

~~PETER ABRAHAMS~~

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Peter Abrahams (1919-2000) was the first black South African author to choose the path of exile; he was the first to establish an international literary reputation; he was the first to accumulate a substantial body of novels in English; and his prose, fiction and non-fiction, commanded attention and respect throughout the English-speaking world in the 1940s and 1950s, especially among those interested in the historical and political development of Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Thus in relation to both African and South African literature Abrahams enjoys at least the importance of being the first. But another reason for his importance was his profound influence on the next generation of African writers, partly because he exemplified for them the existence of the black man as writer, and partly as a result of the themes he chose and the way he wrote about them. Among the founders of modern African fiction in English who have declared Abrahams a key influence on their work are Cyprian Ekwensi of Nigeria and Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya.

Abrahams was born in the Johannesburg slum suburb of Vrededorp, the son of a coloured mother and, according to his autobiography, Tell Freedom (1954), an Ethiopian nobleman who had travelled to South Africa to find work on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. Because of family poverty he began his schooling late, at the age of eleven, but in his later teens studied at two elite secondary schools for blacks, Diocesan Training College at Grace Dieu near Pietersburg, two hundred miles north of Johannesburg, and St. Peter's Rosettenville, in Johannesburg, where Es'kia Mphahlele was his contemporary and Oliver Tambo, now president of the African National Congress, received his secondary education.

Before going to Pietersburg Abrahams found work at the Bantu Men's Social Centre, a Johannesburg institute set up by American Board missionaries in the 1920s, and it was there in the mid-1930s that an encounter crucial to the development of African literature took place. As Abrahams describes it in a famous passage in his autobiography, while he was waiting to be interviewed for a job by the Centre's secretary, he heard a phonograph record of Paul Robeson singing "Old Man River":

That was a black man, one of us! I knew it. I needed no proof. The men about me, their faces, their bearing, carried all the proof. That was a black man!

The glorious voice stopped. The men went back to what they were doing. The moment that had given us a common identity was over. Robeson the man had called him. A name to remember, that. I would find out about that man.

'Some voice, heh, son,' a man said to me.

'Yessir!'

'He's an American Negro,' the man said and moved away.

~~(Tell Freedom p. 192)~~

From there Abrahams went to the ^{Centre's} library where he found Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folks and an anthology called The New Negro, in whose pages he encountered poems by Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and others.

It is currently fashionable to deprecate the role of the American Board missionaries in South Africa in the early decades of this century on the grounds that they aimed at creating and reinforcing

a more or less docile African middle class that would accept gradualist means towards political change because of its stake in the status quo. In this light it is interesting that Abrahams's crucial literary influences, encountered at the Board-inspired Bantu Men's Social Centre, all come from a radical activist position within the black movement in the United States.

Abrahams's earliest published writings were poems which appeared in the white-owned Bantu World, a newspaper catering for black readers, while he was at Grace Dieu in the late 1930s. In the relatively short time he spent at St Peter's, he is described by Mphahlele as talking about Marcus Garvey and expressing Pan-Africanist ideas. At St. Peter's he made friends with a young white couple who initiated him into Marxism, and for the next few years, until he left South Africa, he wrote short stories, sketches and poems and engaged in political activity, working in trade unions in Johannesburg with the Trotskyite Max Gordon and then moving to Cape Town, where he was for a while the protege of the Gool family, aristocrats of the coloured community who were at the same time leaders of a Trotskyite faction. After working in a school in circumstances of exceptional physical deprivation on the Cape Flats and becoming (by his own account) disenchanted with the sectarian struggles of the left in the Cape, the young Abrahams moved across country to Durban where he came under orthodox Stalinist communist influence, and after attracting the attention of the authorities, went into exile about the time of the outbreak of the second world war, by signing on as a crew member of a freighter bound for England. He arrived there in 1941, worked for a leftwing book distributor, and was for a time on the staff of the Communist Party organ, The Daily Worker.

Some of these were collected in two small booklets of poems, Here,

written before leaving South Africa.

Abrahams's youthful short stories and sketches, collected under the title Dark Testament (~~London, George Allen and Unwin,~~ (1942), express with uncontrolled emotion the feelings of loneliness and despair of the young writer and intellectual in the context of political struggle. Given his colour and the rarity of leftwing writers of fiction in South Africa in the late 1930s, it is not surprising Abrahams felt isolated. But another conflict is also already palpable: between Abrahams's simultaneous attraction to and distrust of strong ideological frameworks. This was to become a distinguishing mark of his literary career.

In this first phase of his career Abrahams was deeply involved with the specifics of urban life, which was of course a reflection both of ~~his~~^{his} own youthful experience and of one of the major preoccupations of liberal and leftwing theoreticians and ideologues. The growing black industrial proletariat and the parallel dispossession of many rural whites who also became migrant workers in industry (if they could find work) in the depression ^{ea} years of the 1930s led to an intensification of racial conflict and polarisation^z in the South African polity. The thrust of liberal thinking in the late 1930s and early 1940s^u was in the direction of pragmatic crisis containment rather than resolution, and this was accompanied by eloquent expressions of concern for the collapse of traditional agrarian African social systems. Abrahams, writing his first full-length novels from exile, remarkably and explicitly dismissed this dimension of liberal thought as irrelevant.

This, after all, is the message contained in the title of his first novel, Song of the City (~~London, Dorothy Crisp,~~ (1944). It must be said that the book's literary qualities^{es} are almost as fumbling and incompetent as its young hero, Dick's first attempts at coping with urban life. The action takes place about the time of the outbreak of

the second world war and it deals with the political crisis in the white community over whether to enter the war on the side of the Allies or to remain neutral. Dick never emerges from stereotype and some of the less important characters are more interesting, but Abrahams characteristically provides a full, schematic view of the South African political spectrum, from cautious white and black liberals whose scenario for segregation anticipates ideological apartheid though its motives are more sincere, rightwards to the pro-Nazi extremes of Afrikanerdom and left to include a socialist trade union activist. Dick works as domestic servant in the house of a white liberal professor and inevitably falls foul of the laws controlling the lives of blacks in urban areas. For him the question is: "How does one learn not to fear?" (p. 143), and this points to Abrahams' instinctive predilection for the unvarnished truth over the ideologically ² version -- a strong point in his writing sometimes compromised by deficiencies in his rhetoric. Dick learns to phrase the question while waiting in custody together with a politically sophisticated young black man who shows no fear of the white policeman; and though Abrahams grants his hero a return to the pastoral, where he convalesces from a physical illness in his home village, he also compels him to return to the city (though his conscious feelings about this are rather ill-defined). For Abrahams the urbanization of the black is inevitable and history begins from there, though at this stage he was not yet ready to spell out a doctrine of economic necessity. On the white side the book is at its most rhetorically convincing in the description of the love between the English woman, Myra, and the Afrikaner member of parliament who is her husband. Myra has to opt for separation and a return to England when her husband Van der Merwe, the minister for native affairs, votes to keep South Africa out of the second world war. The disintegration of that marriage bears an allegoric¹ burden, though for all his satiric dismissal of bourgeois liberalism and its impotent segregationist panaceas, Abrahams did not foresee the success of Afrikaner nationalism in winning

Abrahams's second novel, Mine Boy (London, Dorothy Crisp, (1946) Faber & Faber, 1954; Heinemann Educational Books, 1963, etc.) is the highest achievement of the first phase of his career as writer. With it he stakes his claim to a permanent place in South Africa's literary history, on three solid and impressive grounds. First, he presents objective urban reality from a black point of view; secondly, for the first time in the South African novel, he presents a convincing account of the state of mind of urban blacks; and thirdly, he is the first South African novelist to pose a possible solution to the continuing crisis of black experience in the industrial city.

He achieves this through a powerful and detailed challenge to a hitherto unquestioned set of conventions already existing in white South African fiction, and clustered around the structure and content of the novel of black urbanization. These conventions were generated by the comprehensive myth system projected and inhabited by white South Africans as an area of psychic refuge and ~~is~~ expressed as fully in their literature as in their everyday behaviour. Since largescale black urbanization has always threatened the psychic stability of the whites while being at the same time essential to their material comfort and self-esteem, their mythic defences have had to work overtime in this area. Thus, depiction of urban black life in literature was surrounded by rockhard conventions by 1946 in the works of Olive Schreiner, W.C. Scully, William Plomer, Sarah Gertrude Millin and others, though the most influential treatment of these conventions was yet to appear in Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country (1948).

The very rigidity of these conventions in novels by whites about black urban experience indicates the high degree of mythic energy behind them. The conventional matrix dictates: blacks flood to the towns because they

practise primitive farming methods and are incapable of learning better ones; this is causally connected to the "breakdown of the tribal system"; once in the towns the blacks are feckless, lazy, irresponsible and unable to improve their miserable material conditions; this is largely because of their innate disabilities; they are drawn to criminal activities; all this is perhaps the fault of the whites to a very limited degree, but there is really no "solution"; the best way to deal with this self-generated problem is probably to encourage as many blacks as possible to return to the countryside and try to learn better farming techniques; the worst possible approaches to the problem are to advocate making education more widely available to blacks, or to allow missionaries to influence them; black politicians are invariably both corrupt and cowardly as well as being inordinately self-seeking when they are not actually criminal.

This is the literary-historical setting of Mine Boy, which was first published in London in 1946 and was certainly the first Marxist bildungsroman in South African literature. The migrant labourer Xuma, the hero of the novel, is totally displaced from his rural origin, which is, in fact, never described (a telling silence, and quite against the stream of the white writers' insistence on portraying ~~the black rural~~ the black rural "tribal" ambience, or, for that matter, the next generation of African writers' fascination with rural roots as an aspect of pre-colonial experience).

Xuma makes himself from scratch in the city, from raw materials composed of physical strength, moral integrity, and a capacity to endure suffering. This is the second specific challenge to the

conventions of the genre, the first being the dismissal of the traditional rural background. Xuma rises almost immediately to the position of "boss boy" or gang leader to a white foreman with leftwing opinions, nicknamed the "red one", and engages in lucid dialogue with him over whether the workers' first loyalty is to ethnic group or class. He develops his ideas in this respect so that when the crisis of the novel arrives he is able to synthesize his own views, based on his experiences in the city, with those conveyed by the foreman, and to face the responsibilities of leadership (imprisonment, persecution) for a politicized urban black man.

That, says Abrahams, is the meaning of urbanization and the direction of the future: not the ignominious retreat of the black man, wounded physically and morally, from urban to rural slum, there to spin out his hungry days in the decayed framework of some vanishing "tribal system", but the emergence of the black proletariat to political consciousness, from there to struggle against the mine owners, the police and the state that back them, towards a classless society in which race will be irrelevant.

Abrahams uses character to reinforce his challenge to stereotype. In Xuma's first love, the schoolteacher Eliza, whom he meets at the shebeen kept by the imposing Leah on his first night in the city, Abrahams presents a character torn in two by her longing for a decent material existence. The neurosis bred out of the reasonable aspirations of her educated state, and the total impossibility of fulfilling the smallest part of them makes her incapable of happiness or sustaining a relationship -- incapable of loving or accepting love. Eliza's position is an allegory of the present, just as Xuma's points

... the number of blacks trapped

blacks trapped in it, Abrahams was saying, and a fundamental element in the pathology of the oppressed becomes clear. Part of Abrahams's success in challenging the conventions of the novel of urbanization lies in his avoidance of stereotyping, particularly in his secondary characters. This is true of Eliza, of Maisie the proletarian woman with whom Xuma eventually falls in love, of Daddy the ruined alcoholic, once a leader of the struggle, and of course of Leah, the wise, attractive and powerful shebeen keeper, eventually crushed by the law (the first of a long series of strong mother figures to appear in Abrahams's fiction).

But Abrahams's highest achievement in this novel is his description of Xuma's working life. Here, as in the presentation of the minor characters, the technical keynote is the easy and convincing movement between the subjective and the objective, creating the truth for the reader in the space between.

It was the strangeness of it all that terrified him. And the look in the eyes of the other men who worked with him. He had seen that look before when he was at home on the farms ... The eyes of these men were like the eyes of the sheep that did not know where to run when the dog barked.. It was this that frightened him.

Abrahams dwells first on the psychic confusion of the men in transition, the migrant workers squeezed dry in the economic forces represented by the gold mine. He then moves smoothly from a subjective impression of the workers' subjective responses to the objective conditions of physical labour.

With another he had pushed the loaded truck up the incline. The path was narrow on which they had to walk and it was difficult to balance well. ... But as fast as they moved the sand, so fast did the pile grow. A truck load would go and another would come from the bowels of the earth. And another would go and another would come. ...

And men gasped for breath and their eyes turned red and beads of sweat stood on their foreheads and the muscles in their arms hardened with pain as they fought the pile of fine wet sand.

But the sand remained the same. A truck would come from the heart of the earth. A truck would go up to build the mine-dump. Another would come. Another would go ... All day long.

The details of the physical actuality of the work are effective in themselves, and the description as such ^{is} ~~is~~ a rarity in South African literature. Abrahams' success in ~~this~~ tightly controlled description should also be seen ~~against the background of the proletarian novel~~ ~~in the general context of the proletarian novel~~, in which such passages are rare. But the achievement does not end here: he makes another smooth transition, evoking the myth of Sisyphus as he ties the objective and subjective into a unified experience) of mine labor.

And for all their sweating and hard breathing and for the redness of their eyes and the emptiness of their stare there would be nothing to show. In the morning the pile had been so big. Now it was the same. And the mine-dump did not seem to grow either.

It was this that frightened Xuma. This seeing of nothing for a man's work. This mocking of a man by

the sand that was always wet and warm; by the mine-dump that would not grow; by the hard eyes of the white man who told them to hurry up.

It made him feel desperate and anxious. (46-47).

The key, of course, is in the 'seeing of nothing for a man's work', ~~which places the passage as a~~ description of the capitalist process of production, in which the producer is cut off from the product of his labour and as a result suffers the psychic agonies of alienation. Thus in Mine Boy Abrahams locates the black urban proletariat in South Africa firmly in the universal context of class exploitation. He shows in the novel that for him, the inevitable progression was from exploitation to class struggle. ~~Thus~~ At the end of the novel Xuma is reborn, politicized and prepared for leadership, sacrifice and suffering, in the name of a revolutionary transformation to come.

In the first stage of his writing career Abrahams' concern was, by dramatizing contemporary reality, to counter the white myth structure and endow South Africa with an alternative, revolutionary teleology. This stage culminates with The Path of Thunder (New York, Harper, (1948) which challenges another particularly potent area of mythic defences -- that of love between individuals of different colours. To list even the more important novels on this theme by white authors up to this time would be supererogatory. With the startling exception of William Flomer in Turbott Wolfe (1926) the white writers are unanimously horrified (and compulsively fascinated and attracted) by the subject. Their main characters suffer the most elementally inevitable and harrowing fates, which is a necessary climactic discharge for the tension and anxiety involved for both white writers and audience.

The problem inherent in the subject matter is the unavailability of granting the black partner in a transpigmental sexual relation a degree of individuality (which the white myth structure is self-designed to prevent at all costs; in novels of urbanization it does so by a comprehensive reliance on stereotype). One result of this violation of myth is often a singularly vindictive rage directed by the writer at his black character.

Needless to say, Abrahams again challenges the myth at all points. In The Path of Thunder the central character, ~~Lanny~~ ^{Lanny} Swartz, has roots in the rural coloured proletariat, but is no longer of it. He is a young coloured intellectual, a newly-graduated schoolteacher who, out of an obstinate sense of mission, returns from the relative liberal ease of Cape Town student life, after turning down a prestigious high-school teaching post in the city, to the karroo village of Stilleveld where he was born, there to serve the impoverished coloured community that had sent him to university.

Abrahams draws an important distinction between the poverty of coloureds in urban and rural settings: in Cape Town ~~the~~ ^{the} coloureds were poor but psychologically free; in the rural areas they were completely broken. The poor people in Cape Town were poor but they were different. Inside, some of them ~~were~~ ^{were} free of their poverty. Here they were not. Here one could see it in their eyes and in the way they moved and in everything they did. Here one could hear it in their voices. It was there, inside them, and that was even worse than the poverty in which they lived. (The Path of Thunder, p.39).

He depicts the feudal relationship between the coloureds and the white landowners in rural areas of the Cape, and suggests that the complete dependence and powerlessness of coloureds in relation to whites is reflected in a totally exploitative pattern of sexual relations. Thus Lanny learns that he is half-brother to the violently racist lord of the local manor, Gert Villier. He also falls in love with Gert's ward Sarie and the feeling is reciprocated, and ^{he} makes friends with two other intellectuals, Isaac, the son of the local Jewish storekeeper, and Mako, a young black teacher who runs the school

in the local black 'location'. Abrahams uses their friendship to contrive an airing of political issues some of which must have been painful for the author himself (they surface also in Return to Goli, the autobiographical account of a return to South Africa published in 1953). These concern the role of the coloured group in the struggle for racial equality. Abrahams's critique of the coloured elite is directed against their political conservatism, their subservience to whites and their pathetic expectation of reward for this subservience by white authority's granting them a slightly higher place in the hierarchy of colour than the blacks.

In The Path of Thunder Abrahams develops an emphasis on the centrality of the individual--a theme by no means new in his writing but hitherto contained within the conceptual framework of Marxist political activism. Thus the discursive interludes in this novel all tend to support the burden of the love story, and the conclusive resolution of the conflicts within the South African polity is presented in terms of the ability of individuals to transcend the limitations inherent in their situation through their relations with others. ~~Lanny and Sarie encounter one another~~ in Isaac's father's shop, after Lanny has successfully avoided encountering her for some time.

The old Jew behind the counter faded. Isaac, polishing his thick glasses, ...faded. Mad Sam, just behind Sarie, seeing and understanding everything, faded. And they were alone.

Man and woman alone. Looking at each other across everything. And everything faded because only they were important. Only they mattered. Not the people around them. Not the store with its buzzing fan to keep away the flies; not the sharp eyes of the people watching them. Only they mattered. Nothing else. Not colour or creed or race or class. Only man and woman. Speaking in the language they spoke centuries ago, before sound was controlled and reduced to an exact and understandable medium, the language of the eyes.

(p.143, 1st English edition)

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This is the first unambiguous evidence of a pronounced ideological shift, which has driven some critics of Abrahams' work to a pitch of irrationality only too characteristic of the highly politicized arena of contemporary Southern African studies. This is exemplified by the way critics concerned to attack what they call "liberalism" for failing to bring about change in South Africa simply ignore or dismiss the implications of the ending of this novel. ~~Vernie February, for example, writes: "The reader is treated to a blaze of guns and false heroism",~~ (Mind Your Colour, London, Kegan Paul International, 1981, p.149) and chooses to quote Abrahams' ironic postscript--a distorted newspaper report embodying the white myth structure--instead of the genuine climax. The ~~late~~ ^{late} Kolawole Cgungbesan writes: "Such a denouement confirms Abrahams' moral earnestness, and further weakens The Path of Thunder as a work of art: it is not the duty of the artist, but that of the propagandist, to suggest solutions to social problems," (The Writing of Peter Abrahams, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1979, p.60).

In fact the climax of The Path of Thunder is historically and iconographically extremely important. In it Lanny and Sarie, their planned escape across the borders of South Africa blocked, take up arms and shoot it out with the white racists who have trapped them. Outnumbered and cut off from flight, they are killed, but not before three of their attackers perish.

For the first time in black South African writing a black man in a contemporary setting takes possession of the white man's symbol of technological and political supremacy, and turns it on the whites themselves. Lanny Swartz and Sarie Villier demonstrate that there is more than one path of thunder. The figure of Lanny firing his rifle at his white attackers is the first icon of the South African revolution.

Despite the shift towards liberalism, Abrahams does not abandon the analysis of poverty and oppression he uses in the first two novels of his triptych on contemporary South Africa. Its feudal roots

in the rural setting are clearly presented, and the economic basis of institutionalized racism is both explicit and implicit in the text. Abrahams has added a dimension, in which he describes the actions of individuals determined to be free of their historic constraints. And in the end it is Lanny who quotes Shelley on individual freedom and not the avowed black nationalist, Mako, who takes up arms against the racist state.

Of course, the South African miscegenation novel by whites posits a tragic end, though usually without nobility and often consisting of a degeneration into poverty and bitterness. Abrahams' challenge to this convention precludes easy options: his central figures, though they plan to escape South Africa, fail to do so, and die heroically, fighting for their freedom.

Abrahams' next novel, Wild Conquest (New York, ~~Harper~~, (1950) again takes an established theme in the white novel and challenges its conventions. The Great Trek, the migration of large numbers of Cape Dutch families northward from 1834, shortly after the British abolished slavery at the Cape, intensified already existing conflicts over land possession between blacks and whites and led to the eventual spread of white political hegemony throughout Southern Africa south of the Limpopo, except for three small territorial pockets whose black rulers sought protection from the British crown against the land-hungry and technologically better-equipped forerunners of Afrikaner nationalism. The Trek generated a vast literature, a fair proportion of it in English, mostly doctrinal Romantic statements of the heroism of the white trekkers, their taming of the wilderness and their victories over savages, who are usually depicted as cunning and bloodthirsty, with the occasional exception who is almost always a faithful family retainer who saves the life of a Trekker woman at the cost of his own.

Wild Conquest initiates the middle phase of Abrahams' fiction, a phase marked by the emergence of a typically liberal mixture of

passion and scepticism and a thorough rejection of formulated ideology as a guide or framework. Perhaps because of this his challenge to the conventions of white Great Trek literature is half-hearted, and in the end the novel is a failure both as historical treatment and as demythologizing agent. It differs from the white norm in presenting another mass migration--that of the Matabele, an ethnic Zulu group who rebelled against ~~Shaka~~^{Shaka}--as having equal historic importance to that of the Trekkers. The dramatization of black life is heavily indebted to Sol T. Flaatzje's historic romance, Khudi, written about 1919, published in 1930, and largely forgotten when Abrahams consulted it. Abrahams presents his black characters in stereotyped form, often coming close to adopting white conventions on matters such as the influence of witchcraft in black society, the brutality of the Matabele armies, and the failure to produce any but the most superficial account of the causes of black migration. In Wild Conquest his teleology is deeply pessimistic, with the potential standard bearers of liberal values, both black and white, dying on the battlefield in the fateful encounter between Boer and Matabele. Abrahams's problem in Wild Conquest is that while he recognizes^z the existence of two opposed cultures in the historic arena, he fails to find an appropriate idiom for the blacks. Though he proposes a joint rhetoric of liberalism for the enlightened characters of both camps, the effect is merely stilted and wooden. The only discourse that is rhetorically effective in the novel is that of the racist whites--a tragic indication, perhaps, of the degree to which Abrahams, growing up coloured in a Johannesburg slum, internalised^z the vocabulary of the racism directed against himself.

Abrahams's liberal voice gains confidence and resonance in the next two books of his middle period, the autobiographical works Return to Goli (~~London, Faber,~~^e (1953) and Tell Freedom (~~London, Faber,~~^e (1954)). These two works merit brief discussion because they state most clearly and vigorously Abrahams's ideological position in the middle

(a book which describes a visit to South Africa sponsored by the liberal London Sunday paper, The Observer) Abrahams describes his disillusion with communism and his break, in the 1940s, with its British institutionalized version. He then expresses in anecdote form how living in Britain helped him free himself from the victim pathology of racism, and goes on to quote Shelley and Forster in support of his new personal creed of liberalism. In this he is not much different from the host of writers and other artists who supported communism in the 1930s and 1940s as the best means to fight fascism and recanted out of disillusion with the Stalinist tyranny. Though there are specific elements distinguishing Abrahams' case--his South African origin, his blackness, the fact that he was an objective victim of racism--the most interesting aspect of his intellectual progression is its closeness to the norm described above.

Return to Goli and the autobiography Tell Freedom possess a stylistic vigor and directness that his novels lack. In these two works Abrahams succeeds in letting events and people speak for themselves. The result is that their ideological texture is felt by the reader as a living web of ideas rather than the heavy hand that tends to deaden the narrative in his novels. (This stricture applies to both his Marxist and his liberal writing.) They are also characterized by a considerable sense of humor, sadly totally absent from his fiction. Like Mine Boy, Tell Freedom and Return to Goli occupy positions of major importance in the development of South African literature.

The next three novels of Abrahams' middle or liberal phase are expressions of tragic disillusion. The first, A Wreath for Udomo (1956), deals prophetically with the problems of a newly independent black state in Africa. Ghana (still the Gold Coast) was to attain its independence of Britain in the following year, the first African territory in the Commonwealth to do so; Abrahams had lodged with Francis Kwame Nkrumah in London in the 1940s, and had been party to the organization of the Pan-Africanist Congress in Manchester in 1946.

In A Breath for Udomo Abrahams anticipates the crushing implications of neo-colonialism for newly independent states. He also predicts the downfall of the modernising leadership which took power with independence. His central character, Michael Udomo, leads his country ~~to~~^{to} independence only to fall victim to forces of ultra-nationalism combined with obscurantism. What the author sees as the intolerably restrictive forces of traditional tribal life triumph over the virtues of Western liberal individualism, expressed in Udomo's modernising zeal. In Udomo Abrahams is ~~oppressed~~^{oppressed} by betrayal. The plot moves from immediate post-war London, cold and bleak in Hampstead's bedsitterland where foreign students and political exiles congregate, to the steaming African state of Panafrika (modelled on Ghana), with a brief excursus to the shore of the southern Mediterranean. Michael Udomo is a powerful, charismatic, single-minded figure who betrays his English mistress by getting her flatmate pregnant. The price of foreign expertise needed to accelerate Panafrika's modernisation is the betrayal of his friend and comrade in arms, Mhendi, who seeks to lead a revolution against white rule in his country, the neighbouring Pluralia. In the end Udomo himself is betrayed by two close associates, the doctor Adebhoy and the sinister market woman, Selina, who control the political party Udomo founded. They accuse him of selling out to the white man, ~~and~~
and thereby betraying his own people.
~~Adebhoy's indictment is prophetic.~~

~~Sure we're the ministers. The Cabinet's ours. We sign the laws. But white men run all the big industrialisation and construction projects. They control us with their money, and you know it. That's why you have to shut your eyes to their clubs for whites only. Everywhere in the land, in factories, on building and construction projects, where roads are being made, whites give the orders and blacks do the work....~~

~~...And how much money goes out of the country in dividends for whites? You never talk about that, home-boy; not even to your colleagues in the Cabinet. Why?~~
(p.292-300)

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① It sounds ideologically impeccable, and certainly prophetic. But
their accusation
Abrahams links it with a conception of backwardness, superstition
and obscurantism wrapped up in the word "tribalism" that is as
stereotyped in its Manichaean ugliness as the Matabele bonethrowing
episode in Wild Conquest.

This is how Udomo defends himself:

...our country has three enemies. First, there is the white man. Then there is poverty, and then there is the past.... There are schools and hospitals in the land. The young men and women are waking up. Why do you think I spent so much money sending them abroad? I'll tell you. Because I need them as allies to fight our third enemy, the worst enemy we have: the past. I've paid lip-service to the ritual of ju-ju and blood ceremonies and worshipping at the shrines of our ancestors. Now I don't have to any more. There are enough liberated young people now for me to defy all that is ugly and evil in our past...
(p.301-302)

→ Udomo is ritually murdered by his houseguards who revert to savagery at the prompting of talking drums that beat out the refrain "Udomo traitor Udomo die". This is, of course, orchestrated by the tribalists in his party. But Abrahams makes his hero, too, succumb to the hypnotic beat of the drums; his will is paralysed and he cannot resist his assassins.

In the pain of death Udomo feels additional agony over his betrayal of Lois, the English mistress, who stands for the whole structure of liberal values. His betrayal of her is worse, for him, than his selling his comrade Mendi into the hands of the whites. In Udomo Abrahams presents a picture of African reality that is profoundly pessimistic--but it is judged in only one light, that of Western liberalism.

In 1957 the British Colonial Office commissioned Abrahams, who had established his reputation as a travel writer, to write a popular history of Jamaica. This was published in 1957, and two years later Abrahams and his family moved to Jamaica, where they still live. His two novels of the 1960s push the liberal pessimism of A Breath for Udomo still further.

A Night of Their Own (London, ²⁰Faber) (1965) returns to South Africa after the Rivonia trial, and describes a love affair between a black artist (of liberal convictions, living in London) who has been smuggled into the country with funds for the underground resistance, and an Indian woman, a political activist, whose task is to conceal him from the secret police until he can be spirited abroad. This Island Now (London)

Faber (1966) relates how a Udomo-like figure becomes ruler of a Caribbean state and tries to modernize it against a whole ^{spectrum} range of vested interests, ranging (again) from the Western imperialist powers, through the local rich mercantile caste to the backward and intensely conservative peasantry. On the way he is forced to violate most of the liberal shibboleths and ends up isolated, a lonely autocrat and candidate for political assassination. In neither book is much action described: each has its liberal hero and both heroes are weighed down by the moral problem of assessing the motives and likely consequences of political action. There is little progression of thought in the novels, despite Abrahams' deep and genuine commitment to the black struggle in South Africa and his obvious knowledgeability and affection for the Caribbean. The reader has the feeling that the author had reached an acute ideological dilemma and did not know how to resolve it. Abrahams seems to have been confronted--and stopped in his tracks--by the hard fact that the liberal individualism that served him well as moral framework in the arena of ideological conflict demarcated by East and West had no answer to the situations that mattered most to him. The problem of where to turn next was to preoccupy him for nineteen years, before he published another novel.

At the end of This Island Now the island's presidential secretary, once devoted to the mission of transferring political and economic power from the expatriate elite to the humble black people of the island, waits with a high-velocity rifle for President Albert Josiah to drive past him on a lonely road in the hills. The secretary, Andy Simpson, young, black, brilliant and appointed because of his

support for Josiah's goals, has suffered a cumulative means and ends crisis, characteristic of liberals who involve themselves in action towards massive social and political change. Of course, again characteristically of the liberal sensibility when faced with the problem of action, he fails to pull the trigger.

In 1985 Abrahams produced a slightly revised version of This Island Now, with an additional half chapter which enforces the extraordinary pessimism of the ending. But he also surprised the African literary world in the same year with a new novel--~~his~~^{his} first for 19 years. The surprise began with the novel's unexpected appearance. The scope was far greater than any of Abrahams's previous, rather over-focussed plots, and the content astonishing in that it marked a return to ideology combined with an entirely new synthesis in his work.

The novel traces the story of a family created by two runaway slaves in the late 1820s through to Uganda during and after the tyranny of Idi Amin. In a complex, multilayered design Abrahams revives issues and ideological positions which had all but disappeared from his writing in its most recent phase, reassesses them in the light of history, and integrates them into the pattern of his design. The View from Coyaba is a novel of reconciliation, creating an existential harmony between conflicting elements of Abrahams's early and later life and thought. The central character, Jacob Brown, is the grandchild of the original couple of runaway slaves (who had successfully created a cooperative settlement in the Jamaican hills, based on a biblical Christianity and^acentred^e around an impressive church structure, which, of course, the white-run Anglican establishment would later burn down in order to enforce the community's integration within its ²pecumene). He is sent to^a university in Georgia in the early years of this century, where he sits at the feet of W.E.B. Du Bois, falls in love with another student, the daughter of an Alabama^g sharecropper who will marry him only if he commits himself for life to the black struggle

in the Deep South. They part and Jacob, after completing his studies and being ordained, goes to Liberia as a missionary of a black independent church. There he is appointed bishop, and later he marries and is sent to Uganda, where he builds up a flourishing mission based on cooperative and self-help ideas. This period is presented as a lacuna, and the reader meets Brown for the first time after his departure from Liberia at his wife's funeral in Uganda following many years of work there. But Jacob Brown is estranged from his son David, a doctor who has rejected Christianity for radical Pan-Africanism and socialism and is involved in preparations for the Algerian uprising against French colonial rule. David returns to Uganda a day late for his mother's funeral (piloting a small aircraft solo from Algeria: the icon of the black man mastering technology, confidently at the controls of the machine, is a significant one for Abrahams, though its force may escape the general reader); the second half of the novel describes the growth of their reconciliation to ideological and filial fulfillment, through the time of the decolonization of black Africa, the persecution of the church by the Amin tyranny, a retreat to ancestral roots in Jamaica, and a planned return, as Jacob Brown nears the end of his life, to the place of ultimate origins, Africa. By the end of the novel the reconciliation between father and son is so perfect that David Brown (now married to an Ugandan woman) decides to become a medical missionary.

Throughout his writing life Abrahams has struggled with the implications of black disadvantage, political, economic and social, wherever it has occurred. The explanations offered by different ideological systems have afforded partial satisfaction at times, and he records in Tell Freedom his sense of clarity and relief when in late adolescence he first encountered a Marxist economic analysis of the racial tyranny he suffered under in South Africa. Later, when he divested his thinking of Marxist scaffolding he was forced back into despair, which sometimes broke disturbingly through the surface of his rhetoric. (Perhaps the

best example is a sentence describing the artist Abi at one of the crises of the plot in A Death for Udomo: "And all the guilt of Africa was in his voice.") Abrahams' passion is apparent when he first addresses the problem in Coyaba, *by having a runaway slave condemn the white master's*

practice of employing slaves to whip other slaves. Here

Why did they not use their own people to do the whipping? I ask you, why black people to whip black people? Why slave to whip slave? Why not white drivers to whip black slaves? It is that I will never forget! They use a black man to put these marks on my body; and so they made me, a black man, kill a black man to remove the bitterness of the shame.... They do this thing and they take away our manhood; and because they use us whatever we do to those of us whom they use destroys our manhood further. It is like an animal caught in a trap: the more he tries to break free, the tighter the trap holds him and the more he hurts himself.... it is our minds and our spirits they have caught in that trap. They have set a trap for our minds in order to destroy our manhood.... It took me a long time to see it. But now that I see it I cannot see a way out. I cannot see an answer. Will we ever be free of that, brother Bagley, will we ever be free?

(p. 80)

~~The speaker is a runaway slave; his interlocutor, the former slave who brings him the news of abolition. In this attack on the question~~
Abrahams, perhaps for the first time in his career, succeeds in creating an effective metaphoric analogue for the variety of shapes and forms of black disadvantage and dispossession. There will always be those who are prepared to sell their identity in exchange for power to the real exploiters. The black slave who whips his fellows stands for members of black elites who sell their countries into economic and political thralldom or carry out the policies of their neo-colonial masters. And the effects on the black soul, Abrahams suggests, are severely demoralizing. Though the question has now been clarified, no answer is yet available.

The conflict between father and son is finally resolved at the ancestral home in Jamaica, ^{where David and Jacob debate the appropriate} ~~David says:~~

The relationship between the lighter and darker races of mankind of which [Du Bois] wrote has been so unnatural, so ugly, so ~~destructive~~ of one side

destructive

response of blacks to white racism and oppression and affirm finally

as to have become diseased. For the best part of this century you have all worked and hoped for the disease to go away and for the relationship to grow healthy and clean... Your church fought nobly for autonomy on the assumption that once your capacity for self-rule was beyond doubt other good Christians would abide by the reality that your Christ is of all colours, for all men...

Jacob had to cut in to ask: "Do you believe in that Christ of all colours, for all men?"

And David had thought for a while then answered: "Which one? The one who orders submission and obedience in the face of cruelty and injustice?"

The one whose agents are part of the machinery of colonial power and domination? Which one, Dad?

The Christian churches have so confused his image."

And Jacob had said: "Try the greatest revolutionary who ever lived; try the Christ who taught love and kindness and compassion."

who taught love and kindness and compassion." (p. 339)

This is the existential answer the mature Abrahams, surely near the end of his career as novelist, offers to the questions he has examined so relentlessly and with such integrity in his fiction since that career began. David and his wife Emma, widow of the black bishop martyred by Amin, will return to Africa to build the new church militant, dedicated to fighting (with firearms if need be) for a new synthesis, beginning with a black withdrawal from the embraces of both West and East. ~~David's wife, once the victim of cruel rape by a white man, says:~~

"...The pain of it, David. Think of it: generations of black people trying to escape to be themselves. It's awful and depressing. And now, a hundred years and more later, we must do the same thing. How can I not be sad?"

"It may be the last withdrawal, my dear. If we succeed we may free ourselves in time to point to a new way of seeing our world, a new way of living with each other and understanding each other; we may all learn to co-operate instead of compete; to share instead of grab. But it will not come by itself or through pious words and hopes: there have to be the hard times first, the hard decisions and the hard actions necessary to save ourselves. You have to save yourself first before you can hope to save anybody else. A healed people, a whole people, freed of the bitter historical scars, may have something rich to offer the world."

"Pray God you're right, David."

"Dad's manuscript says I am. Please don't be sad."

(pp. 339-340)

Thus the ~~final page of~~ the book closes the circle of reconcilia-
tion between father and son, as David accepts the distilled wisdom
of Jacob's life as Christian pastor and missionary. It also sets
the seal on David's own Christian commitment and the remarkable
change that this seems to signal in the author's own beliefs. David's
final act in the book is to take his wife's African maiden name as
his surname, so the dual commitment is altogether specific:

"Doctor David Batari of Uganda." (~~1. 44~~)

The issue of what was later called black consciousness begins
early in Abrahams's work and is debated thoroughly in Line Boy, his
first major novel, in 1946. There it is considered sympathetically
but rejected in favour of a universalist Marxist ethic, and from
then until 1967, up to and including the publication of the first
version of This Island Now, as his political thought changed and de-
veloped, it remained vigorously universalist in orientation. The
changes in The View from Coyaba may be more apparent than real: by
yoking his "withdrawal" into a version of black consciousness with
the universalist ethic of Christianity, Abrahams keeps the flag of
consistency flying. The contradictions must be embraced: the black
world has failed so far to exploit the historic opportunity of de-
colonization and emerge from white domination, but the struggle must
continue. It will succeed, but it must be based on the universalist
ethic of Christianity; otherwise it faces the danger of becoming
just another racism. Abrahams's final statement in The View from
Coyaba is thus not very different from the ardent utopianism of
his earliest writing or even the liberal skepticism of his middle
period: mankind may have to become free in segments, but there is
no freedom without recognition and acceptance of the unity of
human kind.

1919, 1921 (Durban: n.p., n.d.),

A Blackman Speaks of Freedom (Durban: Universal Printing Works, [1941]);

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Song of the City (London: Dorothy Crisp & Co., 1945);

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The Path of Thunder (New York: Harper, 1948; London: Faber & Faber, 1952);

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Add to entry on PETER ABRAHAMMS:

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