

Race Relationships and Identity in Peter Abrahams's 'Pluralia'¹

In his Introduction to *The Commonwealth Pen* A. L. McLeod writes: 'So common is race the basis of South African writing, in fact, that many critics feel that it has actually taken the form of a national literary obsession'.² Peter Abrahams, a South African writer now living in Jamaica, confesses to this obsession and makes race relationships in plural societies the leitmotiv of his fiction. 'Pluralia' is the name he gives to South Africa in *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956), but this name applies to any country, real or imaginary, with the racial diversity and varied cultural background common to most plural societies. In his latest novel, for instance, 'Pluralia' is a Caribbean Island. Abrahams may have found in the West Indies a set of circumstances similar to that from which he first drew inspiration: a society in which for several centuries a white minority ruled over a non-white majority of Blacks, Colour-eds — in the South African sense of the word — and Asians. The themes he deals with are not always circumscribed by the racial pattern within one country; they sometimes refer to the more general confrontation of the darker races with the lighter, but all his novels interpret the human condition in multiracial societies.

In *Wild Conquest* (1951), Abrahams tells the story of the Great Trek with the understanding, objectivity and detachment of an artist in full command of his vision, showing what principles and passionate feelings lie at the root of the plural society of South Africa. Through parallel descriptions of the Boers and the Matabele warriors before the encounter of these peoples he conveys those elements in their character that determined the nature of the encounter and the subsequent relations between the conquerors and the vanquished. In spite of their courage and their genuine love of freedom, the constructive enterprise of the Boers was corrupted from the start by their implacable hatred of the Blacks and their ingrained belief that the latter could not be considered as human beings. On the other hand, superstition, lust for blood, cruelty for its own sake and rivalry between military chiefs foreboded the decadence of the Matabele Empire independently of the White man's coming. Each people is seen from the inside through the eyes of the more sensitive or wiser among them. Anna Jansen discerns a source of evil in the hatred preying on the hearts of the Boers: it has wrecked her own marriage, it destroys the children's innocence and generates violence among the young. Only Paul van As understands that the harshness and brutality of the Boers will not fade away after their victory but will taint their achievement and remain a feature of their character. Similarly,

¹ Paper read on 11th August, 1968, at the Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia). The theme of the Conference was: 'National Identity, Literature and Language in the Commonwealth'.

² A. L. McLeod, ed., *The Commonwealth Pen*, An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961, p. 7.

Gubuza realizes that his people's lack of wisdom will bring about the decline of their Empire. He hopes that the White men will guide them to progress, but when he hears that they have only come to take their land, he cannot forgive them the destruction of his dream, and he leads his people to battle even though he knows they stand no chance against the White men's firearms. Their defeat marks the dawn of a new era for South Africa: among the Boers, however, violence and destructiveness are the inevitable rewards of hatred, whereas the proud Matabele, who had never been conquered before, are completely bewildered and therefore prepared to resign themselves to the White man's domination.

By presenting from its very origin the two sides of the conflict between Whites and non-Whites in South Africa, Abrahams not only rises above partisanship, he opens a vista on a whole rounded vision of its pluralistic reality: on the one hand, the Whites feel only hatred and contempt for the Blacks, but their racialism poisons their own lives; on the other hand, a proud people loses its self-confidence, not for lack of courage but of wisdom, by failing to recognize what might already be called the technological superiority of the Whites. In Abrahams's other novels the emphasis is on the Black man's attempt to recover his manhood and self-respect, which alone can help him to attain true freedom. How this is to be done is an important issue in his work, not only where South Africa is concerned but also in most plural societies, particularly the newly independent ones. These themes are illustrated by the characters' experience of the pitfalls of racialism, whether white or black. Personal relationships between people of different races are the touchstone of all relations at all levels in the plural societies. Abrahams describes these relationships with a remarkable insight into the complex psychological responses of his characters to the situations he creates.

From his first novel, *Mine Boy* (1946), Abrahams develops the basic assumption of interracial relations, namely that in the present state of things a true and unreserved association between Whites and non-Whites in plural societies is impossible. The Black man's attitude can range from distrust and instinctive recoil from the least show of paternalism, as in *Mine Boy*, to aggressive assertiveness as in *A Wreath for Udomo* or *This Island Now* (1966). At best the White man is paternalistic, at worst callous, arrogant, unjust and destructive. But Abrahams does not oversimplify the issues; already in *Mine Boy* he discriminates between paternalism, which makes people kind on principle, and real sensitiveness, which makes for understanding between men irrespective of their race. In his later novels he eschews stereotyped attitudes even more and distinguishes between the kind of behaviour that is motivated by painful circumstances and one which is due to personal character regardless of colour. Thus in *The Path of Thunder* (1948) most Whites are oppressors because they fear a black emancipation, but it is an embittered Coloured who betrays Sarrie and Lanny and delivers them to the maddened Whites. In *A Night of their Own* (1965) Nkosi and Dee Nunkoo are both able to forget their colour and the dissensions between Blacks and Indians, whereas Karl van As, who is torn between

decency towards the non-Whites and conformity with the current white attitude, finally chooses the latter. In *A Wreath for Udomo* Udomo's personal dealings with the Whites are at first tinged with self-interest. When he becomes President of his country, non-fraternization with the Whites is imposed on him by political imperatives. In fact, when it comes to independent countries where the non-Whites can and must assert themselves, they are compelled to give precedence to the social and the political over the personal and are driven to a systematic rejection of the Whites. We should note, however, that the real test of race relationships is always interracial love, which alone ignores colour and prejudice. Unfortunately, like all other interracial relations, it is doomed to destruction. In South Africa the lovers must either separate or suffer a tragic fate. In freer countries the black racialism generated by the need to africanize prevents or prejudices interracial love. In all of Abrahams's novels personal relationships are subjected to the pressure of fear on the one hand, and of humiliation on the other. But they also reflect people's capacity for freedom: even the politically emancipated non-Whites make the distressing discovery that they have not attained true freedom.

For Peter Abrahams freedom is first and foremost the freedom of the mind, the liberation of the heart from fear and hatred. As a Coloured writer born in South Africa, he was naturally urged to describe the social, economic and political tyranny imposed on his people by a white minority. But he also makes it clear that real freedom, which is of the spirit, is more difficult to achieve than the overthrow of social or political tyranny. The South African Whites are supposedly free, yet they are morally enslaved by their fear of the non-Whites. Because this fear is unavowed and conflicts with humaneness in the more sensitive among them, it breeds a spiritual disease and creates a dilemma which is only resolved at the cost of personal integrity. In *A Night of their Own* Karl van As, who is head of security, endorses apartheid by his very position. But he would also clear his conscience and gratify his love for a Coloured woman. Eventually, he renounces her and silences his conscience by killing in himself the last vestige of generosity and fairness inherited from his ancestor Paul van As. The non-Whites in independent countries are no freer: Udomo liberates his people from the yoke of the Whites, then he is himself enslaved by the determination of other leaders to rule out fraternization, and he must give up the White woman he loves. However, in *A Wreath for Udomo* as in *This Island Now* the struggle for freedom raises dramatic problems which bring home to the characters the incompatibility of individual freedom with the good of the majority. This is a universal issue which does not confront the leaders of developing countries alone, but Abrahams draws attention to the difficult choice the latter have to make as soon as they come to power. In the novels mentioned the choice is rendered more painful yet by two other motives: the first is that the encounter between White and African civilizations makes it necessary for Black people to learn from the Whites without being humiliated. The second is the question of ends and means, for the struggle for

freedom can be corrupted by bad means and issue in another form of tyranny.

In the novels whose setting is South Africa Abrahams describes the appalling conditions in which the non-Whites live whether in the country or in the slummy districts on the outskirts of big cities. In *Mine Boy Xuma*, the Black man fresh from the country, discovers the evil ways of the urbanized masses, the ruthless and bitter struggle for survival which breeds corruption and depravity. In *The Path of Thunder* it is an educated Coloured who returns to his native village and becomes aware of the gradual demoralization and physical degeneracy of his people. In both cases personal tragedy entails a coming to consciousness, a deeper understanding of the import of oppression and exploitation by the White man but also of the wide prospects of emancipation and progress inherent in the Black man's assimilation of the cultural heritage of the Whites. True, those who painfully gain access to the White man's values pay a high price for it and will continue doing so until their community as a whole is given the same chance to progress. They are caught between two worlds, alienated from both because they feel cut off from their race-fellows, while the Whites fear them even more than the uneducated Natives. Abrahams dramatizes the fate of educated Blacks who are sometimes reduced to a life of spiritual and physical degradation because of the acute sense of frustration aroused in them by their hopeless predicament. In *A Night of their Own* he alludes to the sad plight of the South African artist forced into exile in order to create freely. Still, he clearly suggests that it is on the white man's own ground that the African must attempt to emulate him if he is to be considered as his equal and wishes to recover his self-assurance. That is why he fiercely condemns tribalism, which he considers as the chief obstacle to the free development of the individual in Africa. Abrahams is not blind to the struggle between White civilization and tribalism for the African soul. Indeed, he has described some of its tragic implications in *A Wreath for Udomo*, though not from the inside as Achebe does, and with none of the latter's insight into the dilemma of the ordinary educated African who becomes alienated from his own people without being truly Westernized. Perhaps, as an Urbanized South African, Abrahams takes it too much for granted that the African should have no other ambition than to become Westernized; he himself seems to underrate the ancestral customs of Africa and the human values of tribal life. Yet his deep attachment to the African earth and its people appears from his sympathetic rendering of the latter's character. On the other hand, he believes that the supremacy of the clan in the tribal tradition entails the stifling and destroying of the human personality and thwarts the blossoming of the kind of individual talent that has so much contributed to White civilization. He warns that tribalism will pave the way for dictatorship and shows, prophetically, through the fate of Udomo that the African politician who leads his people to political freedom might be prevented by his own countrymen from stimulating them to progress. Udomo fails to free his people spiritually. They are proud and determined to take up the challenge which the White man's achievement represents in their eyes. But only a common enemy had

brought the peoples of different tribes together, as it unites the non-White races in South Africa. When they become politically free, Udomo's countrymen are prepared to allow tribal rivalries to swamp down national unity, and many associate White civilization and culture with White tyranny.

A chronological survey of Abrahams's fiction brings to light a change in his treatment of race relations, a growing awareness that resentment against the Whites may lead the non-Whites into a deadlock. In his early novels he deplored that the non-Whites in South Africa must be Natives, or Half-castes, or Indians in the first place and human beings afterwards. In those of his later novels that deal with people of independent countries he shows the Black man surrounded by an invisible yet insuperable race wall, caught between his repulsion for what the White man represents and the necessity to cooperate with him and adopt his methods. The non-Whites, whether in Africa or in the Caribbean Islands, are forced to hostility towards the White man until they prove his equals and are accepted as such. That is why they feel they must define and impose their racial identity before they can be free to forget about it. In order to reach this end Udomo and Josiah in *This Island Now* are compelled to discriminate against the Whites, though in doing so they run the danger of being perverted from their original ends by the means they use. In most of his novels Abrahams throws light on the power of means to corrupt ends. We have seen that in *Wild Conquest* the Boers degrade their achievement through their fear and hatred of the Natives and that Paul van As foresees the moral aberrations of the coming generations when he tells them: 'We are losing ourselves to win'. The reply of his father was: 'In order to win, to live, you have to be hard, without pity, without mercy. That is the only way'. Abrahams develops this other truth with increasing emphasis where the non-Whites are concerned. Not only are questionable means inevitable, they take the leaders of young states along unexpected paths. Mendhi himself explains to Udomo that the ends justify the means, without suspecting that he is the price Udomo must pay for the progress of his country. As Mendhi rightly guesses, Udomo ends up a prisoner of the revolution he has led. However, in *A Wreath for Udomo* bad means are still the subject of painful choices. Not so in *This Island Now*, in which Josiah takes it for granted that you cannot make a revolution without soiling your hands. Inevitably, he ends by making the revolution not for his countrymen but in spite of them and even against them. His attitude marks the climax of Abrahams's exploration of the ways in which the non-Whites hope to attain freedom and achieve their racial identity. Unfortunately, it is also the negation of the individual freedom of the heart which in his earlier novels he upheld as the condition to real freedom. Abrahams condones this attitude by suggesting that Josiah has no choice. This is what the latter tells Johnson, the White journalist who has edited the island's paper for twenty years and is being dismissed to be replaced by a Black man:

You are primarily concerned with the salvation of your individual soul. I am not that free. Between me and your kind of freedom stands a terrible wall which I and those like me cannot climb until we have achieved the salvation of our racial soul. (...) Till then we cannot be individuals in the sense that you are and until we are all relations between white and coloured must be counterfeit by definition. (p. 211)

Thus in order to ascertain their identity, the non-Whites must discard white competence and impose by force on their own people economic and technological efficiency. 'If this way is wrong', says Josiah, 'then there is no way out for the peoples of the so-called underdeveloped world'. Yet the novel ends with a feeling of uncertainty and impotence as the disappointed young idealist who has supported Josiah to power lacks the courage to kill the man who has imposed a new form of tyranny on the island. *He* also is confronted with the hopeless choice between freedom and the exorbitant price that must be paid to win final recognition.

This Island Now is inferior as a novel to Abrahams's previous works: in the second part of the novel individual characters fade away, and personal relationships are banished from the narrative while the interest focuses on the dialectics of power. This is in keeping with the author's intention to show that as Josiah climbs to dictatorship ideas become more important than people. But in doing so, he himself becomes too abstract. Abrahams may have hardened his position and perhaps finds it now increasingly difficult to reconcile his commitment to the non-White world with his artistic gifts. I think, however, that we should consider his work as a whole. Our conclusion, then, is that his vision reaches beyond temporary necessities to a conviction that in order to achieve maturity the multiracial societies must first recognize their pluralistic character, as well as the true nature and capacities of each one of their communities, and allow all the races to cooperate. Abrahams develops this theme with great historical sense; this is evident, for instance, in the continuity between his two best novels: *Wild Conquest* and *A Night of their Own*. Although the characters in the latter are more sophisticated and reveal on the author's part a subtler psychological insight, both novels offer a penetrating, deeply felt, yet objective, picture of the plural reality in South Africa as well as a perceptive interpretation and analysis of the hatred and fear and of the permanent tension which underlie it. They also bring out most clearly the correlation between race relationships on the personal and the community level. The far-reaching implications of personal relationships in *A Night of their Own* testify to the consummate art with which Abrahams pictures the social scene through individual characters. The Africa of his novels is that of the non-White races who strive after spiritual emancipation and technological progress in the face of either White tyranny or of tribalism.

In *Return to Goli* (1953) Abrahams writes:

I am a child of the plural societies. When the strains and pressures had grown too much for me, I had escaped from the physical presence of the problem. But the problem itself is inescapable. (...) It is the raw material of my work. The most challenging, the most exciting raw material in the world — and also, in one sense, the most inhibiting. (p. 29)

Abrahams is not unaware of the danger of dealing with such exciting raw material, which might confine him to polemical literature. He never loses sight of the problems peculiar to the plural societies, but he succeeds in bringing out their universal meaning.

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Reviews

Die Entwicklung der frühneuenglischen Nominalflexion. Dargestellt vornehmlich auf Grund von Grammatikererzeugnissen des 17. Jahrhunderts. Von G. GRABAND. (Studien zur englischen Philologie. Neue Folge. Band 7.) Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1965. viii + 328 pp. Price DM 44.—.

The early English grammarians were primarily interested in spelling and pronunciation, but some of them include statements on morphology and syntax, and a very few attempt a systematic account of these sections of grammar. The imbalance of early grammars in regard to subject-matter is reflected in modern research, which has produced monumental works on eModE phonology but no comparable book on grammar in its narrower sense. In recent years, however, scholars have begun contributing to the much-needed survey of eModE morphology that must be based to no small extent on the grammarians.

For his investigation into nominal form-words and inflections Graband has summoned a cloud of witnesses but cross-examines only a selected number (24) of them, ranged chronologically from Bellot 1580 to Sewel 1708. Bearing in mind their shortcomings he approaches them with caution. A dialectal bias can easily be detected in Hume, the Scotsman (p. 24), among others. Bellot provides an example of the foreigner who allows himself to be guided by his mother tongue; for instance, when he only admits comparison with *more* and *most*, apparently under the influence of French (p. 175). Gill and Butler were prejudiced by their veneration for Latin grammar (pp. 13-4, 19), whose influence on the description of the vernacular is still felt in England in spite of the warnings issued by Wilkins as early as 1668 (p. 36).

The interdependence of early grammars and spelling-books is a commonplace in researches of the type under review. Graband is of course aware that the *Writing Scholar's Companion* leans heavily on Cooper, but it is uncertain whether he realizes the full extent of its debt. To say that the WSC list of 'Words vulgarly spoken' is very instructive ('sehr aufschlussreich') is true in a sense but becomes an overstatement when one remembers

