

**The Tyranny of Time in Ezekiel Mphahlele's
Down Second Avenue**

The notion of time has always given rise to various interpretations, mainly philosophical and religious. As it is generally perceived, time represents the past, the present and the future of a man. It is almost impossible to dissociate these three dimensions of time, the present being the consequence or the continuation of the past, the future that of the present; while thinking now, one feels yesterday and foresees tomorrow. However, in E.Mphahlele's autobiographical novel, *Down Second Avenue*, the notion of time takes a new shape. The writer does not present it as a chronological, coherent process of life but as a cruel sameness which deprives the Black South African of the meaning of existence and drowns him deeper in uncertainty.

If man apprehends time because he fears death which he knows is ineluctable, the Black South African rather fears a life that is imposed on him and wonders "whether this [is] the sort of life one [is] to continue to live until one's death"(1959:50)and "whether he would be travelling along a long, long winding road that promised no destination".(ibid) In fact, communication with the dead, the ancestors, the spirits may explain the Black man's serenity in front of death. He may even find comfort and peace in that other world he is constantly in touch with as E.Mphahlele confides in his novel,

I don't know if ever it did. What I do know is that about eight out of every ten educated Africans ,most of whom are also professed Christians still believe firmly in the spirits of

their ancestors . We do not speak about it among the educated. But when we seek moral guidance and inspiration and hope, somewhere in the recesses of our being, we grope around for some link with those spirits.(op.cit:64)

Thus, it is much more a life that others have designed for him that the Non White South African is anxious about. And it is this life-time that is described in *Down Second Avenue*, a work which stands as an illustration as well as a testimony of the everyday persecutions, humiliations and alienation of a whole people. It is also the justification of a writer's rupture with a society founded on a racist ideology legitimized by what became later an institution, in other words, Apartheid.

The themes, the structure and the style of this autobiographical novel help creating and maintaining a state of permanence, stagnation and despair ; a heavy and unbearable atmosphere released only by the interference of interludes which constitute the most significant part of the book in terms of form and content. Their recurrence in this literary genre is rather unusual. The author seems to have used them as a technique to draw a particular attention on them. Indeed, in contrast with the rest of the book which relates the life-story of Eseki in a chronological way, the interludes are introduced as pauses that interrupt the sequence of the novel abruptly, as if to break the same, continuous, monotonous and despairing rhythm of life reflected by the balance of the other chapters. Having about the same length, each focussing on a specific event or person announced in the title, these chapters, apparently independent , are interrelated in the sense that they build up the story of the author at the same time as they reveal the state of resignation and utter impotence he and his compatriots are trapped in. For example, in one chapter entitled "Water Tap", the writer describes a daily scene that perfectly renders the cyclic and oppressing atmosphere pervading the ghetto. People are queuing waiting, helpless, inert, watching "time[that] ran out with the same slow, relentless and painful flow of tap water." (1959:30) " It was like this in Second Avenue, " you know it must be like that at every other communal tap in Marabastad ".(1959:29) E.Mphahalele says and repeats; " It was like this" describing

Saturday nights, and again "it had to be like this always", complaining about the Blacks' life in Marabastad. The expression "it was like this" is insisted on not only to reveal the bitterness and fatality of the Black South African who seems doomed to live "like this", but also to provoke a reaction to it, which is actually manifested by the interludes.

The passage from the narrative text to the interludes without transition marks a new attitude of the author who becomes more objective, more conscious, and more determined than before. This can be seen through a shift in tense –from the past to a predominant present- and a change in style –from a plain, descriptive one to a poetic and highly symbolic one. In fact, the interludes recur sometimes as an introspection, sometimes as a retrospection, always as a serious analysis of the Blacks' situation in South Africa. Hence, the narrator assumes a new role; he no longer belongs to the personae of the novel –a victim of society- but becomes a witness capable of judgment and comment. The interplay and alternation of memories, reality and imagination which express the past, the present and the future are reduced to an immediate present. Thanks to his detachment and awareness, the narrator seems to have control over time, for he knows what has been happening and will still be happening in the future. This conception of time may be explained by T.Todorov's "ritual logic" or "eternal return" whereby an event takes place neither for the first nor for the last time and whereby everything is announced in the text, past, present and future. In other words, "an event which takes place is the illustration of a prediction."(1971:141) In *Down Second Avenue*, this event suggests more than a prediction; it suggests certainty as the Black South African is sure to pursue the same activities, to be repressed by the police, to live in the same ghetto. In *The African Image*, E.Mphahlele explains that "in South Africa, you can only move 'up' within your ghetto, only in relation to what you were before –from say working for a white man to owning your own ghetto shop."(1974:30)

After playing upon the concepts of time, showing that the present is not a progression from the past but is the past itself or that the past is forever present, the author finally destroys this syllogism by his decision to view the present and

mainly the future differently. Now a perspective which gives a sense to his life and time is shaping. The interludes are one of the rare moments when he allows himself some freedom and gives way to his feelings and emotions, the only moment when he dreams and hopes....which is unthinkable in South Africa. At last "Dawn came and announced victory"(op.cit:185). It is a victory against silence, against inertia, against acceptance and resignation. It is also a victory against a static, stagnating, immobile time, a notion which E.Mphahlele depicts throughout *Down Second Avenue*.

His departure, announced and decided in the interludes, marks effectively the end of a time and the beginning of another. Exile, which is his last resort, is not an easy 'choice', but when life becomes a prison for a man and especially for a writer who is compelled to keep silent while he is 'made' to speak, there is no other alternative than to leave. Yet, after twenty years of exile during which he lived in freedom, E.Mphahlele was still a hostage of time as he deeply suffered from what he called the 'Tyranny of Time and Place' far from his home and country, South Africa.

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