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by Peter Abrahams

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THE LONG EYE OF HISTORY: FOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
TEXTS BY PETER ABRAHAMS

Stephen Gray

Paper delivered at the History Workshop, Wits,
February, 1990

Peter Abrahams described his life and mine in Tell Freedom.
Richard Rivel¹

... the analysis of South African literature must begin
to go deeper than repugnance to social conditions only,
and probe the basis of the varying reactions of black
literature to racism and suppression. Kelwyn Sole²

The starting point here is Sole's exemplary paper of the
History Workshop twelve years ago, especially in its aspects
dealing with the interpretation of black autobiographical
writing in South Africa (1948-60). There Sole argues that
"What the text is silent on needs to be considered as well,
as a text is always incomplete in an analytical sense and
full of conflicted and contradictory meanings" (p. 144),
and he concludes: "because literature is essentially an
individual's translation and transformation of the 'lived
relation between men and their world', literature is in
any final sense not reducible because each individual
'remakes' his lived relation in his or her work. As a
result, literature may be both ideology and challenge the
ideological structures of its time" (p. 165).

Further, Sole says of the generation of black writers
to which Peter Abrahams belongs: "African writers are in
the unique position of trying to translate European literary
forms to express different concerns, as written literature
was propagated by colonial conquest and Western-style
education... and are forced to rediscover their own past
and remould their view of it to fit [their] present
conditions" (p. 145). Sole then classes Abrahams with Es'kia
Mphahlele (both born in 1919) as part of what by the 1940s
had become a 'repressed elite': "Nowhere is the force of
their aspiration better shown than in the autobiographies
of [these] two young writers who grew up in the 1930s and
were to become extremely influential later on.... " He also
remarks: "A large amount of black literature of the fifties
seems in retrospect to be aimed at the black intelligensia
and white liberals, and intended to arouse white conscious-
ness to the plight of those racially dominated" (p. 160).

Abrahams' publishing career, which began considerably
earlier than Mphahlele's, has attracted a large amount of
rather routine coverage, and his place as a pioneer is secure
in the pantheon of African English literature, but little
commentary on his work has been as acutely contextualised
as Sole's. When last year, together with Mphahlele, he
celebrated his seventieth birthday, unlike in the latter
case, only two occasional pieces appeared (by Cecil
Abrahams and Michael Wade, both in The Southern African
Review of Books, Issue 9). These are in the nature of

impressive and affectionate tributes - yet fresh responses to his work itself in terms of new critical approaches are lacking, and the corpus of secondary work on Abrahams looks increasingly dated and even obsolete. What follows is intended to show the usefulness of a rediscovery of Abrahams at this time. Although his work is now at last all freely available in South Africa, evidently he is not felt to be in vogue any longer. Partly this is because his new work, unlike Mphahlele's, is not obviously and directly South African. The republication of his The Path of Thunder (1948) in Africasouth Paperbacks in 1984 went without comment; his new novel, The View from Coyaba (1985) - a summation of his creative career - probably because of the indirectness of its allegorical technique, excited little, if any, debate. Compared with Mphahlele's, Abrahams' life and work seems to have 'gone dead' on us, like that of so many others propelled into exile and second citizenships (in Abrahams' case, third citizenship in Jamaica). Without the personal memorials of scholars like C. Abrahams and Wade, Abrahams' status would have vanished. The fact that Abrahams has not returned to South Africa since 1952 seems to have ruptured the scholarly memory, as we know only too well the infrastructure that keeps authors alive - reviews, discussions, lecturing, research, the press and journals - tends only to assert the value of contingencies and current needs. In short, Abrahams of the 40s and 50s, the founder of dark testimony in South African literature and the country's first professional black writer, is no longer meaningful to us. But Abrahams' work is not only seminal for the variety and sustained standard of his output, but inescapable for its influence - he was the first South African modern to demonstrate the possibilities and potential of black literature in a postcolonial world.

But how to recover him usefully? - that is the issue which is more complex. Though the reading of South African works without a historical sense has become a prevalent national pastime these days, Abrahams work is of course neither timeless nor universally valid. Sole's historical markers, we now know, are the vital context within which to achieve any understanding of the text at all. Since his return to South Africa Mphahlele himself has recontextualised almost everything he ever wrote in order for it to be accessible to his younger compatriots. But Abrahams remains as was. So it is incumbent on us to reposition him now, according to our new tastes and needs, or he will be lost in some historiography that never gets written, let alone received as common wisdom, relegated by casual default to some footnote in the great text of our featureless present. What Abrahams himself calls "the long eye of history"³ is the only means to finding contours.

Autobiographical works about the rise and entrenchment of apartheid in South Africa are notoriously unread in general, because autobiography itself as a literary category remains highly problematic; for our current tastes it is the form of only too sell-out bourgeois individualism. Writing in 1972, by which time apartheid proscriptions had effectively extinguished the 50s and 60s wave of works and the class that produced them, silencing through bannings a most vociferous and frank genre, James Olney could describe the work of that lost generation as follows:

Autobiography, as a number of observers have remarked, has been, over the past twenty years, the finest literature to come from creative writers of South Africa.

For various reasons - social, political, and psychological - South African writers of our time have found autobiography to be the form best adapted to expressing, recreating, or reacting to their experience. In what is no doubt a corollary to this pre-eminence of autobiography as a literary form in South Africa, 'African' and 'Coloured' writers from that nation have produced a body of autobiographical writing that is the most vital, the most intense and energetic that we have from any part of Africa.⁴

This statement introduces several works, all 'classics' of the genre, the main ones of which are by writers (rather than public figures) and constitute a corporate literary autobiography of the period: Peter Abrahams' Tell Freedom (1954), Ezekiel Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue (1959), Alfred Hutchinson's Road to Ghana (1960), Todd Matshikiza's Chocolates for my Wife (1961), Noni Jabavu's Drawn in Colour (1960) and its sequel, The Ochre People (1963), and Bloke Modisane's Blame Me on History (1963). To this list of full-length works by writers should be added some of the essays in Lewis Nkosi's Home and Exile (first collected in 1965), and some autobiographical pieces by Can Themba and Nat Nakasa (first collected only in 1972 and 1975 respectively).

Although Olney's scheme was necessarily incomplete at that time and he chose to mix in the autobiographies of public with literary figures - for example, Albert Luthuli's Let my People Go (1960) and Clement Kadalie's My Life and the ICU (1970) - his major observation still holds, that all these South African works follow "a single blueprint for writing autobiography, these men all describe variations on a single plan; no doubt this is so because something very like a blueprint was imposed on their lives in South Africa" (p. 249). On the evidence of the texts themselves he shows the configuration of this blueprint to be "the laws of exclusion - in education, in commerce, in residency, in sports, in cultural affairs, in land tenure, in voting rights, in the most trivial and ordinary details of daily existence..." (pp. 256-7); indeed, the effects of these various laws of exclusion are chronicled repeatedly as they enclose the mobility in every respect of each protagonist in turn. All give abundant testimony of the working of the law. Olney correctly concludes: "The classic pattern of South African autobiography describes a progressive alienation that, forced to the extreme, becomes spiritual and physical exile" (p. 250).

But, having said all that, we should not infer, as often is done, that the works mechanically replicate one another - that the blueprint is like a habitual litany, repeated in anthem fashion. While the record-keeping of 50s events is exemplary, the group as a whole exhibits a bewildering variety of style. The same old story may be told, but in as many different ways as imaginably conceivable. Each work is uniquely individual, quirky and eccentric, indelibly printed with the style of the particular personality writing. This is one of the most heterogeneous generations in South African literature. Besides, reducing them to their common tale would be missing the point of the whole movement - its alert responsiveness to the possibilities of difference, the individual freedom to take preferred directions. Stylistic variety to them is affirmative of the spirit itself not being crushed; the inventiveness of a generation is what they had

in common. One work reacts off its predecessor, takes fire from another; they are simply irrepressible. (Today, by contrast, conformity is the virtue, stylistic norms enforced.)

Why was autobiography chosen by that school of black writers, when contemporary white writers (Paton, Gordimer, Lessing, Jacobson) were writing fiction? The answer cannot simply be that whites were more habituated to Western literary priorities while blacks, suspecting the artifice of fiction, chose autobiography for its factual nature, the truthfulness which could not be wished away. This is to suppose that autobiography is somehow less 'artful' (some would say 'contrived') than fiction, which it is not, and thus more veracious than deceitful, though in fact all the autobiographical works in hand are organised with every bit as much skill as any fiction, and the 'I' persona of them as constructed as any fictional narrator.

Possibly the decision at the time was not formal at all. The success of the forerunners, Abrahams' Tell Freedom and Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue in the 1950s, meant their successors in the 60s could move unproblematically into that literary area. Certainly what became expected in publishing and in the press was that an escaping South African arriving in London or New York would write more of the same. Besides, the British and American publishing industry is white; from black authors it requires explanation, not competition. For this reason from the two most relevant American black writers it had induced the two autobiographies which set the trend, Langston Hughes's The Big Sea (1940) and Richard Wright's Black Boy (1945). No black South African author could fail to feel the pull of kinship in those trendsetters, which themselves come from a tradition stretching back to Equiano. As our writers frequently acknowledge, those are the models for what was to follow.

I am suggesting that black South African autobiographies should not be read literally, merely for the record - although that is not a bad starting position; they should rather be read second-time round for something more apposite, evidence of the much-vaunted 'African personality' of the day. No reading can then be fixed, sociologically finalised; we are looking at texts that compel a humanistic response - that is, empathy, agreement, consent. In later works the emotional responses called for from the reader are extended: in Matshikiza outrage and despair, in Modisane repugnance and disgust, even loathing and rejection, as the tone of the school moves from explanatory and coercive to anger and confrontation. Form breaks down rapidly too, from Abrahams' classic formative model, through Mphahlele's repetitious entrapment to Matshikiza's reversed progress and Modisane's shattered, existential hell. A formal shift which occurs in European literature from modernism to postmodernism over half a century is compressed into an intense nine years (1954-63). Each and every departure in this movement needs to be plotted with care.

The fundamental first step in this process of clarification needs to be taken: it is to demonstrate how black autobiography in South Africa came to be devised as a workable and persuasive writer's procedure. Abrahams is indeed the key figure here. A study of the genesis of his Tell Freedom will establish the necessary preliminaries. The slow manifestation and development of the autobiographical impulse in Abrahams is particularly clearly marked, as it happens, in four stages.

Abrahams' first published attempt at autobiography is a sketch placed as the preface to his first book, a collection of sketches and short stories about his life mainly in Vrededorp, written over and covering the period 1930-38. The title of the book is Dark Testament, the sketch "I Remember...":

"Stand up, Peter Abrahams."

I stood up.

"Now tell the class what you want to be."

The class had been discussing what each student wanted to be when he grew up. A few boys had wanted to be doctors. A few girls, nurses. Some had wanted to be engine-drivers. Some professors. One had wanted to get his B. A. and become a store-keeper. Every one had voiced some ambition.

I felt frightened. I was extremely self-conscious. I had reason to be. I wanted to be something that was reserved for Europeans only. I knew of non-European doctors and nurses, and even lawyers and professors. I had heard of Professor Jabavu, a Native professor. But I had never heard of any non-European being what I wanted to be.

"I want to be a writer."

I waited for the effect. There was none. The teacher just sat smiling at me. A strange, half-amused smile that made her look beautiful to me. She was good to look at even when she was not smiling. A light-coloured girl, who could pass for white in a dim light.

"Why do you want to be a writer?"

My khaki shirt was torn in many places. It was very dirty. My body was not much cleaner. My khaki shorts had a great hole in the seat. Two girls behind me kept giggling at the visible parts of my bottom. My feet were cracked and bleeding. It was winter. There was a bump on my head from a recent fight.

"I want to be a writer so that I can write stories about everything. You know, like the stories in books. That will make me famous, and I'll have cakes and ginger beer for breakfast, and fish and chips for lunch, and a whole fowl at night. Then I'll be able to eat three times every day, and have shoes and a motor car, and live like the rich white people do. And then I want to wear a collar and tie. That's why I want to write stories."

For some time after she had told me to sit down the teacher laughed at me. Mostly with her eyes.

I remember that afternoon particularly well, because I fainted shortly afterwards. It was very difficult to revive me. When I came to I had to admit that I'd only had a slice of bread in two days. They gave me food, but that only made me ill, so I was sent to the General Hospital. I stayed there for a few weeks. They said I was suffering from starvation. Then they let me out to starve again....

In kernel form that passage contains most of the thematic elements later seen to be operative on the individual life: member of a class with an overwhelming ambition for social betterment; commitment to education as a means; the teacher herself who could 'pass' as the embodiment of the highest a Coloured could go; the attrition of poverty in the slum condition during the Great Depression (torn garments, cracked feet), the harshness of winter and the marks of

physical violence in contrast to the fantasy signs of wealth (menus, motor cars); the assertive belief in the achieving self, held against mockery, even against the prohibitions of Smuts's colour-bar society, that a 'non-European' could become 'European'; the guiding principle that 'stories' in 'books' may contain all of life - the act of testimony rewarded with bounty and status in a festive atmosphere; the freedom to create as against the only freedom available to him there and then - freedom to die.

Those points in summary are also most of the essential elements of Tell Freedom itself, yet it comes as something of a horrible surprise - especially after he has said "I remember that afternoon particularly well" - that that cardinal scene is omitted from the later work. There we find no schoolroom declaration of intent, no emergency rush to the General Hospital... so already Abrahams' version of himself is not meant to be read as documentary fact, but rather as symbolic construction.

Abrahams' second autobiographical piece comes after the publication of his reasonably successful fourth novel, Wild Conquest, but only when there is an occasion for it - the advent of African Drum in 1951. The first issue contains this "Letter to my Mother: Author of Wild Conquest Explains his Motives" (p. 24). On 17 August The Forum picks up the piece, headed "Testimony of Peter Abrahams" (p. 4), handling it as a news item attached to an interview with Abrahams' mother. The letter reads in part as follows:

You know, my dears, that I swore a very long time ago, when I was no more than a boy, that I wanted to prove to the world that any person, Coloured or Black, was as good as anybody else in the world.

I thought that was more important than becoming rich and making money. I thought I would serve my people by doing so: I wanted to do something that would make my people feel proud and raise their heads when the whites of our country told them they were inferior.

And I wanted to show the rest of the world what a non-European could do if they gave him half a fair chance.

I have kept that promise I made a long time ago. My books are read in nearly all the countries of the world. And nearly all the countries of the world are against the colour-bar of South Africa.

And whenever any white South African comes to Europe and tells the people that the non-Europeans of South Africa are lazy and drunkards and thieves, the people here say: "Well, what about Peter Abrahams?" And then the white South African has nothing more to say... And now it will be easier for another boy or girl who comes after me to become respected in the world as a writer... The first time is always the hardest....

In the context of Drum this type of declaration was to become standard in the 'Masterpiece in Bronze' column - the biographical record of black achievers held up as exemplars, living proof that against all the odds lazy drunkards and thieves could produce white-beating excellence and international acclaim. The heroic hyperbole is par for the course, as are the immodest, sweeping claims, for this is the emphatic gesture of victory.

Although the liberal Forum endorses this stance, in their

context its confidence is drastically undercut with a quote from his mother: "He always was ambitious. In some ways he was a strange boy. He would make impulsive and unexpected decisions. We did not always understand what he was doing." This view of Abrahams is reinforced by the way the piece focuses on the "simple, unsophisticated" mother, living on "quietly with her family in a trim cottage in Albertsville"! The innuendo suggests that her son is an irrational discontent who would have done a lot better to stay home.

In Abrahams' eyes, his story is evidence that a 'non-European' may pass. Now, by 1951, the story has altered: the quest for fame and fortune in the first piece has been transformed into the missionary service of "my people." The very boldness of the claim betrays a world of doubts; indeed, Abrahams had maintained his head among the whites in their own game with substantial and successful novels, the themes of which were readily assimilable in leftist 'European' thinking - the structural violence of the colour-bar, the infringement of personal liberty in the Immorality Act and, above all, the history of common interests above those of sectional power-blocs. This is simply apologia for his desertion of "my people", their cause dropped for his lone one, which as Sole says is the classic attitude of the 'repressed elite.'

In 1953 this whole area of contradiction opens out in the next autobiographical piece - more correctly, the book of his articles written for the London Observer. Return to Goli is his account of a six-week homecoming to what he calls the plural (colour-bar) societies of Africa - two of them at least, pre-independent British colonial Kenya and the Union of South Africa he had left fourteen years before. He returns as a distinguished BBC commentator on African affairs, confidant of Kenyatta and Mr Drum himself, Henry Nxumalo - he is the 'new African' personified, practising his alternate career of journalism. Ostensibly Return to Goli is reportage - the necessary dates and figures are all there - but his project was to

take little stock of statistics and formulae. These were cold, lifeless things that did not convey mood and feeling, pain and laughter; and, anyway, the libraries were full of books filled with figures and political treatises. I wanted to reach the hearts and minds of some of the 33,000,000 non-whites who live under the rule of the 3,000,000 whites in the vast areas of South, Central and East Africa. And I wanted to reach the hearts and minds of the whites too....

(p. 29)

But the hearts and minds Abrahams actually attempts to influence are those of the decision-makers in Britain, to remind them of what they are a party to "on the battlefield of race hatred" (p. 28).

So Return to Goli would not have worked with any power or conviction had it not been cast in the autobiographical mode. The long prelude establishes Abrahams as a normal British family man, escapee from deprivation and discrimination, passing as democratically free. The return is to face the "unfreedom" of "half-men" (p. 27) and explicate the "crime against humanity" that is race hatred. Only if he as a character in British Africa's story is credible can his project succeed. It does succeed - with a polemical deftness

that always pulls the reader up short. For example, on his arrival in Johannesburg: "In my years away I had forgotten how much a slight thing like a notice on a lavatory door could hurt" (p. 40); or:

The form asked for my nationality. I wrote 'British'. The next question was race. I leaned back and thought about it. What race was I? There was a moment of angry revolt, then I wrote 'Cape Coloured'. (p. 41)

The return journey obviously also crystallised for him a new version of what his life in South Africa up to the age of twenty had been:

... for the best part of the year before I left South Africa, I had gone through the not unusual experience for a non-European 'intellectual' of being homeless and near starvation point in Natal. The fine Zulu poet Herbert Dhlomo was my companion in want during that year.

But my spiritual and emotional want, much more than my physical want, had been the driving motive behind my leaving the land of my birth. The need to be psychologically free of the colour bar had, over the years, grown into an obsession, blinding as all obsessions are. And in that year my obsession with this need had reached breaking point. I had to escape or slip into that negative destructiveness that is the offspring of bitterness and frustration. (pp. 14-15)

His decision to escape at all costs coincides with a full formulation of his life's mission:

My business as a writer was with people, with human thoughts, conflicts, longings and strivings, not with causes. Painfully, I was slowly groping to a view of life that transcended my own personal problems as a member of one oppressed group of humanity. I felt that if I could see the whole scheme of things with the long eye of history I might be able to fit the problems of my own group into the general human scheme and, in so doing, become a writer. (p. 17)

'Only connect,' said Forster; this is formulation unmistakably within the great liberal tradition, very palatable to a British readership.

These two quotes become the sub-text of Tell Freedom and, considerably elaborated, are very close in wording to the triumphant closing pages there. But in Return to Goli they are pre-text, to be tested in the field of experience at home in 1951. His attitudes before the trip have been decided, and as a result anything which might challenge or disrupt such a credo in Return to Goli is cursorily dismissed. Kenyatta is portrayed as a good scholar gone to waste, rather than as a charismatic political leader. Quite shockingly for the sceptical reader, he describes his family reunion as an "ordeal" (p. 48). Of his last half-day with those who had known only "unfreedom, insult and hate" (p. 202) he concedes: "Not half the things in our hearts could be said" (p. 201) yet, speeding off again, maintains: "I am a child of Goli, forever involved in its problems" (p. 203). Where the personal and political intersect most pain occurs for Abrahams, and he becomes evasive, contradictory, guiltily over-emphatic. Clearly in Return to Goli there is unfinished private business

which it is the intention of Tell Freedom, written immediately after it, to resolve. Return to Goli is completed in February, 1953; Tell Freedom completed and out by 1954.

Now, as Gusdorf says of the secret purpose of autobiography:

The man who recounts himself is himself searching his self through his history; he is not engaged in an objective and disinterested pursuit but in a work of personal justification. Autobiography appeases the more or less anguished uneasiness of an aging man who wonders if his life has not been lived in vain, frittered away haphazardly, ending now in simple failure.⁶

This fits well with Tell Freedom. In 1954 Abrahams in England is 35, but the period covered by the work is the period from his birth in 1919 to 1939, the date of his departure from the Union. So his purpose is now revindictory, his early life distanced across a great and crucial gap in time and space. The sensibility of the author writing is now middle-aged, English, utterly cut off from home. As Gusdorf remarks:

there is a need of a second critique that instead of verifying the literal accuracy of the narrative or demonstrating its artistic value would attempt to draw out its innermost, private significance by viewing it as the symbol, as it were, or the parable of a consciousness in quest of its own truth. (p. 44)

The "own truth" here for Abrahams is frozen at 1939. He seems to let none of the intervening developments touch this. Trade-unionism, for example, which he deals with on p. 260, creates "a new social and political consciousness in the making",⁷ but it does not effect Tell Freedom. The Defiance Campaign of June, 1952, which drastically effected the attitudes and rhetoric of everything to follow in South African history, is cursorily mentioned in Return to Goli (p. 184), but it is not allowed to impact in his vision of his past in any way. Other factors are excluded: for example, Abrahams leaves out the whole of World War II. Aged 35, his private self is now more important to him than his social being.

Some may find this inexcusable in Abrahams, but as Gusdorf remarks it is a common phenomenon in autobiography:

The child, the young man, and the mature man of yesterday [these phases correspond to the three parts of Tell Freedom] are gone and cannot protest; only the man of today can speak, which allows him to deny that there is any division or split and to take for granted the very thing that is in question. (p. 40)

Exactly. In order to keep intact his vision of his younger selves, which is often the only privacy a writer has, he excludes any interventions. Only a new biography of Abrahams could clear an objective perspective on these disparities.

That Tell Freedom is almost exclusively about the development of a private consciousness - frozen in time - is made abundantly clear in the opening passage:

I pushed my nose and lips against the pane and tried to lick a raindrop sliding down on the other side. As it slid past my eyes, I saw the many colours in the raindrop.... It must be warm in there. Warm and dry.

And perhaps the sun would be shining in there. The green must be the trees and the grass; and the brightness, the sun.... I was inside the raindrop, away from the misery of the cold damp room. I was in a place of warmth and sunshine, inside my raindrop world.

"Lee."

The sound jerked me out of my raindrop world. I was at the window, looking out, feeling damp. (p. 9)

This first memory of the private consciousness is portrayed by means of many themes. The raindrop is a symbol of a multi-coloured, harmonious world, fragile and unattainable. Themes of exclusion (the pane of glass), of the aspirant dream (the comforting brightness inside the raindrop compared to the bleak slum interior), of naming as mastery ("Lee" becomes the person) are announced. The first line of dialogue - "Come, Lee. Tell us what you see and we'll make it into a story" (p. 10) - establishes the main technique to be followed, the conversion of raw experience into narrative.

This scene broadens into the first crucial learning experience, the discrimination of ontological differences: "... he was my father.... The word 'Mother' leaped to my mind.... These were my brothers and sisters. These were my people and I was seeing them for the first time in a way that I could remember for the rest of my life..." (p. 10). The vantage-point of the time of writing establishes this Lacanian last statement, not the original experience itself (supposing it took place at all). As Abrahams says:

What went before I know only from hearsay. A little of what came after has slipped back into the shadows.

I can build what went before out of hearsay and afterknowledge. (p. 10)

More than his ancestry and childhood is built from this afterknowledge; of course all of Tell Freedom is organised along the lines of these interconnected themes, wise with hindsight. The pane of glass becomes the general barriers against black aspirations, notably the RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY signs that typographically disfigure the text. The dream, after several variations, becomes Du Bois's ("the Negro is not free...") and Hughes's (the dream deferred of the weary blues). The obvious light/dark imagery is endlessly elaborated ("I became part of the flowing dark stream," p. 67; "Slum is darkness. Dark folk live in darkness," p. 204). Naming is at the core of each scene, becoming articulation ("Something was happening to me and the way I saw the world in which I lived," p. 148) - which with literacy produces liberty ("I was free at last, free to go," p. 308).

Most of all the story motif is strong - the formation of the writer is seen in retrospect as triggered by story-telling. Finally, Tell Freedom is made as an enormous reclamation of narrative itself, in which densely intertwining stories are embedded in a systematic arrangement. The writer so formed is constituted out of these stories. The criterion of selection is memory only, as Abrahams says - the memory reactivated by his 1952 trip, but kept apart from its findings. As Gusdorf remarks in general:

Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions

but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been.

(p. 45)

What Abrahams wishes himself to have been is an individual, a writer, destined for personal freedom. This retrospective sense of destiny drives the work, hones it down so that the trajectory is not interfered with. Dissonant relationships, unproductive learning experiences, blank, purposeless years at a time that do not contribute to this drive are simply not recollected, omitted from the pattern. Important but unsympathetic realisations are dealt with dismissively ("... I was rapidly moving out of this Coloured world of mine, out of reach of even my dear mother and sister. I saw them with the objective eyes of a stranger," pp. 197-8), or concluded in the pluperfect before begun:

They had called their explanation Dialectical Materialism. They had called the creed by which they lived Marxism.

Marxism had the impact of a miraculous revelation. I had explored this creed with delicate care. I had measured its adherents by their creed. A profound revolution [of disillusionment] had taken place in my heart and mind.

(p. 250)

So the break with the family circle and with the Marxist set. (which includes his first cross-colour love affair, after all) are not dealt with in any detail. But his break with missionary education in his early teens, and with the whole 'plural society' at the end, are thoroughly described, because these are the issues with which his readers at Faber and Faber would have the most ready sympathy. To stress this somewhat unfairly, these are the standard revolts of European bildung, outlined with stark clarity in, say, another colonised writer like Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), which Tell Freedom more than superficially resembles. Joyce's scheme of betrayals includes: family, school, church, intellectual movements from grassroots patriotism through to internationalism, and his development is also from passive conformism through rebellion to - ultimately - exile. Abrahams flies by those very same nets cast to catch his soul, but what he commits by way of achieving autonomy and independence is actually betrayal and treachery. (Joyce the aesthete and egotist is clear on this, Abrahams the self-effacing establishment figure is not.)

Abrahams does not give his crimes a name. As so often in South African liberal writing, the system is made the criminal, not the transgressor. In the 50s of Abrahams' composition, when at last the general criminality of the South African state is common knowledge, as he says, or at least outside of it, Abrahams can write from a position of certainty. His relation to South Africa is so slanted that he can only win an overwhelming moral victory.

Abrahams is free, of course, to condemn, to indict the system with impunity, but what he cannot moralise about is his own role within it. For example, his petty gangsterism is portrayed but never interpreted. His sometimes appalling practical jokes against Indian and Chinese traders, sickeningly racist in an absolute sense, are never condemned, even in retrospect. In the famous visit to Diepkloof Reformatory scene, where his half-brother Harry is serving hard labour

for a stupid gambling offence, a welter of police clubbings of him is recorded while Abrahams turns his eyes to a soaring eagle:

I longed, suddenly, to be like that eagle, able to fly right out of the range of this place, so that I would not have to watch my brother breaking rock under the hot sun.

(p. 136)

We sympathise... but that is the same brother who will get two girls pregnant simultaneously, become alcoholic and be dropped from the family. This downwardly mobile sibling is excluded from the dedication of Tell Freedom as well. The story has not been told in full, nor has the true motive for Abrahams' defection been given: the "sensitive young's" (p. 164) utter terror at the prospect of being brutally assaulted separates him from his kith and kin.

So in some important respects Tell Freedom is superficial and evasive. Analysis is all too often pre-empted by dramatisation, bedrock introspection by wish-fulfilment. Should one be surprised that the work is not otherwise? Not really, since the inaccuracies and bias of memory become thematic themselves in later black autobiographies. Down the memory lane of Mphahlele's Second Avenue and in subsequent works of the school, this situation pertains - Don Mattera's Memory is the Weapon of 1987 is a particularly aggravated example, where virtually no scene is credible.

Tell Freedom is also an important and influential work for other reasons - mainly its complete formal success. In a tribute to his English teacher, Mrs Lindsay, at St Peter's Secondary School in Rosettenville in 1938, Abrahams says: "I first discovered the independent life possessed by a work of art and the strange loyalty art demands of those who would serve it" (p. 250). This now unfashionable autotelism of New Critical doctrine in fact shapes Tell Freedom; the work is meant to be a detached artwork, denying its own inevitable referentiality. Literalist readers of it are indeed doomed,⁸ for it is intended to function at the level of Gusdorf's second critique, autonomously. Read as a novel about the formation of its hero, Tell Freedom is only a work of protest, too cut and dried. And as Ndebele has remarked, between 1948 and 1961, protest literature was free only to articulate "grievance, at both organisational and personal levels, [which] became ironically the very index of powerlessness."⁹

However, re-read as Afro-American autobiography - specifically black South African autobiography of a certain period - it does come alive again, freshly and seductively, if we consider the means by which grievance is articulated. While Abrahams thought to beat Westerners at their own game, what he may not have seen (and certainly few of his critics have seen) was that he could beat them even better at an African game. It is these aspects which make Tell Freedom truly innovative, fixing the blueprint of possibilities for autobiography as it activated the story of the "continent on the move" (Return to Goli, p. 145).

In line with its annunciatory title, Tell Freedom is really about telling (as opposed to writing). Most of its characters, including the first-person narrator up to p. 145 of 311 pages, are preliterate; therefore, an extraordinary amount of space is given over to rendering voices as they were (or as they are supposed to have been). In numerous cases these voices are disembodied, even without speech

attributions - for example:

"Let's not play with him. He's got woolly hair like a kaffir."

"Go to hell. Yours may be straight but your skin is blacker."
(p. 155)

- these two lines of dialogue are set apart; merely heard out of the blue for the direct impact on us. A virtuoso passage (section IV of Chapter V - pp. 151-160) is rendered entirely thus, conveying all the information we get on his primary school career. Compared with the "I Remember..." sketch quoted earlier, this is a huge innovation. The first version of the school-boy as active agent falls away in favour of a medley of discussion of himself. Occasionally scene-depiction by the clock (as in Western realist fiction) gives way to choric interludes (as later in Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue) - for example, describing his friendship with Joseph the Zulu:

There was the voice of the wind in the willows....

There was the voice of the heaven in thunderstorms....

There were the voices of two children in laughter,
ours....

There were Joseph's tales of black kings who lived
in days before the white man....
(p. 45)

(The passage is considerably extended.) Here the choral style conveys an idyll which time seemingly cannot alienate and terminate, though repetition elsewhere can convey frustration and despair (as is predominantly the case in Mphahlele's "Saturday night. Saturday night"). Abrahams' recall of song is faultless: the nursery rhyme to his cat on p. 13 ("... I lost my brother Moe, / I grieved and grieved him so"), the song of the train ("On a-way. O-n a-w-a-y," etc., p. 16); even the harsh Uncle Sam is transformed by: "I'll be your sweetheart, / If you will be mine..." (p. 42). Often quotations are parodic: "Our father / We charge in heaven, / Hello, be thy name" (p. 114). Evocative sing-song scenes of togetherness are conveyed not by quotations but by impressionistic summary:

A room
Dim-lit by candle-light,
Soft voice
Singing on the night....
(p. 119)

Voices and song are not only free in a repressed society - Abrahams knows this assertion from his fidelity to Keats and Shelley - but they are unhampered by literacy problems. The apotheosis of the oral, lyrical impulse in Vrededorp is the Christmas coon carnival, when "all my world came out to watch it and be carried away by a dagga-smoking, dice-playing, Coloured boy who, for a brief moment in time, carried the gods of grace and beauty in his heart and mind and twinkling toes" (p. 129). So traumatic for Abrahams is the advent of literacy that on p. 154 he gives a typographical display of the alphabet itself. Numeracy is treated likewise: "Two times ten are twenty - these sums are very plenty" (p. 154). Later sections of the book are a tribute to his rapid progress as a book-worm, but he does not desert his former preliterate, industrialising community. Indeed, probably

the most memorable passages in Tell Freedom are their inserted stories. First is Joseph the Zulu's. Then comes 'Hotnot' Annie's, about which he concludes:

It was the voice of the eternal storyteller, the trader in dreams who nursed the dreams of all the ages and caged them with words. The words dripped on my consciousness, sank into my being, and carried me away to the magic of long ago and once-upon-a-time.

(p. 66)

Mr Wylie's secretary's telling of the story of Othello from Lamb's Tales is what convinces him to attend school. The country boy, Jonathan, at Grace Dieu, the Diocesan Training College near Pietersburg, says: "I want to talk" (p. 234), and Abrahams gives his story of the city fully in indirect speech. So is given the story of Jim, the older black at the third-rate hotel near Malay Camp, a biography essentially about the offensive and inextricable absurdities of the pass system from which young Abrahams is exempt (pp. 178-181). The telling of Peter Abrahams' testimony is not a matter of the lone-voiced narrator at all - the work is a Babel, a chorus of historic voices.

But as if to clinch the argument about how literary an arrangement Tell Freedom is, it comes as a consummate shock to learn that most of the text is also an act of translation. Only on p. 121, aged 10, does Abrahams pick up his first "smattering of English" - from the tuberculotic Boeta Dick, working in the Wrededorp smithy's. In other words, his Abyssinian father, his family circle, his in-laws at Elsburg, Joseph the Zulu, Ruiter the drover, descended from Adam Kok... have all had to be reconceived in English for the purposes of this book. (The text never signals this.) Only when he is deep into his clerical job at the Bantu Men's Social Centre at Langlaagte, aged 15, does he say:

Because everyone at the Social Centre spoke English, it became a habit with me. I thought in English. It took the place of Afrikaans as my first language. My range of words expanded, and with it, the range of my thoughts.

(p. 202)

With English 'Peter Abrahams' is in fact born; formerly he was a character called Lee de Ras!

Acquisition of English may mean one step taken out of the restrictive circle, but it also means for the autobiographer this gigantic task of transliterating one verbal culture into another literate one. Inevitably there are gains and losses, but (because of his intended readership) Abrahams gives no sign of the latter. Apparently the language of workerist and populist cultures may be accommodated within the culture of middle-class English without uneasiness or distortion. This is another untold part of the tale.

The glittering bioscope throughout the Depression provides another cultural input that is assimilated with ease ("From it, we drew our picture of the world of white folk" - p. 111). The bioscope stimulates Abrahams' first writing at age 15 - a 'Wild West' story (p. 185). Then so does Bantu World, Palgrave's Golden Treasury and the famous bookshelf marked 'American Negro Literature.' Above all, the input of the Bible in English is decisive:

"The Bible says 'And Jesus wept.' I suppose that would be too simple for you. Read the Bible if you want to see

how good English should be written."

I read the Bible and saw.

(p. 223)

Rosenblatt has observed of black autobiography in the U. S. that it is future-orientated:

That future, which is not solely his own but that of his people and national ideals, generally seems more important to him than the life that he has gone to such pains to record. 10

This, too, is a remarkable characteristic of Tell Freedom. The work is business-like about the past, rather than nostalgic, dedicated to the task of changing the lot of black folks, rather than revelling in its mundanity.

But one final question remains: why autobiography was so readily co-opted from the West to become the distinctive form of attack made by blacks against apartheid? Why in the 50s was it not poetry, as recently (too cryptic), or drama (too vulnerable to control), or fiction (too easily decoded as inauthentic)? Rosenblatt seems to have stumbled on the answer, though he does not stress it. At a time when Africans continent-wide were striving to achieve independence from European domination (Nkrumah is the key figure for Abrahams), as Ngugi has recently said,¹¹ the authentic testimony of disabilities and reports on 'real conditions' could only be admitted.

But the very desire for freedom itself, to be successful, must create the conditions of its own liberty. In autobiography, as Rosenblatt says, the writer is a lone being. But then so is the reader (see p. 180). Autobiography is the only form through which the two can meet one-to-one, on a true basis of equality.

The four Abrahams texts show that this goal was not reached without considerable effort and creative thinking over a long period. But once the long writer's path taken to achieve Tell Freedom was laid bare, others would indeed follow with works resembling it like members of the family. The portraits may differ thereafter, but Abrahams had established the parameters of the frame.

Stephen Gray
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(footnotes follow)

NOTES

- 1 Writing Black (Cape Town: Philip, 1981), p. 10.
- 2 "Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature (1948-60)," Paper delivered at the 1978 Wits History Workshop, B. Bozzoli (ed.), Labour, Townships and Protest (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1979), p. 167.
- 3 Return to Goli (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 17.
- 4 James Olney, "Politics, Creativity, and Exile," Tell Me Africa (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 248.
- 5 Dark Testament (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1942), pp. 9-10.
- 6 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," James Olney (ed.), Autobiography (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 39.
- 7 Tell Freedom (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 260.
- 8 Michael Wade's chapter on Return to Goli and Tell Freedom in Peter Abrahams (London: Evans, 1972) fails to find much beyond Abrahams' "pedigree for his liberalism" (p. 99) in these works.
- 9 Njabulo Ndebele, "Redefining Relevance," Pretexsts, Cape Town, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 1989), p. 42.
- 10 Roger Rosenblatt, "Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon," Olney (ed.), p. 179.
- 11 See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Writing against Neo-colonialism," K. H. Petersen (ed.), Criticism and Ideology (Stockholm: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), p. 93.