"A SOFT MAN IN HARD TIMES": LIONEL ABRAHAMS: WRITING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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PREFACE

This thesis has three principal aims. First, to provide a critical reading of Abrahams' poetry, fiction, and essays over the course of the following chapters in an attempt to reconstruct his thought. There has until now been no serious study of Abrahams' work. If he is, to his own admission a "scholar without scholarship" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 320), then it is our task to perceive and uncover the capacity for development contained in his work; to locate the essential element or elements - be it artistic, philosophical, political - that have remained unspoken, and explicate their proper meaning. In doing so, I will place his work within its proper historical context, provide it with an appropriate theoretical frame, and put Abrahams in contact with relevant interlocutors, thus delivering the scholarship that is both internally as well as externally absent. The argument that I will pursue is that what is at stake in his work is a thinking through of the state of emergency. There is, in my view, a vital political dimension to his work that deals with a concrete historical reality: the state of emergency.

I must, however, be specific about what is meant when I refer to the state of emergency. One cannot merely treat the state of emergency as the series of formal legal periods in South African history - first in 1960, and then again in 1985 and 1986. Instead, it must also be understood to be a specific set of politico-juridical instruments which reveal something essential about governance, power, and the meaning of citizenship in general. Herein lies the second aim of this project: to provide an account of the state of emergency as the ruling paradigm of governance through the period of Apartheid (1948-1990). Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series is of particular interest here given the political history of South Africa under apartheid. Agamben's argument that something akin to a 'police state' is no longer the exception but the model of modern political states is easily applied to the South African case, whereby states of emergency were gradually built into National Party governance and

its disciplinary apparatuses from 1948 and developed through subsequent legislation. I will, over the course of the chapters to follow, build upon the structure of *the ban* that Agamben identifies as being synonymous with sovereign power and the execution of states of emergency, employing it as the key structural paradigm to guide our reading of Abrahams' texts.[1] Yet, as the investigation develops, the structure of the ban that is definitive of the state of emergency will be revealed to have a more general significance, characterising the structure of every sphere of life. The structure is always the same: something is divided, with one element being excluded as illegitimate, and precisely through this exclusion is included in the other as its foundation. In sphere of art, the separation is between prose and poetry, commitment and autonomy, black and white art, with each being the negative foundation of the latter. This too holds for notions of citizenship, where a line of distinction is drawn between the Bantu and the European, with the former's exclusion from the metropole serving as the foundation of the rights of the latter.[2] So too for humanity, which is split into the distinct races, each of whose identity is the negation and the distorted image of the other.

Only with an appreciation of the structure that defines the state of emergency and the meaning of this paradigm of governance, is one able to ask questions regarding imaginative strategies of resistance in its social, political, and cultural forms. Faced with the structure of the ban, thought is confronted with a very specific task: that of overcoming it.

Here, I arrive at the third aim which admittedly is less rooted in the explicit content that will be presented in this thesis but is instead contained and performed in its form. If, following Agamben, humanity continues to exist under the state of exception and the structure of the ban which defines it, the study of literature can never simply be a strategy

[1] In the early pages of *Homo Sacer* Agamben provides the following definition of *the ban*: "If the exception is the structure of sovereignty, then sovereignty is not an exclusively political concept, an exclusively juridical category, a power external to law (Schmitt), or the supreme rule of the juridical order (Hans Kelsen): it is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it…The relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable" (Agamben, 1998, p. 28)

[2] As Achille Mbembe convincingly argues, the functioning the homelands and townships not only entailed severe restrictions on landownership and influx control, but so too "the denial of citizenship to Africans" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 79). Mamdani's thesis in *Citizen and Subject* (1996) that the separation of rural subject and urban citizens facilitated by colonial institutions is the major impediment to democratization post-independence is useful here too when considering the formations of citizenship under colonial rule.

of considering new and more effective articulations of divisions - as is the case in the most reactionary forms of contemporary identity politics active in countries as varied as Turkey, the United Kingdom, China, and the United States of America. Within literary scholarship, an adequate response could only be enacted once the question of literature moves beyond the structure of the ban. One must, as a point of departure, follow Agamben's call for the abandonment of the paradigm in which modernity has situated the artist and artistic activity.[3] "An artist or poet", Agamben contends, "is not someone who has the potential or faculty to create, which one fine day, through an act or will or by obeying a divine injunction (the will is, in Western culture, the apparatus that permits us to attribute actions and techniques in possession to a subject), he or she decides, like the God of the theologians, to put to work, who knows how or why" (Agamben, 2019, p. 12). To move beyond this model, as this extract already anticipates, requires renouncing an entire metaphysic system and the ontological apparatus that defines the subject as possessing transcendent qualities or capacities which realise themselves in a work.

On the contrary, artistic practice is a form of praxis wherein what is essential in the work of art is not merely its form or content but instead the act of production by which the work establishes and defines its aesthetic reality. The imperative is to retrieve the act of artistic creation from considerations of some abstract essence inherent in a single or collection of works. It is through the act of creation that the artistic constitutes themselves: it makes an 'artist' of them. The character of artistic creation, then, is to constitute the artist as a being capable of art; it is humanity giving itself the gift of 'art'. Not only does the artist succeed in producing a work of art, but at the same time construes their own aesthetic protocols, procedures, and horizons as 'art'. In other words, the act of artistic creation implies a precise double movement wherein, on the one hand, the practical creation of a work of art, involving the aesthetic transposition of the world, is proof that humanity is capable of art; but, on the other, precisely in this transformation of the world humanity defines for themselves and for the first time this phenomenon we call 'art'. The act of artistic creation, produces itself as its own object, laying claim to be doing art while itself producing (in the sense of inventing) the idea of 'art'.

[3] An appeal he registers most clearly in two important essays "Archaeology of the Work of Art" and "What Is the Act of Creation?", both of which are collected in *Creation and Anarchy* (2019).

What I am hoping to excavate, ground, and guide the reading of Abrahams' work in the second chapter is a form of reading that affirms and indeed centralises the act of creation. And, linked to this, is my claim that every work of art – through various figurations – maintains an essential proximity to its own *artifice*; that is, to the act of their production. Moreover, this turning of the work of art upon itself resembles what Agamben in his reading of the Aristotelian concept of potentiality identifies as the work's *inoperativity* (Agamben, 2019, pp. 17-18). For Aristotle, Agamben reminds us, "The one who possesses—or has the habit of—a potential can both put it into action and not put it into action" (Agamben, 2019, p. 19). But this does not simply mean, he clarifies, that the potential-not-to is another potential juxtaposed to the potential-to; instead, the brilliance of Aristotle's model of action resides in the fact that the subject (the artist, the sculptor, the doctor) is potent insofar as he is capable of not creating; that the work of art functions in so far as it is capable of not functioning; "that potential is essentially defined by the possibility of its non-exercise" (Agamben, 2019, p. 19).[4] Thus, Agamben following Aristotle infers that there is a constitutive co-belonging of potential and impotential; that, in other words, there is no potential not to write, to sculpt, to act that precedes the potential to write and that therefore must be annulled for something like art to be realized: "the potential-not-to is a resistance internal to potential, which prevents the latter from being simply exhausted in the act" (Agamben, 2019, p. 24). It is this inoperative remainder of potential which cannot wholly pass over and dissipate in the act which pushes art to turn in on itself and grasp its own potentiality as such. This impotentiality, Agamben argues, accounts for the fact that in the history of art the artist is condemned to remain a being of potential, capable of adopting a range of colours, languages, and techniques, and adapting to varying environments and contexts, yet with none of these ever exhausting or wholly defining their activity (Agamben, 2019, p. 26). As such, the task of criticism is to make this inner impotentiality an object of experience – one must ask after it, bring it to light, and finally submit to and undergo it. The critic cannot limit their concern to the life or intentions of an artist, the appropriateness of

[4] So writes Agamben: "It is in this way that, in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle responds to the theses of the Megarians, who claimed, not without good reason, that potential exists only in the act. Aristotle objects that, if this were the case, we could not consider an architect to be an architect when he is not building or call "doctor" a doctor who is not exercising his art. What is at stake is, then, the mode of being of potential, which exists in the form of *hexis*, of mastery over a privation. There is a form or presence of what is not in action, and this privative presence is potential" (Agamben, 2019, p. 19)

its content, nor simply trace the relation to historical context (as if the work could be separate from it to begin with); rather, it must attend to the semblance of life that the work itself possesses by virtue of its (im)potential for representation.

Finally, it is precisely this inoperativity that defines art as a form of praxis that is linked to resistance. Resistance to what? First, to the paradigm of information in which this generation and countless before it continues to suffocate. Second, to paradigms of sovereignty and the exercise of power by which the human life is coerced to live out their biopolitical and social destinies. “What is poetry,” asks Agamben, “if not an operation in language that deactivates and renders inoperative its communicative and informative functions in order to open them to a new possible use?” (Agamben, 2019, p. 29). And if literature is considered as having a political function, this is because it effects the same interruption in social life as it does in language; that is, by rendering economic and social relations inoperative, by showing their *artifice*, literature shows what human life can do by preserving the opening through which possibility as such may be contemplated.

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE DESTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE: A THEORY OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

> "The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us" – Agamben, *Infancy and History,* 1993, 13

We may easily adopt Agamben's assertion as our own. If, as Agamben argues in *Infancy and History*, one of the preconditions of modernity is the destruction of experience, the character of everyday life under apartheid is founded upon a similar desolation. Not only were people denied fundamental rights to dignity, but the authority of experience had also been disfigured. Because of interventions of various kinds, the fabric of experience had ceased to be structured in a coherent manner.

The meaning of experience as it used by Agamben, and which will serve as the foundation for our thinking through this period in South African history, coincides with the notion of experience Benjamin develops first in his essay "Experience and Poverty" and is later picked up in "The Storyteller". In both instances, experience is not confined to what an individual encounters in the present but instead has an immediate communal aspect. It is the means by which an individual relates to collective experience, where the present ceases to be a discrete moment in time but rather an extension of tradition into the future. The German word Benjamin uses confirms this: *Erfahrung*. Unlike the other German word for experience, *Erlebnis*, which is limited to an individual instance of perception or witnessing,

Erfahrung emphasises the authority of that which is passed through time, an event whose significance does not wither with the passing of occurrence. Benjamin traces the interruption of experience to the effects of the First World War:

> One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience (*Erfahrung*) has fallen in value. And it looks as if it may fall into bottomlessness…Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day…For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horsedrawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 143-44).

What is most interesting is to extend Benjamin's insight and argument to the colonial context. For experience, in the sense of *Erfahrung*, endures its most thorough contradiction in the face of the horrors of colonialism: subjective experience is shattered by the logic of racism, civil experience by expropriation and relocation, economic experience by migrant labour, moral experience by state power. Everywhere the colonial subject undergoes what contemporary theorist Mbembe calls necropolitical control, the threat of violence and death: "The sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies. In the colonies, the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner. Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules. It is not a legally codified activity" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 78). No moral tradition, no experience of morality, can be maintained in the face of this unprecedented violence – a violence which itself is predicated upon the suspension of the moral order. The present, in this way, is experienced as an instant which is properly divorced from the continuum of tradition; an exceptional period of time that signals the end of a transmissibility of experience and the inability for the subject to totally possess that which occurs to them. "Thus experience is now," Agamben concludes, "definitively something one can only undergo but never have" (Agamben, 1993b, p. 34)**.**

The power of these theoretical insights can be seen by the ways in which it connects to and throws light on the formulations of the South African writer under Apartheid. For, in my view, the strength of Njabulo Ndebele's essay "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1986) lies

precisely in the way in which he traces how the development of the South African novel coincides with the change in the fabric of experience. South African life is horribly spectacular in its ugliness, and the artist has (unconsciously or consciously) modelled his art on the spectacle. If, as Ndebele maintains, the most outstanding feature of South African oppression is its "brazen, exhibitionist openness" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 38), then what is displayed in the literature of the spectacle is "the complete exteriority of everything" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 38): every limit is transgressed, everything is available for public exhibition, the inner life is neither safe from the law nor from language. If one were to read the spectacle as an instance of the destruction of experience, then this destruction does not imply that there is no experience, but that all experience is enacted outside of objective reality.

For example, as Ndebele observes, in its figurative substitutes: "the whole plain of aesthetics here involves the transformation of objective reality into conventional tropes which becomes the predominant means by which that objective reality is artistically ritualised" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 39). Although it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, it does so by obliterating the details. Consequently, its ritualised figurations falsify and trivialize the reality it attempts to depict: "it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 41). Additionally, while the validity of this literature lies in the reader's recognition of an oppressive reality, the experience of reading these spectacular depictions introduces a crisis within reading itself: "it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 41). Importantly, the experience of the spectacle does not imply a lack or ignorance of experience. On the contrary, it signals that everything is seemingly available to experience. Just as the machinery of the state is able to bring every person before the law, so this power is matched by the artist that provides a totalizing view of the social whole and the individuals place within it. In the case of Alex La Guma's "Coffee on the Road", for Ndebele, the story's protagonist – her motives, her inner life, the development of her character with the text - is wholly integrated within the social process that produces her, symbolically, as an Indian woman. The text itself, Ndebele concludes, as an artifact of the period, is a product of the oppressive reality that birthed it, providing, implicitly, a confirmation of said reality without offering a real challenge to it.

One may, however, seek to take issue with or at least provide an importance corrective to Ndebele's argument concerning the 'rediscovery of the ordinary', which he traces in the latter half of the essay. For, just as for Benjamin for whom the figure of the storyteller – the crafter of *Erfahrung* – is detected and comes into view for the first time in its disappearance, so one may ask if the rediscovery of the ordinary is not something separate from the spectacle, but the unspoken exigency contained within the spectacle itself? In other words, (and does not the form of Ndebele's essay decisively prove this?), it is only in the spectacle that one could 'see' and make sense of the ordinary, but 'see' and make sense of it only in the form of its destruction, its withdrawal. And, furthermore, upon experiencing this destruction, this absence of the ordinary which everywhere imposes itself alongside the ubiquity of the spectacle, is one not delivered over to the exigency of its recovery in the most profound way?

If this is the case, then it is necessary to provide a similar corrective to the meaning of the destruction of experience that is being developed here. The destruction of experience, and concomitant absence of tradition, is not a simple privation or loss as such. Instead the destruction of experience entails a negation of experience, which is not quite the same as an obliteration or vacancy. What is negated, as Hegel teaches us, is not simply gone without leaving a trace of itself. It may, in its very withdrawing, continue to offer an index of itself in its negative form. When tradition (read: experience) has been negated it still preserves its (now empty) form, and the particular force of tradition during the period of its destruction – as with the ordinary in relation to the spectacle – consists precisely in its capacity to burden us with its presence. If modernity has been described as the advent of nihilism, this is because nihilism is afflicted by and experiences the destruction of tradition in a very specific way: enacting a nullification of tradition, but maintaining it in a perpetually deferred state of validity; at once freeing itself from it but in the same act paradoxically coming under its spell.

It is this force of law that Agamben identifies with the state of exception (written as "force of ~~law~~", indicating that what is at stake in this formulation is a force of law without law), which, he claims, has become "the domain paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (Agamben, 2005, p. 2). The state of exception, considered in its most basic sense, concerns a suspension of the law that is inscribed within the law itself, whereby the law

paradoxically legitimises and legislates for its own temporary transgression, conferring upon the sovereign the power to reign during those situations – the exceptions – in which the law no longer applies. However, the law maintains its force precisely at the moment of its suspension, for it is the law which grants the sovereign its legitimacy. The law, under the exception, legally sanctions the use of extra-juridical power, maintaining the normative order of the law precisely by stepping outside it. For Agamben, Carl Schmitt's grounding of the state of exception as simultaneously within and outside the law was his most significant intuition (Agamben, 2005, p. 33). Schmitt argued that the sovereign decision on the exception is above the normative framework in that it consists of the suspension of legal constraints, but at the same time the exception is what defines the condition of possibility for the normative legal order to exist.[5]

Although, as Stephen Morton has argued, the history of the state of emergency in South Africa does not begin with the election of the Nationalist Party in 1948, but can rather be traced to the formation of British colonial institutions such as the Department of Native Affairs, it was the transformation of the Department of Native Affairs from a relatively ineffectual administrative department into an efficient and centralised bureaucracy that gave apartheid its institutional form (Morton, 2010, p. 492). "And it was the legal powers," writes Morton, "granted to such state bureaucracies over the lives and bodies of the colonized which provide an important frame of reference through which to understand the state of emergency in apartheid South Africa, as we will see" (Morton, 2010, p. 492). With respect to South African law, the state of emergency has its legal foundations in the South African Public Safety Act of 1953, which allowed "the state president to declare by proclamation in the *Gazette* that a state of emergency exists within the Republic or South West Africa or any of their areas" (*The Law of South Africa,* 1984, p. 297).The president's powers under this Act included "the prohibition of gatherings and processions, the dispersal by force of illegal gatherings, the detention of persons without trial or access, broad and sweeping crimes and the suppression of publications and organizations" (*The Law of South Africa,* 1984, p. 300). The totalitarian character of the apartheid state lies precisely in the establishment, through the state of emergency, of an ersatz civil war that allowed for the

[5] "Because the state of exception is always something different from anarchy and chaos, in a juridical sense, an order still exists in it, even if it is not a juridical order" (Schmitt, 1985, p. 12).

elimination not only of political adversaries (as was facilitated by the Suppression of Communism Act) but of an entire category of the population who cannot be incorporated within the body politic.

The pernicious biopolitical dimensions of the apartheid state was realised through what Brian Bunting has called South Africa's Nuremberg laws: the Group Areas Act and the Immorality Amendment Act (Bunting, 1964, pp. 142-60). The apartheid state assumes as its fundamental task the fulfilment of the conditions necessary for the preservation for the people, whose life is secured only if the racial traits and hereditary health of the body was preserved. For Agamben, building upon Foucault's critique in *The History of Sexuality*, the significance of modern biopolitics lies in the fact that the biological is immediately a political element, and the political immediately a biopolitical one: "we are not only, in Foucault's words, animals whose life as living beings is at issue in their politics, but also inversely citizens whose very politics is at issue in their natural body" (Agamben, 1998, p. 188). As such, the modern biopolitical state is founded upon the blurring and establishment of a zone of indistinction between juridical rule and biological life – that today the classic distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, between private life and public existence, between the human as simple living being and their political existence no longer holds. Quoting the German geneticist and national socialist Otmar von Verschuer's declaration: "Politics…that is, giving form to the life of the people", Agamben finds in this formulation an articulation of the bare life that is the prime biopolitical referent, that is, the zone of indistinction between *zoē* and *bios.* Bare life is life that has no inherent meaning of its own – or, put differently, whose only form is the nothingness of their own content. Precisely in being without form, bare life requires the intervention of the state, which will animate it and provide it with a sensible presence, and in doing so (re)produce the bare life that is the presupposed referent of its power. Bare life, because of its essential emptiness, is the most sublime place where infinite possibilities may be actualised, including, in exceptional circumstances, its putting to death.

South Africa, of course, has its own history of the camp, beginning with the British concentration camps formed during the Anglo-Boer War, continuing through apartheid with the state's own internment camps. "In the camp", writes Agamben, "the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual

state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order" (Agamben, 1998, p. 169). Vlakplaas, a farm that served as the headquarters of the South African Police counterinsurgency unit C10, under the leadership of the notorious killer Eugene de Kok, is but one example of the spatial realisation of the state of emergency, having absolute independence from every juridical control and reference to the normative juridical order.[6] It would, however, be impractical to list all these sites, given the fact that the South African police could, as a rule, operate with impunity with respect to the law. In this regard, Chris van Wyk's poem "In Detention" which speculates on the circumstances of Biko's death while imprisoned without trial, expresses on a linguistic level, on the one hand, the mutilation of Biko's body as it was brought before the law of the state, as well as, on the other, the disfigurement of the law itself that under the state of emergency moves within a zone of indistinction between fact and falsehood:

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He slipped from the ninth floor
He hung from the ninth floor
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing. (Van Wyk, 1979)

Although Abrahams doesn't think the state of emergency, in the sense that it is an explicitly articulated issue in his thought, his critical writings do, more than anything else, express his dismay in the face of a government that consistently "displays the *spirit* of fascism" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 165). The journal entries that are collected in *Lionel*

[6] See Binckes, Robin, 2018. *Vlakplaas:Apartheid Death Squads, 1979-1994.* Barnsley: Pen & Sword.

Abrahams: A Reader (the only published collection of Abrahams' non-fictional work), which were written in the first months of 1966, provide an intimate sense of a period in which the National Party was bent upon obliterating the remains of the forces of political resistance of the previous decade. Writing out of a period that was defined by curfews, raids, detentions, interrogations, imprisonment without trial, mass surveillance, censorship, and gagging, where a network of secret prisons and torture chambers were established to detain those deemed enemy combatants in the name of state security - all effects of the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1960, and which would become common features to life throughout the National Party regime - the question of sovereignty and the way in which the rule of law legitimizes itself is ever present in Abrahams' work even where it is not referred to directly. The question of sovereignty and the rule of law over life are approached obliquely, via a concern for art and its survival. Literature, he proclaims, is under attack (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 211), referring to a campaign mounted by a variety of agencies employing various weapons, including the state's censorship of specific publications and their proscriptions of certain authors, as well as, perhaps controversially, the formalisation of aesthetic judgment that issues from the opposite ideological quarter, which "[matches] the censor's prohibition on certain subjects and attitude with positive prescriptions" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 212). The question that must be posed in response to Abrahams' claim concerns precisely what is at stake in this attack. That is, what is meant by "literature", and what is it in literature that is threatened to be destroyed?

Abrahams' 1996 interview with Ivan Rabinowitz may provide an answer. To the question 'what is the teacher of literature to do'?, Abrahams provides the following response:

> I think that question raises the issue of the canon, the uses of a canon… But now, the canon by itself, a canon that is established once for all and doesn't change and doesn't grow, becomes a dead thing no matter how marvellously it started off. But if there's no canon at all, no consensus on what is valuable, what is excellent, there is no language, no aesthetic language. It's been left in a way without anything at all to teach. I mean, it's excellent to be questioning the canon and modifying it and adding to it, having it there as a living thing. And always the value of the canon has to be retested, ultimately, against that individual response. In all that there's a great deal to teach isn't there? (Rabinowitz, 1996, pp. 47-8)

The canon, for Abrahams, would serve a precise task. The canon would constitute the medium that would connect all the elements of the world of literary art into, indeed, a *world*, a space of human habitation, where the diversity of literary expression symbolically unites with a transcendental foundation and thus assumes a form. “Abjure it”, Abrahams writes elsewhere, “and you abjure language in the fullest sense, you attenuate or even break your connection with humanity” (Abrahams, 1996, p. 16). To what extent Abrahams’ attachment to the canon is a mere nostalgic yearning would be a question worth exploring. Yet, as will be explored in the chapter to follow, the weapons waged against art and that compulsively seek to realize the destruction of tradition are themselves the means by which a tradition of aesthetics continues to be affirmed.

In his critical writings, Abrahams traces the development of a culture of aesthetics which is driven by the critic whose exercise of aesthetic judgement initiates a split into the work of art. A split between, on one level, reader and poet, where the former requires and enacts a distance from the latter as the condition of possibility for their evaluation of the work of art. On another level, this split is between art and non-art, authenticity and unauthenticity, and, inevitably in the South African context, white and black art, with each side of the split having as their foundation the negation of the other. Where the canon once was an absence has appeared, and aesthetic judgment precisely concerns the preservation of this empty place, with art itself, in the arena of aesthetic judgement, assuming the form of a mere nothingness whose meaning and value are ratified only in the aesthetic judgement of it. That art is under attack, that the canon which once held its elements together has been destroyed, concerns the bringing of the work of art before the law of judgement, which everywhere sees art as ~~art~~, which Abrahams illuminates in order to bring to light the link between aesthetics and the nihilism which defines this period. Where Agamben identifies the state of emergency as the situation where “’force of law’ floats as an indeterminate element that can be claimed both by the state authority…and by a revolutionary organisation” (Agamben, 2005, pp. 38-9), Abrahams identifies the freeing of a force of judgement that no single ground can be consubstantial with, and against which every work of art can be devoured. And, as it shall be shown in the chapter that follows, Abrahams' thought on aesthetic judgement is, in fact, rooted in the human violence that has consumed

life under apartheid. In his thought, the treatment of art is synonymous with the treatment of the human being, where both are caught in a nihilating spiral of violence without end.

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1

CENSORSHIP AND AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

How might the struggle against apartheid pit one against barbarism? For Abrahams, barbarism, being the attending principle of censorship, always implies the effecting of a division and a fracturing:

> The world of books is, in a certain sense, indivisible. Either you grant a special sanctity to books as such (and to do so is the mark of civilised man) or you do not. To sanction or cause…the burning or cutting of any books is to reduce respect for all books, and to this extent to barbarise the people. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 136)

Of course, it would be impossible to evaluate censorship without considering its place as part of a larger set of state apparatuses. In South Africa, censorship was only one expression of a strategy that included the Immorality Act, Group Areas Act, influx control, job reservation, legislation controlling the press, detention without trial, and the denial of citizenship to black South Africans through the creation of artificially 'independent' homelands. If barbarism, in this sense, is the expression of a certain mode of governmental perversity and deformation, then it ceases to be, as may be assumed, something 'outside' or antithetical to 'civilisation' and modernity but is immanent to it. As Georgios Sagriotis points out, the central difficulty attending any conception of barbarism, where barbarism is meant to represent that which is opposite to 'culture', is that its significance could only be recognised in a cultural context, and, in this way only used in the name of culture: "in this sense," he writes, "we are obliged to admit that culture is, and is condemned to be, contaminated with barbarism" (Sagriotis, 2015, p. 255). Less a threat originating anterior to the cultural sphere, barbarism here describes an inner inconsistency and fracture. More

specifically, a social whole that is defined by an internal deformation and inconsistency, but where this deformation and inconsistency is paradoxically necessary for the consistency of the whole.

This fracture has its most definitive manifestation in apartheid's specifically racial capitalist formation. Where all material wealth accrued was due to the coordination of savage systemic oppression, and every unit of accumulation simultaneously a consequence of deprivation. One may in fact adopt Agamben's notion of the ban as the principle of this exploitative class relation, whereby through the double mechanism of their alienation and objectification, black labour was simultaneously excluded and forcibly locked within a system that prevented them from appropriating the products of their own work. It is no understatement to say that black people were no more than mere empty units of potential utility, whose entire existence and accommodation within state machinery was solely as a means for capital accumulation in the metropoles that they were also prevented from living within freely. With this in mind one may similarly attest to the fact that, as Benjamin had well observed, there is no product of culture that is not at the same time a product of barbarism – a barbarism, in this case, that Benjamin associates with the "horror" felt in contemplating "cultural treasures" that "owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 256). Crucially, the force of Benjamin's statement resides not so much from its comparison between two apparently discrete social classes but from the question of their unity within a social whole that, as has been said, receives its consistency based upon the inconsistency of its parts.

Thus, where barbarism in Abrahams' formulation is first presented as an aesthetic problem concerning the violation of 'the world of books' it is possible to already perceive the ways in which division and its sanctioning is from the beginning a veiled reflection on the status of life generally under apartheid. Where, under apartheid, the meaning of life was always linked to its capacity for dissection, partitioning, and the rearticulation of its components. The anthropological machine of colonialism, which provides the metaphysical premise of apartheid, is defined by such a division and articulation, but here within the human being: a split between the human (read: white) and the animal (read: black). In all instances under apartheid the same mechanism is at work. The foundation, which should be

understood in the double sense of what grounds a phenomenon and simultaneously governs its development, of an entity is constituted by dividing and excluding one half of it and then rearticulating it as the principle of the other. The city is founded upon the division into townships and suburbs, the citizenry upon the synthetic unity of the racial category 'non-whites' and the diametrically opposed politically qualified European, the law upon the state of exception and sanctioning of extra-juridical violence.

What is at stake in Abrahams thought, I intend to show, is a critique of the metaphysical apparatus that serves as the foundation of apartheid, in its juridico-political, capitalist, and aesthetic forms, and the 'status of life' that is expressed in each of these spheres. This chapter will seek to reconstruct his thought, which is a matter of tracing certain divisions and their articulations in order to understand the extent to which the logic of division and fracture, and the barbarism they produce, is the critical issue of Abrahams' thought.

I

An ever-present concern in Abrahams' work, even where it is not referred to directly, is the question of language, which first and foremost takes shape in his critique of language. Specifically, his opposition to an instrumentalist conception that reduces language to a mere vehicle for the communication of information and semantic content. This is present, for example, in his attacks against censorship and the supporting assumptions of the work of language. Present too in his opposition to the intellectual and aesthetic commitments of his contemporaries, many of whom were the ideological opponents of the state. Reflecting on the aesthetic category of style, Abrahams understands it "to be a species of magic…a matter of word music, syntactical rhythms, rich and idiosyncratic vocabulary, a distillation of the writer's unique personality, his truth, his passion, which however had nothing to do with his opinions or his circumstances" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 308). With this idea of the 'magic' of speech (which, as we shall see, is articulated in a distinctly theological register) Abrahams seeks to conceptualise a communicative potency in which something else is transferred in language besides what is represented - a principle or effect that transcends in the sense of precedes and conditions its causative operations. If the apartheid state was responsible for effecting a split within language between cause and effect, between the materiality of language and the idea this splitting is then accomplished by their opponents who sought definitively to reduce language (and art) into a weapon of struggle. Certainly, it is possible to

recognise the necessity of this weaponisation – yet, now being afforded the benefit of hindsight, one may at least take measure of what is at stake in this instrumentalisation. Indeed, Abrahams' work offers the occasion to do so.

At the very end of his essay on state censorship, the vandalism against books committed by the censor is expressed by Abrahams as a problem immediately concerning the integrity of language:

> In this silent, sweatless, bloodless massacre, blasphemy is pronounced and sacrilege is committed. For we have here a direct assault upon the indivisible spirit of man, whose thought, whose essential life, is a life of words – an affront to the spirit of civilisation, which is the life of the understanding, and to which the Christian gospel accords the ultimate sanctification of: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with *God*, and the word was God'. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 139)

The question of language is evidently an ontological question, concerning, on this account, the meaning of revelation and the original structure of language. The precise dimension of this question is given a fuller sense in a poem of Abrahams' where the issue of revelation is given a decisive articulation:

> In the beginning was the word,
> the whorl, the whore, the hole.
> Sh'mai Isreal! Hear, o nations, hear!
> Thy god, the word without image, is one,
> and his name begins with D.
> His first commandment was "Ignore!"
> And he commanded us again
> against the taking of his name.
> Yet, nations, hear!
> This lord, this one word which is all
> moved at the first and made the world,
> in his imagelessness made heaven and earth
> one squared-off hole. (Abrahams, 1975, p. 24)

For Agamben, the construction of revelation in the Gospel of John - where the sole content of revelation is the Word of God ("In the beginning was the Word"), and which

Jewish theologians affirm in stating that God's revelation is his name - provides the most rigorous and coherent account of not only the word's primordial status but additionally the original status of the world and humanity's place within it. "The Trinitarian movement of God that has become familiar to us through the Nicene Creed", he writes, "says nothing about worldly reality; it has no ontic content. Instead, it registers the new experience of the word that Christianity brought to the world. To use Wittgenstein's terms, it says nothing about *how* the world is, but rather reveals *that* the world is, that language exists" (Agamben, 1999a, pp. 40-1). The proper sense of revelation is thus that every act of speech and every formation of knowledge have as their foundation an "openness that infinitely transcends it" (Agamben, 1999a, p. 41), where this opening concerns only language itself and the possibility that something may come to be expressed in it. This could only mean that what is revealed in revelation is not an object as such, that only an instrument of adequate force could bring to light, but instead that there exists the possibility of communication and knowledge. "What revelation allows us to know must," Agamben concludes, "be something not only that we could not know without revelation but also that *conditions the very possibility of knowledge in general*" (Agamben, 1999a, p. 39, my emphasis). If, in Abrahams' poem, the revelation of God is also his concealment in "the word without image", this withdrawal is not simply a negative determination, or indeed a defect in language, but rather an essential characteristic of language as the pure and immediate medium of thought. Precisely in its ubiquity language itself cannot be named.

There is an essay of Benjamin's that throws further light on this. In "On Language as Such and the Language of Men", Benjamin elaborates on a theory of language that begins with a consideration of its pure mediation, which he contends is a condition of its infiniteness: "there is no event or thing", writes Benjamin, "in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 314). Everything that is imagined or presupposed for there to be language is, in the final instance, a presupposition of language. Consequently, Benjamin would offer the formulation that language has no speaker; that while language "communicates the mental being corresponding with it", this mental being "communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language" (Benjamin, 2019, pp. 316-16). The subject, who bears and performs the utterance, does not precede language but is instead only conceivable and constituted *as subject* in language. Mental being is

always already linguistic being, and this immediate coincidence between the mental and the linguistic, inner and outer, confirms that the essence of the subject is not derived from a communicable content but from their capacity for communication, their openness to communicability. The same goes for objects: “the language of this lamp, for example, does not communicate the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself), but: the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression” (Benjamin, 2019, p. 316). The language-lamp, like the language of mental being, is a language that does not have a content, nor does it convey objects and their meanings, but instead communicates nothing else except itself: “There is no such thing as a meaning of language”, writes Benjamin, at the point in his essay where his philosophy of language comes into contact with the religious concept of revelation, “as communication, language communicates a mental entity, i.e. something communicable per se” (Benjamin, 2019, p. 320).

The “pure language” Benjamin defines here is a significant departure from the instrumentalist conception which understands language as the means of a communication that transmits a message from one subject to another. Such a conception of language is expressly rejected as a “bourgeois notion of language” that, later in the essay, is associated with original sin and the fall from paradise - events which, he contends, mark the birth of signification.[7] For Benjamin, the fall is accompanied by the “judging word”:

> The word must communicate something (other than itself). That is really the Fall of language-mind. The word as something externally communicating, as it were a parody by the expressly mediate word of the expressly immediate, the creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful, Adamite language-mind that stand between them. For in reality there exists a fundamental identity between the word that, after the promise of the snake, knows good and evil, and the externally communicating word. The knowledge of things resides in name, whereas that of good and evil is, in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, "prattle," and knows only one purification and elevation, to which the prattling man, the sinner, was therefore submitted: judgment…In the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose…In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a

[7] Indeed, as Agamben would have it, commenting on these dense passages in Benjamin’s essay, origin sin is “the fall of language from being a language of insignificant and perfectly transparent names to signifying speech as the means of an external communication” (Agamben, 1999a, p. 52).

> means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a mere sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages. The second meaning is that from the Fall, in exchange for the immediacy of name damaged by it, a new immediacy arises, the magic of judgment, which no longer rests blissfully in itself (Benjamin, 2019, pp. 327-8).

With this passage in mind, it is not without significance that Abrahams would formulate the barbarism of language effected by censorship through the figure of the puritan exegete for whom "the most innocuous-seeming word may conceal the subtlest perils" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 135).Their very activity, which primarily consists of discriminating between good and evil, presupposes the event of origin sin and the splitting of the purity of the word. The censor (the exegete), to exercise their judgement, is s/he who must by necessity experience their expulsion from the origin plenitude of the word, and indeed continually impose this condition upon themselves. The condition of their alienation manifests first, as JM Coetzee had pointed out, as paranoia: "[reacting] to the world around him as though the air is filled with coded messages deriding him or plotting his destruction" (Coetzee, 1993, p. 36). Similarly, for Abrahams theirs is a paranoia borne in "hysterical superstitious terror":

> Not only does this measure presuppose satanic *intentions* on the part of those it gags, but also it implies them to be possessed of fully satanic *powers* to gull and injure us puny innocents who are still allowed to speak – powers that might demolish the state with an essay on architecture, plough down parliament with a poem, or pervert the volkswil with a witticism […] This is a Censorship born of childish wilfulness and spite, or perhaps of hysterical superstitious terror (havoc! It cries, the inkwells are poisoned!). (Abrahams, 1988a, pp. 135, 138)

In this case it is not 'the air' that is filled with potentially poisonous coded messages but language itself, with censorship being a matter of deciphering them in order to reveal what they *really* mean. But to approach language as a network of signifying messages requires an imposition of a split within language, for it is only on the basis of this division (between sounds and sense, signifier and signified) that something like signification is possible. Indeed, censorship realises the scission that underpins Saussure's development of the sign as divided between the material signifier (the phonic element, the mere glyph of the letter) and the meaningful signified (the abstract idea), that are at once separated but held together by a bar: S/s. Importantly, this is not so much the separation of the sign into two distinct spheres, but instead an act of positing the unity of the sign as founded upon an

internal fracture. Aesthetic judgement[8] of the kind exercised by the censor is wholly dependent upon such metaphysical conceptions of scission and separation, which are enacted on several levels: between the censor and the artist, between the work of art's poetic or expressive elements and their meaning, and finally between the work as such and the abstract ideal of 'art' against which they are measured. Between each of these splits the very status of art – of what, in an ontological sense, can be referred to as '*art*' - is called into question in the most fundamental way.

The censor, as figured by Abrahams, is s/he who is said to have a sixth sense for art, "arrogat[ing] to [themselves] alone the wit that can determine the innocence or evil of *any* utterance" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 135). If we were, for a moment, to imagine a consistent culture where, in Abrahams' terms, the integrity of the 'world of books' were still intact, the specific role of the censor and the resultant change in the status of 'art' as such becomes apparent. The censor is not an active participant in an integrated and undivided culture but is, so to speak, at once a participant and simultaneously an anonymous spectator who, having removed themselves, merely gazes from a distance and, in the end, passes judgement. The relation between the artist and the censor is always one of irrevocable disjunction. They are never equal participants, bound to a process of mutual identification. Art is, for the censor, merely an occasion for the exercise of judgement – to practice their discernment, hone their abilities of detection, to provide definitions, categorise the world of art, and finally to expel.

The paradox, of course, is that while censorship provides a tool for 'understanding' the work of art, it does so only through the exercise of a universal negation: "to sanction or cause…the burning or cutting of any books is to reduce respect for all books" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 136).[9] The moment the censor engages the faculty of judgement, they negate the

[8] Although it may seem strange to refer to aesthetic judgement and censorship interchangeability, what is stranger still is that the censorship body which oversaw the dissemination of literature in South Africa were, to some extent, were occupied by notable literary figures, such as: Anna Louw, a notable Afrikaans writer; H. van der Merwe Scholtz, a poet and professor of Afrikaans literature; F.C. Fensham, a professor of Semitic languages.

[9] One cannot help but be reminded of what Agamben, in *The Man Without Content*, determines to be the fundamental operation of aesthetic judgement, whereby the work of art *appears* and is *recognised* as art as such only when it has seemingly been drained of its vital force: "In the act of aesthetic judgement that separates art from non-art, we turn non-art into the content of art, and it is only in this negative mould that we are able to rediscover its reality […] Whatever criterion the critical judgement employs to measure the reality of the work – its linguistic structure, its historical dimensions, the authenticity of the *Erlebnis* from

very object that they are seeking to bring into view. Censorship, therefore, is not only the (supposed) purification of art through then ban of undesirable elements, whereby the critical definition of art coincides with its nihilation, its death. The true 'object' of aesthetic judgement is not art per se but on the contrary what art is not. The censor's paranoia is not a concern for ensuring the existence of art but is an obsession with everything that they consider to not be art. Thus, the commencement of the era of art under apartheid begins at the moment of art's negation; that is, when the 'value' of art is associated with the nothingness of art, when art is '*art'* only when, at the moment of its judgement, it becomes a 'lifeless element' whose essential meaning and status is always under question.

What is put to death? On one level, it is the materiality of the book; that is, literature's existence as an artifact amongst others within a material tradition of books. For censorship begins with the valorisation of the sensible presentation of ideas, since it is on the basis of this valorisation that the decision on appropriateness and what will be admitted into circulation within the state is made: "by which", writes Abrahams, "the suppression of certain pronouncements is justified on the ground that they are offensive, thus injurious, to the whole community or to outstandingly important groups in it" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 138). Censorship therefore arrives precisely at the moment when the content, which holds the secrets to the social ethics of a work, becomes the primary concern. Indeed, the prevailing model of censorship is a discrimination on the level of content alone, between what constitutes dangerous and perverting ideals and those which preserve the *'volkswil'* (will of the people), between Communist and Christian ideals, black and white cultural values, etc. Certainly, one could not in a culture that remains undivided from itself judge a work of art and identify it as 'bad' or undesirable. To judge art as bad and engage in acts of purification would be to judge bios as bad. Only a sovereign can do that.

Unquestionably, censorship is a type of sovereign banning order, where everything that comes to be valued, and everyone that is still 'allowed to speak', comes there as a result of an exclusion and a silencing. Moreover, through its division and capture in the apparatus of

which it has sprung, and so on – it will only have laid out, in place of a living body, an interminable skeleton of dead elements" (Agamben, 1999b, pp. 42-3).

censorship, art assumes the form of what Agamben terms *bare life*,[10] a life than has been separated from its form. And it is, finally, in this sense that one must understand Abrahams' use of the term barbarism: where the fundamental activity of state censorship consists in the barbarisation of art and the production of art as a bare aesthetic element that has no meaning besides that which is realised in the censor's judgement of it. Under censorship, art only survives according to a fate of burning and cutting that it endures endlessly.

As censorship increases in precision so the work of art starts to be regarded as the exclusive product of the individual artist: "it isn't the opinion that matters", Abrahams explains, "it is the name…[censorship] does not [merely] concern itself with pronouncements and their effect on the community, but only with persons" (Abrahams, 1988a, pp. 137, 138). But what is the status of the name and the person in this respect? The author – the person, the name – has a social and juridical function beyond its mere aesthetic reference, and is, then, like the work of art, a mute and lifeless element that is merely the prop for the distribution and enactment of power. For the author is, especially under a regime of censorship (although its status as a mere legal function goes beyond censorship), wholly defined from the point of view of the law as the centre of speech, and thus the centre of responsibility, so as to be open to prosecution and have their work brought before the law of judgement.[11] In this way, the origin gesture contained in the categories 'good' and 'bad' art, appropriate and inappropriate, authentic and inauthentic, and indeed identity generally, is the possibility of punishment.

III

But the true force of Abrahams' critique is to be found in his uncovering of uncomfortable complicities between the aesthetic commitments of the state and their ideological counterparts. Where, for the censor, art functions as an occasion for aesthetic judgement that continually distinguishes between art and non-art, and thus allows for a continuous scrutiny of the status and definitions of art, their opponents inadvertently realise this condition of art. In the latter case, art too finds its true ratification in negative

[10] **"**Bare life," writes Agamben, "remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion" (Agamben, 1998, p. 11).

[11] In the essay "What is an author" Foucault argues that the legal system was central in the rise of the author, or what he calls the "author function", whereby an author was needed (in order to be punished) for making transgressive statements. (Foucault, 2016, pp. 305-6)

determinations, most prominently through the destruction of aesthetic norms and the dogma of radicalism. “A third weapon attacks our literature”, writes Abrahams, "not only from the lines of the state and its patriotic defenders, but at least equally from the opposite ideological quarter" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 212). Where the first weapon is the censorship of publications and the second the gagging of authors, the third "match[es] the censors prohibition on certain subjects and attitudes with positive prescriptions", with the result that if you are to be counted as an important South African writer a prescribed material and attitude are the requirements (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 212). Increasingly, Abrahams laments, literature is recruited to conform to one social attitude.

Unsurprisingly, the declaration of such a view inevitably opened Abrahams to criticism (and, in many cases, misunderstanding) within the debate on the place and status of literature that took place in the so-called ‘cultural wars’, coalescing around the question of literary commitment. The poet Keorapetse Kgositsile, also known by his pen name Bra Willie, speaking at a panel ‘On Literature and Commitment in South Africa’ hosted by the University of Texas in 1976, provides the most thorough response to the issue:

> When we talk about literature in South Africa - or in Africa as a whole, or for that matter, anywhere in the world - already we are talking about commitment, so that it seems redundant to talk about literature and commitment separately…It seems to me very, very important that when we talk about commitment, we should attempt to destroy whatever illusions we have on any level about literature. If what we seek is a kind of wholeness, an integrity, I would hope there is not one single damn writer anywhere on this planet who would claim to be committed to the typewriter or the page or the word; because you are committed to certain values, you are committed to life, long before you sit at the typewriter. What comes out are the outer trimmings of your commitment, waiting for use. In other words, anytime you open your mouth, or you sit at a typewriter, you are either opposing, affirming, or proposing certain values, which means every time you do that, you are showing your commitment. In a situation of oppression, there are no choices beyond didactic writing; either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation. It's that simple. (Kgositsile, et al., 1976, pp. 34-5)

Although not mentioned by name, the notion of commitment elaborated here bears an almost identical resemblance to that formulated by the French philosopher and political

activist Sartre in the immediate post-war period in France.[12] "To speak is to act," he had written, in what is a decisive expression of his existential philosophy; "anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence" (Sartre, 1988, p. 36). Thus by speaking, and here the phenomenological influence on Sartre's thought becomes apparent, one reveals the situation to oneself and others *intentionally*, which is to say that the 'world' that comes to be expressed in speech is from the beginning implicated in an act of structuring and ordering. "The 'committed' writer", Sartre continues, "knows that words are action" (Sartre, 1988, p. 37); that to reveal the world, society, or the human condition, through literature, is never an impartial activity. To this extent, there is no wonder why, equally for Kgositsile as it was for Sartre, there is no point in speaking of value as such (literary values, for example), nor for that matter literature as such (as if literature were not contingent upon historically specific formulations of its essence), for just as language is condemned to a signifying function so both 'value' and 'literature' are functional expressions of intentions, and thus always already implicated in a politics. One cannot, in other words, be committed to literature as such, for to be committed to literature is to already be committed to certain values that are, always, implicated in a political order, the ordering of society, the way in which its resources are distributed, and finally the way in which power is disseminated. It is thus entirely understandably why Kgositsile (and, again, as Sartre did) would conclude that when one writes you are (explicitly or unconsciously) either following an established order, functioning within it, and thus collaborating with it, or challenging it, questioning it, and seeking liberation from it.

Abrahams, by contrast, attempts to celebrate the ability of literature to detach oneself from these commitments which everywhere seek to put a weapon in one's hand. "I believe in literature," he writes, "I believe that a concern with literature *is* a matter of involvement with life at large (as well as detachment), and that involvement is a different, more complex, subtle, embracing thing, than commitment, which is what politics requires of one" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 140). For Abrahams, literature has as its critical source human

[12] The contextual similarity between post-war France and Apartheid South Africa, specifically concerning the status of literature, is one worth noting. As Phillip Watts observes in *Allegories of the Purge*, Sartre consistently assigned to himself the roles of attorney, judge, and jury: "If a juridical rhetoric was crucial to Sartre's thought, if his writing consistently returned to the space of the tribunal, it is perhaps because his development as an intellectual was determined less by tradition that by an event: the purge of collaborationist writers at the end of the Second World War" (Watts, 1998, p. 60).

experience, where experience here must be understood in the double sense of the human feeling that informs a work of art, but also, and perhaps more critically, the experience of reading and writing which are indispensable for the cultivation of one's humanity. Literature, being an archive or history of human experience, as well as the name for the act through which our humanity is communicated through language and thus given a sense, is the means by which we continue being human. He does not however advocate for a relativism in literary expression. Art depends, he argues, on technical skill, and sets forward various criteria for its evaluation and enjoyment, such as "originality of vision", "cleverly chosen images", "the aliveness of the writing", "wit and substantial responsiveness to life and words" (Abrahams, 1988a, pp. 197-8, 229, 259). Qualities that a committed literature is seemingly lacking. He praises, on the hand, Ezekial Mphahelele's "He and the Cat" for "the intimacy of intellectual subtlety" it achieves (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 140). But criticises Can Themba's "The Suit" for "fail[ing] to be moving or important precisely because it doesn't have the real intimacy, the involvement that would have brought the main character to life. Themba had an idea, but not a feeling" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 140).

It was these readings of black South African authors that would provoke the most intense responses. For Priya Narismulu, returning to and picking up upon Sole's critique, Abrahams forms part of the other hegemonic formation that the emergent culture of liberation had to contend with, "comprising white English-speaking intellectuals who took interest in South African literature", and whom had been influential in the production and reception of literature (Narismulu, 1998, p. 191). The ideological position of the conservative liberal class, she contends, clarifies the central dilemma of settler culture: "never substantive and too remote from the European centre, they compensate for their marginality by asserting their power in the ex-colony as neo-colonial guardians of access to the centre of cultural life…clearly shown [in] their presumption of themselves as part of the principal interpretive community" (Narismulu, 1998, pp. 192-3). In this way, she continues, "questions regarding the source of interpretive authority are circumvented, and authority devolves as if by default upon a tiny intellectual coterie which constitutes itself as universal, transparent and ahistorical" (Narismulu, 1998, p. 193). Similarly for Kelwyn Sole, whom Narismulu cites in her article, Abrahams demonstrates "a strongly hierarchical and Eurocentric sense of what constitutes good creative literature" (Sole, 1988, p. 102). Referencing Abrahams' argument

that it is necessary to perceive regional literature as a mirror through which universal experiences and values are at stake albeit in response to localised issues, Sole contends that this is just another instance where the general is privileged at expense of a close examination of specific lived experiences. Once more, beneath the idea of universality there lies an assumption of superiority and an implicit rustication of a Eurocentric position that never needs to substantiate its own claims of what may be admitted as real experience and value. "He remains blind," Sole claims, "to the fact that there *is* in fact a theoretical and political underpinning to his views. He seems unaware of the legacy of colonial attitudes in the teaching of literature in this country, and the ideological bias that permeates much criticism and which disguises itself by promulgating the notion that 'eternal verities' can be easily used in the study of our literature" (Sole, 1988, pp. 101-2). What is most decisive about Sole's criticism is not found in the content of his dismissal but in its language and form. *He*, Abrahams, lacks the ability to understand *our* literature. Although Abrahams insists upon employing a notion of experience "it has become patently clear that [he] remains far removed from the actualities of 'black experience'" (Sole, 1988, p. 102), and without this intimacy with *their* experience he has no business evaluating its literary translations.

When read from a certain position these criticisms do maintain validity. But one may too respond to the equally urgent need to subject this somewhat artificial opposition between Kgositsile and Abrahams, between commitment and involvement, European and African ('black') experience to serious scrutiny. This would not, to be sure, amount to denying the existence of a 'Eurocentric' position (I will, however, attempt to dismiss the accusation that Abrahams occupies and endorses one), but instead require us to reorientate our understanding of its manifestation, and indeed the oppositions and divisions which condition it. For it seems plain to see, at least in the way in which the 'cultural wars' took shape, that something which may be called a 'black aesthetics' is the point in time when the era of 'European (white?) aesthetics' retrospectively appears precisely as the product of the negation of notions of 'timeless and universal values'. What I am thus proposing is that black aesthetics not only reveals European aesthetics but in fact invents it for the first time. Thus the birth of 'black aesthetics' is in many ways a recursive glance back to 'European aesthetics' the latter of which only comes into full view at the moment of its cessation - the

reinvigorated literature of this new epoch is thus constitutively involved in a recursive projective interplay that defines its expressive structure (more on this later).[13] Abrahams himself was aware of this negative interplay, noting how the creation of new genres, the splitting of art into distinct groupings, or as he expresses it the reduction of literary value "to a function of cultural identity, [which] annexes various literary traditions to various nationalisms" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 210), does not aid the transmission of experience but in fact eliminates it; replacing universality with the void, 'timeless values' with the absence of value as such, where there is no legitimacy in-itself but the mere contestation of power, and where authority is always indeterminate and thus infinitely open for appropriation.

IV

To get a fuller sense of Abrahams' critique of commitment one must begin where Michael Chapman does in his essay on the 'cultural wars' and the state of emergency, with the debate between Cronin and Abrahams in the *Weekly Mail* on the character and status of COSATU 'worker poets'.[14] Where Abrahams sees the text as failing to achieve a proper poetic character, Cronin in return attacks what he sees as the limitation of Abrahams' 'bourgeois aesthetics':

> The principal reason for his misunderstanding lies in his assumption that aesthetics, as opposed to political ideology, is a neutral field of timeless values. The main business of poetry (Abrahams writes) is to pursue the 'high or deep'. But whose high? The high of the crane operator, or the mystical dreamer? And whose deep? That of the exploited miner, or that of the obscurantist melancholic? (qtd. in Chapman, 1992, p. 517)

Cronin rebukes Abrahams, who is supposedly representative of the bourgeois elite, for being either unaware or purposefully scornful of 'ordinary people'. This is, of course, an echo of the critiques already covered - Abrahams, for Cronin as it was for Sole, lacks both the intellectual tools as well as the 'lived experience' to deal adequately with the poetry of

[13] I want to stress that I do not wish to reduce all of 'black art' as being a function of and heir to European aesthetics. I merely wish to show that the valorization of a supposed opposition between 'black' and 'white' art only succeeds in producing each side of the division as their respective negative images, which each producing the other through a process of expulsion and negation.

[14] Chapman's essay, first published in 1987, is written at the same time as the debate between Abrahams and Cronin, against the backdrop of the massive socio-political revaluation taking place in the late 1980s including the declaration of a brief State of Emergency in 1985, which was later reimposed with greater severity in June 1986.

ordinary South Africans. In strict opposition to the defamiliarising tendencies Abrahams deems essential to literature, Cronin would, Chapman suggests, judge the liberating possibilities of literature in strictly Gramscian terms, "in acts of opposition, in symbols of oppositional culture, in confrontational performance, in the affirmation of mimesis where images are directly related to life and, therefore, have narrative power in the real social world" (Chapman, 1992, p. 518), which would trivialise and render illegitimate the literature of the 'high and deep'.

For Abrahams, Cronin's rebuttal is considered to be an instance of a broader phenomenon that he, in his 1996 Alfred and Winfred Hoernlé memorial lecture, refers to as the 'politicisation' of literature. Certainly, at least on the level of immediate reading, Abrahams use of this term is perhaps naïve and, to a certain extent, rather crude; yet, it is deployed in a very specific way, and to get a sense of meaning we may look to who he cites as support. In this case, he turns to Stephen Watson who had, in his earlier essay "Poetry and Politicisation" first published on the eve of the declaration of the State of Emergency in 1986, decried the situation in which the imperative of politicization has overtaken all of life:

> Politicization, it needs to be said at once, does not mean the same thing as 'politics', a word which designates a quite distinct human activity defined by certain boundaries. It does not simply mean that the political aspect of any particular activity is revealed and emphasized. Rather, it refers to a process in which the category of politics becomes primary, fundamental, all-consuming, in which everything else is accordingly reduced to a mere reflection of politics. As such, politicization is nothing other than politics in the process of becoming totalitarian, invading every sphere of human activity and reducing these to its single, monomaniac imperative: *everything is politics*. (Watson, 1990, p. 14)

With respect to the impact of politicisation on literature, a dilemma necessarily arises, says Watson, when one's loyalties are divided between the requirements of art (which, he seems to affirm, exists in an autonomous sphere) and the needs of society. The writer, afflicted by an acute form of self-consciousness, comes to sense and affirm the impotence of art, which is nothing more than an irrelevant self-indulgence when set beside the demands of history and social responsibility. But the distinction that he seems to be drawing between art and politics, between autonomy and social responsibility, is not in fact his own. Watson goes on to reference Sartre's theoretical intervention in the history of aesthetics

staged in the essays collected in *What is Literature?,* focusing specifically on the division he effects in 'the world of literature' (to borrow Abrahams' phrase) between poetry and prose, between poesis and praxis: "So here we are, led by the hand to the moment when the literature of *exis* must be abandoned to inaugurate that of *praxis"* (Sartre, 1988, p. 194). For Sartre, "poets are men who refuse to *utilise* language…nor do they dream of *naming* the world"; whereas the writer of prose "deals with *meaning*", and the art of prose is, by its nature, significative: 'the writer is a *speaker*; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates'' (Sartre, 1988, pp. 29, 28, 35). For Watson, however, the division which Sartre effects between these two modes of expression is less diagnostic that it is "symptomatic of…a world in which, evermore, action not contemplation has become the measure of our being and, often enough, the yardstick with which the value of a work of art has been gauged" (Watson, 1990, p. 11). What is most decisive in this critique is the way in which politicisation, as it is formulated here by Watson, not only describes a certain force or phenomenon but also an era in which everything belonging to human life becomes the locus point of political strategies and categories. Politicisation, in short, describes the situation in which politics calls human life into question.

What does it mean for politics to call human life into question? For Abrahams, as well as for Watson, it refers to the way in which politics "lays claim to the heart and mind" of every human being (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 213). In the Alfred and Winfred Hoernlé memorial lecture, politicisation is determined to administer life (and literature) through two principal categories: 'usefulness' and 'identity'. The former concerns the reduction of the work of art to an instrumental function: "stories, poems and plays were demoted to the status of documents. In common with all artifacts and relics – from fossils to potsherds, from dwellings to clothing, from newspapers to graffiti, from tools to toys – literary texts were to be interpreted as items of historical and sociological evidence" (Abrahams, 1996, p. 15). It must, however, be stressed that Abraham's unease does not amount to an absolute dismissal of these hermeneutic strategies but, instead, as can be seen in Watson, a critical observation of a defining feature of contemporary aesthetics. South African art, in the era of politicisation, is the valorisation of the sensible presentation of an idea at the exclusion of design, arriving precisely at the moment that praxis, as social action, has inundated all. Not dissimilar to this, the reification of identity reduces the significance of the work to

biographical aspect and the author's (as well as the character's) social position; when, Abrahams explain, "his or her class, age, racial identity and ideological orientation became more worth noticing than his or her creative gifts" (Abrahams, 1996, pp. 15-16).[15] Thus identity is a certain functional principle by which the expressive possibilities of the work of art are decided in advance of its composition and reading. Identity therefore has the function as a regulator of meaning. Where the state sought to control the distribution and proliferation of a work's content through the figure of the author, the committed writer attempts to enact a transgression through the prioritising of identity. But in the end the same questions are posed: who is *really* speaking? And with what authenticity? Is this part of *our* literature? For Abrahams, the reification of identity is from the beginning implicated in an aesthetic practice that has blurred the preferred object of the study: the work itself.

So is it the same in those instances when appeals to 'the people' are made, where the collective figuration is gradually displaced from having a definite reference to a concrete reality to being mobilised as an empty rhetorical device. The legitimate essence of 'the people' can never be established with certainty; it is always for appropriation. Mbembe has more recently identified the same operation to be at stake in his *Critique of Black Reason*. "When it comes to the term 'Africa'", he claims, "everything stems from the extraordinary difficulty in producing a true image that can be associated with a word that is also true" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 70). When 'Africa' is involved – and, by extension, what it means to be 'African' – the relation between words, images, and the *thing itself* is never straightforward.

> It is not necessary for the name to correspond to the thing, or for the thing to respond to its name. For that matter, the thing itself at any moment can lose its name, and the name its referent, with no consequence for the statement itself, or for what is said and what is produced, or for who says it and produces it. (Mbembe, 2017, p. 70)

All that matters is the power of appropriation. But it is not only the case that 'Africa' directs us to "a kind of primordial arbitrariness, the arbitrariness of designations" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 70), one is also able to glimpse the way that 'Africa', just as the 'the people' and the

[15] Importantly, as has been said, the force of politicization is not limited to the aesthetic sphere; 'usefulness' and 'identity' not only concern the fundamental character of the work of art (is it useful? Is it black or white?) but the fundamental character of human life as well. What is the fundamental character of the work of art? What is the fundamental character of human life? These questions are indistinguishable.

'author', survives and operates as the most sublime object precisely because of the emptiness, the nothingness, that resides within it. Thoroughly indeterminate, it is infinitely open to speculation; vacant, it is the void upon which all sorts of imaginings can take place: "In other words, to say "Africa" always consists in constructing figures and legends—it matters little which ones—on top of an emptiness" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 71).

What is most curious is the manner in which the work of committed art – mobilising various figures and legends for the sake of 'the people' – in the end becomes its despised opposite. The mimetic faculty of committed art, where, as Cronin says, 'images are directly related to life', itself perverts into a kind of politically-correct formalism. In its search for meaning and the truthful depiction of 'lived experience', the "African writing gesture" (a phrase used by Abrahams in his critique of Can Themba) strays from its original quest, producing works in which only empty symbols and pliant forms survive.[16] By some cruel irony, the more didacticism became the principle of the formal construction and content of art, each work being constrained to teach something, the less successfully it served its original purpose of showing the structure and essence of racism.[17] The formulaic form in which life under apartheid was expressed falsifies the very objectivity that committed art hoped to distil. Abrahams' observations are apt in this regard:

> The paradox is that, simultaneously with the process of undertaking to remake *reality* in some of its aspect, the political vision, by superimposing an interpretive grid of interested theory, remakes the *realism* from which it presumably begins, into, inevitably, something other than realism: interest predetermines values, theory takes precedence over the perceptions of facts, and in any case, the programme of political engagement decides which of the multifarious elements of experience are admissible for serious attention. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 321)

For Abrahams, and here he is close to the argument mobilised by Ndebele against what the latter called 'the spectacle', with committed literature there is inaugurated a process of dehumanising simplification that does not stop with one's enemies but also overtakes one's leaders, one's 'fellow men': "you have to drain him of his complex identifiable humanity and

[16] Ndebele too had warned about the "emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior sign" in his critique of the spectacle: "the complete exteriority of everything"; "spectacular ritual instantly turned into symbol"; "instant meaning"; "thinking is secondary to seeing" (Ndebele, 1986, p. 38)

[17] Although it could equally be said that these works, through their apparent failure, in fact exhibited the ethos of racism far better than they believed they could.

transform him, finally, into a monster" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 322). Committed art is not only an aesthetic failure, but a political one as well. One may, in fact, be so bold to accuse both Cronin and Sole for being guilty for enacting an almost patronising fetishism for the other. Shannon Walsh, in her scathing critique of the mobilisation of the 'poor black' as a trope in contemporary politics, argues that these figures consistently appear as objects rather than subjects of knowledge, employed only as examples that enable the author to affirm their own 'progressive' agenda. Historically for the academic left, she claims, there is a cruelly optimistic attachment with a fungible 'poor black', often bound up with emancipatory and pseudo-revolutionary desires:

> The fundamental antagonism is one in which the poor-Black is a repository for the projected desires and longings of (white) revolutionary fantasy—a strange nostalgia of some impossible vanquished time that existed in the pure space of non-knowledge. (Walsh, 2015, p. 125)

This is a romance, she continues, that is necessarily structured according to a scission and divide between the Human and the necessarily non-Human - the Other, which is always an object of fantasy. The poor-Black becomes object onto which revolutionary desires can be projected and fantasized: "the horrible irony of such a situation is that while the poor-Black as an object of desire might offer an anchor for such 'fantastic investments' towards a better world for the Left, in so doing it effectively denies that world from ever appearing" (Walsh, 2015, p. 125).

V

Mbembe's critique had already identified the source of the vacancy in the symbol. The symbol brings together signifier and signified into a single unified entity and, in doing so, foregrounds the imposition of the scission that makes such a unification possible in the first place. Thus, the symbol is an act of recognition that unites what is from the beginning always-already divided. Moreover, the symbol is diabolic in the sense that it continually exposes this division in each instance of its mobilisation. Symbolic acts, therefore, artificially cover over while also maintaining a metaphysical scission that cuts across all of linguistic reality. It is, then, less an actual reunification but the reminder of a caesura that inhabits the symbol and without which it could not take its form.

Similarly, recalling Cronin's rebuke of Abrahams, it is significant that there "art" never gets defined as such. Observe how Cronin limits himself to breaking it up, by first isolating 'worker's art' in order to then rearticulate it as distinct from the art of the 'bourgeoisie'. This thing called 'art' repeatedly gets articulated and divided time and again through a series of caesuras and oppositions – black/white, African/European – in the domains of philosophy and politics. That is to say, it reveals an approach to art governed by the indeterminateness of the very thing at stake, as if it were only through division and separation that the construction of a unity is possible.

It is precisely these divisive operations that Abrahams notes in his exchange with Ursula Barnett, writing as a literary agent enquiring about translation rights to Oswald Mtshali's poems on behalf of a German publisher. "As Western writers," she says, "I see no reason why [white writers] should not compete for publication by those publishers who wish to publish poetry as such, whatever the theme, and not as African poetry" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 217). To which Abrahams responds:

> When you speak of the African poetry that your German customer and the overseas reader in general are interested in, are you speaking of something in contrast to 'poetry as such'? what could that be? Non-poetry? Non-literature? Some such interpretation would give a certain logic to your argument, but would still leave me wondering what this highly-favoured non-literature-as-such could be. And it would leave me feeling that the black writers of Africa have been insulted. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 219)

Of course, the affirmation of a "African literature" and an "African literary praxis" is part of a wider dismissal of received aesthetic conventions. Yet everywhere this dismissal presupposes the articulation of a non-literature, or non-art. Even where the goal is to recover lost tributaries and possibilities of expression, there is always the enactment of a relation to an enemy or some undesirable element that must be purged.

Accompanying the development of Black Consciousness in South Africa was the deployment of literature as not solely a tool to expose social conditions under apartheid but also a means of self-discovery and expression. Notions of 'art for art's sake' were dismissed as a Western indulgence, as the black artist sought to create a fresh aesthetic that was relevant to their lived experience. As Sole notes in his essay on Mtutuzeli Matshoba, "notions of subjecting their literature to, or evaluating it through, pre-existing notions of

literary 'standards' were rebuffed…in a famous quote from 1980, anthologist Mothabi Mutloatse stressed the need for black artists to 'pee, spit and shit on literary convention'" (Sole, 2001, p. 102). A critical application of taste against the grain thus becomes the defining tool of the artist, which is not unlike the "doctrine of originality" that, for Agamben, introduced the most radical split into the meaning of artistic production (Agamben, 1999b, p. 62). Any suggestion of a common tradition or space in which art can be evaluated and in which different artists may meet "became a *commonplace* in the pejorative sense" (Agamben, 1999b, p. 62), an unbearable encumbrance that always threatens the artist with a loss of identity. The negative consequences of this enthusiasm to affirm and maintain one's identity against the 'common' can be measured in our contemporary age, in which a hyper-fantasized and fetishistic notion of 'difference' invades all thought on art. Consequences exposed in self-conscious performances of 'bad' art that assert beauty in its negative form. The paranoid way in which 'Eurocentricity' is incessantly identified is crude and erroneous not only for the fact that Western aesthetics has never been defined by a singular and homogenous perspective on art, but also, for Abrahams, that its employment informs an aesthetic praxis that creates a canon of art by way of its absence (Abrahams, 1996, p. 21). This is a canon that can never be openly presented and argued for as such, for it is merely the product of a universal negation – not a new canon, but the absence of the canon, the canon-as-absence, its negative image.

As a result of these developments, the task of literary scholarship has entered into an indefinite crisis. Without any established theoretical or conceptual tools to draw upon, the 'cultural wars' that defined the artistic landscape under apartheid has realized the Hegel thesis concerning the "death of art" in the most catastrophic way. For both the censor and their counterpart, the encounter with a work of art is merely an occasion to distinguish between art and non-art, white and black praxis, European and African traditions. What is essential for both of these figures is the isolation of a pure force of judgement that allows for the continuous scrutiny of the status and definitions of art. Nothing can limit this force; nor can any work of art escape its legislative powers. The unleashing of this critical power has reduced art to the status of something resembling *bare life* – life that has been separated from its form. From the scission between art and non-art there follows the division between bare life, which suffers sovereign power, and the multiple forms of

abstract and empty identities which rest upon it. The ceaseless production of new conceptualizations of art – black-art, white-art, trans-art, black-women's-art, global-south-art - and the proliferation of discrete fields of scholarship in the contemporary age bear witness to this.

Although, in the end Abrahams continued to hold on to the belief that literature could operate as an "ethical agent in society" (Abrahams, 1996, p. 25). It is a matter of holding open the possibility of what he calls 'identification':

> Identification with humankind does not imply a negation of selfhood…The more developed – that is to say the more individualised the identity, the more significant the identification. A greater psychic space has been traversed. Conversely, significance is less when the identification takes the form of solidarity with one's own nominal brothers and sisters, one's own side, in a political, economic, religious or social conflict. Indeed, solidarity on the one hand and the imaginative act of human identification on the other require entirely different things of the self. Submergence the one, transcendence the other. (Abrahams, 1996, p. 25)

Typical of Abrahams, these thoughts are left disappointingly underdeveloped – this is the only instance in which this term 'identification' is deployed. Which is not to say that the question of ethics, and indeed how it is bound up with the question of literature, does not constitute a central part in his work. Does identification involve a reference to and recuperation of 'timeless value'? And how might one, to take things a step further, represent these values, with them having such an uneasy foundation precisely because of their immeasurability? A turn to Abrahams' poetry and fiction is necessary in this regard. We will discover that there is something else at stake. What can be seen in his poetic and fictional work is less a recuperation as such, but a *real* crisis, that is, an exposure of the emptiness that resides with our fallen language.

* * *

2

THE QUESTION AND PROMISE OF LITERATURE

Responding to a questionnaire edited by Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk, published in the collection *Exchanges* in 1991, Abrahams appeals to an ethics that is intrinsically tied up with an idea of literature. This attempt is not unique; there are several instances in his writings where the issue of a community bound by a love of art is reflected upon. What interests me about his response in *Exchanges*, however, is the formulations he uses to make his appeal. One is familiar: literature involves an imaginative act of recognition; the other, however, is new: literature contains within it an inherent subversive and transgressive character, enacting a disruption of all orthodoxy and, to this end, the power of the law. Our question, which will guide our reading of his poetic work and his first novel *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan*, published in 1977, is concerned with understanding and making sense of this transgressive character as a principle of writing and community. The question, in other words, is as such: what is the originary principle around which literature and community can be articulated?

Although the polemic coordinates of his response in *Exchanges* may be familiar to us by now, it is nevertheless worth recounting the key points of his position. For Abrahams, the history of aesthetic enquiry in South Africa is grounded in a mimetic theory of art, the idea that art is an imitation of reality, offering a representation of the world, or communicating a concept. That there is, in other words, something within the work of art which is trying to be shown or said that is distinct from the way it is shown or said, and which necessitates a form of engagement that is explanatory and interpretive. It is the task of the critic, in accordance with this view, to excavate, apprehend, probe, and finally summon from the work its true meaning by, first, separating the medium from the message (a rose is not simply a rose but

a symbol of love; a poem is not simply a poem but a sign of culpability).[18] As a result, there is nothing in the work of art that may count and distinguish it as a singular, luminous thing. Instead, the work is reduced to a series of abstract coordinates, such that what is undergone by the critic is less an experience of the work of art as such but simply political experiences, theoretical experiences, an experience of everything but the work of art that now appears transfigured before them. For Abrahams, the work of art doesn't exist to show or say something but should instead seen to be *doing* something, and it is on the basis of this generalized *doing* (its *being*-literature) that the work demands our attention. Not however to encourage further the proliferation of abstract categories that succeed only to increase our distance from art, but instead to undergo an amorous encounter with it: "to cause recognition of the human face by means of involving aesthetic pleasure" (Abrahams, 1991, p. 3). But there is something deeply dissatisfying about this appeal to the "human face". In a gesture that is typical of his work, a formulation is made but is lacking a full account. Yet, the importance of this formulation cannot be overstated. We are thus obliged to speculate on its sense.

While there is certainly no evidence that Abrahams had read or was familiar with the work of Emmanuel Levinas,[19] that both employ the same lexicon is too uncanny a coincidence not to pursue a link between them. The significance of the "face" in the thought of the latter reveals a difference between the way things are given to consciousness and the way things are spontaneously encountered in the world - a difference between the order of ontology and that of ethics. Whereas things are available to consciousness in sensible experience through the mediation of forms or concepts, the face is present, according to Levinas, in its "refusal to be contained":

> The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment *destroys and overflows* the plastic image it leaves me. (Levinas, 1969, pp. 50-1, my emphasis)

[18] As we had discussed in the previous chapter, the incessant attempt to identify the work by extracting from it a meaningful confession is a violation in the sense that it introduces a scission in the work of art between its form and content, rejecting one half of it as a mere accessory while reifying the other.

[19] For a useful introduction to Levinas' thought, see: Hand, Seán, 1989. *The Levinas Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

The face is thus a "phenomenon" (if it remains at all sensible to continue use this term here) that properly belongs to the category of the transcendental, expressing a relation to the nonidentical, the particular, the singular, the Other to whom one is referred in a manner that is neither dialectical nor dialogical, and whose "appearance" is premised on a heteronomy that precedes their sensible, conscious apprehension (de Vries, 2005, p. 348). In this ethical, and far from moral, relation one is exposed to the "humanism of the other human being", beyond whatever epistemological, axiological, and indeed juridical-political criterion through which the human is defined. "Our humanity", writes Levinas, "consists in being able to recognize this priority of the other…It is here in this priority of the other man over me that, before my admiration for creation, well before my search for the first cause of the universe, God comes to mind" (Levinas, 2001, pp. 235-36).

It is indeed possible to find, in Abrahams's work, a consideration of art which approaches the sentiment of the passage above. He decries the "deadness of theory" (Rabinowitz, 1996, p. 43) and the unfortunate professionalisation of aesthetic criticism, who reveal the secrets of a works meaning and value by erecting and aggressively processing them through a set of hermeneutic codes, failing in this respect to engage with the demand art makes upon our attention. "Its creation", he writes, "occurs as part of a human tradition, possibly on the whole indifferent to the responses of the individual beholder" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 325). In Abrahams's time as it is for ours, when we think of the relation between ethics and art, we think of this relation only in terms of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of its message; or, indeed, whether a culture, or a group of people are maligned or misrepresented. If an ethical experience of the work in the sense of an encounter with the "face" is at stake here, then the mimetic theory of art which props up the practice of aesthetic hermeneutics must be disregarded in favour of a form of engagement which prioritises, before an admiration or condemnation of its creation, its divinity, its humanness and its being part of a human tradition, its *doing-human,* which Levinas describes as its 'destruction of the image' and Abrahams as its 'indifference to the individual beholder'.[20]

It is on the basis of this indifference that art, for Abrahams, will always survive the powers which seek to appropriate and disfigure it. Art, he writes, referring in this case to an

[20] It is beyond the ambit of the current chapter to excavate what this engagement would look like (at least in terms of content. We will however seek to perform it).

admission made by Trotsky, cannot be approached as one would politics, not because artistic creation is a strictly religious or mystical rite, but because of arts power to always subvert the law, any law, by the fact of its disinterestedness, its disengagement, its uselessness:

> In this sense (rather than the proto-revolutionary subversiveness the radical critics praise whenever they discern it) literature as an agent of the inner life, in the limitlessness of its individual variety, the immensity of its visionary freedom, is inherently subversive vis-à-vis orthodoxies and hegemonies. (Abrahams, 1991, p. 5)

Literature is thus subversive in at least two senses. The first concerns its freedom to name the world, to express and invent the emotions. What is important in this regard is less the content of the expression, than the expression of a capacity for naming and aesthetic invention. Literature, it may be said, is an act of (and a history of) will and refers all who encounter it to the unique and singular will that creates for itself a shape for its own expression. Recall the emphasis of style in Abrahams's thought. Where style is not one side of the putative opposition between form and content but is instead the foremost distinctive feature of the work that, preceding the moment of conceptual communication, is the form of an exultation, the excitation of life in aesthetic form; the delirium of freedom, the rapture of language.[21] The reader is in no uncertain sense invited to participate in the kinds of energy, vitality, and expressiveness which are embodied in the work. Not, it must be stressed, to understand how a work refers to the will in the way a picture of a flower might refer to *that* flower, but to be captivated by and have one's faculties and responsiveness engaged by the expressiveness of the work of art - and, in the end, the value of this expressiveness. It is certainly with this captivation in mind that Abrahams would write: "I believe that we find our reality in each other and that our self-fulfilment is completed precisely in giving ourselves away" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 326).

The second sense, linked to the first, concerns literature's refusal and resistance to containment. To the law which everywhere seeks to subdue and suppress its vital energy, literature enacts the most profound transgression. In fact, the amorous captivation with style already contains in itself the conditions for the suspension of habitual and ritualistic

[21] "Art," writes Susan Sontag, who here shares a proximity of concerns with Abrahams "is seduction…but art cannot seduce without the complicity of the experiencing subject" (Sontag, 1982, p. 143).

responses, disrupting the homogenous order that defines the 'current state of things', while at the same time opening a passage to what remains (and has always been) outside the prevailing arrangement; a more original, authentic sphere.

I

The problem, of course, is that the integrity of this sphere is conditioned upon the impossibility of its delineation. The problem, in other words, that is introduced with the notion of a radical freedom is that this freedom must remain absolutely irreducible to conceptual appropriation, and yet by affirming it one cannot but give it a sense and so threaten to betray it. In an early essay "Violence and Metaphysics" published alongside *Of Grammatology* in 1967 Derrida mobilises this problem against Levinas' privileging of radical difference as the basis of the ethical encounter with the other. Derrida suggests that Levinas' claim that the absolutely alterity of the 'face' refuses conceptualisation is undermined from the beginning, since in order to have meaning as an Other, to be recognised in words with respect to a radical difference, the Other has already in 'appeared' in language:

> It is impossible to encounter the alter ego…impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not appear for an ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally. (Derrida, 1978, pp. 153-154)

In what sense can one think or represent absolute alterity if, strictly speaking, it is unthinkable and unrepresentable? Similarly, regarding the possibility of an ethical encounter in art, although there is an insistence on addressing each work individually the problem that inevitably arises is that the sheer act of understanding and heeding respect to a work's singularity inevitably involves relating it to certain ideas (especially in those instances where the work is said to challenge them), to other works and styles, or situating it within the historical moment that is the real condition for its creation. With respect to understanding literatures subversive tendencies, which is linked to its radical freedom, the problem for Abrahams (as well as, perhaps in a different way, for Levinas) is that of finding a position from which to speak that does not get assimilated by the prevailing axiological and juridical-political orders. It would be foolish, however, to assume that such a position can be

created merely by declaring oneself to be outside of these fields. For Derrida, even if one cannot truly encounter the other, nor totally accede to a position on the outside, "this impossibility and this imperative can themselves be thematised" (Derrida, 1978, p. 154).

Isn't this gesture of thematization precisely what Abrahams identifies to be at stake in Serote's poems, which he says resists the temptation to situate the origin of thought and expression in the symbolic, and indeed attempts to locate the taking place of poetry in an individual experience that emerges in resistance to this order?[22] Serote's poetry is thus, on the one hand, a reflection upon the symbolic as a totalising expressive category while, on the other, gesturing to the possibility of a stance outside it, in an attempt, Abrahams explains, to clear his personal experience from it. An attempt all the more significant because of its mobilisation, rather than mere abandonment, of the symbol. On this reading, the individual experience that comes to expression in Serote's poems take on a peculiar paradoxical form in that it at once takes shape in the symbolic field and yet also sets itself up as condemning and being beyond it, thus holding open the promise of an individual experience which surpasses the calculations of the symbolic-political.

The difficulty that nevertheless remains is that if there is an individual experience of the type that Abrahams identifies here, an experience of a freedom or of an individuality that escapes calculation, then there is no way to represent or speak about it directly – in which case the question arises, in what precise sense '*is'* it?

Abrahams's own poetics certainly constitute an attempt to express this individuality. An attempt which has its basis in the emphasis he places on individual experience and the extent to which he places "inwardness" at the origin of literary expression. "Arts", he writes, "have their essential existence, their meaning in the realm of individual inwardness" (Abrahams, 1991, p. 3); it is an expression of the human heart and of the phenomenon that is human subjectivity. In opposition to what he perceives to be an overwhelming didactic stance taken by 'committed' South African writers, who neglect the interiority of the subject for the sake of explicating a path of action,[23] Abrahams in his own work sets out to cultivate

[22] See his reading on Serote in Abrahams, 1988a, pp. 198-9.

[23] Recall here his criticism of Can Themba: "[The Suit] fails to be moving or important, precisely because it doesn't have the real intimacy, the involvement that would have brough the main character to life. Themba had an idea, but not a feeling" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 140).

a language that is adequate to the complexities of the inner life, a language that is not primarily concerned with communicating a content, but rather a subjective affect or tone. Consequently, particularly in the case of his first novel *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan* (which will receive our attention later), it is not the story, its plot and development, that takes precedence but rather the presentation of interiority, which in Abrahams's rendering is neither immediately concerned with outward results, nor with objective thought and its goal-orientated demands, but is instead an expression of the realm of thought as such, with the processes by which thought takes shape. What is communicated in his novel as well as his poetry is a process wherein the subject, in a more intimate and indeed disquieting way than what any conceptual system could offer, comes to be aware of and is forced to confront the fact of their own thinking, of the subject's existence as a thinking being. A fact which can never simply be undergone and experienced abstractly but which the writing subject endures immediately, prior to the possibility of refusing or accepting it.

Here we are approaching a second important divergence between Abrahams and his 'committed' contemporaries. More significant than any specific literary touchstones or inherited stylistic influences is the thoroughness with which Abrahams has absorbed into the very centre of his work a self-conscious awareness of his own creative activity. The effort to expound upon an objective truth is wholly suspended, for in the realm of inwardness the question of the truth of one's beliefs is not determined by the existence of the object of belief but rather by the way one believes it. In other words, what counts is the *relation* one bears to the object, where relation is, as Rudolph Gasché[24] describes it, the most "minimal thing": "a minimal thing not because it is the least possible thing but because it constitutes the philosophical 'thing' in the sense of issue and matter of concern at its most minute" (Gasché, 1999, p. 4). Without relation, which in Gasché's reading "nothing but the trait of being-held-toward-another" (Gasché, 1999, p. 9), thought would not be possible. For it is only upon the always prior opening and possibility of a relation, *relationality as such*, that something like an intentional thought oriented toward an object can take place at all.[25]

[24] Gasché began his career translating Derrida's major essays into German. Later, his major work *The Tain and the Mirror* would seek to locate Derrida's thought within the phenomenological tradition. For an introduction to Gasché's work and its influence on literary theory see Guerlac, S. (2011). Response to the Work of Rodolphe Gasché. *CR: The New Centennial Review, 11*(3), 19-30.

[25] Indeed, in relation, neither the subject nor the object can have a stable place but are always preceded by a mere potential: "no consideration of the notion of relation can abstract from the fact that the *relatum* to

Yet, as Gasché significantly adds, if relation is nothing but this quality of a being-toward the potential of something other, a quality which provides relation with an identity, relation (or relationality as such) also shows itself to be without identity and a stable essence of its own but is too something like a pure potential that always exceeds its actualisation: “Does the referring to another that constitutes relation affect relation itself, its own intelligible identity, especially if one takes into account that the other, even if it is the Ab-solute, only occupies the space of otherness?” (Gasché, 1999, p. 9).

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that Abrahams’s notion of “inwardness” corresponds to the pure potentiality of relation. While identity reveals the subject in its abstract universality, inwardness proclaims instead an essential indeterminateness, that subjectivity is first and foremost nothing but a pure potentiality in itself before and beyond any qualitative determination. In this way, the sphere that inwardness coincides with is the transcendental: ‘transcendental’ because it always exceeds categorisation while being the condition upon which the category is built. Inwardness, as with relation, is that which always already precedes any named thing while also ‘naming’ the conditions under which something could be named.[26] Moreover, inwardness, besides being the ‘name’ that overflows and destroys all names, also describes a movement of thought that sustains itself in pure contemplation beyond and indifferent to the strictures of knowledge production, in which what is at stake in thinking is thinking itself. And a thought that thinks itself does not remain transfixed by an object, tarrying away to discover its truth; it thinks only its capacity, its potential to think, which if isolated in a state of purity is always corruptive to power.

II

In my view, in Abrahams’s poetry this pure potential is at stake, taking the form of a question and a putting into question – of the individual who writes and of the literature that is the former’s sensible presentation. He is certainly a writer for whom the subject of literature, in both senses of the one who writes and the topic under discussion, is literature itself. His poetry - in much more overt ways than his novels - rather than remaining in the

which another is held is by definition only within the place of the other…[similarly] if the subject of a relation is dependent in this manner on the other, the subject is never at its place, either. In its place, too, there is "only" a subject to come” (Gasché, 1999, p. 8).

[26] For Agamben, the transcendental “does not signify any determinate object, but rather that which is always already received in every received object and predicated in every predication" (Agamben, 1982, p. 21).

sphere of the transmission of objects, suspends this transmissibility by enquiring after how it may transmit those objects in the first place.

This question is not, to be sure, a question that presupposes an answer. For just as is the case in Gasché's thought on relation, to approach something as a question is to be already decided that a thing (and can one even say 'thing' here?) is indeterminate in some way. And, furthermore, in so far as the question establishes a relation to something indeterminate, there is no guarantee that the question itself is not 'in question'. But even if the question is indeterminate speech, it nevertheless puts one in touch with the pure potential for representation that exceeds any discrete act, precisely because this indetermination and uncertainty is an 'experience' of the originary *possibilisation* (the possibility of possibility as such) in the suspension of specific possibilities. Abrahams's poetry, taking the form of a question, is the communication of a potential for communication. The kernel around which his work revolves and attempts to expose is not simply the author-subject behind the text but instead an inwardness, the pure potentiality for representation: the taking place of poetry itself. The question his work raises, therefore, is *the question of literature*, of its foundation and condition of possibility. This is a question that is not posed from outside the work but is immanent to the writing itself. Abrahams's work is the emergence of a question, is nothing an uninterrupted questioning.

Dan Wylie, in his essay "Speaking Crystal's", offers a reading of Abrahams's poetry that acknowledges the importance of the question as a key formal element. For Wylie, the question functions as a polemic performative concerning Abrahams's anxieties as a South African writers under apartheid whose absorption with the 'inwardness of things' was dismissed as self-indulgent liberalist leisure. For Abrahams, says Wylie, this dismissal amounted to the triumph of dogma over experience, the surrender of inwardness to the delusions of the masses, evident in the following poem:

> Poems? Dare we enjoy such shapes?
> Professors of today,
> earnestmen of justice, priests who invoke
> the holy masses of masses say:
> 'The mass extruded from the choiceless mass
> whose struggle is meaning

suffices for the weight of art.
The rest is custom, artifice and privilege,
pacts between the blindly self-elect
elect what they'll call excellent.' (Abrahams, 1995, p. 18)

Here, writes Wylie, is portrayed a view "which wishes to subsume all within its own rationalisation, to destroy or banish as frivolous the dissenting voice" (Wylie, 2002, p. 105). What it expresses, in other words, is a situation wherein all forms of life are made to appear, so to speak, before a tribunal that withholds the sovereign right to judge and dismiss those forms of life it deems inappropriate. While reading his poetry one is always afforded a sense, as Wylie notes, of the extent to which the gesture of accusation is embedded with his poems.

Busy in my skin in my house, I receive
rumours and news. Again and again I hear
about too much death, too much pain,
too much emptiness, the culpabilities,
relentless causes and terrible ends. (Abrahams, 1995, p. 14)

The first line, says Wylie, enacts the white suburban isolation which poets like Abrahams were so often accused. What he hears come from afar and never directly, "muffled, distorted/diminished". The poets 'business', moreover, is easily interpreted as an avoidance of the reality of violence taking place outside of his own surroundings. But at once absorbing the judging gaze into the very centre of the verse, the poet responds to these accusations by declaring that he too is not safe in his skin. His house contains "sufficient travail"; the apparent comforts he is granted "are not vouchsafed":

I must carve them out of each slippery,
hard-textured day, must grapple
with the knotted minutes for those luxuries:
my bare subsistence, a glint of meaning. (Abrahams, 1995, p. 14)

The reference to 'those luxuries' is deployed ironically: it is not his word, but those of the accuser. Here, Wylie observes, the poem takes a personal, existential turn: "[he] is no less threatened by existential annihilation than those for whom the other, political 'struggle' is

being waged" (Wylie, 2002, p. 107). The equivocation on the nature of 'struggle' may be problematic, unless, as Wylie suggests, the argumentative point is taken not as a dismissal of the wider, political struggle, but as a protest against the wholesale dismissal of his own (Wylie, 2002, p. 107). There is, in addition, a vital affirmation at stake. Emerging here are the outlines of an ethics rooted in the empathetic recognition of the bodily morality and materiality of the human being which is obfuscated in idealistic moral orders. In connection with this, doubt and fragmentation emerging as two important themes:

> The snapped, permitted piece
> participates in the
> continuum, the self
> unended in the whole of
> numberless others. (Abrahams, 1995, p. 54)

The image of a self 'unended' here registers the critical difference between what Abrahams, we may recall, refers to as 'solidarity' and 'identification'. "Abrahams", writes Wylie, "imagines himself a 'piece', at once painfully removed from the whole, 'snapped' off, but 'permitted' rather than condemned, participating not through a self neither irrevocably removed from society nor lost within it, but one connected to its multiplicity of 'others' through persistent acts of the imagination" (Wylie, 2002, p. 105)**.** Writing, in the end, is precisely the imaginative performance this imaginative union, which however is only possible through the curiously paradoxical situation where distance emerges as the sole condition for connection. That, in other words, connection (communication) is not something that can be guaranteed in advance of its event, and whose promise is what gives writing its vital exigency.[27] Ivan Vladislavic, referring to one of Abrahams's poems, bestows upon his work the paradoxical title "A Science of Fragments".[28]

> Fragments neither close
> nor open meaning:
> they may mean anything except

[27] Moreover, as Wylie points out, the 'permitted' reveals a concern over who or what is doing this 'permitting'. "Here an anxiety over the distribution of power lurks" (Wylie, 2002, p. 105)**.**

[28] See Vladislavic's tribute to Abrahams collected in Friedman, Graeme & Roy Blumenthal, 1998. "A Writer in Stone: South African Writers Celebrate the 70th Birthday of Lionel Abrahams". Cape Town & Johannesburg : David Philip Publishers.

wholeness, except certainty. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 54)

The fragment – the fragmentary – is neither the thought of an autonomous substance nor, as is usually implied, a prefiguration of a whole to come (or that has been). Instead, with the fragment, a new relation – relationality as such – is given to thought and whose expression is taken up by poetry as a task. “A Science of fragments” is not a science that remains unaccomplished but instead holds out the promise of a different order of accomplishment.

But the accusatory gesture is not only directed toward the subject. Its is also a question addressed inwardly, specifically whether his poetry is to be considered ‘poetry’. He echoes, even internalises, as Wylie notes, his own critics accusations (Wylie, 2002, p. 106); His poetry invokes, in other words, the conventions that determine one’s understanding of what constitutes (good, or appropriate) literature. It is, therefore, a poetry that is from the very beginning ‘in question’, and one which is involved in a reflexive investigation into the powers that decide what constitutes ‘poetry’. A question concerning, on the one hand, certain aesthetic conventions that are guaranteed by the state and maintained in law, and on the other those upheld by critics and academics. But in a more meaningful way, it is the very presumption made by both the law and the guardians of literary studies to posit in advance what literature is (in addition to the question about their power to judge what constitutes literate) that is precisely what is in question here. This question regarding the essence of literature is not however solely pursued with the intention of discovering it. It is instead a matter of understanding what Derrida, in his reading of Kafka's deceptive parable “Before The Law”, means by literature’s “subversive juridicity” (Derrida, 1992, p. 216)**.** Literature, he explains, may only receive an identity from the law (the theory, the criticism) that, in a certain sense, allows it to ‘appear’ and confers upon it the title of literature. But if literature is wholly dependent on the law for its identity, it is equally what precedes and conditions the possibility of the law. The specific identity of a literary text, writes Derrida, derives from its “power to make the law, beginning with its own":

> a power to produce performatively the statements of the law, of the law that literature can be, and not just of the law to which literature submits. Thus literature itself makes the law, emerging in that place where the law is made. Therefore, under certain

> determined conditions, it can exercise the legislative power of linguistic performativity to sidestep existing laws from which, however, it derives protection and receives its conditions of emergence. (Derrida, 1992, p. 216)

Having the ability to 'produce performatively' the law, in the sense of assuming its garb and theatrically adopting its role, literature must thus precede, be prior to, and overwhelm the law. But as Gasché notes in his powerful reading of this difficult passage, when literature engages in this *play* with the law, at the moment in other words that it seizes the law and confers an identity upon itself, it necessary at the same time jeopardises the possibility of having a stable identity: "In short, then, before the law, literature makes the law and gives it to itself. This is how it acquires an identity and specificity, which, however, obtain only to the extent that they are sanctioned by the law that they subvert" (Derrida, 1992, p. 204). What is singular about literature – to the extent that it is subject to the question "what is literature?" – is its peculiar and paradoxical relation to its own status as 'literature'. Indeed, Derrida refuses to see literature as 'subversive' if what is implied is that literature remains dialectically bound to the presumed aesthetic norms of the question "what is literature?". Additionally, the specificity of the work is neither linked to its autonomy with respect to these conventions; nor to the idea that literature is engaged in a more authentic, pure form of communication that is denied to 'ordinary language'; nor, finally, in those instances where it performance of its own falsity and artifice. For Derrida, the authority of the question "what is literature?" is traversed from the beginning by an aporetic logic. Of course, the question itself serves to discriminate between what may fall within and without the category of 'literature', but also, as in the South African case, between so called 'committed' and 'bourgeois' literatures, and equally 'black' and 'white' literatures. Not only is it the case that these boundaries are wholly artificial – where the identity of each category being wholly determined and inevitably contaminated by its opposite – but, more significantly, that the very posing of the question requires a reference to an authority that is not itself subject to the question. To ask the question "what is literature?" therefore is not only to set boundaries so as to easily discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate, black and white, but instead to paradoxically yield to the fragility of any such attempt. It is, in other words, to make the boundary a function of the excess that inhabits it and upon which it receives its conditions of possibility. And although literature is conferred its identity

by the law, literature too is beyond the law and obeys a different authority than that which is circumscribed by the question.[29]

But this is not to presume that there is in literature an affirmation of an anarchic lawlessness that would constitutes a law unto itself beyond the reaches of normative law. Although the law and literature – or, say, the philosophical question and the poetic performance – remain dissymmetrically disjointed from one another, they do not however exist in isolation. While literature lawlessness with respect to the law belongs to the law as its condition of possibility, it is equally the case that literatures subversive character receives its measure from the law that interrupts it. For Derrida, what is essential to literature is this play with the logic of the law, that literature neither be it is said or professes to be, but nor simply what it is not. What remains at work in a literary text is

> an essential rapport with the play of framing and the paradoxical logic of boundaries, which introduces a kind of perturbation in the "normal" system of reference, while simultaneously *revealing* an essential structure of referentiality. It is an obscure revelation of referentiality which does not make reference, which does not refer, any more than the eventness of the event is itself an event. That this nevertheless makes up a work is perhaps a gesture toward literature. An insufficient gesture, perhaps, but a necessary one: there is no literature without a work, without an absolutely singular performance. (Derrida, 1992, p. 213)

With this in mind, it would seem to be necessary to provide an import corrective to what Wylie suggests is “the highly individualistic metaphysic" at stake in Abrahams’s poetry. Rather than emerging as an artifact attesting to a transparent self-presence, Abrahams’s poetry, as our readings to follow will show, are in fact thoroughly indeterminate, and in fact take their measure from their indeterminateness not only in relation to the question posed to it from the outside but too with respect to their own self legislation as autonomous, self-bound works. Moreover, it is this indeterminateness – or what Wylie correctly highlights as the centrality of “doubting brokenness” (Wylie, 2002, p. 105) – itself constitutes an attempt to think through a position that is not available to power. As I have been painstakingly attempting to show, one cannot simply suppose that such a position can be ascended to

[29] “In the fleeting moment,” writes Derrida, “when it plays the law, a literature passes literature. It is on both sides of the line that separates law from the outlaw, it splits the being-before-the-law, it is at once, like the man from the country, ‘before the law’ and ‘prior to the law’” (Derrida, 1992, p. 216)

merely by devaluing oneself outside the field of the law. Instead, such a position is available only to the subject that, in a decisive gesture, can escape the logic and the demands of law, which as we have seen always paradoxically includes and accommodates the possibility of its own suspension. For Abrahams it is radical doubt and indetermination, defining a subject that does not fully coincide with itself and who is a scandal to logic, not only in the sense that it remains unavailable for categorisation but that it forces the work of categorisation to unwork itself, that is capable of negotiation the problem of a situation of manichean conflict.

It is possible that Abrahams did not know his own radicalism. For here writing is called upon to abandon all the principles that would seek to contain it, that is to say, all the laws that guarantee and maintain the current state of things. Not, however, to turn back to some previous arrangement but instead to go beyond it and all the concepts that have hitherto defined human life and which have maintained the inertia of history as it mutates increasingly pernicious forms of oppression. Writing, having the form of a radical questioning, holds out the promise of a radical change in epoch, performing an 'obscure revelation of referentiality' that while not naming what it references nevertheless keeps open the space for it to enter:

> Retreating from these orders
> on steps remote from soil and growth
> we find a butterfly inert.
> Taken for dead and 'a final symbol',
> Once on her hand it stirs
> and spreads its symmetry.
> 'It's very much alive,' she says
> of an order we can't make but may receive. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 35)

III

One cannot of course associate Abrahams's thought with the demand of commitment. Indeed, so much of his concerns are built in opposition to such dictates. But in the essay "On Being here" he offers a reflection on the topic, to register his own style of commitment, in an attempt to wrest it away from its various ideological appropriations by thinking a form of engagement that shares its logic with the transcendental already encountered with the face.

Here, however, he defines this dimension as the "here"; that which is always already implicated in the human habitation of space without itself being named.[30] What is at stake, in other words, is the transcendence of the event of "being here" with respect to everything which, in this event, is said about it. But how could one's "being here" receive and take on a definite sense if the possibility of its sensibility is only consequent upon its taking place? Human subjectivity conveys its "being here" before it can communicate its "here", revealing in this way the principle of thrownness which Heidegger identified as the principal basis of Dasein which 'finds' itself as having been brought into the world, but not of its own accord. Abrahams would thus attempt to grasp the structure of commitment from an understanding of an original acquiescence that lies at the foundation of human subjectivity. Curiously, but most significantly, the possibility of responsibility is not something that can be chosen responsibly.

> The commitment to being here becomes, simply, the commitment to being oneself in the place that is part of oneself…My life's meaning is involved with my being here; I see to have no choice in the matter. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 320)

So, from the beginning, there is "no choice". At the point when the human subject arrives in its "here", this coming into presence is betrayed by the fact that its occurrence precedes my freedom to accept it. And, perhaps more unsettlingly, that this "here" is not itself a place but a no place, nothing that is but the pure potentiality-for-place. There is a critical proximity of this thought to the violence of revelation formulated by Levinas when he asks: "Wouldn't Revelation be precisely a reminder of this consent prior to freedom and non-freedom?" (Levinas, 1990, p. 37)**.** In his commentary on the Talmudic tractate "Shabbath" in his essay "The Temptation of Temptation" Levinas urges us to conceive of revelation as having its basis in always prior form of relation, and consider it as a 'reminder' of a consent given before any exercise of a freedom of thought.[31] For the teaching of revelation, which the Torah is, cannot be accepted after deliberation: "the recipient of the message cannot yet benefit from the discernment this message is to bring him" (Levinas, 1990, p. 36). As it is

[30] The "here" is transcendental in the sense that it does not signify any determinate space but rather that which is always already presumed in every determination of space and supposed in every portioning of an area.

[31] The difficult freedom of being Jewish, writes Chris Fynsk with this passage in mind, "is a choice between the Torah or death, and thus not much of a freedom at all" (Fynsk, 2013, p. 20).

with the epiphany of the human face, the content of the Torah's teaching would on the level of human subjectivity confirm a prior for of adherence that precedes the possibility of discernment.

For Abrahams, commitment would be the name for this form of relation, and whose integrity is not determined by norms of conduct (since it precedes the articulation of such norms) but by the structure of a subjectivity that 'consents' to the principle of its "here". This consent from which commitment unfolds derives, as Abrahams declares in his "University of Natal Address", from the very structure of human subjectivity in language. Human subjectivity is born, he argues, in a responsiveness to the other:

> I believe that we find our reality in each other and that our self-fulfilment is completed precisely in *giving ourselves away*. Moreover, our humanity is bound up with language…Language discovers and defines the self. But it absolutely cannot do so without simultaneously relating us to others. (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 326, my emphasis)

It is only in this *giving oneself away*, in the radical exposure to an obligation that human subjectivity receives a sense; that is, only in its response to the claim of the other which exceeds and surpasses it. Significantly, the form of commitment takes the shape of an address. What is more, every linguistic art, including literary ones, follows this order of relation wherein commitment precedes articulation of that to which one has committed oneself. “Being here” as the condition of possibility for signification as such. Indeed it is poetry, for Abrahams, that contains that experience of language that, in every one of its discrete acts, discloses the dimension of the “here”, and experiences above all the ‘miracle’ that language exists.

According to the theory of poetic dictation enumerated by Agamben, poetry is less the notation of an object (even where this object is thought itself) but instead the singular exposition of an experience of language, of languages taking-place. An early theorisation of poetic dictation can be found in *Stanzas*, where Agamben offers a powerful reading of a tercet from Dante’s “Purgatorio”, the second part of the *Divine Comedy*, that reads as follows: “I am the one who, when Love inspires me, takes not, and in the manner that he dictates within I go signifying” (qtd. in Agamben, 1993, p. 124). While, on a certain level, this tercet conforms to the definition of language as “notation and sign of a passion of the soul”

(Agamben, 1993b, p. 127), for Agamben it in fact radically calls into the question the idea of language as an exposition of thought. “Dante,” he writes, “instead characterised poetic expression precisely as the dictation of an inspiring love” (Agamben, 1993c, p. 127). Love, amorous experience, is not a modality of the understanding but rather a generative principle or space that provides the possibility for thought to take shape. It is precisely this theory of dictation which would provide the most appropriate means to engage with Abraham’s poetry, to trace how the “here” as an ‘inspiring love’ (and commitment, as an amorous experience) affords an experience of the linguistic event wherein the poem assents in an originary manner to the taking-place of language. Abrahams’s topic, in the sense of the place from which poetic expression arises and begins, is inwardness. Of course, inwardness – as should be clear – is altogether similar to the logic of the “here”. The experience of the taking-place of language is above all an individual experience, that is it has its basis in individual inwardness. Where the dimension of identity, which is to say the universal – and what he (perhaps naïvely) calls the political – assures the correctness and ensures the categorisation of peoples, inwardness sets off after the very advent of discourse and promises the possibility of grasping the originary place of enunciation. Whereas philosophy has forsaken this originary access to the originary place of language, its judgement being constituted on the basis of the already-given status of the law, poetry conceives of its task and duty to hold open the chance of laying hold of the principle that precedes and conditions the possibility of the law and all discursive acts. In short, to construct a place for the pure potentiality of language.

Thus, inwardness does not simply means the psychological or biographical person that is subsequently expressed in words. Instead, it is the attempt to render the taking-place of language as an experience of the event of individualisation (subjectivisation) as such. If, in Abraham’s poems (and indeed his novels as well) the biographical aspect remains in close proximity, here the biographical is invented or found for the first time in the poetic and does not precede it. In this sense, the experience of the taking-place of language is above all an experience of will. The birth of the subject, which coincides with the event of enunciation, is driven by a desire, a will. A will, moreover, that is not a psychological substance but a *voice*, which for Agamben, is situated, with respect to content and form, in a different and more original dimension. In fact, as the extensive analysis that circles around the voice of

indication in *Language and Death* illustrates, this constitutes the fundamental ontological dimension – the transcendental of language. The voice, he argues, is structured like a shifter: those small grammatical units that include pronouns (I, you, etc.) and deictic indicators of an utterance (here, there, etc.), "before they designate real objects, indicate precisely that language takes place. In this way, still prior to the world of meanings, they permit the reference to the very event of language, the only context in which something can be signified" (Agamben, 1982, p. 25). The voice reveals itself as a "pure intention to signify" in which "something is given to be understood before a determinate event of meaning is produced" (Agamben, 1982, p. 33). The voice, then, discloses something like an infinite potential for speech that is maintained in the suspension of all actual references, where what is at stake is not so much the sound and the signs of the voice, emissions that may be discerned to be correct and true, that the significance of the exposure to the voice. Not, however, as Agamben clarifies, "as it is conceived by he who knows what one usually signifies with that voice (from which it is conceived according to the thing, even if this is true only in thought), but, rather, as it is conceived by he who does not know the meaning and thinks only according to the movement of the soul, which seeks to represent for itself the effect of the heard voice and the significance of the perceived voice" (Agamben, 1982, p. 34). But, as he is quick to add, this would also mean that human language does not have at its root a (strictly speaking) human voice: it is neither the disclosure of an organism nor the expression of a living being, but only the exposition of an advent of language and the subject's "being here".

IV

But, does this conception of the abyssal potentiality of the voice not troublingly coincide with the status of the law under the state of exception? The experience of inwardness that coincides with the taking-place of language necessarily includes a negativity that in Abrahams's poetry, in various guises, inhabits and indeed defines the poetic 'space' as an immense silence.

> A stone stood in her house.
> The stone lay in her bed.
> Under the rain of her words
> the stone gave out nothing.
> Her child moved about the stone,
> wishing this, wishing that.

The stone said: 'Mine is mine.'
She threw herself on the stone:
'Open! Give! Move!'
Stunned in her skull,
her back bruised,
she beyond honey,
beyond bread,
beyond water.
The stone contented her. (Abrahams, 1988b, p. 19)

The stone that stands in her house, and which endures the barrage of attempts to open it and discover the secrets it may hold, is not merely an object in the world. Instead, it is an altogether poetic thing, the very thing of poetry: an original principle or element that gives poetry a beginning and brings it in to being, and also what commands and governs its growth and development. The ineffability of this thing is betrayed, on the one hand, by the difficulty the poet experiences in trying to identify it outside the pure tautological gesture "mine is mine", and, on the other, through the ordeal which the woman in the poem suffers trying to clear this mute and immovable object from her home, or at least make it intelligible. Here poetry's original principle and most intimate companion is a silence that inhabits writing as its generative principle. Poet, mother, and child were required to maintain an absolute silence concerning this object that they are each exposed to. How are we to understand this particular power of silence? Is it a simple privation of speech?

For the Afrikaans novelist and critic André Brink, the writer's principal occupation is with silence, referencing in this case the silences that were concomitant to life under apartheid.[32] "The experience of apartheid," he writes, "has demonstrated that different kinds or levels of silence exist. There is a general silence…which exists in a dynamic relation with language/literature; but there are also more specific silences imposed by certain historical conjunctions" (Brink, 1998, p. 14). Just as certain territories of experience were forbidden to language, so certain sexual relationships were prescribed by the state; just as certain areas were reserved for citizens of a particular race, so certain areas of knowledge were

[32] For an exemplary insight into Brink's thought on the relation between the dissident writer to state power and censorship see Coetzee, J. (1990). André Brink and the Censor. *Research in African Literatures, 21*(3), 59-74.

prohibited to the probing consciousness.[33] But, for Brink, this is not only revealing of an isolated historical problem but also an immanently linguistic one. There is, he says, "a coexistence of silence and the word" (Brink, 1998, p. 14), and if the writer's task is to interrogate this silence, the relation they strike with it is not one of examination but an altogether dialogical one: "silence is not be thought of as an opponent or an adversary; it is simply the other of language. If words are indeed, from a certain point of view, wrested from silence, it is equally true that silence may be read to inhere in language itself" (Brink, 1998, p. 14). Words come from silence and return to it; and it is only from languages union with silence that thought is born. Silence, in this way, represents something akin to a zero degree of language; that, in other words, we experience language precisely when the silence behind the word, which in this sense is understood as the suspended reference, becomes an object of language. If Abrahams's poem is marked by negativity and the presence of the ineffable this is because inwardness is that desperate and tragic attempt to grasp the taking-place of language as silence, and thus can only approach it so long as it remains beyond its reach and perpetually in question.

In the following short poem the problem of the relation between silence and writing, hiddenness and disclosure, is really a question of language and indication. Abrahams's poetry itself performs the violence of linguistic enunciation, taking its measure from the opening that this radical negation inaugurates:

> The poet lets loose his eye
> and his unsteady heart,
> attends to the shifty
> rumours of the breeze or shade,
> brings the soluble moment's load
> of sensation or insight,
> by feeling it, first into fact.
> Fiat! an inward moth,

[33] But, Brink continues, behind or supporting these silences loomed empty expanses of even greater proportions: "Whole territories of historical consciousness silence by the power establishment…These included the distortions of the 'right' to land (even today few white South Africans realize that blacks had settled in the subcontinent many centuries before the first European caravels circumnavigated the Cape of Storms); abuses in the name of Christianity (using the Bible to instil an acceptance by the oppressed of their fate); the extent of miscegenation between staunch Afrikaners and their slaves or servants; the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the interior; strategies to ensure and perpetuate the marginalization of women in both black and white societies; the involvement of 'Coloured' people in the Great Trek; the rape of the environment in the process of 'taming the wilderness'; the tradition of Afrikaner dissidence, etc." (Brink, 1998, p. 15).

fluttering madly to regain
unbeing! But he grabs it fast and nails it word by
insubordinate word, down –
each blow of this violence felt,
each feeling subverting
the pure and simple memory. (Abrahams, 1988b, pp. 24-5)

There is a negative aspect that accompanies the symbolisation of the world, and Abrahams's poems make little attempt to conceal the violence of their own language. When we speak of something, we can only do insofar as that thing has been negated in its finite particularity (this is of course a thoroughly Hegelian idea).The power of writing, for Abrahams, arises not from the ability to transmit 'the soluble moment' but, on the contrary, from their capacity to 'subvert' and transfigure, at once detaching the moment from its organic context and inserting it into a field of meaning that is ultimately external to it. The poet, attending to the promise of meaning carried by 'the breeze or shade', frees the moment from speculation of rumour by 'feeling it into fact'. But this facticity, which legitimises the significance of this otherwise transient moment, presupposes the violence through which this legitimisation could take place, in which the value of the moment's conscious recollection takes the place of the 'pure and simple memory'.

In my view, Maurice Blanchot's thought represents the most significant attempt in 20th century philosophy to grasp the structure of literary enunciation as coinciding with the form of the question.

> Let us take two modes of expression: *"The sky is blue," "Is the sky blue? Yes."* One need be no great scholar to recognize what separates them. The "Yes" does not at all restore the simplicity of the flat affirmation; in the question the blue of the sky has given way to the void. The blue, however, has not dissipated. On the contrary, it has been raised dramatically up to *its possibility*…Yet hardly is the Yes pronounced, and even as it confirms in its new brilliance the blue of the sky brought into intimacy with the void, we become aware of what has been lost. Transformed for an instant into pure possibility, the state of things does not return to what it was. (Blanchot, 1993, pp. 12-13)

Literature, if it is questioning speech, rests upon incompleteness. It is not however incomplete as a question. On the contrary, Blanchot urges, it is a speech that is accomplished by having declared itself incomplete. The negative frames the question. But the lack that defines the question is not that of the Hegelian negation. Although Blanchot's

thought is certainty indebted to that of Hegel's, the violence of the negative that drives the Hegelian dialectic is pursued to its radical extremes in Blanchot.[34] Where the Hegelian analysis aims toward a dialectic synthesis of the negative in the universal, Blanchot would proceed by rehearsing the dialectic in order to find an insurmountable emptiness within it. In other words, to the Hegelian contradiction which produces "movement" towards the resolution of the negative relation that exists between the sensible "now" and its discursive representation, Blanchot compares the proliferation of paradoxes and the stasis of repetition, consistently reproducing the indeterminateness of the origin. In Blanchot's thought, the question "is the sky blue?" inaugurates a type of relation characterised by a radical openness – the question not only places the sky into the void (enriching it with a pure potentiality as it does so) but so too places any answer to the question, that is any determinate act of speech, i.e. the yes that is announced in response, back into the void, while preserving at the same time the possibility of an answer to come.[35]

What is most striking in the following short poem is the sudden shift in narrative voice in its final phrase. There the poem exhibits a disquieting awareness of its own linguistic mediation, and called to witness the negation that is its founding condition:

> Terrorist sky
> wrapped to the eyes
> in a balaclava of dust
> dusk-watches my dark window.
> Draw curtains,
> make light.
> But the night is rocked by the wind
> and wrecked
> by the sabotage of that metaphor. (Lionel Abrahams, 1986, p. 262)

[34] In the first chapter of *The Phenomenology Of Spirit*, which Blanchot frequently references, Hegel addresses the issue of sense-certainty through an analysis of linguistic enunciation. Any attempt to express the sense-certainty of the "here" reveals, for Hegel, that enunciation is process of mediation that always contains within itself a negation: "To the question: 'What is Now?' let us answer, e.g. 'Now is Night.' In order to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth; a truth cannot lose anything by being written down, any more than it can lose anything through our preserving it. If *now, this noon,* we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become empty. The *Now* that is Night is *preserved,* i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as an entity*;* but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, a nonentity. The *Now* does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is *not* Night; equally, it preserves itself in the face of the Day that it now is, as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general" (Hegel, 1977, p. 60).

[35] "Through the question we give ourselves the thing and we give ourselves the void that permits us not to have it yet, or to have it as desire. The question is the desire of thought" (Blanchot, 1993, p. 12).

The light which is made corresponds to the revelatory power of language, which according to Maurice Blanchot is “the terrible force that draws being into the world and illuminates them” (Blanchot, 1995, p. 326). Referring to the work of Hölderlin and Mallarmé, “poets whose theme is the essence of poetry” (Blanchot, 1995, p. 322), Blanchot reflects upon the force language through a consideration of the act of naming. While language puts things into our possession by giving them a name, naming presupposes a prior annihilation and suppression of the thing that is named:

> For me to be able to say, "This woman," I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being - the very fact that it does not exist. (Blanchot, 1995, p. 322)

This may well explain the mysterious experience undergone by Abrahams’s narrator as he peers into the depths of the night. Like any mystery, there is the retention of something ineffable, whose disappearance is only heightened as language attempts to render the thing that it seeks. Precisely at the moment of its inscription the night steals away. Rather than apprehending it, the metaphoric order that binds, unifies, and propels the image indicates a lack with respect to its object. The night, then, appears in the form as something endlessly elusive, and the more the poet tries to express it in words, the more he experiences the ‘sabotage’ of his own language.

While negation is intrinsically linked to the possibility of language, the question that inevitably arises is how poetry, which is composed of language, responds and takes shape against the background of this loss. One the one hand, being initiated into the negative power of language, the poet not only takes his distance from the immediacy of things but accomplishes their negativity. It is not merely the case that language has lost its relation to what it designates, but a matter of recognising that it is only through its misrecognition that the world may take on meaning, and that the negation effected by language is the advent of meaningful creation. One would only need to observe the proliferation of metaphoric constructions in the poem: “terrorist sky”, which is then personified, “wrapped to the eyes/in a balaclava of dust”, etc. And yet, the poem too performs the unfortunate consequences of this accomplishment. One may – and one certainly gets the impression that Abrahams does – only need to read the word “night” to sense the nothingness that is

beneath it. This is how an altogether different poetic pursuit begins for the night that precedes language. But poetry can only devote itself to this search because it has already proceeded to the annihilation of the night in question.[36] So is inaugurated a poetry that attempts to enact its own failure, and, indeed, confess to the failure of all poetry to designate one single thing that always manages to elude them: 'the night is rocked by the wind/and wrecked/by the sabotage of that metaphor'.

Off the basis of this analysis, it is clear that the poem does not function unproblematically. Every textual moment, and the gestures that support them, are always double. If, as Blanchot maintains, "language can begin only with the void" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 324), that it can only proceed through an affirmation of nothingness, then any gesture by necessity contains within itself the conditions of its own suspension. This it seems is the principle that emerges as the essential gesture of Abrahams's poetry. Always prior to the world of meaning and taking its measure from the taking-place of language, poetry is only a pure potential for speech that maintains this potential through the suspension of all determinate signification. But equally, the place from which and in which poetic enunciation comes into being is always defined by a radical negativity. To write, to indicate, becomes thus to experience a silence, a void that, while depriving me of the world in-itself, at the same time dramatically raises the world to the level of its possibility. And if the "night" in the previous poem shows poetry to be a desperate search for an object that is always manages to elude it and yet is accessible in this disappearance, that is because there the experience of the taking-place of language is at stake, and this experience, therefore, is always marked by a negativity that signals the presuppositional structure of language.

"Every specific tradition, every determinate cultural patrimony," writes Agamben, "presupposes the transmission of that alone through which something like a tradition is possible…What has always been transmitted in every tradition, the *architradition* and the *primum* of every tradition, is the thing of thinking" (Agamben, 1999a, p. 104). What is essential for Agamben is that this 'silence' of language which everywhere seems to be at stake in Abrahams's poetry acquires its proper sense only when referred to this presuppositional structure of language. Before communicating anything in particular, every

[36] For Blanchot, this is the particular affliction of language: "the torment of language is what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this. It cannot even name it" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 327).

act of communication presupposes the transmission of language, the fact that *there is language*, for without this transmission communication as such would not be possible. And it is this fact, Agamben argues, that is presupposed and left unsaid in every utterance. The very affirmation of the existence of language – "there is language" – only renders explicit what is, from the beginning, already implicit by the fact of this affirmation. Thus, in each determinate act of speech the word – "night" - appears as the cipher of event of language that must always already be presupposed in every act of signification. The 'thing' of language cannot be said as such because what is at issue in it – the making manifest of something in language, or simply that there is *sayability* in language – is always presupposed in everything said. The pure intention to signify, as one critic usefully explains in his reading of these passages of Agamben, always exceeds the possibility of itself being signified for the simple reason that it always already anticipates and renders possible signification in the first place. "Preceding and exceeding every proposition is not something unsayable and ineffable but, rather, an event presupposed in every utterance, a *factum linguae* to which all actual speech incessantly, necessarily bears witness" (Agamben, 1999a, p. 4).

What is more, because they always presuppose the fact that there is language, poetry is incapable of saying the event of language, that is of establishing an equitable intimacy with the power of language that it is otherwise infinitely exposed to. In fact, we may identify here Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of abandonment in order to detect the extent to which the presuppositional structure of language signals human beings' abandonment to language.[37] Everything that is presupposed – whether it be some inexpressive experience, an event of language, or the silence of the world before the word – is nothing other than the presupposition of language, that *there is language*. Thus, what is *really* absent is our already-passing over into language: that language has taken place, and in having taken place provides the possibility of speech. Which is also to say, that what is unsayable and inaccessible is assent to language; that, in keeping with Abrahams's formulation of the "here", one's being-in-language can only be understood as an *acquiescence*, whereby one's

[37]Jean-Luc Nancy develops a notion of abandonment as follows: "To abandon is to remit, entrust, or turn over to such a sovereign power, and to remit, entrust, or turn over to its ban, that is, to its proclaiming, to its convening, and to its sentencing…Abandonment respects the law; it cannot do otherwise" (Nancy, 1993, p. 44). For an introduction to the significance of Nancy's concept of *abandonment* see Benjamin Pryor, 2004, 'Law in Abandon: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Critical Study of Law', 15 Law and Critique 259.

consent (and thus one's agency) can only be formulated in language which, in already taking place, precedes and exceeds it. What is 'repressed' and left 'unsaid' then, is not some divine origin of language but the very fact that language cannot be accepted in advance, that names cannot be determined as true or false but only as *necessary* – the fact that language's authority is in fact without truth, and the experience of being-in-language can only be measured by one's limitless *exposure* to it. Writing is, therefore, less an affair of freedom than an unconscious submission to a 'dead letter' – an obedience from which one is powerless to escape; that language can neither be fully delivered over to its subjects nor returned to its point of origin.

Nowhere is this submission, and the alienation that accompanies it, better expressed than in the poetic enunciation that is always transfixed on the verge of a night – a taking place – that has always already disappeared. And does this form of writing that perpetually nullifies language but simultaneously maintains it in a perpetual state of deferred validity not wholly correspond to Agamben's thesis on the relation of the ban that underpins the state of emergency: "What, after all, is the structure of the sovereign ban if not that of a law that is *in force* but does not *signify*?" (Agamben, 1998, p. 51). At this stage, language (read: law) does not signify yet continues to affirm itself by the fact that it is in force. And this being in force without signification corresponds, in the sphere of knowledge, to the transcendental object which is, after all, "not a real object but 'merely the idea of relation' that simply expresses the fact of thinking's being in relation with an absolutely indeterminate thought" (Agamben, 1998, p. 52). The speech act that is represented as an incessant movement that goes nowhere and is in no place similarly opens an ethos, an ethics, that is itself thoroughly indeterminate and can only be determined through an abstract legislation that is in force but as an empty principle. What I hope is clear by virtue of this positioning of poetry as corresponding with the dimension of the voice is that commitment, as it is formulated by Abrahams, threatens to be exposed as a failure to recollect and articulate a form of community that would surpass the ethical vision imposed by the apartheid state. Unless, according to the Benjaminian principle that it is only in the destruction of storytelling that the fundamental importance of the storyteller emerges for the first time, Abrahams's vision may, as it approaches the point of its apparent failure, make visible its original project.

V

"In the most hidden corner
of your childhood garden
you folded yourself into the wholeness
that leaves us all your fragments" - Abrahams,
'Fragments After A Tour', 1988a, p. 52

There is – as common logic would indeed dictate – no better place to start than with the question of the beginning. Abrahams two novels respond to this question, each performing a gesture of origination as if called to witness their own taking-place.

> In the old house once, Moh had walked him to a corner of the garden where there was a little rockery in a loop of the pathway. It was a journey to America, she had told him. 'Let's go to America and see all the wonders.'
> She had walked him around the rockery twice, then stood him between the stones on the lowest of the three dry beds.
> And that was a journey.
> America?
> *America?* (Abrahams, 1977, p. 9)

What exists in and united the opening scene of the novel is an originary event, but one which only appears in the form of a deferral that stretches across the entirety of the chapter so that what at the end (as well as the beginning) is just the imprint of the question. The uncertainty that characterises this opening is captured in the question asked by the young Felix in the above extract. This question inaugurates and unleashes a disquiet in the text that propels it into a modality of "perhaps". Even though we are told what the child sees and undergoes, it is implicit that what we told is in fact thoroughly undecidable.[38] No sooner is the child suddenly displaced from the garden and is staring out the window of a moving car when, "dizzy and frightened" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 9), the sky opens up to reveal a gaping absence, "an empty silence nearly as deep as the one where the sky was that cold colour" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 9). Having now entered a hospital ward, the child undergoes an encounter of some kind that abandons him to its secret. Voices, we are told, can be heard as

[38] The chapter itself unfolds in a manner that resembles a dream sequence, which is not without significance given that its central theme concerns the witnessing of a traumatic event that lies at the root of subjectivity, but which resists clear translation.

they echo off the walls, but without their source being known. The scene is witnessed too early in life for him to fully integrate it into conscious thought – it too, like the "sound[s] that came of itself" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 10), echoes in the recesses of the psyche while marking it with an archaic inscription. There is only the promise of an intimacy still to be realised:

> Somewhere in the chill he felt kisses. Somewhere through the hum and rustle of the uniformed people's quiet hurrying he called out, and everything that Moh and Daddy said became knotted into, 'Soon, darling! Soon…'
>
> Soon?
>
> It was a sound that came of itself, echoing off the smooth, high walls…and they were gone. (Abrahams, 1977, p. 10)

The promise itself has an almost eschatological temporality, here uniting what is lost with the assurance of its eventual absolution. The unexperienced experience that is given in the promise testifies to the possibility that what has not yet happened will happen another time. The promise, in other words, carries with it an index that refers us to an event that while not immediately available cannot nevertheless be forgotten, and is retained in its unreachability. Yet, for this reason, the promise too unravels the notion of experience because it erases the present in which experience might be configured. The child in this scene experiences a moment in which something occurs, but occurs as something as already having happened, promising to happen before happening, to always be in advance of its occurrence. Sameness is displaced by otherness, permanence with difference.

The novel as a whole is split at its core. A series of divisions consistently appear – but what is important in this regard is less the division between two definite things but *divisibility* as such and the play of difference that characterises division.[39] Traceable, for example, in the incident of the child staring out the hospital windows: "But more mysterious, what he longed most of all to know about was the other windows" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 11). One morning the child is described as sitting on his bed looking through a window and seeing across the garden a tall red-brick building. He sees children playing in the garden and glimpses the outline of a figure in the windows. "Perhaps," he wonders, "he

[39] This divisibility, like Derrida's notion of différance, is neither strictly the other side unity nor a principle unto itself but is rather like a radical negativity that introduces an ambiguity in the distinction between wholeness and separation, sameness and difference, inside and outside, etc.

saw them yet another time, or even twice more" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 12). Although the open window is presented as a means of escaping his solitude this perceptual relation to the outside world is also what prevents him from actively joining it. On the one hand is he connected to what he sees through this distanced relation, but on the other this distance only serves to produce a gap, isolating him from what he sees. It is as if perception, represented in the motif of the open window, is both an experience of connection but also one of profound alienation, transforming what is perceived into estranged, impersonal spectacles: "the mystery of the windows across the garden that were as remote as the pattern of white canals on a planet" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 13). Moreover, this ambiguous experience of perception also reflects the child's own relation to his own inner experiences. The being-held-at-a-distance experienced by looking through the window conveys the same captivation that the child from the very beginning must endure. Captivated by this distance and its mystery, the window prevents the child from engaging in an experience of a familiar world, just as the subject is marked in advance by the occurrent non-occurrence indexed in the promise that constitutes it without ever belonging to it.

This account of the relation of perception also refers us to the issue of the opening and taking-place of language. "The tension", says Cullinan, "between reality and art, between the live thing and the artefact, is fundamental to [Abrahams's] work" (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 10). This tension is clearly demonstrated in the novels apparent autobiographical character.[40] The text is rooted in the singular 'experience' of individual life. But, as Cullinan observes, a distance is affected by his use of the third person. 'He', Felix Greenspan, performs these actions, and it is precisely with this distance that the 'art' is attained (Abrahams, 1988a, p. 10). Questions relating to autobiography, authorship and the authority of the writer are all at stake here. These are questions, to be sure, that concerns the relation between subjectivity and language.[41] As with his poetry and the principle of the voice that was found to be at stake in the notion of "being here", to write oneself in this sense is first

[40] Felix, like Abrahams himself, is borne with cerebral palsy and is confined to a wheelchair until adolescence.

[41] Here Abrahams's work has a close proximity to that of J.M. Coetzee, both of whom engage in linguistic and literary strategies that call into question the "I" who writes. Carrol Clarkson, in her powerful reading, confirms that for Coetzee all writing participates in the positioning of an "I". That is, all writing is a kind of autobiography in which "the relation between thought and language, and the possibility of rendering the truth about the self in language" are at stake (Clarkson, 2013, p. 28).

and foremost to invent the possibility of a self to be written.[42] Thus the subject, having no a priori existence apart from the instance of discourse, is always preceded by, as we may recall, a 'pure intention to signify' that discloses only the taking place of language itself before any determinate event of meaning is produced. The subject experiences themselves, in the act of writing, as an impersonal and anonymous "he" who is marked primordially by the ineluctable condition of their own abandonment to language. An abandonment which, signalling the taking-place of place of language and their linguistic "being here", leaves the traces of a subject always promised to be written.

What I am suggesting therefore is that the promise, as narrative device, functions as an allegory for the condition of the law in the state of emergency, that is, in the stage wherein the law is in force but does not signify. The already-taken place, the captivating distance outside the open windows that cannot be bridged, and the anonymity of the subjective "he" are all ciphers for this condition of the law. The promise, by its structure, always-already threatens to disable any attempt to bypass it. The child cannot reveal its secret precisely because the secret concerns the very structure of the promise to begin with. His passivity with respect to his surroundings is at once the condition of his perception of his world but also what prevents him from establishing an intimacy with it. It is easy, to this extent, to establish the connection between the situations describes in this chapter and the law in the state of being in force without signification, wherein the law is valid precisely insofar as it commands nothing yet continues to affirm itself by the fact that it is in force. Felix is abandoned to the law (read: promise) for the simple reason that the law asks nothing of him, imposes nothing on him other than its ban.

But this is only one half of it. If the promise is an allegory for the law in the time of its suspension, is it possible to find in the Felix an image other than the subject that is abandoned to its force? The text itself offers a suggestion:

[42] Roland Barthes, whose thought holds an important proximity to these issues, considers the verb 'to write' as belonging to the middle voice which, just as is the case with grammatical shifters "I", "here", and "there", "designates the way in which the subject of the verb is affected by the action" (Barthes, 1989, p. 18). To write, in other words, is to "effect writing in being affected oneself" (Barthes, 1989, p. 18), whereby the subject that writes does not precede and exist prior to writing but is instead constituted and takes its measure from the experience of writing itself.

> The Messiah, when he came, must be Jewish, a Jewish Christian. So any Jewish boy, any day now, could be Him…[Felix] began to think that it might, it could, it must be him. The Messiah. Although nobody knew it yet, and he wasn't ready to tell anyone – he would know when it would be the right time to let the secret out – he, Felix, was that special Jewish boy. (Abrahams, 1977, p. 36)

What would it take to take, as the text itself suggests, to see in the figure of the shy crippled boy the figure of the Messiah? It would require us to trace in the novel a messianic index that a cursory reading may not immediately reveal. It is a question that in most part refers us to the novel's title, in particular the "celibacy" that appears there and which informs the structure of the narrative itself. Felix is not, however, celibate in the usual sense of this word. "Celibacy" is, instead, here deployed as an instance of antiphrasis whose ironic effect is captured precisely in the fact that the novel seems to claim that the sexual union (and the movement of desire that underpins it) contains in itself a celibate principle in the sense that the basic structure of desire consists in the fact that it never realises itself in an object, and that it is this truancy of the object that is the source of its pleasure. For Felix, from the very beginning the fulfilment of desire is linked to the promise of redemption. But rather than offering an account of a relation that prioritises reconciliation or release, the novel traces nothing but the perpetual intensification of desire through its indefinite suspension. Although desire holds out the possibility for its future relief, this future never arrives. And the more the promise of desire isn't redeemed, the stronger one is seduced by it:

> Eventually to compound a suspicion that the woman's love which alone would let him begin to be himself would never come…the suspicions, even, that he himself did not exist. These doubts and the tension of his unrequited hunger were growing to a point of obsession and unbearableness. (Abrahams, 1977, p. 130)

This is where the erotic is taken to its most provocative point by highlighting how desire is constitutively established through an experience of dispossession and loss. What is at stake here is a privation characterised by an immersion within a simulacral field devoid of any real presence. The present is nothing more than an inert continuum (resembling what Benjamin had described as "homogenous empty time") in which time passes in an eternal present which remains structurally the same in each of its 'now' points. This experience of time arises from the constant renewal of desire and is associated with the closed world of

fate in which neither accomplishment nor rest is permitted, only an unbearable obsession. Accordingly, "community" is far from the consensual transparency of a coordinated relation and reciprocal relation. Communication (communion) is fractured from the start. The subject starts off in the world as lacking; the taking place of consciousness coincides with lack and the diachrony of consciousness action always affirms this lack. But it is not that some *thing* was taken from the subject. The object of desire has the most curious ontological status: one searches for and desires after the object in so far as it is missing. And, indeed, the subject themselves is similarly defined by this abnormality, as if the very existence of the inner life is dependent upon what can never be known to it. The subject, as our previous investigations have already shown, can arise only in a situation traversed by impossibility.[43]

But as the novel reaches its climax in the final chapter the experience of impossibility contains within itself an altogether different secret. Beyond the failure of communion (communication, community) – of the subject being turned away from any possibility of acting potently in the world – the experience of this impotency also serves, unexpectedly, as the principle of a profound and unique form of relation. Here the secret of the promise resides in the manner in which it leads Felix from an experience of separation to the threshold of an unprecedented intimacy. If Felix, in other words, is abandoned to operations of postponement then this is not on account of some deficiency; but, rather, because the very lesson at stake resides in *living through*. It is through the endless regiment of suspension and postponement that Felix finds himself able to express both the enigma and the truth of his most challenging thought:

> He left it. He settled for her acknowledgement of that "Something even closer". In fact he had no cause to struggle for: nothing he might do could make Lucilla to him what she was not – and nor could any accident undo what she was and remained to him after all. Only his own actions and time… (Abrahams, 1977, p. 189)

[43] Lacan himself when declaring that there is "no sexual relationship" had this uncanny situation in mind. What is meant by this peculiar affirmation, as Zizek elucidates, is that the subject is immanently, constitutively sexed; "that is to say, in order to have a subject, the antagonism (the impossibility) that cuts across reality has to acquire a form of sexuality, of the impossibility of the sexual relationship" (Zizek, 2017, p. 1).

What is suggested to us is that the message of the promise may reside not in its arrival but within its failure to be realised.[44] This revelation takes place against the backdrop of Felix's tortuous relation with Lucilla, who appears to him in the form of an extraordinary figure whose presence corresponds with the promise of redemption. "I want to give you joy" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 177) – these are the words she offered to Felix, who sensed in them the prospect of "finality and arrival" and for whom "her words absorbed the whole of future time" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 177). Lucille, the painter, draws his portrait, and it is this image that holds out the promise of self-recognition and would be the culmination of his earthly actions, wanderings, confusions, and torments. He goes to meet his image and his image comes to meet him, appearing as a mirror of himself. He sees himself entirely in it, "he felt he was witnessing more than a process, an agony of incarnation which, by paradox, freed the spirit through the very act of its imprisonment in material limits" (Abrahams, 1977, pp. 180-1). In the figure of Lucille and the image composed by her hand, origin and redemption, as well as the doctrine of creation and salvation, are thus joined together in the idea of perfection: "Once she had presented herself to Felix, the rest of whatever had been reality was displaced. She was the familiar, unrecognised reality under everything, making all the meaning of his life draw to one sharp focus and filling him with a religion as much as with love" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 175). The encounter with this angel, "the artist, the child within the archetypal woman", is the cipher through which Felix registers what was for him his most essential amorous task and most perfect experience of joy.

Summoning all of his energy, concentrating all of his yearning upon this single, incomparable figure, he does not lack the courage to risk everything. But his failure to attain her reverberates throughout the entirety of his experience: "to have the old rejection of his bodily reality re-enacted by her, was to suffer a small death, a wrenching apart of matter of spirit" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 180). He retreats into the catastrophe of life bereft of satisfaction. Having expended all his energy, he is left with no choice but to renounce all claims to her. She recedes from him. Lucille, we discover, is approaching death. And Felix,

[44] Indeed, this doctrine was already prepared for in the middle passages of the text: "A hopeless pang told him that he was re-entering desire, the prison in which he had lain, and certainly would again, an incorrigible fool of a detainee, at the mercy of unreachable girl after girl. The knowledge was painful; but he could only welcome it with joy" (Abrahams, 1977, p. 136).

watching from a distance, suddenly understands that she will never be his. Does this mean that redemption has failed? Not exactly. The peace that descends upon Felix at precisely this moment is similarly prodigious. A transformation begins to take place. A second movement now asserts itself – not so much in opposition to his desire but internal to its passage.

For Agamben, whose interpretation of Book 9 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Book 3 of *De Anima* occupies a central place in his thought, the one who posses a potential – to have the habit of employing – a potential can both put it into action and not put it into action: "Aristotle's brilliant, even if apparently obvious, thesis is that potential is essentially defined by the possibility of its non-exercise" (Agamben, 2019, p. 12). Every act has a remainder - an impotency, an *impotentiality* – that 'exceeds' it and in which potentiality as such is preserved: "there is a form or presence of what is not in action, and this privative presence is potential" (Agamben, 2019, p. 12)**.** But if these forces, potency/impotency, positive/negative, engender one another they do not supplant one another like scenes on a film. Instead, they are present and persist side-by-side in a disunified totality that is the structure of each present moment (these opposing forces are, in another sense, different articulations of inequalities, conflicts, and difference, and the means by which Agamben's thought comes into contact with issues surrounding class struggle, the state and governance, and the anthropological machinery of modern life). Human potential is thus defined by an aporia that derives from the fact that potential is defined by the possibility of its non-exercise: "[Aristotle's] thesis defines the specific ambivalence of every human potential, which in its original structure always maintains a relationship with its own privation and is always – and with reference to the same thing – the potential to be and not to be, to do and not to do" (Agamben, 2019, p. 12)**.** The impotency that somehow comes to coexist with the potential to do is not, however, merely an inert passivity. It is not that there exists a potential not-to that precedes the potential to do, and that must be abolished and overcome in order for the act to take place. The potential not-to is an impotency internal to the potential to do, which prevents the latter from exhausting itself and in this way exhibits it as such: "In the same way, great poetry does not simply say what it says, but also the fact that it is saying it" (Agamben, 2019, p. 15).

This deactivation and contemplation of potentiality is, furthermore, precisely what eroticism achieves, each time putting the body to new uses beyond the nutritive and reproductive (that is, instrumental) functions that supposedly limit and define it, "and turn them – in the very act of using them – away from their physiological meaning, toward a new and more human operation" (Agamben, 2011, p. 102). The potential not-to is thus not another potential juxtaposed to the potential to do; it is, rather, what Agamben calls the latter's *inoperativity*, what results from the deactivation of the schema potential/act, desire/realization. Inoperativity suspends and disorganises the closed economy of functional, utilitarian labour in order to rediscover the body and open it up to new possible uses: "the naked, simple human body is not displaced here into a higher nobler reality; instead, liberated from the witchcraft that once separated it from itself, it is as if this body were now able to gain access to its truth for the first time" (Agamben, 2011, p. 102)**.**

It is now possible to comprehend the final celebration at stake in the novel's conclusion:

> As, since their first ten days, he had felt that she had been in his life from its beginning, so, now that she was pronouncing this negation, she was not closing him out of her life, nor herself out of his. She was freeing herself from a particular net of his expectations (she knew how deep but not how undefined his expectations were), and once this had been thrust off, she was free to stay within his reach. (Abrahams, 1977, p. 188)

If Lucille had from the beginning been represented as a figure who brings redemption it is because the messianic is irreducibly linked to inoperativity. What is rendered inoperativity and whose force is deactivated is not potentiality (read: desire) but only its aims and modalities – the 'net of expectations' that claim and dictate Felix's relation to her. What is at issue is an interruption of the law which holds out the promise of a genuine appropriation of the object. Through its suspension desire is fulfilled not in the sense of finally claiming what it sought but, on the contrary, by coming to an end. To redeem is to bring to conclusion, to free and be freed, to render inoperative and open thought and the body to new possibilities.

VI

Here it is required to make one last adventure through his poetry.

> Lie with me.

Whether or not this ritual be love
it cannot bind.
The exchange of saliva means no commitment.
The mingling of sexual fluids
does not imply possession:
those nine points of the law can have no bearing
on our sacred singular embrace.
It is not because you have a house
that I would enter you.
It is not because we have bodies
that I'd press my flesh on yours
like a rubber stamp,
marking you with my indelible name.
We do this in recognition
of our recognising souls.
We do this in celebration once for all.
And every time we meet we start anew. (Abrahams, 1988b, p. 36)

In our previous readings our attention was concentrated on the 'here' of poetry, that is, the experience of the taking place of the poetic word and the ethos it opens. The "anew" that closes the poem contains the idea of a unity that intersects and unites a plurality of now-points while also preserving a reference to a remnant and excess that indexes a change of epoch. The whole of Abrahams' work – his poetry as well as his novels – must be read in this sense as an attempt to seize a habit, to experience the transtemporal common place of language. If there is a connection here between writing and temporality this is because language and time is in every thing as the place in which every thing *is*, both being the transcendental dimensions that serve as the condition for the determination of every entity. But here the transcendental is not an entity above all things; it is neither simply the ideal order within which all singularity is dissolved; nor is it what results from the liquidation of the general in the name of the particular. Recall Benjamin's definition of language as the expression of a "mental entity" that had set the foundation of our investigation in the previous chapter. By this Benjamin does not mean that language is simply a means of expressing mental activity. Rather this concerns the fact that human language and mental activity are from the beginning inseparable from one another: to speak of language is also to speak of thought, where the medium, language, and the life it intends to convey are immediately one and the same. Language, insofar as it names a thing, is nothing but the thing as it is named, expressing in this way a union between word and thing without

performing the false synthesis of two entities that presupposes their separation and difference, nor playing on the timeworn metaphysical dichotomy between what is essential and contingent. The thing itself is thus the thing in the very medium of its knowability, and precisely its being irreparably sayable is what transcends and exposes every entity. Poetry, moreover, is the movement that, fully experiencing the taking place of the entity in language, seeks to think, to hold this sayability in suspense, and measure its dimensions. Here, the repetitive taking-place of language ceases to be a negative experience. Over the course of its movement –the poem itself, by ending on this word, demands that it is read more than once – the truth of human potential emerges: to dwell in their immeasurable sayability, that is, their luminous manifestation and presence in language.

For Agamben, it this fact concerning humanities dwelling within this immeasurable place that must constitute the point of departure for ethics: "that there is no essence, no historical spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realise" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 43). This does not mean, he quickly clarifies, that humans do not, and do not have to be, something, "that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be, to adopt or not to adopt this or that destiny (nihilism and decisionism coincide at this point)" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 33). There is something that humans are and have to be: "but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 43). Morality, he claims, is the reduction of the taking-place of things to a fact like others, which "amounts to the forgetting of the transcendence inherent in the very taking place of things" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 14). Here too, the appeal to the transcendental is an attempt to think through that which is constantly hidden in social acts. Agamben suggests that desire seeks the *being-such* of the other, which is not itself a quality yet bears all qualities, and which he expresses using the simple formula: "there is an x *such that* it is desired by *y*" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 2). The transcendental singularity that here comes to light is "whatever you *want*, that is, lovable":

> Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates,* its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such* - *this* is the lover's particular fetishism. Thus, whatever singularity (the Lovable) is

> never the intelligence of some thing, of this or that quality or essence, but only the intelligence of an intelligibility. (Agamben, 1993a, p. 2)

It is this idea of the lovable that finds its expression in Abrahams's poem. What is their singular embrace? It, we read, does not guarantee commitment; nor does it follow an exigency of possessing the other. It is not reducible to the logic of capital; nor to the name. The ritual that is enacted here is never directed towards *recognising* the other, their qualities or essence; but, on the contrary, 'in recognition of our recognising souls', that is, *the intelligence of an intelligibility*. To love, then, is to relate without intention; to will with the consistency of a desire for *whatever* pleases. Whatever pleases is a being with all of its properties (both realised and potential), in which something is individuated without presupposition of essence (of being blonde, of being tall, of being brown), nor for the absence of indicators of attractiveness, but for the mere fact of its *being such*. To love and be loved is to be in relation to the totality of one's possibilities, which is thus necessarily a relation to an empty and indeterminate potentiality. But rather than pure negativity, this indeterminate potentiality is the lover's own inoperativity, an empty and unemployed remainder that is internal to their acts and is necessary for the exposure of them as such. A potential that, by not wholly exhausting itself in the act, remains free, unoccupied, and is thus capable of turning on itself and grasping its own potential to act. Capable, that is, of contemplating itself and rendering inoperative the functions its acts has been assigned to. In other words, to the outrage of conservative fundamentalists, human beings are not destined to love someone in particular or in a specific way; humans are those beings that act, love, and work but are without 'work' in the sense of having an innate directive. And it is this absence of work, this unemployable potential that allows us to contemplate our freedom to love; to communicate a communicability, to love in recognition of our recognising souls.[45]

[45] Moreover, the celibacy of those who fail to have a union with no other fault than their dwelling in immeasurability cannot suffer an afflictive judgement, as in those cases of lawful injunction. Agamben's musings on limbo are instructive here: those that dwell in this celibacy, like those in limbo, do not feel pain from this lack: "they do not know that they are deprived of the supreme good, or, if they do know…they cannot suffer from it more than a reasonable person is pained by the fact that he or she cannot fly" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 5). The greatest punishment, the lack of vision from God, the inability to realise one's desire, turns into a natural joy: "irremediably lost, they persist without pain in divine abandon. God has not forgotten them, but rather they have always already forgotten God; and in the face of their forgetfulness, God's forgetfulness is impotent" (Agamben, 1993a, p. 5).

Here it is possible to measure the transgressive (inoperative) potential of writing as well as its link to redemption. Just as celibacy deactivates and contemplates its own potential to desire, so writing deactivates and contemplates the potential of language in order to free it from its uniform usage. Writing then follows a recursive dialectic movement, performing an operation on language and in language where what matters is less the something said (some truth or doctrine) but the communication of a potential to say.

In conclusion, if, as I have been suggesting, Abrahams's work is to be understood as a layered allegory for the State of Emergency, the law of the ban which his texts produce, and which also unifies them, is rendered inoperative by being reflected in them. And if this 'communication of a communicability' is for Abrahams an attempt to restore the potency of literature for his generation then it is because the practice of literature is the epitome of that activity that constitutes the notion of community as embedded in the sharing of a life. Here, the life of literature (of the singular work, as well as the history of the written word), consists in what it brings forth as a meaningful experience: *narration*. In literature, language and life are bound in an intimate communication of the experience of what is properly human about existence, namely the naming that occurs in language through which humanity communicates itself. In the case of the autobiographical aspect of Abrahams's novel, it knows no object, has no truth to uncover. Here the two moments of action – writing and being written – as well as the two dimensions of the text – form and content - become indistinguishable. Moreover, the fracture between the indicating (the voice, the word) and the indicated (the object, the 'night') has been closed, and what had previously demonstrated the negative chasm between semiotic and semantic is here configured as a threshold in which literature can have a face.

Just as the human word is neither simply the appropriation of what is universal nor the recovery of what is exceptional, so too is literature's (and the human's) face neither the individuation of generic qualities nor the generalisation of singular traits – it can neither be said to be 'African' or 'Western', nor to have singular traits that mark its belonging to totalizing nationalist or ethnic traditions. It is *whatever* face, in which what belongs to common nature and what is unique to the individual are absolutely indistinguishable. Literature belongs to no one. It is neither mine nor yours; it can neither be said to be proper/improper; nor should it be considered a property (in both sense of something

owned, or a quality embodied). Literature must be reclaimed from its having this or that quality, or belonging to this or that genre, just as the subject must be liberated from the properties that identifies it as belonging to a certain group (being black, being European, etc.) – recovered for their simple, constitutive being-toward (Gasché), taking-place (Agamben), their 'being here' (Abrahams).

An endless celebration is born in literature and social acts (are they even worth distinguishing?): that human beings may contemplate themselves and liberate their own potential for acting. And every time the work is read, just as every time we pass someone by, we are forced to engage with this potentiality and recreate it anew.

> He left it. He settled for her acknowledgement of that 'Something even closer'. In fact he had no cause to struggle for: nothing he might do could make Lucilla to him what she was not – and nor could any accident undo what she was and remained for him after all. Only his own actions and time…
>
> On the second of January he wrote to Veronica Steen, 'Thank you for accepting me. Now I'll open to you, my woman, my intimate, my secret love, my joy…' (Abrahams, 1977, p. 189)

* * *

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