu*," *English in Africa*, 13, no. 2 (1986): 39-45;
- Norman Hodge, "Dogs, Africans and Liberals: The World of Mphahlele's 'Mrs. Plum,'" *English in Africa*, 8, no. 1 (1981): 33-43;
- Hodge, "'The Way I Looked at Life Then': Es'kia Mphahlele's *Man Must Live, and Other Stories*," *English in Africa*, 13, no. 2 (1986): 47-64;
- Martin Jarrett-Kerr, "Exile, Alienation and Literature: The Case of Es'kia Mphahlele," *Africa Today*, 33, no. 1 (1986): 47-64;
- Joyce Johnson, "Culturally Derived Motifs and Symbols as Structural Features in Es'kia Mphahlele's *Chirundu*," *Kunapipi*, 6, no. 2 (1984): 109-120;

Vladimír Klíma, *South African Prose Writing in English* (Prague: Oriental Institute in Academia, 1971);

Leon de Kock, "Literature, Politics and Universalism: A Debate between Ezekiel Mphahlele and J. M. Coetzee," *Journal of Literary Studies*, 3, no. 4 (1987): 35-48;

Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson / Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980);

G. M. Nkondo, "Apartheid and Alienation: Mphahlele's *The Wanderers*," *Africa Today*, 20, no. 4 (1973): 59-70;

Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1965);

Okpure O. Obuke, "South African History, Politics and Literature: Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Rive's *Emergency*," *African Literature Today*, 10 (1979): 191-201;

James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973);

Adrian Roscoe, *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977);

Damian Ruth, "Through the Keyhole: Masters and Servants in the Work of Es'kia Mphahlele," *English in Africa*, 13, no. 2 (1986): 65-88;

Hilary Semple, "'Brother Mortals': Robert Burns and Es'kia Mphahlele," *Contrast*, 17, no. 4 (1989): 25-41;

Sipho Sepamla, "The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas," *New Classic*, 3 (1976): 18-26;

Brian Worsfold, "Growing Up with Apartheid: A Look at the Socio-political Background in Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom*," in *Autobiographical and Biographical Writing in the Commonwealth*, edited by Doireann MacDermott (Barcelona: AUSA, 1984), pp. 255-259.

Papers:

Unpublished correspondence (1959-1979) between Mphahlele and Ursula A. Barnett is in the National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown, South-Africa.

Add to entry on ES'KIA MPHAHLELE:

BOOKS:

Mandela: Echoes of an Era (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990);

Add to entry on ES'KIA MPHAAHLELE:

REFERENCES:

Leon de Kock, "Literature, Politics and Universalism: A Debate between

Ezekiel Mphahlele and J.M. Coetzee," Journal of Literary Studies, 3, 4

(1987): 35-48;

Hilary Semple, "'Brother Mortals': Robert Burns and Es'kia Mphahlele,"

Contrast, 17, 4 (1989): 25-41.

Change name in earlier entry from Ogunjimi 'Bayo to 'Bayo Ogunjimi.