

Review

Lindy Stiebel and Therese Steffen (eds) (2014)
*Letters to my Native Soil: Lewis Nkosi
writes home (2001 2009)*. Zürich: LIT

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This precious book comes as a sequel to the seminal collection *Still Beating the Drum: critical perspectives on Lewis Nkosi* edited by Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner, and published by Rodopi in 2005. It is entirely different in tone and materials collected, yet it positions itself as a necessary corollary to that earlier work. Both books have in common the main object of their analysis – the South African writer Lewis Nkosi – and both reflect the perceptive and loving presence of Lindy Stiebel, who weaves around him a fabric of critical attention and affectionate friendship. *Letters to My Native Soil*, however, germinated from the intent to devote a posthumous homage to the writer, who died in Durban in 2010 after a long year of illness, and never managed to write down his memories into the book he had planned and provisionally entitled *Memoirs of a Motherless Child*.

Lewis Nkosi lived outside and far from South Africa for almost 50 years from 1961, and was only able to go back there after the end of apartheid. He refused the definition of ‘exile writer’ for his own experience, yet he was in fact cut off from his homeland and the culture that had raised him. Maybe in his youth it was good for him to get away from the stifling and provincial atmosphere of South Africa where colonialism was clinging on and apartheid raged, and face the world at large where he soon managed to emerge and make himself heard. But he never grew new roots in any other country and kept wandering from one place to another, to the point that even his regained homeland seemed strange to him. He had developed the sensitivity of an outsider and, as a truly postcolonial intellectual,

placed himself in the interstice and the in-between. Possibly he would have laughed at this new definition of his position in the world because he liked to make fun of all definitions and labels.

It is also true however that, after visiting what was then proudly called New South Africa, he never settled there, and moved in and out of the country as a temporary visitor, although the correspondence published in *Letters to My Native Soil* proves his desire to find something of his old self there, even if this only meant tracing his way back to the grave of his grandmother who had brought him up and sent him to school in a situation of great hardship.

This correspondence also shows that the only thing Lewis Nkosi could accept and appreciate as he did in fact appreciate was a 'native soil' of the imagination, passed on through literature. Literature had become home for the restless writer who trusted the power of the word well above anything else, as he says in his inspiring speech 'In Defense of the Study of Literature' given at the University of Zambia in 1983 and republished here as Appendix One:

I would like to defend the study of literature as a mode of intellectual activity whose results [...] have a special significance for society. [...] I would like to defend a cultural practice, a critical activity, a discursive practice whose object is literature. [...] Literature is a specific mode of appropriating reality, a legitimate form of cognition, and therefore we can say that it provides us with a specialised form of knowledge. (207-210)

And it is indeed through literature that Lewis Nkosi was engaged in the correspondence reflected in the book. It was the only way to go back home to a country which had forgotten him and expelled his work from literary histories and anthologies. His two correspondents – professor Lindy Stiebel and the then doctoral student Litzi Lombardozi – helped him to assemble the scattered elements of his biography into a consistent timeline and to retrieve lost pieces of writing. It is funny, but also somewhat painful, to read how Lewis, when questioned about the whereabouts of some of his manuscripts or publications, keeps replying 'it must be in Lusaka' – referring to his mythical 'Lusaka trunk' which in fact, once explored, proved to be empty of literary treasures.

Letters to My Native Soil is a rich and carefully structured book articulated in three sections which will prove extremely useful to scholars of South African literature. Yet it is also lively reading in itself thanks to the mind of the writer who is allowed to come through in all his vivacity

and complexity in an unprecedented medium e-mail. After Lindy Stiebel's rich and accurate Introduction, one finds a series of gems – the e-mail correspondence with Lindy Stiebel, 2001-2009 (Section One), and Litz Lombardozzi, 2003-2007 (Section Two), which brings back to us Lewis Nkosi's vivid intelligence and passion for literature, together with his complex personality where a mischievous smile and the loneliness lurking behind his perennial restlessness combine in pervasive self-irony.

These e-mails are extremely interesting from a stylistic viewpoint, because the medium's fast and uninhibited nature bestows new freedom to a writer who was already known for being outspoken and irreverent. Moreover, the proximity generated by e-mails creates an atmosphere of trust and confidence which releases a delightful aspect of Lewis's character his playfulness and marvelous sense of humour. All this is especially evident in his letters to Lindy, which outline the gradual growth of a warm friendship through the years of their exchange. It is a pity we cannot also read Lindy's letters to Lewis, as they would contribute a rhythm of antiphony and maybe even counterpoint. Unfortunately they seem to have been lost or destroyed. As a result, however, Lewis is left alone on the stage and thus becomes all the more visible and attractive to the observer. Those who have known him or, even more so, those who entertained a long friendship with him, will recognise in these e-mails the most lovable aspects of his personality and the light of his bright, swift mind. In my opinion, these sections of the book – and especially Section One – offer a meaningful and highly relevant contribution to the appreciation of Lewis Nkosi's literary value, helping us to understand him better. The tone of these two sections is the result of a combination of intellectual exercise and friendly exchange, underlined by a constellation of small pictures commenting the texts – mostly snapshots and reproductions of letters and postcards – which convey a homely feeling and create an affectionate framework to the story unfolding in the pages.

Section Three includes six texts in appendix, the first five by Lewis and the last one (Appendix Six) by Henry Louis Gates reviewing his *Mating Birds*. They are gathered here mainly because they had become difficult to find and therefore almost forgotten. Gates' review helps the reader to understand the quarrel between Lewis and his correspondents as reflected in the e-mails, and touches on a raw nerve – the accusations of sexism and racism which followed the publication of *Mating Birds* and (all these years later!) were still irritating the writer, as proved by his disdainful

allusion to André Brink's review of the same novel. Looking at the matter from a personal viewpoint, I found Lewis's irritation greatly justified, because *Mating Birds* was, and still is, an extraordinarily powerful book which holds its place as the best South African novel about apartheid. It seems therefore futile and even unjust to lower it to a discussion about political correctness.

Appendix One is Nkosi's passionate and eloquent defense of literature echoing the polemical style of ancient classics, and arguing for a critical reading and teaching of texts at a time when literary theories were threatening to obscure them. It closes with an exhortation to read *Huckleberry Finn*, which sounds like a reiteration of the subversive quality of literature asserted in the opening of the essay.

Appendix Two includes miscellaneous pieces, among which an article published in a German newspaper describing the underworld of Gillespie Street in Durban, a 'human flotsam' which fatally attracted the Afrikaner professor Johan van Wyk, but also Lewis Nkosi himself. These texts convey the writer's gaze on urban life and the changes it undergoes in time, and hint back to his works of fiction.

In Appendix Three there is a very important piece of theoretical writing by Nkosi, 'The Wandering Subject: exile as fetish'. It is included here (I believe) as an example of his brilliance as an essayist, but also because it throws light on his personal experience and the way he elaborated it. The Freudian 'fetish' is introduced to represent the nature and social role of the exile, used in order to create an effect upon the imagination with its implication of pain, torture and isolation and attract ritual worship, but later to be abandoned, as a degraded object, once its function is over. The way the exile's role is analysed is almost cynical and certainly dispassionate, and finds an adequate conclusion when, towards the end of the essay, Nkosi describes the anticlimax of his own return to South Africa and deflates the myth of the 'grand return' with his typical self-irony. In between this reasoning, Nkosi quotes and examines many examples of exiles from literature and history up to his own time (Bloke Modisane and Milan Kundera).

Appendix Four comprises a text I heard in its original form when Lewis read it as a paper for the 2004 Cambridge Letters Home Festival. He compares Faulkner's American South with Coetzee's African South, again applying the concept of 'fetish' but this time to language. Lewis admired Faulkner whom he said was a major influence in his formation as a writer,

and here he uses him to discuss multiracial societies. The essay has bitter implications involving a harsh judgement of the ‘rainbow nation’ slogan the New South Africa which he sees as ‘a poster-image suitable for tourist publicity’ but not representing ‘social reality’. Only a few years have passed since Nkosi wrote these words, and we have to admit that he was right: the rainbow nation was just a poster concealing unresolved social problems.

Appendix Five offers a very short but interesting article Nkosi wrote for Oprah’s Bookshelf to indicate books which were important for him. Not unsurprisingly, he mentions Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, to which he adds, very surprisingly, Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, praised for its ‘verve and racy humour’. Among the South Africans, he cites Peter Abrahams and RRR Dhlomo. But the first of his *livres de chevet* is the Bible. To invite prospective readers to explore this charming book, I shall quote Lewis Nkosi from a nice, racy e-mail he sent Lindy Stiebel in 2006 from Martinique where he was travelling with his partner Astrid Starck-Adler:

This is not exactly Durban. But what an island! Completely green, the sea is all colours like the people. Everyone seems to be beautiful, old and young and in-between. [...] Astrid swims and I watch the water like a good Zulu who can’t swim. Tomorrow we leave for Basel after ten days here. (126)