

“Keep it, Guard it, Care for it”: Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* and Environmental Conscience

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Abstract

The article looks back on Alan Paton’s 1948 best-selling work of fiction, which, in spite of its cool and even harsh local reception in the decades marked by a major shift towards political radicalism, still represents a milestone in the history of South African literature in English. *Cry, the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort in Desolation* invites closer consideration from the perspective of environmental crisis and the ‘ecologically-sensitive’ mind of a variety of figures, from Zulu parson Stephen Kumalo to the Jarvis family and the agricultural demonstrator. Paton, a writer, teacher, reformatory principal and well-known anti-apartheid activist born in present-day KwaZulu-Natal, created his fictional universe by drawing on the rural and urban areas of a wounded territory for whose exploitation European colonial history and segregation policies were largely to blame. Hence the compelling relevance of the land-degradation motif and the image of an abused landscape located at the lowest point of the Western world, waiting for a revitalisation of its natural resources: for a redressing of the ecosystem balance to be enacted by replacing spoiling with care, with an ethics of sustainability inspired by the ideals of a healthy biological interdependence, preservation and continuity in a half-forgotten corner of the Empire.

Key-words: ecologically-sensitive view, Alan Paton, segregation policies, South Africa’s environment.

1. “There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo...”

A long distance has now been travelled in post-apartheid South Africa towards environmental justice, and this includes a restructuring of priorities, with greening programmes for preservation, conservation and the restoration of degraded areas. With hindsight, one observes how such major objectives and the concept of eco-friendly technologies or measures were totally out

of focus during the “separate development” interregnum, when the so-called politics of conservation went hand in hand with white minority centralisation, capitalist modes of production, economic (and military) protectionism. Moreover, the pastoral myths and farming ideal cultivated by Afrikaners or English-speaking people were basically rooted in a self-referential, nostalgic imaginary, which provided a psychological antidote to the expanding tentacles of industrial and commercial growth and simultaneously strove to erase alterity, to say nothing of the state-sanctioned relocation and confining of millions of blacks to the impoverished homelands¹.

In the democratic South Africa of our day, that glaring condition of imbalance fuelled by a political engineering aimed at safeguarding the people of ‘European stock’ has fortunately come to an end. Despite other kinds of socio-economic problems knocking at the door, the philosophy regarding conservation and environmental protection has definitively brushed aside colonial fantasies of ownership and is now being given proper consideration in the light of the astounding biodiversity characterising the territory. At the same time, with ecology joining ranks with postcolonial politics and a (trans)national dimension, “tendencies have emerged that link environmental and social well-being in ways that are ‘people-centred’” (Vital 2005: 297) rather than steeped in ‘dark green’ eco-radicalism². These ways reflect “the inseparability of current crises of

¹ See for instance the following statement from an article published by the Worldwatch Institute (worldwatch@worldwatch.org), an independent research organisation dealing with global environmental concerns: “‘Institutionalized racism has polluted the air and water, pillaged the bedrock, and ripped away the earth in wide regions of South Africa,’ said Alan B. Durning, author of *Apartheid’s Environmental Toll* and a Senior Researcher at Worldwatch, a Washington, D.C.-based research organization [...]. Under apartheid, half of South Africa’s 29 million blacks – primarily women, children, and the elderly – have been pushed onto 13 percent of the national territory euphemistically called ‘homelands’. ‘By design, these areas are remote, their topsoil is thin, rainfall scarce and unreliable, and the ground sloping and rocky. Suffering under politically enforced overpopulation – ten times the population density of white rural areas – the homelands are among the world’s most degraded regions’. Enormous erosion gullies criss-cross the topography, and in some areas the topsoil has been worn down to bedrock” (1990: online). Interestingly, Durning’s study opens with a key quotation from *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

² In the terminology of environmental thought, the ‘dark green’ stance concurs

ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse” (Huggan 2004: 702).

Casting again a backward glance to the first half of the twentieth century, we realise how a similar marriage between the idea of human welfare and attunement with, and respect for, the natural environment as a corrective to imperialistic exploitation also underpinned Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort in Desolation*, although recent ecocritical studies (e.g. Caminero-Santangelo, Myers 2011; Okuyade 2013) have not paid much attention to it so far. This was a groundbreaking novel published in 1948³, the *annus horribilis* of apartheid’s ascendancy, but actually written in 1946, when its author was travelling through Europe, the United States, and Canada, and taking a survey of correctional institutions in an attempt to delve deeper into the question of penal reform. While in Norway, he was caught by a sudden pang of homesickness and began writing his thoughts on paper, eventually completing the manuscript in December 1946, in San Francisco⁴. Notwithstanding its mixed reception over the decades, Paton’s first novel became a worldwide best-seller which gave him “financial independence and fame” as well as a *guru* status: facing us here is “a book that has probably opened the eyes of more readers to the woes of South

with a deep ecological view, an ecocentric ‘egalitarianism’ undermining any hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman entities. A phrase coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s, “deep ecology” locates a high value in the interrelationships existing within biotic communities and their intrinsic worth, regardless of man’s needs or supposed dominance over other species.

³ It first came out in February 1948 in the USA, with the title *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York) and then in September 1948 in the UK as *Cry, the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort in Desolation* (Jonathan Cape, London).

⁴ Iannone reminds us that in September 1946, “at twilight, he [Paton] found himself sitting in Norway’s Trondheim cathedral, admiring its beautiful rose window and longing for home. He went back to his hotel and began writing, completing in three months as he continued his trip the novel that was to become *Cry, the Beloved Country*. He gave the manuscript to the friends whom he was visiting in the United States; they were much and tearfully taken with it, suggested changes, and found a publisher, Scribner’s, where Maxwell Perkins, the editor for Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe, advised acceptance” (1997: 443). For a detailed reconstruction of the novel’s composition, literary references and reception, see Alexander (1994: 187-240).

Africa than any other” (Coetzee 1990: 39). A literary yardstick in the (British) liberal novel tradition inspired by Christian and humanistic principles, it has also “opened a fictional discourse which sought to explore the ways in which life-sustaining bonds could be forged between people across the racialised lines of division” (Morphet 1996: 53).

Born into a deeply religious family of Anglo-Scottish settlers in Pietermaritzburg – the then administrative capital of British Natal Colony – Alan Stewart Paton (1903-1988) is still to be considered as a lucid interpreter of South African society. He was a committed spokesman for the dignity and worth of the individual, for egalitarianism, freedom, and racial justice at a time when apartheid, from June 1948 onwards (just a few months after *Cry, the Beloved Country* was published in New York), was to take a decisive turn for the worse. A versatile author of fiction, poetry, drama, autobiography and essays, he was also very active in the political field – being the founding member, chairman and president of the Liberal Party of South Africa – and in matters of social welfare. Indeed the Johannesburg *Sunday Times* has sponsored the “Alan Paton Award” literary prize in his memory since the 1980s and President Thabo Mbeki posthumously granted him the “Order of Ikhamanga” in 2006.

After taking a Bachelor of Science degree at Natal University College in 1922, a period when he began to champion tolerance and examine the discrimination suffered by non-white communities, Paton toured England and Scotland and then went back to Natal to teach mathematics at the white High School in Ixopo (formerly Stuartstown). The very name of this town, now situated in a KwaZulu-Natal forestry and sugar farming area, calls to mind the opening passage of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, in which a lyrical, solemn voice tinged with biblical and isiZulu cadences introduces the story by way of an earth-centred approach:

There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa. About you there is grass and bracken and you may hear the forlorn crying of the titihoya, one of the birds of the veld. Below you is the valley of the Umzimkulu, on its journey from the Drakensberg to the sea; and beyond

and behind the river, great hill after great hill; and beyond and behind them, the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand. (Paton 1958: 11)

From the winding road to the valleys below, the strands of the beautiful regional topography are here icastically woven together through a rolling expanse of scenery. However, as happens in prospect poems, geographical traits are also cultural signifiers conveying social, political, and allegorical meanings⁵. For all the sympathetic vibrations that these idyllic descriptions might elicit, we shall see in fact how the 'green agenda' taking shape in the novel posits itself less in the pastoral romance genre than within a social-ecology discourse where "environmental problems cannot be clearly divorced from things more usually defined as social problems such as poor housing or lack of clean water" (Garrard 2012: 32). And this is understandably so, in a text which patently confers primacy to the ideals of solidarity, cross-racial bonds, reconciliation at a historical moment when South Africa was standing at the precipice of a decision, either in favour of or against the iron fist of *Afrikanerdom*.

In the "Author's Note", besides, Paton took pains to locate his first published work within a realistic frame where such fictional settings as Ndotsheni (the black protagonist's village) and "High Place" (the tellingly 'titled' farm of English-speaking James Jarvis) come alongside the ones recalled in the excerpt above and a few others still, including Johannesburg, the largest city in the Union. And if most of the characters are figments of the imagination, the described "process of deterioration" should be "considered as a social record" (p. 7)⁶. The closing paragraph of the paratextual

⁵ Baker has already given cognisance to Paton's Christian allegorising of geographical features, such as the associations of the valley with a nurturing cradle or the Shadow of Death and of the mountain with the sacred Peak of Omniscience. He states that "Paton has, in fact, even readjusted South Africa's profile to resemble that moral terrain which both Bunyan and Dante traveled [...]. Paton does this by allusions both Biblical and primitive. His language leads to the hills, cities, valleys, and green pastures we connect with right and wrong [...] with the mountain at Carisbrooke as reference first for the Beautiful then for the Good, we come to think of Johannesburg as sprawling somewhere on a plain even lower than the home valley. And Paton helps us to this illusion" (1957: 56, 59).

⁶ On the documentary value of the narrative see Collins (1953); Alvarez-Pereyre (1972); Foley (1998).

section lends further weight to the idea by informing us that “the population of South Africa is about eleven millions. Of these about two and a half million are white, of whom roughly three-fifths are Afrikaans-speaking and two-fifths English-speaking. The rest, except for one million coloured people [...] are the black people of the African tribes” (pp. 7-8).

What cannot be underestimated in this connection is also Paton’s Christian belief, his conviction that God presides over human affairs and that charity, goodwill, and brotherly love are the only weapons one is allowed to grasp. It is then no wonder that he duly placed a high premium on the need to heal any fatal breach separating ‘erring humans’ from the ‘miracle’ of natural creation: from a *beloved*, if regretfully neglected land, conceived of as a sacred cosmos which cannot be treated as a commodity or an inexhaustible store of supplies. While the land must be tilled with quasi-religious zeal so as to bear fruit and meet human demands, the community should for their part go to all lengths to ensure a sustainable development and be wary of causing damage to a magnificent habitat. Yet, while Paton was practicing his Christianised form of eco-consciousness matters such as the carrying capacity of the soil were anything but a pressing concern, and the dying tribal acreage was paving the way for the Bantustan system of the 1950s.

In this writer’s conservationist/conservative perspective, therefore, the countryside and rural dwellers epitomise the ethical path as opposed to the metropolitan road of Sin engulfing a host of deracinated subjects. In a dysphoric echo of the popular saying “All roads lead to Rome” (with Rome metaphorically standing for an overarching civilised goal), the omniscient and semi-oracular narrator punctually alerts us to the apocalyptic dangers stemming from a perverted urban bias: the fact that, precisely, “All roads lead to Johannesburg”. Throughout the narrative we will thus be confronted with a consciousness-raising parable regarding on the one hand state-induced migrancy, segregation policies, and murderous violence and, on the other, the relationships between humans and the environment in an extreme region where no less than subsistence and continuity are at stake. The evoked Midlands, hills and plateau of the Natal Province might be compared to a natural heritage area whose constitutive traits must gain recognition, together with their “environmental and social fragility” (Zerbi 1998: 9). Instead, this is what lies in store for a societal

attitude endorsing overexploitation and promoting in the same breath hyper-separation and minority rule:

Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed.

Where you stand the grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. *But* the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling, change their nature. For they grow red and bare; they cannot hold the rain and mist, and the streams are dry in the kloofs. Too many cattle feed upon the grass, and too many fires have burned it. Stand shod upon it, for it is coarse and sharp, and the stones cut under the feet. It is not kept, or guarded, or cared for, it no longer keeps men, guards men, cares for men [...]. Down in the valleys women scratch the soil that is left, and the maize hardly reaches the height of a man. They are valleys of old men and old women, of mothers and children. The men are away, the young men and the girls are away. (pp. 11-12, my emphasis)

After warning against the destruction of a consecrated ground linked with human thriving, the magisterial voice resorts to a "But" which splits up the paragraph and heightens our sensibility to the native question by means of the land imagery itself. "Natural evocation" goes in tandem with "political provocation" (Foley 2006: 37) as the fertile surroundings give way to an inhospitable redness struggling for survival. This is the barren soil of the depopulated African reserves, which in light of the corresponding *incipit* of Book II – the novel being divided into thirty-six chapters and three books – will testify to the grossly inequitable distribution of the land among Europeans and natives. At the beginning of that second part the reader is in fact made aware of the prosperous Carisbrooke farm and well-ploughed fields owned by Master Jarvis, towering over the eroded valley of Ndotsheni.

The groundwork is therefore laid for a trajectory where the "beloved country" – at that time the Union of South Africa, a dominion of the British Empire – incarnates a cardinal presence which all ethnic groups should learn to respect and share. In this sense, the imperative "Cry" also gathers momentum as a cry of protest against injustice and captivity, in line with "the cry of the people of Israel" and their search for the Promised Land in *Exodus* (Foley 2006: 42).

2. Joining forces for the “restoration of Ndotsheni”

If his teaching experience at Ixopo High School (1925-1928) and Maritzburg College (1928-1934) marked an important step in Paton's career, the turning point in his moral awakening dates back to 1935-1948, when he took over the headmastership of the Johannesburg Diepkloof Reformatory for African boys. Direct confrontation with native crime and its underlying causes would prompt him to take a progressive stand on such key issues as the treatment and prevention of black juvenile delinquency and penal reform (hence his tour abroad in 1946).

Notably, the main action in *Cry, the Beloved Country* centres around a case of criminal offence by a black youth escaped from a reformatory: the murder of Arthur Jarvis, a broad-minded and enlightened white man, in his Johannesburg home, by Absalom, the rootless son of Zulu parson Stephen Kumalo from Ndotsheni. Long sections in Book II can be shown to lay a strong emphasis on both the sound and compassionate thoughts of Arthur – a Patonian double who anatomises the degeneration of Eurocentric supremacy and its self-legitimising ideology – and the “judicial dramaturgy of a murder trial” (Lenta 2001: 51) followed by a death sentence impending on Absalom, a killer as well as a victim of the hellish ‘metropolitan ways’.

As foreshadowed by the sombre “All roads lead to Johannesburg” refrain, the ‘Jim-Comes-to-Jo’burg’ trope⁷ falls under the rubric of a moral indictment brought against an increasingly detribalised society, with a white megalopolis surrounded by the compounds of (male black) migrant workers, generally employed as a cheap labour force in mines and factories, but not recognised as legal residents. In the text, Stephen Kumalo's brother and vanished brother-in-law are the first to be affected by the ‘Jim syndrome’, until the haemorrhagic

⁷ This turn of phrase, which I employ as a cultural category referring to the rural black's initiation in the city, echoes a 1949 South African film titled *African Jim*, or *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*, where the eponymous Jim leaves his tribal lands and tries his fortune amid the perils of Johannesburg. On the left-wing front, and miles away from Paton, Marxist critics and radical black intellectuals were to attack the film's allegedly paternalistic portrayal of the naïve Boy catching up with Western ‘development’. Throughout the years, this plot theme has provided the basis for a popular subgenre in South African literature.

trend sweeps away other members of the reverend's next of kin: "His sister Gertrude [...] had gone there with her small son to look for the husband who had never come back from the mines. His only child Absalom had gone there, to look for his aunt Gertrude, and he had never returned" (pp. 12-13).

Upon receiving a letter from Theophilus Msimangu, a black minister in Sophiatown and a Virgil-like figure for him in the urban underworld, Kumalo decides to leave his Anglican mission church and look for the community's lost sheep, namely Gertrude and Absalom⁸. From the "small toy train" climbing up from the Umzimkulu valley into the hills – in an as yet positive "world of fancy", studded with "green shadowy banks of grass and bracken" (p. 17)⁹ – to the last leg of the journey, the country priest must get acclimatised to alien surroundings and a chilling sense of fear. The first Transvaal markers catalysing his attention are the polluted mine dumps looming on the fringes of Johannesburg, with its high buildings and threatening traffic congestion. If one may smile at the naïve rustic's panic when faced with traffic lights, the tone verges on the dramatic as he reaches Msimangu's mission house and, escorted by this trustworthy mentor, finds out more about the horror and misery of township life. Kumalo also has to gather all his moral strength when discovering that Gertrude has turned to prostitution and the brewing of illegal liquor, that his brother John has become a self-seeking racial militant, and that Absalom is a thief and the confessed murderer of Arthur Jarvis, the only son of the owner of "High Place" farm. The way this boy has plunged into a self-

⁸ If the name "Theophilus", literally meaning "Friend of God", "Loved by God", resonates with the addressee of the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Gospel of Luke*, Foley adds that, like "the biblical King David, who also lost his beloved but aberrant son, Absalom, and like the first Christian martyr, Stephen, after whom he is named, Kumalo must confront real pain and suffering" (1998: 78-79). Baker (1957: 57) finally suggests an analogy between James Jarvis and "Jahveh" or "Jehovah", Jarvis's "High Place" farm significantly standing on a mountaintop overlooking the world.

⁹ The passage closes however with a sour note: "And always behind them the dim wall of the wattles, like ghosts in the mist" (p. 17). One is tempted to associate this 'spectral presence' with the destabilising effects that Australian wattles produced on the local environment in terms of loss of water yield, soil compaction, habitat deterioration (Tewari 2001: 53-58). Wattles are just one example of a variety of water-hungry species imported to South Africa over the centuries.

destructive chasm is evidenced by his absurd, if unpremeditated, shooting of one of the few whites who was earnestly working for the uplift of the Africans.

Though epiphanic, the progress of the Patonian Pilgrim towards – rather than away from – the City of Destruction unfolds via a shocking confrontation with greed and moral corruption, and this seems to be largely a result of how, in Msimangu's words, it "suited the white man to break the tribe", but "it has not suited him to build something in the place of what is broken" (p. 30). To quote another pregnant passage, the backlash against an oligarchic system combining exploitation of labour with the disintegration of African customs and laws culminates either in rage or a paralysing, mutual fear: "Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply [...]. Let him not be too moved when the birds of his land are singing, nor give too much of his heart to a mountain or a valley" (pp. 77-78).

Taking this paradigm of *desolation* as a given, I would like to expand now on the countervailing element of *comfort*, and see if the faith and persevering hope of the finally 'sadder and wiser' parson succeed in intimating some form of positive resistance and regeneration.

Briefly shifting back to Paton's life experience, one's curiosity is piqued by a vivid detail pertaining to his transforming the prison-like Diepkloof Reformatory into an educational centre: in a symbolic gesture, he does away with the barbed-wire gates and has them replaced with flower beds, as though also appealing to the beauty of nature to mitigate suffering. Social conscience, a reconciliatory attitude and a 'greening policy' palpably intermix in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, too, especially in the shorter Book III dealing with the betterment of living conditions in the tribal reserves. Regrettably, these chapters, due perhaps to their sentimental emphasis on (inter-) community bonds and workaday advice on things agricultural, have often been considered as little more than a paternalistic appendage to the tragic vision pervading the narrative. Be that as it may, from an ecologically-minded point of view Book III acquires a momentous significance in relation to the theme of a ravaged territory in *crying* need of recognition on the national map.

Kumalo has by now set forth on his journey home with two family members who guarantee continuity: Gertrude's son and

Absalom's pregnant girl-bride, who easily integrate into the community. This *nostos* will lead him to adopt a sensible course of action and, with James Jarvis's support, take "whatever steps are possible to them as individuals in the immediate present", without waiting for "the flowering of the promises of some manifesto" (Callan 1968: 66). True, Christian axiology never loses its semantic poignancy and the relevance of events like the pouring rain rushing across an Eliotian "wasted land" (p. 203), or Stephen's ascent of the Emoyeni mountain on the eve of Absalom's execution, does not pass unnoticed. Mercy and devotion are nonetheless accompanied by the search for practical measures and a feasible coordination of labour to stop the drought and soil erosion that are jeopardising the agriculture of the valley:

Kumalo began to pray regularly in his church for the restoration of Ndotsheni. But he knew that was not enough. Somewhere down here upon the earth *men must come together, think something, do something*. And looking round the hills of his country he could find only two men, the chief and the headmaster. (p. 210, my emphasis)

The efforts required, though, bring into play personal responsibility and a genuinely cooperative spirit, which, unfortunately, the perplexed chief and his counsellors as well as the headmaster, with his impractical theorisations, fail to show. The restoration task will be carried out instead by implicitly looking forward to the ideals of the "Rainbow Nation", *ubuntu*, and forgiveness, championed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, across racial lines and with a sense of humaneness and mutual recognition as supreme guiding principles. Emerging from the slumber of various establishment figureheads, *Umfundisi* Kumalo and Master Jarvis – the grieving farmer who follows in his reformist son's footsteps – manifestly *think* and *do* something in the direction of reconciliation and restorative solutions¹⁰.

¹⁰ Foley singles out a few other white characters "who have dedicated themselves to fighting that system and aiding the oppressed: the Afrikaner official at the Reformatory; Father Vincent at the mission; Mr Carmichael, the lawyer who takes Absalom's case *pro deo*; the white motorists who help the bus boycotters; and, of course, Arthur Jarvis himself" (1998: 70).

Jarvis (the bereaved father of an assassinated man) resolves to start helping the non-white community and Kumalo (the bereaved father of a boy turned killer) through a generous donation for the African Boys' Club and the rebuilding of Ndotsheni's leaky church. These flickering hints at a new covenant will be invested with symbolic connotations when a plan is developed for the construction of a dam designed to collect water from Jarvis's property and channel it into the thirsty soil of Ndotsheni, so as to prevent further shortages. The dam can be easily read as a sign of reconciliation, an allegory for the sealing of a bond that envisions a 'rainbow in the cloud', with all the biblical resonances of the case. When meeting Kumalo on his way up to the Emoyeni mountain, a widowed Jarvis about to move into his daughter's house in Johannesburg does show sympathy for Absalom's grieving father, and tries to comfort him by claiming that if "[o]ne thing is about to be finished [...], here is something that is only begun" (p. 249).

Metaphorical weight is also added by Jarvis's sending cart-loads of fresh milk for the starving children of the reserve: this happens thanks to his grandson, a sort of angelic figure who regularly pays visits to Kumalo and is touched by the grim conditions in which the natives are forced to live. Welcomed by the clergyman as "something bright" (pp. 227-228), Arthur's son is blessed with candour, politeness and healthy curiosity and comes to personify Hope and Joy, as witnessed by his keenness to learn Zulu and the over twenty occurrences of lexemes related to laughing in the scenes featuring him.

The isotopy of comfort permeating Book III ultimately brings us back to one of Msimangu's rosier intuitions, a prophetic gloss to Martin Luther King's 1963 memorable speech: "I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it" (p. 42).

3. "We work for Africa"

When reading it from a multi-layered perspective, one finds it difficult to dismiss *Cry, the Beloved Country* on grounds of its alleged anachronism and political naiveté. Paton's interesting profile as a social analyst further comes to the fore through another black

character from Book III: Napoleon Letsitsi, a young agricultural demonstrator hired by Jarvis to familiarise the local people with farming techniques which would prepare for a more integrated life and, possibly, a self-supporting policy. Typifying neither the ‘Jim’ lost in the urban jungle, nor the native languishing in a wasteland, Napoleon belongs to a comparatively emancipated, skilled slice of the population and knows only too well that sustainable agricultural productivity is a priority in a semi-arid country like South Africa. This is why he gives instructions aimed at fostering practical and attitudinal changes in matters of dunging, ploughing, and planting. His recommendations specify

how the people must stop burning the dung and must put it back into the land, how they must gather the weeds together and treat them and not leave them to wither away in the sun, how they must stop ploughing up and down the hills, how they must plant trees for fuel, trees that grow quickly like wattles, in some place where they could not plough at all [...]. And hardest of all would be the custom of lobola, by which a man pays for his wife in cattle, for people kept too many cattle for this purpose, and counted all their wealth in cattle, so that the grass had no chance to recover. (p. 231)

Greeted by Kumalo as another angel from God – his laughing joviality being on a par with that of Jarvis’s grandson – Napoleon does not underrate judicious planning alongside field or cattle redistribution and a patient re-education of the dwellers. He also explains that the ‘revitalising’ of the land is a slow process and that it will anyway be impossible for it to totally prevent migration. Although he is not politically committed and truly wishes to restore the valley, this character provides an entry-point for yet another stance: that of a secularised, second-generation ‘man of conscience’ who, while exceeding the bounds of the Reverend Kumalo’s value system, brings us nearer the Fabulous Decade and its fervid campaigns in support of full democratic rights. Napoleon (is there a nuance of irony in the name?) sounds adamant on the issues of equality and of a country that everybody should be allowed to care for:

“I work so because I work for my country and my people [...] it was the white man who took us away from the land to go to work. And we were

ignorant also. It is all these things together that have made this valley desolate. Therefore, what this good white man does is only a repayment [...]. We work for Africa", he said, "not for this man or that man. Not for a white man or a black man, but for Africa". (pp. 244-245)

If in the book's epilogue Master Jarvis has abdicated his 'high place', the *Umfundisi* is absorbed in prayer and the narrator enwraps the dawn "of our emancipation" (p. 253) in a cloud of unknowing, Letsitsi's pronouncements continue to interweave with other possibilities lying ahead: the chance (now a historical truth) for the beloved country to rejoice at the *born child* of justice and reconciliation. This again suggests how, standing at a pivotal crossroads between the segregation era and apartheid rule, Paton's best-seller offers a multifaceted, 'liquid' substratum of meanings which demand the proper re-evaluation of a modern classic and eco-novel forerunner.

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