chilling and comic irony. Whatever ironies occur here are commonplace and minor, such as Fritz and Käthe's being forced to write notes to each other to avoid the ever-present microphones in their own home.

Böll it appears is too concerned here with establishing the humanity and dignity of his people. He provides an abundance of motivation but has forgotten about motivation's natural outgrowth, plot. A safety net that destroys is an intriguing idea, but Böll fails to breathe life into the idea and, like Herbert Tolm, is guilty of too much philosophizing and not nearly enough action.[WV]

Alexis Rockman

CHIRUNDU
by Es'kia Mphahlele
(Lawrence Hill & Co., Westport, Conn.; 158 pp.; $9.95 [paper])

Martin Tucker

Is it possible for a South African author to live and write in his country without avoiding or compromising the central issue? Can a South African writer remain in his native land and avoid social and governmental pressures or the torments of self-condemnation? Although such questions are not the theme of this second novel by Es'kia Mphahlele, a widely respected African critic of African literature, it is difficult to avoid them when reading it. For South African writers, black and white, these questions are at the heart of a basic dilemma: whether to stay or to exile themselves from their homeland and face the inevitable erosion of feeling and vision.

The voluntary exile option has been addressed, and responded to, in a number of ways by various South African writers and intellectuals. Nadine Gordimer, now the white South African writer most popular in the U.S., journeys to the United States and England periodically and is unflinching in her attacks on apartheid; yet she returns home because she feels it essential to remain there. Doris Lessing left South Africa more than twenty-five years ago, returning only once for a brief visit years back. Alan Paton, under house arrest some years ago, made no attempt to leave but smuggled his writings out of his home. These writers, all white, have a privileged position in South Africa. Although their freedoms are curtailed, they have had an easier time than their black, brown, and Coloured compatriots.

Mphahlele states his own history of pain and of wandering in an autobiographical preface. He left South Africa twenty-five years ago when the pressures of the color bar and pass laws became unbearable. Twenty years of exile failed to mitigate his need for living among the roots of his life. In 1977 he returned to South Africa, took a teaching job at a university, and has lived and worked there since.

"I got to know, when I was in the United States, that an academic can, if he likes, lose himself in intellectual pursuits, move only in the university community, and be insulated from the larger community out there, safe, cozy, contented. I didn't want that to happen to me. I didn't want my self-respect to hang on the thin thread of long-distance commitment.

"I also realize the longer I was away from here, the angrier, the more outraged, I felt against the sufferings of people here. Out of sheer impotence. In a sense, my homecoming was another way of dealing with impotent anger. It was also a way of extricating myself from twenty years of compromise, for exile itself is a compromise. Indeed, exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind. My return to Africa was a way of dealing with the concrete reality of blackness in South Africa rather than with the phantoms and echoes that attend exile."

Mphahlele does not deal in his preface with the compromises with which he must live in South Africa today. For him, apparently, they are not as degenerative as those attending exile. And, indeed, the present novel is concrete proof that Mphahlele can work—that is, write—in South Africa. His novel, then, must be seen in at least two contexts: as sheer fiction and as testament of a writer's faith.

Mphahlele's story, about the self-made Chimba Chirundu, minister of transport and public works in an imaginary African country, is well crafted. The atmosphere conveys a sense of momentum; life is on the tracks in Mphahlele's fictional land, and the characters, while momentarily blocked by subterfuge, disappointment, or deception, do not lose their spirit. Chirundu is arrested on a charge of bigamy brought by his first wife. He defends his second marriage on the basis of Bemba tribal law. He has divorced his first wife because both realized their marriage was not working and because they have lived apart for some time. With this situation Mphahlele comes to grips with issues of modernism and tribalism, of new and old Africa, of individualism and communal responsibilities. He invests Chirundu with ambition and passion, even with a reluctant admiration for his Medea-like first wife.

Mphahlele tells his story through several narrators: The "I" sequences are written by either of two exiles in the same prison as Chirundu and also by Chirundu and his inimical nephew,

who is planning a transport strike against the government. Their various points of view have cumulative force, and the reader senses the division and rich complexity of the independent nation Mphahlele is drawing. Chirundu is found guilty of bigamy, ends up in jail, and his first wife burns down the house in which Chirundu lived with his second wife. The plot is thus resolved, but not the novel.

Chirundu is one of the new African breed—the men of power who order their suits from London tailors and drive in long, sleek limousines. We see that he is admirable as well as stubborn, intelligent as well as avaricious. But his fall is a result of the wish to "test" colonialist British law against tribal custom, or the new centralism against the traditional regionalism. This is a profoundly complex matter, but the author does not treat its ramifications. As a novelist Mphahlele is under no obligation to proselytize, but he must resolve what he introduces. Merely to leave the reader with a sense of these many layers of African society is to leave unfinished one's novelistic business.

Yet, if Mphahlele's novel seems unresolved, it also offers extraordinary insights into contemporary African life. Mphahlele is writing with a sense of command and a strong sense of his own identity. That he should have had to return to South Africa to do so may be unsettling to some, but it is a fact worth reckoning with. As Chirundu himself says in the telling of *his* story, we are "forever making choices or failing to make them." We are forever "walking the often tight-rope narrow path between what is elevating and exciting for ourselves as individuals in the acquisition of this new power and what is beneficial for the community, materially and spirtually." [WV]

Newly Published

The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism by Michael Novak (Simon and Schuster; 434 pp.; $17.50). .

Michael Novak is a Contributing Editor of *Worldview* and is currently Resident Scholar in Philosophy, Religion and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. He is the author of, among other works, *Belief and Unbelief, The Experience of Nothingness,* and *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics.*

DISTANT RELATIONS
by Carlos Fuentes
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 225 pp.; $11.95)

Peter Rand

The fiction of the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes is full of narrative experiment. In his short stories and occasionally in his novels, technical ingenuity serves an urgent storytelling purpose. The narrator of "A Pure Soul," for instance, addresses her brother in the second person throughout and in so doing reveals not only her incestuous obsession but the cunning crime it has driven her to commit. It is a chilling, poignant tale told with admirable efficiency. Fuentes's most successful novel, in my opinion, is *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, in which he employs a variety of narrative devices to tell a deathbed story about success and failure in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution. It is one work of modern fiction in which flashback is truly indispensable to narrative development.

Distant Relations, Fuentes's latest novel, translated by his very able interpreter, Margaret Sayers Peden, is a yarn. Fuentes hosts us to a ghost story as told to him by one Comte de Branly, a worldly old Frenchman, over a long luncheon at the Automobile Club de France in Paris. This method of storytelling allows Fuentes to embellish Branly's story with his own observations and to tell us a bit about Branly. Occasionally he even fills in for Branly. This is how a yarn is supposed to work. Yarns are elaborately spun-out tales, and they may be understood, as Fuentes suggests, as open-ended texts that grow and change in the retelling. In this instance, however, Fuentes's narrative strategy does not serve the urgent needs of the story but, rather, is placed at the service of some of Fuentes's notions about the relationship between storytellers and stories and extra-phenomenal life.

It is not worth trying to recapitulate Branly's tale here in all its baroque intricacy. Let me summarize: A Latin American archeologist, Hugo Heredia, agrees to trade his son Victor Heredia to a ghost of the same name in return for his wife and their other son, who have died in a plane crash. This transaction, and indeed most of the story, takes place in an old house outside Paris. Branly, at first unwittingly, and then with growing concern, acts as agent, but by the time he realizes this he has become part of the story. His task is to survive even if he cannot save the boy from a weird fate. All the flesh and blood characters in the novel—including, finally, Fuentes—have relationships to one another that somehow correspond to relationships between the deceased characters, who are themselves in attendance, especially in the old house.

The ghosts already have played out a drama of their own in the New World during the reign of Napoleon III. They are hungry to replace the living, or reproduce themselves through them, and thus to escape eternal oblivion. One means for doing this is the story itself, which is a curse. The narrator is lost, consumed by his attendant ghost, when the story is retold by his listener; but *he* will be trapped by the story too if he does not retell it. Fuentes states the problem near the end of the novel, when he says: "I didn't want to be the one who...receives the devil's gift and then cannot rid himself of it. I didn't want to be the one who receives and then must spend the rest of his life seeking another victim to whom to give the gift, the knowing. I did not want to be the narrator."

Fuentes's ideas about narrative and its relation to the actual life process are interesting. I like to imagine, as Fuentes suggests may be the case, that we have spectral or parallel narrations that run alongside our lives as alternative possibilities. This, Branly suggests to Fuentes, is one way to elude the devil's trap, since our lives are contiguous with what-might-have-been and not necessarily prey to a single fate. A life is not simply one open-ended text.

The past grotesquely trying to assert itself over the present is one of Fuentes's favorite themes. He is eloquent and moving when he writes about victims of this voracious past in his more realistic fiction, the real living dead of "The Mandarin" and "These Were Palaces," stories to be found in his recent collection, *Burnt Water.* In his novella, *Aura*, and stories like "In a Flemish Garden," he works in the tradition of Poe as he evokes the mystery of haunted houses in Mexico City. Now, in *Distant Relations*, Fuentes seems to want to go beyond the mystery of the supernatural, to manifest his ghosts as surreal presences in the way