

The Historical Experience of Exile as an Intellectual Odyssey: The Instance of Ezekiel Mphahlele

by

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[The following essay was commissioned for the 1990 annual South African Conference which Robert Kriger organized on behalf of the Evangelische Akademie at the city of Bad Boll, in the Federal Republic of Germany. All the South African exiles in the then West Germany looked forward to this annual intellectual ritual which held the community together. The series continued from 1986 to 1992, that is, until the dawning of a New South Africa].

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I wanted to see Ezekiel Mphahlele. I had read his autobiography *Down Second Avenue*, which had struck me as a book of great literary power.

-J. T. Ngugi (Ngugi wa Thiong'o), "A Kenyan at the Conference", *Transition*, August 1962, p. 7.

Ezekiel Mphahlele, an editor with Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier of *Black Orpheus*, and one of the founding members of Mbnari publications in Nigeria in the early 1960s; Mphahlele, founder and Director of the Chemchemi Cultural Center in the early 1960s in Kenya, which was one of the causative factors of the English-language literary renaissance in Nairobi; Mphahlele, one of the central forces behind the *East African Journal*, and one of the strongest voices on the pages of *Transition*; Mphahlele, the organizer of the 1962 historic conference in Kampala of African writers who express themselves in the English-language; Mphahlele, an interlocutor of Langston Hughes, thereby establishing the interconnections and bridges between the Harlem Renaissance and the Sophiatown Renaissance; Mphahlele, the editor of one of the classic texts of African writing in 1967, *African Writing Today*; Mphahlele, one of the principal opponents of the poetics of the Negritude Movement; Mphahlele, one of the consistent contributors in the 1970s to Chunya Achebe's *Okike* magazine, a series of brilliant essays, which had predecessor left alone successor, in constituting themselves as the most consequential encounter between an African

critical imagination and the African American creative genius; Mphahlele, participant and contributor to a 1975 Conference, "The Function of Black Criticism at the Present Time", organized by Houston A. Baker in Pennsylvania, a conference which was the founding moment of the great literary criticism presentIt being written by Hortense Spillers, Henry Louis Gates and Houston A. Baker himself; Mphahlele, the abrupt terminator of the self-imposed exile in 1977: all of these are cultural semaphores in the intellectual landscape of Ezekiel Mphahlele's exile odyssey that make his historical experience unquestionably the most important and fundamental of all South African exile experiences in the twentieth-century. To some this claim will seem extravagant, if not down-right bizarre! What was the unity of this fascinating and exhilarating intellectual odyssey?

The political philosophies or political ideologies of nationalism and Pan-Africanism were the defining field forces of the structure of Mphahlele's intellectual odyssey. Mphahlele, in his book of 1962, *The African Image*, which was a cocatenation of somewhat two incompatible projects, the delineation of the intellectual contours of a black intellectual culture and the tracing of the logic and validity of black images in white writing, gives prominence to these two philosophies of consciousness. Perhaps this could hardly be otherwise, for by the time Mphahlele left South Africa for Nigeria in 1957, the gathering forces of African Independence were already on the march to make the 1960s the decade of Frantz Fanon and the decolonization in African political and intellectual history. In fact, the first major conference attended by Mphahlele upon leaving our country, was the 1958 All Africa People's Conference, called by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana under the auspices of Pan-Africanism to give acceleration to the decolonization process which had been ignited by the explosion of the Algerian Revolution in 1954 and by the attainment of independence by Ghana in 1957. Among the participants at this conference were Frantz Fanon and Patrice Lumumba, whom Jean-Paul Sartre was to designate as two great men produced by Africa in his celebrated great essay on Lumumbaism as a black Jacobin ideology.

Clearly, as is evident in *The African Image*, Mphahlele was to draw the principal lesson from the ideologies of African nationalism and Pan-Africanism that the fundamental task of the African woman and man of letters at that particular historical moment was to establish the essential cultural unity of the black world. The essentialism of this cultural unity standadized into uniformity the heterogeneous cultural components of the black world. To a large extent, cultural nationalism diagnosed the conflicting differential nature of African cultural textures as the result of vwhite machinations, having minimally to do with their internal logics. Yet paradoxically, one of the glaring omissions of this book was its refusal to confront the question of imperialism: the deleterious consequences

of cultural imperialism in Africa. We shall see in a moment the devastating consequences of this omission. What principally occupied Mphahlele in this text was to map the literary geography of African culturalism, rather than conceptualize and articulate a cultural politics that would have been the accompanying armour of political decolonization.

The intellectual odyssey of Mphahlele's exile journey was then a striving to unveil the structural cultural blocks of the black world and an attempt to construct the interconnexions of African culturalism. Whether it was a conscious decision on his part, or perhaps a fortuitous accident, the disembarkation of Mphahlele in Nigeria, has had profound cultural consequences. Just to see the monumentality of this encounter, compare Mphahlele's rendezvous with Nigeria to Alfred Hutchinson's rendezvous with Ghana: one is a breakthrough to a preeminent position within African cultural history, the other is an entrance to its blind alley.

Retrospectively, it would seem that in the 1950s both in Nigeria and in South Africa it was a crucial moment in the emergence of modern national literatures in the European languages. It was this fundamental occurrence which unified the Sophiatown Renaissance writers (assembled around Drum magazine) and the first modern generation of great Nigerian writers: Ezekiel Mphahlele and Wole Soyinka working together in *Black Orpheus*, Christopher Okigbo and Lewis Nkosi foxtrotting together in *Transition*. This national literature in either French or in English or in Portuguese represented and reflected the aspirations of the incipient national bourgeoisie, a social class whose national pitfalls Frantz Fanon was to delineate with absolute clarity in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The frustration of this class in attaining state power in South Africa resulted in the explosion whose result was the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The similarity in the historical projects of the South African and Nigerian national literatures is made all the more clear by the first book published by Mbari publications in Nigeria: Ale La Guma's first novel, *A Walk in the Night* (1962). The emergence of this type of national literature was also occurring in other African countries.

Black Orpheus and *Transition* were both cultural and literary reviews which gave a forum to the writers of this emergent modern national literatures in the European languages. The national writers forged an alliance with also the emergent national bourgeoisie in Africa. Leopold Sedar Senghor was then a classic representation of this unholy alliance: he was both the President of Senegal and Senegal's leading national writer, having together founded with Leon Damas and Aime Cesaire, in their student days in Paris, the Negritude Movement. The animosity between Leopold Sedar Senghor and Sembene Ousmane must be understood within the context of this cultural politics: the former represented the cultural interests of the national bourgeoisie, whereas the

latter defended the interests of the working class and the peasantry. Beyond this fundamental disagreement, they were one in endorsing the hegemony of the French language within Senegalese cultural texture. The arrest and detention of Wole Soyinka during the Nigerian civil war and the arrest and detention of Ngugi wa Thiong'o nearly a decade later were to mark the end of the alliance between the national bourgeoisie and the writers of the modern national literatures in the European languages. This alliance had always been unholy because it was based on historical opportunism and political vacillation: whilst the national bourgeoisie refused to confront the historical questions of imperialism and socialism, the national writers acquiesced to the dominance of European languages over African languages, thereby endorsing cultural imperialism. We shall see in a moment the nature of the spectacular break.

At the moment of Ezekiel Mphahlele's participation within Black Orpheus, this alliance held sway. The cultural project of Black Orpheus, as it was proclaimed in the inaugural issue of the review in 1957 (just before Mphahlele left South Africa for Nigeria), was to forge cultural alliances and exchanges between Africa and the African diaspora (the two Americas and the Antilles). Mphahlele had initiated a similar cultural project while still the literary editor of Drum magazine, making it possible for Langston Hughes to be one of the judges in the literary competition then held annually by the review. In selecting one of Richard Rive's short stories, in one of the competitions, Langston Hughes enabled the forging of interests between the Sophiatown writers and the District Six writers. In other words, Mphahlele, before his departure for Nigeria, had already forged an alliance between the Harlem renaissance and the Sophiatown Renaissance. Consequently, Mphahlele's entrance into Black Orpheus was all the more easy because of perceived mutual cultural affinities and identifications.

The founding of Black Orpheus was inspired by the 1956 First Conference of Negro Writers and Artists held at the Sorbonne under the auspices of Presence Africaine. Mphahlele himself had been invited to this conference, but the South African fascist regime would not allow him to leave the country. He had always had deep ties to Presence Africaine. In fact, Mphahlele's first essay for an international publication was perhaps the 1957 article which appeared in this great review, a cultural and sociological study of the reading habits of Africans in South Africa. The project of Black Orpheus was in large measure derived from Presence Africaine. The list of participants at the Paris conference was very impressive: it included among others, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, George Lamming, and Leopold Sedar Senghor. Black Orpheus was to draw its own impressive list by translating many of the Negritude Movement poets from Aime Cesaire to Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Latin American and Caribbean writers like Nicolas Guillen, Rene Depestre and Jacques Romain. Mphahlele's intervention within Black Orpheus was to attempt to shift the point

of focus away from the black Latin countries to the Anglo-Saxon countries. Ezekiel Mphahlele's complexly calibrated antipathy towards the Negritude Movement is well known. But it should perhaps be made clear that this hostility was more directed at the black romanticism and biological ontology of Leopold Sedar Senghor rather than at the historical poetics of Aime Cesaire. Mphahlele's essay on Langston Hughes in the literary review was part of this attempt to re-orient the point of focus. The essay appeared in 1961. This date is very important in African political history.

In early in 1961 Patrice Lumumba was assassinated in the Congo (today Zaire) through the connivance and machination of the American imperialism; in December 1961 Frantz Fanon dies of cancer in Washington, D. C. at the hands of the Central Intelligence Agency: between the two dates of these tragic deaths, the derailment of the authentic decolonization process in Africa is effected by imperialism. Lumumba's death signals a historic moment in African history: namely, the utter political exhaustion of Pan-Africanism as it had been known from Edward Blyden through W. E. B. Du Bois to Kwame Nkrumah. Paradoxically, the moment of the exhaustion arrives at the very hour of its greatest victory. While Pan-Africanism was able to defeat classical colonialism, it was incapable of confronting neo-colonialism. It was in this historical instance, taking the cue from Jean-Paul Sartre in *Search for a Method*, that Pan-Africanism disappears as a living philosophy of history, only to re-emerge in South Africa as a virulent ideology of black consciousness. Having resolved the historical problem which had necessitated its emergence in the first, the philosophy of Pan-Africanism had every right to disappear in African history. The works of Kwame Nkrumah, *The Challenge of the Congo* and *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, which were written as a response to the Congo Crisis of 1961, were a historical obituary to this great philosophy of Pan-Africanism. C. L. R. James, the great Marxist historian and philosopher from Trinidad, who passed away last year [1989] at the age of 89, facilitated the transition from Pan-Africanism to a new living philosophy that has been challenging and contesting neo-colonialism in Africa up to the present. This new philosophy of African history was the African Marxism of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, forged respectively within the context of the Algerian and Guinean revolutions.

Ezekiel Mphahlele, even in his revised 1974 edition of *The African Image*, failed to register this monumental change in African political and intellectual history. Because of the disjuncture between his ideology and the concrete reality of Africa which he wanted to transform, Mphahlele was to become disoriented in African cultural history, which resulted in his troubled return to our country in 1977. When Mphahlele turned his back on Africa, it was not because of a willed malice, but rather, it was a process stemming from a desperate loss of political and cultural orientation. Lewis Nkosi's subsequent attacks on Mphahlele were

largely misguided because they failed they failed to make this historical and analytic appraisal. Mphahlele's unhappy in Kenya and Zambia. each respectively punctuated by recuperative stays in Denver and Philadelphia, were profound expressions of thos dis-orientation. He could no longer ber productive in independent Africa. The fundamental cause of Mphahlele's crisis, was either an inability to accept or a complete incomprehension , that African Marxism had replaced Pan-Africanism as the living philosophy of our time in Africa. His subsequent embracing of Humanism was never really a solution to his political and cultural crisis, as the spectacular clash with the proclaimed Humanism of President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia was to make clear.

Despite his profound sadness towards Africa and the interminable crisis of his Humanism, Mphahlele's last years in exile in Philadelphia were productive. It would seem that one of the factors for this productiveness was his encounter with the young Houston A. Baker, wjo today is a formidable African American literary critic of great power. In fact, to the young Baker, perhaps Ezekiel Mphahlele constituted that great link ro Langston Hughes. The tri-continental conference of black writers and scholars organized by Houston A. Baker, which resulted in the book *Reading Black: Essays in the Criticism of African, Caribbean, and Black American Literature*, seems to have given Mphahlele the impetus to comprehensively and critically examine the complex structure of modern African American literature. This critical encounter is the most important ever to have occurred between an African critical imsagination and the African American creative genius. The pan-Africanist nature of this project was displayed in Chinua Achebe's journal, *Okike*, probably the true successor to *Transition* and *Black Orpheus*. This pan-Africanist internationalism in the l; iterary field could not hide the fact that classical Pan-Africanism as a living philosophy had been shattered in the Congo Crisis. Upon completing this project, Mphahlele immediately returned to South Africa to pursue the cultural nationalist project in the literary sphere with tremendous effectiveness, which is not our immediate concern here. It should be remembered that nationalism was the other structuring principle of *The African Image*. The inability of Mphahlele to join the Cpngress of South African Writers (COSAW), which was founded in 1987, testifies to the continuing strangle-hold on him of these two ideologies of particularism. But these ideologies with Mphahlele were never necessarily and inherently tied to the politics of black eclusivism, precisely because they were tempered by his Humanism. Mphahlele always yearned for the unity of humanity, invariably on a metaphysical plane.

The historical pathway that Mphahlele (read here also Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe and others) was unable to negotiate beyond the traumatic experience of the Congo Crisis, Ngugi wa Thiong'o was to effect with tremendous consequences for the whole continent of Africa. After Patrice Lumumba and

Frantz Fanon, there can only be Ngugi, with Julius Nyerere possibly occupying an adjacent and oblique position: from Lumumba Ngugi wa Thiong'o derived an intransigent anti-imperialist, and from Frantz Fanon learned the historical principles of African Marxism. It is in the historical person of Ngugi wa Thiong'o that the two fundamental intellectual and cultural processes of the 1960s intersect and converge: the legacy of African Marxism and the lineage of modern African national literatures in the European languages. Elsewhere we have indicated the intellectual importance of this historical conjuncture. One product of this convergence is the emergence of a new form of modern African national literatures in the African languages which establishes a new structure of African national cultures. A new dialectic between orature and the written literature in the new mode is achieved beyond the rupturing effected by the advent of colonialism and imperialism in Africa. It is this monumental achievement of Ngugi wa Thiong'o that makes him the most important intellectual on our continent in the last quarter of the twentieth-century. The historical pathway taken by Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the only one that fundamentally grapples with the profound cultural and political crisis tearing at the heart of Africa.

For us who come after the Sophiatown Renaissance, the one historical lesson that Ezekiel Mphahlele has imparted to us South Africans is the vision of the indissoluble unity of the black world: a unity achieved within diversity and heterogeneity. For Mphahlele the African Diaspora is inseparable from Africa, as much as Africa cannot do without the African Diaspora. It is this which makes him a great teacher and a brilliant intellectual. To criticize Mphahlele is to enter deeply into our African souls, the souls of black folk.

. . . every intellectual in emigration, is without exception, mutilated. . .

-Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*.

Emigration is the best school of dialectics. Refugees are the keenest dialecticians. They are refugees as a result of changes and their sole object of study is change. They are able to deduce the greatest events from the smallest hints--that is, if they have intelligence. When their opponents are winning, they calculate how much their victory has cost them; and they have the sharpest eyes for contradictions. Long live dialectics.

-Bertolt Brecht, *Refugee Dialogues*.