

‘A persistent letter writer – an addict at that’

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Book Review Article

Bury Me at the Marketplace: Es'kia Mphahlele and Company, Letters 1943-2006

Editors: N. Chabani Manganyi and David Attwell

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All Mphahlele scholars will have consulted the original edition of Mphahlele's letters with the same title, edited by Chabani Manganyi and published by the alternative Braamfontein publishers, Skotaville, in 1984. Apart from its significance for Mphahlele scholarship, it had the additional distinction of being probably the first edition of a black South African writer's letters. It was intended as the companion volume to Manganyi's experimental first-person biography of Mphahlele, *Exiles and Homecomings*, published by the feisty Ravan Press a year earlier, and both were beautifully presented, with covers by Gamakhulu Diniso, and testimony to Manganyi's impeccable scholarship.

The new edition, with a similarly attractive cover, George Pemba's portrait of Mphahlele, is desirable for the additional correspondence it contains: many more letters by Mphahlele, and letters from a wide range of correspondents absent from the original edition. It is also timely, appearing some eighteen months after the giant of South African letters and scholarship was finally 'buried at the marketplace'. However, I suspect that Mphahlele's death in October 2008 was an inconvenience for the publication of this book, as it bears all the marks of having been rushed through the press – before the great man's shadow receded from a fickle public? Manganyi's budget-conscious Skotaville edition attractively reflected the Mphahlele we came to

know: a serious man, concerned with substance, not show, for whom accuracy and integrity were paramount. It did not pretend to be what it wasn't. Like a true scholar, Manganyi even hoped that the first edition of the letters would be superseded in time by a fuller one, which would include letters from Mphahlele's correspondents. On the face of it, the expanded edition seems to do just that. And with Manganyi himself as one of the editors, and the respected David Attwell as the other, things look set for a fulfilment of the earlier invitation. But the book flatters to deceive.

Yes, it is packed with interesting correspondence from the wide range of people, here and abroad, with whom Mphahlele engaged on his travels across three continents. Yes, gaps in Mphahlele's own correspondence have been filled in. It retails at a decent price (around R230), and is thus available to current scholars in a way the first edition is no longer. Because of the peripatetic nature of his life, Mphahlele did a lot of letter writing and, as Attwell points out in his fine introduction, it was 'to reach someone whose presence to him was made especially difficult by circumstance: segregation, apartheid, cultural distance, political risk, family fragmentation, exile – these are the typical conditions which [he] seeks to overcome in his correspondence' (16). And the fuller correspondence contained in the new edition surely demonstrates Mphahlele's generosity of response, for, as Attwell notes, 'the *person* mattered deeply to him' (16). There is no doubt that its appearance is to be welcomed. But is it the edition that Manganyi envisaged twenty-five years ago?

On a number of counts it cannot be. The editing is nothing less than an embarrassment for a university press and, if the rights are bought by an overseas publisher, some serious corrections will have to be done. To start with, after the correspondence, the book reprints two important interviews Manganyi did with Mphahlele, one shortly after his return from exile and the other a few years before his death. What follows them is a list of references, erroneously titled 'Interview references' (504), when, in fact, they seem to refer to the book's introduction, almost 500 pages earlier! However, there are errors in this list as well, which do not accord with the citations in the introduction. One can only conclude that the editors did not have oversight of the proofs, perhaps giving too much responsibility to the Wits Press editor, who failed them and Mphahlele, who had entrusted this project to them.

But the editors are not blameless, either. Manganyi's introduction to the Skotaville edition of the letters was a model one, in which he set out his parameters for inclusion: he made it clear that, of the letters available to him, only three were rejected on grounds of propriety, others where they proved to be repetitive, and no letters were included after 1980 (1984: 2). He also said that where material was excised for reasons of propriety, standard ellipses were used to indicate an omission (and they were). Neither Manganyi's preface nor Attwell's otherwise helpful introduction in the new edition spells out the single most important job of an editor: the grounds for selection or rejection.

Moreover, significant excisions have been made to Mphahlele's letters to his daughter, Teresa, who remained in the United States along with her brothers after his return in mid-1977. Comparison with the original edition demonstrates that the material omitted dealt with her parents' concern for her brothers, treated openly in the 1983 companion volume, *Exiles and Homecomings*. Other cuts were made in letters to Mphahlele's friends, Makhudu Rammopo, Khabi Mngoma and Peter Thuynsma. The excisions begin in letters from 1971 onwards, and a discreet footnote indicating the first instance could even have done the trick. Excisions are perfectly acceptable – if the reasons are given and the occurrences indicated. Behind this practice is scrupulous attention to the sanctity of the letter as an 'utterance' (a word used by both Manganyi and Attwell). Both editors claim that a letter is crafted, like a short story, and inflected by its addressee. If this is so, then it is simply wrong to tamper with that crafting without indicating as much. An editor who exercises the right to edit has an obligation to both letter-writer and reader to indicate that editing has occurred to maintain confidentiality. One assumes that omission of sentences and paragraphs was done to protect Mphahlele's sons, and this is quite acceptable. What is not, is the deafening silence from the editors around this, and the shoddy manner in which ellipses are sometimes given, sometimes not.

The silence might have been pardonable if the excisions were done in careful, standard fashion, as they are in some letters, an ellipsis (three dots) placed between paragraphs (see e.g. 14 October 1977, 8 September 1978 and 20 October 1979). However, elsewhere it's four dots (see 14 October 1977 and 22 March 1979), or three dots following on from the sentence (17 October 1978), which can be confused with Mphahlele's own

ellipses – see e.g. his letter to Khabi and Grace Mngoma (396), or his letters to Teresa (339 and 436). The resulting confusion is especially noticeable in the first paragraph of his letter to Teresa on 30 July 1978. In his long letter to Peter Thuynsma (10 March 1980), there are two substantial excisions, which are not indicated by any ellipses at all. The cuts completely alter the tone of the letter, and the footnote about Thuynsma’s oral defence of his PhD at Denver, at which Mphahlele was present, serves to present the context of this letter as little more than an encouragement of him to return to where ‘learning is still appreciated – in Africa, where nothing is ever stale’ (419). The letter in the Skotaville edition (1984: 184-6) carries another dimension, which simple ellipses (placed between paragraphs, as elsewhere) would have honoured. In fact, every letter from now on, from which material was omitted, fails to use ellipses (e.g. in his letters to Teresa on 18 June 1980 and in July 1980). The new edition has furthermore excluded a handful of letters to Teresa, and a remark to this effect is the least a reader could expect.

Because Attwell himself refers to subsequent collections of letters by a black South African writer – Bessie Head’s correspondence with Randolph Vigne (1965-1979) and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan (1963-1977) – brief comparison with both texts is instructive and casts the new edition of Mphahlele’s letters in a less favourable light. An extensive comparison *would* be odious, however, as the new edition is very different in scope and intention from both Head editions. Furthermore, Mphahlele’s disparate letters are not linked together within a personal memoir (Cullinan), or before a retrospective commentary (Vigne). I only wish to point out the editorial practices followed by both Vigne and Cullinan, which escape Mphahlele’s editors entirely. During the 1970s, when she was fighting for her rights with various publishing houses, Head launched stinging (and often untrue) attacks in letters to Vigne, which he chose to omit from the letters for publication. But this did not go without comment: ‘The cutting I have subjected these letters to and the suppression of some names may spare feelings’ (1991: 191). Further on he notes:

The first half of 1976 brought a rush of letters, almost solely about Bessie’s running battles with her publishers and agents. More than half the contents have been omitted because they are wounding and probably libellous, and because, to all but a tiny

few interested in the minutiae of author-publisher arrangements, they are tedious to read (1991: 210).

The excisions are clearly and systematically indicated with three-dot ellipses where necessary, often between existing paragraphs. There is no ambiguity. Vigne's editorial approach, stated in the preface (1991: vi), combines prudence and scholarly rigour.

One of Head's potential publishers at the time was, in fact, Patrick Cullinan, who ran Bateleur Press with Lionel Abrahams. The shock upon realising that he was one of her targets led him to work through the Cullinans' own correspondence with Head during the same period in order to deal with it. For publication in the resultant memoir, he himself recognised the need to excise material from the letters. Like Vigne before him, however, he gives the grounds for his editorial approach in a note in the prefatory material:

I have chosen to let her text stand as it was written, including the few minor solecisms. . . . I have omitted only what is libellous or a breach of confidentiality. Anything wantonly hurtful to people still alive has also been removed (2005: xi).

All that was required of Mphahlele's editors was to adhere to scholarly practice if confidentiality was to be maintained.

Attwell mentioned that Mphahlele's correspondence shows the many sides of the man, including that of father (16); in fact, we get a complete picture of this side from the Skotaville edition. It is unfortunate that, despite the advertising of this edition as being 'expanded' and 'augmented', which it undoubtedly is, it also reduces significantly (for those who know the original edition) Mphahlele's utterances as a father, therefore diminishing one aspect of his voice. In *Exiles and Homecomings*, he made it clear to Manganyi that his only real failure in life was as a father: 'I failed to make my children realise that they owed it to themselves to create viable lives for themselves. This has been my greatest failure. It is not as if they owed us anything in terms of specific expectations. It is to themselves that they owed everything they could aspire to' (1983: 224). (The same sentiments are expressed in a letter to Teresa on 14 October 1977.) Attempts to see his children through

school and college education in the United States characterise many of the letters to Teresa (e.g. 13 September 1974 and 22 July 1975, on furthering her BA studies in her mid-20s, or on 16 July 1979, urging her to proceed to the MA). In the biography he had written: ‘Looking back now, I often wonder whether I did not lay too heavy a stress on the necessity and value of education. Perhaps as the children grew older they thought I was a crank. Education had made me an independent spirit and it seemed natural to believe in its near omnipotence’ (1983: 172). He of course had a nervous breakdown at the age of sixteen when he feared he would fail the mid-year JC exams at St Peter’s, Rosettenville, and so disappoint his mother, like his father before him: ‘Mother was so self-sacrificing that it was difficult for me at that age even to contemplate some kind of rebellious act’ (1983: 53). He famously pulled through, to achieve a first-class pass (1983: 59). But circumstances were different for his teenage sons in the United States, and he didn’t seem to have the means to deal with their rebellion. The biography openly acknowledged defeat: ‘The story of my life with our children is one without an ending, a saga that cannot be pigeon-holed into time slots and locations. It has become a subterranean emotional puzzle with many points of entry and no discernable exits’ (1983: 266). Somehow this labyrinth ought to have been conveyed in the new edition, as much as the Skotaville edition did – even if new imperatives that had come into play since then had to be respected.

Then there is the list of correspondents. In the original edition, every one was listed, even if only a line’s information was accorded them. This was highly satisfactory, especially since the information was pertinent to the time of writing. The new edition created a dilemma, for decades have since intervened. What to do? – or, in one of Mphahlele’s catchphrases ‘Mais, que faire?’ Well, the decision was badly made. It would seem that, in the interest of keeping big names prominent in order to heighten the profile of Mphahlele’s correspondence, major writers and scholars like Chinua Achebe, EK Braithwaite, Syl Cheney-Coker, Isidore Okpewho, James Olney, Philip Tobias and Charles van Onselen – who are actually represented by *one letter only*, even if their names appear elsewhere – have full details to their name, including what they did way after Mphahlele was in contact! The editorial note clearly states that correspondents who exchanged very few letters would simply have salient details given in a footnote, a more honest

and satisfactory practice – but one not adhered to. Sometimes a footnote is given as well for good measure (in the case of Okpewho). However, less well-known correspondents represented by a single letter are not accorded the same honour. Peter Clarke, the Cape Town artist and writer, also has only one letter – but probably the longest in the book, and he was also Mphahlele’s illustrator. Why does a footnote (and in another correspondent’s letter to boot) suffice? Conversely, why should four academics, Andrew Gurr, Edward Lindell, Ian Glenn and Nick Visser merit being listed among the correspondents, when they also only have one letter to their name? In other cases, footnotes are missing, as for Barend van Niekerk, writing on 24 July 1978 about a possible position for Mphahlele at the University of Natal. One would have had to have read Nadine Gordimer’s letter of 23 March 1978 to know he was Professor of Law.

My point is that the decision was not thought through and applied consistently. It would seem that the original list was simply updated, and in some cases augmented, instead of a new list being compiled on the strength of the new edition. And not completely updated, either: that Teresa predeceased her father is simply not mentioned in the new edition. Furthermore, one of the most important interlocutors throughout his exile (from 1958 to 1977), his childhood friend, Makhudu Rammopo, is given less information in the list of correspondents than Glenn or Visser (no more, in fact, than in the original edition). Just a glance at *Exiles and Homecomings* (151-161), to which the reader’s attention is directed, shows what should have been culled for his entry in the new edition: Makhudu encountered Mphahlele in Standard Six at the Methodist School in Marabastad; later, as teachers, they met often at TATA meetings; he was the one who suggested that Mphahlele make use of Rev Tema to get his passport; he left for Nigeria two weeks before Sharpeville in 1960 and stayed with Mphahlele, his family remaining behind in the turmoil. Was this culling too much trouble for the editors to do?

Similar inconsistency also applies to many of the footnotes which are taken from the original edition’s endnotes, and occasionally reworked or updated. Again, this has led to random application: certain names are footnoted and circumstances contextualised, but not systematically. Again, I would have thought that a fresh look at each letter in the context of the new edition would have been *de rigueur*. New footnotes, too, betray unacceptable

carelessness. For example, the first reference to Adam Small in a letter from Jack Cope on 11 March 1970, although substantial, is not footnoted, whereas an extensive footnote about the writer is appended to a passing reference to Small in a letter from Ursula Barnett (19 November 1973), some forty pages on. And the footnote for GM Nkondo in a letter dated 30 July 1976 calls him ‘Dr’, unlike the more accurate footnote for him in an earlier letter (29 February 1972) – yet he only received his degree from Yale in 1980. Silly typos, too, bedevil things: a footnote for PAC firebrand Zeph Mothopeng (305), gives their joint attendance at ‘Adam’s College’! But this is not an egregious slip. At least two letters fall victim to shoddy proofreading: one to Makhudu (postmarked 3 November 1970), in which the first sentence of the third paragraph is garbled (cf. the original letter (1984: 99), and one to Teresa on 17 October 1978, in which the first English sentence after an opening paragraph in French makes no sense (again, *vide* the original (1984: 166).

This carelessness is carried through to the lame ‘writer unidentified’ appended to certain letters, when a bit of sleuth work might have yielded the necessary clues. For example, the letter of 11 November 1979 from an unidentified writer is clearly from Bob Pawlowski, one of Mphahlele’s circle at the University of Denver, who had written to Mphahlele earlier that year on 20 March (although he is not identified there by surname). In that letter he refers to each of his three children by name, and to being condemned to work, after his years at Denver, in the depths of Mississippi. The same names are mentioned in the later letter, which remonstrates with Mphahlele for not commiserating with his teaching conditions. But the editors did not pick up that both letters were from Bob Pawlowski. It would seem that Mphahlele never replied to either letter, as a letter on 6 February 1980 from Gunnar Boklund, Professor of English at Denver, takes Mphahlele to task for not communicating with the Denver crowd, and Bob especially. Bob is called ‘the big Pole’ in the letter (416), and we know from *Exiles and Homecomings* (1983: 242) that he was one of the favourites in that bunch. Despite the fact that the years at Denver were the longest Mphahlele spent anywhere in exile, it is quite obvious that he was drawing in his resources two years after homecoming, to focus on South Africans. This is seen in his writing to Norman Hodge on 25 February 1980, just after receiving Boklund’s reproachful letter, that ‘unanswered letters bother me, nag my

conscience to exasperation' (417). Incidentally, the letter to two others in the Denver bunch (21 November 1969), is not to Jerry and Karen 'Powlowski' as supplied, but Karen *Chapman*, a Francophone African specialist, whose two very warm 1980 letters are included, which render her worthy of being listed as a correspondent, rather than some others, and who is mentioned in letters from Dennis Brutus in mid-1970. Both Jerry and Karen are wrongly listed in the index under 'Powlowski' – and 'Pawlowski, Bob' is nowhere to be found! I would have thought that the editors would have followed up on the Denver circle, given its significance in Mphahlele's life.

A related cavil is that some of the 'writer unidentified' letters, or letters to an unknown addressee, have little context and, given their anonymity, might have been omitted. A Mr Aldworth, presumably from *The Star* in Johannesburg, to whom Mphahlele wrote from Denver on 18 May 1981, is not given a footnote, and Mphahlele's palpable indignation at offensive letters to the paper is thus left uncontextualised. It does show his determination to speak his mind – but on what subject? I would have thought that a bit of detective work in the paper's archives, tracking down the letters published around August 1980, should have been mandatory if the letter was to be included. Similarly, the letter from one 'Lloyd' dated 11 February 1974 at the University of Southern California, which weighs in on the 'Addison Gayle' debate, could only be by the scholar Lloyd W Brown, if clues in the letter are followed up. More importantly, a letter dated 13 December 1975 whose writer's identity is unknown, turns out to be probably by the eminent African-American writer and educator, John A Williams, if a search is made for the Regents' Lectureship he held in 1972. (In this electronic age, there is no excuse for not googling to ascertain information.) His Fall 1975 lecture, 'The Crisis in American Letters', which argued that most white American writers refused to recognise the right and ability of black writers to speak for themselves, was later published in *Black Scholar* (June 1975), presumably what Mphahlele had just read, and a chronology of Williams's life available on the University of Rochester library website indicates that he was indeed the Regents' Lecturer in 1972. The unknown writer of a letter dated 8 July 1981 might have been identified by a phone call to Peter Thuynsma, for there are enough clues in it to jog his memory of a visit to the writer in New York a month before. Real application might just have tracked down the unknown writer of the letter from London dated 6 June 1970, or that of 2 January 1976

(whose statement ‘I posted off your book just before Christmas’ requires a footnote – this was the typescript of *Chirundu*, still looking for a publisher, and only to find one after Mphahlele’s return).

Footnotes are probably even more important for letters than for published material, but this edition is noticeably short on them. Brian Willan makes this point in his edition of Sol Plaatje’s *Selected Writings*, which includes a varied, and to date the only, selection of Plaatje’s letters. ‘Annotation tends to be more extensive in relation to correspondence rather than newspaper articles, pamphlets or extracts from books’, he remarks, ‘since the latter were written for a wider public consumption in the first place and are largely self-explanatory’ (1996: 3). The endnotes in his edition are a model of editorial scholarship: in them, he makes extensive reference to other publications, indicating where further information on individuals and events can be found. It may be, however, that the conception of Mphahlele’s editors was different from Plaatje’s, in that they did not intend the book to be a scholarly edition. They are better on footnoting people than issues and circumstances; this might have been a considered decision, but it is not one that I found helpful. To give one case in point: correspondence with Jack Cope and Langston Hughes in late 1962 indicates that both had been asked by Mphahlele to adjudicate a literary contest – presumably under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom – in two categories: short stories and poetry. It seems from Cope’s letter (15 October 1962) that he was a preliminary judge, creating a shortlist of eight out of hundreds of entrants, and Hughes afterwards saw the shortlist, among whom were the poets Brutus and Nortje, although *not* the short fiction writers Maimane and Modisane – and it was Maimane’s short story to which Hughes gave first place (see his letter of 27 November 1962). It is obvious from Mphahlele’s response to Hughes’s judgement (28 December 1962) that Ulli Beier was another judge – but of what contest?

The correspondence with Langston Hughes, and with Patrick Duncan at the same time, demonstrates the widening circle of Mphahlele’s contacts even before he went into exile. The Liberal Party leader was also the first (included) addressee to whom Mphahlele wrote from exile in Lagos on 28 September 1957, and his reply was immediate. However, the first letter that Mphahlele addressed him as ‘Pat’ (3 July 1954), warrants a surname in brackets, as is the practice elsewhere in the book. This omission of the

surname has led to the important early correspondence (46-50, 61, 66-70) not being represented in the index. Another repercussion is that, in the first letter indexed under 'Duncan, Patrick' (a letter from CJ Driver on 16 July 1976, in which he thanks Mphahlele for his memoir of the politician), Duncan's name is given an unnecessary footnote, and the information there is replicated from his entry in the list of correspondents. Did no one pick this up? A related omission is failure to supply the surname for the addressee of Mphahlele's first letter to Jack Cope (22 November 1961), in which he moots Congress for Cultural Freedom sponsorship for *Contrast* – which, of course, means it is not in the index. A misspelling of the writer Bob Leshoai's name (131) likewise means that the reference with the correct spelling, in a letter to Teresa (29 July 1976), is never reflected in the index. The index is the shabbiest aspect of the new edition, the main casualty of the poor proofreading overall: inaccuracies regarding page numbers abound, and certain letters are simply not included. The omissions are legion, but a few examples will suffice: Lionel Abrahams's follow-up letter (370-1), Peter Clarke's only letter (290-7), Solveig Ryd's only letter (388-390), and Mphahlele's only letter to Charles van Onselen (397). The most unforgiveable error, however, is the failure to list fourteen references to Chabi (Mphahlele's fourth child) under 'Mphahlele, Robert Dichaba (son)', which has only one reference!

All the above criticism notwithstanding, the additional correspondence makes the new edition well worthwhile for any scholar of South African literature. As Manganyi himself put it in his preface, 'the book is enormously enhanced by the addition of the voices of the famous and not so famous, of colleagues, fellow writers and lifelong friends' (4). Particularly harrowing is the first letter from Sipho Sepamla (28 February 1977), in which he tells Mphahlele that he tried to write a number of times, but the upheaval of the time prevented him: 'I can't seem to separate the various feelings impinging on my body' (319); he ends by describing himself as an open sore. And the wound is not his only: he carries the emotion of detainees' wives, who were literally hanging on to their sanity – which puts Mphahlele's own struggles in exile into perspective. Another moving letter comes from the poet Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, in exile in New York (30 June 1970). He tells Mphahlele he has not written in order to spare him his own anguish: he is a broken man, and ends with the bald admission, 'Bra Zeke, I

am very lonely’ (197). Kofi Awoonor, the Ghanaian poet, is an appealing interlocutor: his first letter (11 December 1977) after Mphahlele’s return, endorses Mphahlele’s decision ‘a thousand percent’, because, despite persecution, he had made a similar decision to stay on in Ghana: ‘we have work to do here, and if we must die, let us at least die on the native soil’ (342). Unlike Dennis Brutus, who actually used the children of Soweto to try to persuade Mphahlele *not* to return in a letter of 26 June 1976 – ‘the graves of the school-children dying gallantly in opposition seems to me a strong reason for refusing the favours of the racists’ (290) – and who does not seem to have corresponded with him afterwards, Awoonor encourages him: ‘The kids of Soweto, like the little child of the New Testament have led. You must not hesitate’ (342).

A letter from a ‘not so famous’ correspondent, Solveig Ryd, a graduate student in Växjö, Sweden (12 March 1979), is one of the classics in the book (and it is not even indexed!). It must have given the near 60-year-old educator much joy. She ends her long, delightful letter on a conspiratorial note: ‘I have got a nice letter from Mrs. Mphahlele. She thinks I am a man. Shall we tell her the truth I am a woman? You can find my curious name in Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt* or Grieg’s sonat, ‘Solveig’s song’. Sorry to say that I have no similarity with the wonderful Solveig in *Peer Gynt*’ (390). A famous voice, of course, is that of Nadine Gordimer, a new letter to whom (19 March 1953) is included in this edition (but needless to say, not indexed), and shows the early start of their correspondence, which would continue into exile and beyond. Gordimer writes memorably on 6 August 1976 after Mphahlele’s first visit home about her joy on seeing him again: ‘And with all the quiet surety and strength you have gained. Exile destroys many, tempers the rare few. You are one of steel. And shining brightly’ (308). The new correspondence included in this edition shows that she was very much involved with the legalities of his return in 1977 (he was still a listed person, and therefore could not teach until this had been lifted). Curiously, just as he wrote to his mentor Norah Taylor on 6 September 1957, the day of his departure, his first (included) letter on his return is to Gordimer, also on 6 September 1977, a fact not lost on him – see 330. Given the hostility of many regarding his return, her supportive contact must have helped. On 11 October 1977 he thanks her for her ‘heart-warming letter’ and treasures her phrase ‘the obstinate affirmation of life, *in spite of everything*’ (333). He is replying

to her sombre letter of 17 September, written a few days after Steve Biko's death in detention (peculiarly, Mphahlele had returned from exile a day before Biko's arrest): 'Brecht wrote about a time when it seemed a sin to talk of trees; it's that sort of time here, now. But I don't think men like Biko die for people to deny what is live and positive in themselves, but to refuse what is deadening and negative' (333).

All these voices indeed contribute to what Attwell hoped the new edition would achieve, 'a more complete record of the growth and development of Mphahlele's life and career' and an illustration of 'the networks that shaped Mphahlele's personal and intellectual life' (7). It should perhaps be noted, however, that the additional quarter century of letters reflected in the augmented edition's title (1943-2006) comprises no more than 20-odd pages. There is some telling correspondence, alluded to in the introduction (14), but the title is not really an accurate reflection of the additional material, and any review needs to point this out. More to the point, all correspondence from 2000 onwards is with Stephen Gray, mainly regarding fresh editions of Mphahlele's work for the Penguin Modern Classics series. Footnotes are desperately needed for the material in some of them, which a phone call to Gray should have clarified (the cryptic '5 copies', for example, mentioned by Mphahlele in a letter of 12 March 2005, or the 'idea of a schools edition' in his next letter of 22 March). Interestingly, the Wits University Press website catalogue shows that the book originally had a more modest, and more honest, scope: 'The letters cover the period from November 1943 to April 1987, forty-four of Mphahlele's mature years and most of his active professional life' – quite different from the introduction's claim that the letters span sixty-three years (7) – true on paper, but disingenuous when two decades are represented by 11 letters. Far more valuable are the letters from the period of the original scope (1943-1980) which were not available in that edition, particularly the correspondence with Langston Hughes, starting in the early 1950s and continuing for a decade.

This letter writing is particularly interesting, because we know that Peter Abrahams was corresponding with Richard Wright a few years before, until 1948 – see Michel Fabre's work on Wright, although the letters still await publication – and with Langston Hughes regularly from the start of 1954 for the rest of the decade. Hughes's correspondence with Abrahams and Mphahlele, and with others loosely connected with *Drum* magazine, was

generated by a request from *Drum* in 1953 to help judge a fiction-writing contest, and maintained through Hughes’s subsequent collecting of African writing for his 1960 anthology, *An African Treasury*, unsurprisingly banned in South Africa upon publication. Mphahlele congratulates Hughes on 27 July 1960 for an anthology ‘which bristles with life & newness’ (87), and ‘which resounds through and through like the footsteps of a giant rubbing his eyes as he walks, just from a deep sleep’ (88). Hughes’s correspondence with the various contributors has just appeared in *Langston Hughes and the South African Drum Generation: The Correspondence*. Interestingly, the book has as its front cover an airletter from Mphahlele at University College, Ibadan, to Hughes in New York, postmarked 26 June 1961, and sent from Oshogbo, outside Offa, where Mphahlele was living at the time. This letter is not in Manganyi and Attwell’s edition, however, and it could well have been a notification by Mphahlele about his new job for the Congress of Cultural Freedom in Paris. The nearest we get is Hughes’s own letter, dated 3 July 1961, in which he congratulates Mphahlele for his new post, especially since they will now be only a five-hour flight apart, and asks him to drop him a postcard once he reaches Europe.

That Manganyi and Attwell do not give the current location of any of the correspondence is problematic. This was not an issue for the homogeneous Skotaville edition, but whether the letters have since been published elsewhere, or are available for consultation in archives or university libraries does require mention. Take for example the letters of another giant of our literary history, Sol Plaatje. In *Selected Writings*, the various locations were given (those written to the Principal of Tuskegee, Robert Moton, in the 1920s, for instance, are housed in the Moton Papers at Tuskegee University, or the single letter to Walter Fenyang – a letter strangely like so many of Mphahlele’s, a mixture of the public and personal, and written in 1919 from outside the country – can be consulted in the Molema/Plaatje Papers at the University of the Witwatersrand.) Willan conceptualised his selection of Plaatje’s writings as an adjunct to his earlier biography, *Sol Plaatje*, in the same way as Manganyi envisaged the original edition of Mphahlele’s letters vis-à-vis *Exiles and Homecomings*, ‘as a logical extension of the biographical enterprise’ (1984: 1). And Cullinan made frequent reference to Gillian Stead Eilersen’s meticulous and empathetic biography of Head, especially when she covered circumstances

with which he had no acquaintance, crediting her for this in the acknowledgements (2005: x-xi). Because letters belong to what Manganyi aptly called ‘the realm of the intimate’ (1984: 1), in that their voice is different from that intended for publication, such as autobiography, they can be particularly helpful when made available in conjunction with a biography, even if the ‘I’ of the utterance is, as Attwell cautions (15), not to be equated with ‘the real Mphahlele’.

Importantly, Mphahlele’s letters to Khabi Mngoma reveal something not evident in his published writing: that it was probably the Ngoyi Music Professor’s visit to Pennsylvania in mid-1975 which actually planted the seed of his decision to return. Mphahlele’s letter of 23 June 1975 where he rhapsodises, ‘in all the 18 years of exile, we hadn’t experienced an occasion like our reunion and I mean it’ (254), is suffused with a warmth not often felt in the book. And because Khabi’s record of achievement in the musical sphere had been ‘enviable’, and he had ‘also found self-fulfilment’ – at *home* – Mphahlele began to feel it was possible for him, too. He said as much in his letter: ‘Tell those fellows – Phatudi etc that I want to come and teach my own people’ (255). (Correspondence on his return shows that ‘Phatudi etc’ failed him dismally.) In a letter after his first visit home (8 July 1976), Mphahlele acknowledges the timing of Khabi’s trip: ‘your coming here was a mystical sign that it is time we surfaced from the underground realism of exile. There *must* be a design to it’ (298). Despite the notorious travails of the first year after his return, as he struggled to land an academic post in the face of Cabinet interference, Mphahlele’s humour still leavened a letter written from Chuenespoort to Tim Couzens (5 September 1978), who was working on getting him a research position at Wits: ‘The enclosed cheque: from the sublime to the narcotic and celestial. Would you kindly buy me tobacco? Johannesburg is the only place where I can buy it. It’s *Capstan* (Medium) tobacco, and they sell it at Mickey Bass, Market St., off Harrison. Buy as many tins as is possible’.

The abundance and engagement characterising the correspondence in this book bears out Mphahlele’s comment on 23 May 1966 to Gerald Chapman, Chair of English at Denver: ‘I am a persistent letter writer – an addict at that – so please do not be impatient when you receive a continuous wave of words, words, words’ (142). His attitude to letter writing is clear from *Exiles and Homecomings*: ‘To offset the element of risk I have often

had to strive for the greatest degree of transparency in my letters, that is, I leave as little as possible for the imagination and whim of the person I happen to be writing to’ (1983: 256). This need to cross the ‘i’s and dot the ‘t’s is most evident in his next letter to Chapman, written on the same day, where he laid out exactly what he had been taught in university studies of English in South Africa to obviate any confusion in Denver when he took up his PhD studies there. Incidentally, I feel Manganyi’s footnote to this letter in the Skotaville edition is more useful than the footnote about Leavis in the new edition: ‘This letter reveals most clearly the fiber of Mphahlele the class-room maestro who has the patience for details, logical connections and above all, one who takes nothing for granted in the sphere of communication’ (1984: 140). This comment could be applied to so many of the letters, which reflect Mphahlele’s meticulous approach across the continental divides, and imaginative empathy with his varied addressees. What is missing from the abundance, however, is the *depth* of communication that is generated over time by a particular friendship, and written from an isolated environment, which characterises Head’s letters to Randolph Vigne. She writes to Vigne, her ‘imaginary father’, out of a profundity that is not characteristic of Mphahlele’s correspondence, not even his letters to Makhudu and Khabi (hence the startling intensity of Kgositsile and Sepamla’s *cris de coeur* noted above). Going on the letters included in this collection, we discern that Mphahlele’s strength lies in the versatility of his letter writing, its wide-ranging interlocution, not deep thinking or feeling, or laying the soul bare. In this respect, Head knew her own worth: ‘Forgive the vanity’, she told Vigne, ‘but few people equal my letter-writing ability!!’ (1991: 118).

The verdict, then? And to answer this, we must bear in mind the dearth of published correspondence by our black writers. Any volume, therefore, contributes to our literary history, even if it only contains letters as part of its scope, like Plaatje’s selected writings. Any Mphahlele scholar, moreover, would rather have a flawed volume of his correspondence than none at all. (It also corrects the dates, and thus reverses the order, of Mphahlele’s first two letters to William Plomer in 1958 – probably the only scholarly lapse of the Skotaville edition!) But I would not agree with Manganyi in his preface that the decades-long hope of an augmented edition has, in fact, been realised. There are prominent academic friends of Mphahlele who had obviously no part to play in this book, judging from their

absence in the acknowledgements. Once Mphahlele himself passed on, they might have shed light on unknown correspondents and obscure circumstances – or at least the editors could have indicated that they tried and were rebuffed (academia being the notoriously contested terrain it is). When editions of black writers' letters are not two a penny, the few available have a lot riding on their shoulders. More honesty and deference to the task would have given this book the distinction it deserves as the first substantial collection of a black South African writer's correspondence, and a titan's at that.

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