

## **‘The Examined Life’: Alan Paton as Autobiographer**

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The well-known neurologist Oliver Sacks, in a book appealingly entitled *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, tells the story of some of the patients he has treated over the years. One of these is the man he refers to as ‘Mr Thompson’. Mr Thompson is a sufferer from Korsakov’s Syndrome, which causes severe amnesia. Mr Thompson is unable to remember anything for more than a few minutes, and suffers severe anxiety because he is unable to understand who he is and why he is living in an institution.

Tormented by this mystery, Mr Thompson spends hours every day inventing elaborate accounts of his identity, each of them highly imaginative and each day’s account different: in fact, as Sacks observes, Mr Thompson produces an endless series of disconnected narratives in an attempt to explain himself and understand his position in the world. Mr Thompson is in a pitiable position, because he has no stable identity or understanding of who he is. And Sacks argues, in the light of the Thompson case, that the production of a stable narrative is a vital part of our identity. ‘It might be said’,

comments Sacks, 'that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative", and that this narrative is us.'<sup>1</sup>

This is a remarkable, indeed an astonishing claim, and one worthy of careful reflection. Sacks suggests that we do not merely tell stories about ourselves. Those stories define us and in an important sense are us. It is we who produce the stories, but it is also the stories that produce us. As the scholar Paul John Eakin has remarked, 'there is a mutually enhancing interplay between what we are and what we say we are.'<sup>2</sup> Talking about ourselves is a form of self-construction: we are creating a persona for ourselves, and we have no choice about doing this. It's a matter of desperate need, as the Mr Thompson case illustrates.

If this is true, we would expect that the production of autobiography would be a vital part of all our lives, that it would be a universal art form, and a moment's reflection shows that this is the case. We all engage in verbalized autobiography many times a day. How often have you heard somebody answer their cell phone with the words, 'I'm just arriving at...' or 'I'm just getting on to the bus', and there follows an autobiographical account of what has recently happened or what is happening now. If you sit in a public place and listen to people meeting, a very common greeting is 'What a day I've had', or 'Guess what's just happened to me', or some variant, followed

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (London: Picador, 1986) p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How we Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p.2.

by an autobiographical anecdote. This is an art-form more common than any other, so common that we don't even think of it as art. And this process is not just verbal. One of the commonest written forms to have emerged over the last few years is blogging, the production of an electronic diary posted on the web. Sites like Twitter show the natural extension of this tendency: most 'Tweets' are mini- or microblogs. Much of the world, it seems, is now producing verbal and written autobiography at an accelerating pace. Sacks's observation tells us why.

Psychologists have long understood the importance of this process, which is why therapy frequently consists of asking the patient for an autobiographical narrative, and healing flows from this production.<sup>3</sup> Children in our schools embark on their earliest experiences of public speaking through 'show and tell' sessions in which they are asked to describe some object or some experience important to their own lives. Autobiography is arguably the universal artistic form which sustains us as individuals in society.<sup>4</sup> Talking about ourselves involves more than self-indulgence. In doing it, we are performing a work of self-composition: we are engaging in a narrative act which calls our identity into being.

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<sup>3</sup> Artists have always recognized their need for structuring narrative. Robert Louis Stevenson put the case most plainly when he remarked, 'the nature...of any art whatever is to make a pattern'. Roslyn Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Pacific* (London: Ashgate, 2009), p.33, fn 17.

<sup>4</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How we Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p.1.

The types of self knowledge evoked through an exploration of narrative have been categorized by the scholar Ulric Neisser, who distinguishes five kinds of self knowledge, all of which are evident in Alan Paton's autobiographical writings. These are exploration of the ecological self (that is, the self within the physical environment); the interpersonal self (the self in social interaction); the extended self (extended, that is, in time through memory of the past and desire for the future); the private self (the self of conscious experiences unavailable to others, such as pain or fear); and the conceptual self (the self conceived in terms of social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind). All of these are capable of exploration and definition through autobiographic narrative.

Though it may now seem to be universal, autobiography is a subset of biography, and biography is essentially a western literary form, one could perhaps argue a Judeo-Christian one. If you're a believer in reincarnation, for instance, and regard any individual life as just one of thousands or millions which each soul is going to go through, your focus on any one of these lives will be reduced. There is no equivalent interest in societies structured by Confucian or Hindu or Buddhist ideas in uncovering the personality of an individual human consciousness in the way that western biography and autobiography have striven to do. Autobiography in particular is specifically Christian in inspiration: New Testament books such as *Acts* are partly autobiographical, the first known exemplar of formal autobiography is Saint Augustine's *Autobiography*, and Protestant

writers from the sixteenth century on have consciously used autobiography as a tool of spiritual definition: the Puritan Diary, a form of written confession, became a common genre. The autobiographical impulse is dependent on the Judeo-Christian and Western Classical insistence on the importance on individual lives: as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, 'we are given once to die; then comes the Judgement'.<sup>5</sup> The Western interest in the individual *per se*, which shows itself in such literary forms as the heroic epic and the lyric poem, is very different from (say) the Confucian approach, with the result that heroic poems and epics have never become established in China.<sup>6</sup>

The Western philosophical tradition of self-examination, which Georg Misch traces so convincingly,<sup>7</sup> has taken only shallow root elsewhere. In the anglophone west, however, it has come to be seen as a central element in common culture. And it is of considerable antiquity. The notion of recording individual lives in the western tradition is at least as old as Plutarch (AD 46-120) and Suetonius (AD 69-140), probably older. The biblical accounts of the lives of the Patriarchs, Prophets and Kings, or the Gospels themselves, could be

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 9:27.

<sup>6</sup> See on this topic D.C. Twitchett, 'Chinese Biographical Writing', in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleyblank, (London: SOAS, 1961), especially p.110. Chinese biography, Twitchett remarks, is 'biography in a strictly limited sense, derived from the eulogistic writings of family cults, and concerned with only one aspect of the subject's life [e.g. noteworthy actions within the clan relationship, or details of an official career]. It is concerned almost exclusively with members of the same social group as its authors'. Ibid p.113.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, translated by E.W. Dickes, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1973).

considered biographies; hagiographies (writings about saints) abound from very early in the Christian era.

This tradition, I would argue, is clear in Alan Paton's autobiographical writings. Paton kept in mind the saying attributed to Socrates and alluded to in my title, 'the unexamined life is not worth living'.<sup>8</sup> Although Alan Paton produced his autobiographies at the end of his writing life, in old age, he seems to have been well aware of the importance of autobiographical narrative almost from the moment he began to write. To drive home this point, in this lecture I will largely sidestep his autobiographies, and focus on his earlier writings. And from early on, one can see him deliberately and consciously constructing a series of interlocking narratives which shape his life, support his values, and give structure to his personality and his existence. There is no doubt that he redefined his experiences in terms of these narratives, and even a brief examination of his writing career makes this plain.

Paton gradually came to see his life as structured around not one, but several linked narratives. These included a religious dedication to living for others; a nationalist dedication to living for his country; and, locking the first two together, a struggle against racism and towards a common humanity.

He was taught to see his life as having a purpose, by his friend Railton Dent. Dent, whom Paton met at NUC was a man of the type

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *The Dialogues, Apology*.

that exemplified to Paton a group of virtues whose very meaning seems as vague and questionable towards the end of the twentieth century as it was clear and admirable at its start: manliness, decency, honour. And Dent exemplified something else, whose lasting value is clearer: he lived by a conviction that each human life has a purpose, directed towards helping others, and the primary duty of each person is to seek out that purpose and fulfil it. As Paton put it,

I could see no fault in him. He was I think the most upright person I ever was to know, and his influence on me was profound. He did not make me into a good man, that would have been too much. But he taught me one thing... that life must be used in the service of a cause greater than oneself. This can be done by a Christian for two reasons: one is obedience to his Lord, the other is purely pragmatic, namely that one is going to miss the meaning of life if one doesn't.<sup>9</sup>

That is the first Paton narrative.

The nationalist impulse in his writing arose at almost the same time. In 1924 his fellow students collected money to send him to Britain as a delegate to a student conference. On his return from this, his first trip abroad, Paton was surprised by the depth of his feelings on first seeing South Africa again. He found he had learned as much about South Africa as about Britain:

The sight of Table Mountain rising from the sea overwhelmed me. I doubt if I put my thoughts into words, but it was clear that at the age of twenty-one I had, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, given myself to this strange country, to love and to cherish till death us did part.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Towards the Mountain* p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Towards the Mountain* pp. 81-2. In a letter at the time he wrote, 'the incomparable English countryside...does not call to me... but when I think of the wattle-bloom at Umvozaan, & the great silence of the Amphitheatre, & the loneliness of the Tugela... it sends into my blamed breast 'murmurs and scents of the infinite

Though his was to be a life full of overseas travel, and though he was occasionally to flirt with the thought of living in other countries, he never lost his sense of profound loyalty to South Africa. Exile was not for him. Hereafter the context of his narrative was clearly patriotic. He loved South Africa and considered it a duty to work for the betterment of his countrymen.<sup>11</sup>

This in turn contributed to the third of the narratives that structured his life, and his autobiographies: the struggle to defeat racism both in himself and in the wider society. To begin with, he thought of himself as British, and was dismissive of Afrikaners. Blacks were outside his purview altogether. This state of affairs was reinforced by the fact that both his parents spoke of England as 'Home', and that he was encouraged to do the same. Natal at his birth was a British colony, a situation that would not change until Union in 1910. His growing to maturity was marked by a steady extension of his sympathy to include first Afrikaners, then Indians and then Blacks. His mature tendency was to think of common humanity as expunging boundaries between human beings, and one can see this steady spread of sympathy as one traces his autobiographical writings.

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sea'. Letter to Reginald Pearse, 9 January 1925, Peter F. Alexander, *Alan Paton: Selected Letters* (Cape Town: Van Riebieck Society, 2009), p.40.

<sup>11</sup> As Martin Rubin has noted, Paton was a British patriot before he became a South African one, and Rubin remarks that Paton is almost unique among South African liberals for 'his unabashed and avowed patriotism'. Martin Rubin, review of *Towards the Mountain* in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer, 1983), p.261.

Paton's early background was severe Protestantism of a sectarian character. Accordingly, he inherited the tradition of Puritan diary writing, in which the diary, from the sixteenth century onwards, takes the form of a confession or spiritual exploration.

Paton's own autobiographical writing seems from the first to have been of this confessional type. Even in his earliest writing there are what can only be called confessional passages, and these are often his most effective and powerfully analytical writing. Occasionally he reworks such a passage in his later writing, and these give us fascinating insights into the development of his personal narratives. The earliest of his novels to repay examination in this way is one of his early unpublished books, known after its protagonist as *John Henry Dane*.

This unfinished novel was almost certainly written in 1934, and in it Paton involves his hero, John Henry Dane, in many of his own childhood experiences. One of the key experiences of Paton's early schooldays makes its first appearance in this apprentice novel. What happened was, simply, this: on a cold day his mother sent to school for him a basket containing some scones and a hot drink. When the black servant boy with the basket asked for him in the playground, Paton, horrified to find himself singled out in this way, denied that the food was for him, and allowed some of his older schoolmates to eat it. And when the servant saluted him on leaving, he ignored the greeting.

He gave an account of this event many years later, in his strangely moving story 'The Gift', and he told it again in his

autobiography *Towards the Mountain*.<sup>12</sup> But the earliest, unpublished account, in *John Henry Dane*, since it was written closer to the time, has a peculiar interest of its own:

One cold biting day I had an experience of which even the philosopher of twenty-eight [Dane's age at the time he tells the story, and Paton's when he wrote this section] is a little ashamed... And at the short-break, which we country bumpkins called 'little play-time', a native boy approached with a basket of warm buttered toast & a jug of hot tea. It was the very day for such a gift, & I looked longingly at it, not knowing it was mine.

'Dane, you lucky devil, here's some grub for you,' one of the bigger boys told me.

'It's not mine,' I said.

'But the nigger says it's for you.'

'It's not mine,' I said vehemently.

Some obscure motive—fear of eating something that would single me out from the shouting personless crowd where I was content to lose myself—perhaps fear of owing to a mother & the fact of being loved—who knows?

'You can't waste it, you fool.'

'You can have it. It's not mine,' I said doggedly.

'Here goes,' said the lucky one, & I tried to watch carelessly the sharing of my mother's gift. But the feeling of cowardice, the knowledge of my own strangeness, set me drifting to a place where I was hidden from the scene of this incomprehensible treachery.

I told my mother the story years afterwards, & felt even then the shame & the need for forgiveness. Of all my queer actions it still remains the most incomprehensible.<sup>13</sup>

Paton analyses why he feels ashamed of his embarrassment. He calls his action 'incomprehensible treachery'. But what exactly was he betraying. Here, in this early version, it is his mother's love, the only love that bound Paton's family together, which is betrayed, and the fear is fear of being singled out by the bigger boys.

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<sup>12</sup> Pages 21-23.

<sup>13</sup> *John Henry Dane*, chapter 4. APC.

However, the focus of his guilt altered very interestingly in later years. It is high significant that in the later versions of this story, particularly the one in his autobiography, the betrayal focusses itself not on the mother's gift denied, but on the black boy who brings it:

Some of the schoolboys came to me and said, your boy's here with a basket. But I, though inexperienced in lying, denied that such a boy could be there. So they brought the boy, and of course it was our boy, and he smiled at me uncertainly because of the strangeness of the place, and I denied all knowledge of him. But he told them he was certainly our boy, and that I was the son of the house, and that my mother had sent me something warm to eat and drink. I denied him the second time.<sup>14</sup>

Notice the focus of the story has changed from rejecting the gift, to denying knowledge of the black boy who has brought it. Just look at the steady, relentless repetition of the word 'boy' in that passage. Childish embarrassment at being picked out in public has, in the mind of the mature writer looking back, assumed the significance of Peter's denial of Christ—and the Christ here is black.

What is so striking about these passages when one examines them in order of writing is that Paton's sense of being a betrayer has shifted from his mother to the little black boy. Initially he sees himself as culpable for rejecting his mother's gift, and he is embarrassed to face her afterwards. In the later versions of the story it is the boy whom he sees himself as having betrayed, and his mother fades into the background. Filial disloyalty has been turned into something much larger, something which is easily seen as characterizing all of

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<sup>14</sup> *Towards the Mountain* p. 23.

South African history, and something which has been given a strongly racial tinge. In short, Paton has transformed this juvenile anecdote into something with national, spiritual, even universal significance. Nothing more clearly shows the growth of racial sensitivity in him, or more clearly shows the development of his personal narrative.

The autobiographical instinct runs through all Paton's writing, and shows itself strongly in his early poems, in many of which he considers both his past and his future. In some he pictures himself as a multiple personality, showing he was aware of the potentialities within himself, and the need to choose responsibly between them. In other words he was, as we saw in the passages we have just examined, deliberately constructing, and choosing between, personal narratives—not unlike Mr Thompson. A poem he wrote on 3 April 1932 and published in the *Natal University College Magazine* shortly after, 'Trilemma', vividly suggests his inner debate at this time as to who he was and what he should be doing with his life: and again, it is a black worker who triggers the evaluation.

I dreamt three students walked a road,  
Nobly degreed and capped and gowned;  
A humble labourer in a field  
Close on the roadside tilled the ground.

One student wrapped in lofty thought  
Passed by with neither sight nor sign.  
I saw his face beneath the hood  
And gaped bewildered -- it was mine!

One student smelt the honest sweat,  
Screwed up his nose in cold disdain,  
I saw his face beneath the hood,  
Gaped more bewildered -- mine again!

One student leapt the roadside hedge  
And tilled the ground without a word  
Beside his mate -- I saw his face,  
This dream was growing more absurd!

But most absurd of all was me,  
The real me, not the other three,  
Going from hood to hood to see  
Which of the three was really me!<sup>15</sup>

This poem is about the conscious and deliberate choice of narrative. Intellectual life, worldly ambition, and the desire to serve his fellow human beings: these were three of the forces which tugged at him at this time, and the struggle would be long. But already the signs of increased social, political and religious commitment were there to suggest that the third dream-ego was the likely winner.

The autobiographical impulse was to show itself in Paton's most famous novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, in which he draws a vivid portrait of a young man running a black borstal, a portrait clearly intended for himself. And it is a self-portrait of an impatient and often angry man, who lashes out at others when he is hurt or enraged.

Paton provides here a self-analysis of what he regarded as his besetting sin, which was not pride but anger. Many accounts of him at this period speak of his quick and sometimes violent temper, a temper which was sufficiently habitual to mark itself permanently on his face, and to give him an expression which some found forbidding and

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<sup>15</sup> *Natal University College Magazine*, vol 26, May 1932, p. 34; reprinted in *Knocking on the Door* p. 12. The MS is in APC.

others found angry or bitter. As his character puts it in *Cry, the Beloved Country*:

—I spoke like that because I was grieved and because I tried to give myself to my work. And when my work goes wrong, I hurt myself and I hurt others also. But then I grow ashamed, and that is why I am here... The young man frowned and said, as if to himself, It is my great fault.<sup>16</sup>

This is writing being used for rigorously honest autobiographical analysis, like the Puritan Diary.

This self analysis was of course conscious, and it affected every aspect of the narrative. When he came to write his second novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*, Paton began in the third person but deliberately switched to the first person, telling a friend that by doing this the novel became much more personal to himself, 'for now the author is saved from the necessity of psychological writing, because he is using a narrator that merely observed external events... But at the same time his narrator is able to feel the terror of these incomprehensible events, and to impart to the whole story a subjective and emotional quality which would otherwise have been lacking. That is how I see it.'<sup>17</sup>

We have begun looking at Paton's autobiographical writing in unexpected places, in his fiction and in his poetry. But he also wrote two major biographies, of J.H. Hofmeyr and Bishop Clayton, the first of which is notable for the fact that Paton makes virtually no

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<sup>16</sup> *Cry, the Beloved Country*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948), Chapter 15, pp.104-5.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Railton Dent, 1 July 1952, Peter F. Alexander, *Alan Paton: Selected Letters* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2009), p.216.

appearance in the book, not even in the index. This is striking, partly because it is a truism that biographers are their own main subjects, meaning that biographers tend to choose biographical subjects who resemble themselves, and partly because Paton did in fact know both of his subjects very well indeed. This is particularly true of the outstanding biography he wrote about J.H Hofmeyr, his friend and patron. The more Paton learned about Hofmeyr, the more fascinated he became, because of the links he seemed to perceive between his own upbringing and that of Hofmeyr.

Paton had had a brilliant and accelerated school career. Hofmeyr had been a child prodigy. Paton's rapid school career had made him feel isolated from his fellows, and with Hofmeyr this process had gone much further, so that he was almost entirely a solitary. Hofmeyr was not only an alter-ego and a friend, but seemed to Paton to symbolize political liberalism, standing for all that was best and most threatened in South African political life. Writing his life then, was a way in which Paton could support and publicize the Liberal cause while shaping the historical record of his country.

Paton saw this biography entirely in narrative terms. 'It is the story...of a white South African who was moving steadily towards emancipation, although he did not quite achieve it. It is also the story of a man who did not learn until he was fully grown that God gives

certain gifts which neither industry nor virtue can ever win.<sup>18</sup> It is in part of course a self-analysis, and an honest one.

His second biography, that of the Anglican Archbishop Clayton, was in one sense a continuation of the Hofmeyr biography, since Clayton had come to prominence as a national figure immediately after the death of Hofmeyr.<sup>19</sup> Yet for Paton the writing of *Apartheid and the Archbishop: The Life and Times of +Geoffrey Clayton* was a labour of love akin to the writing of *Hofmeyr*. As Hofmeyr had been Paton's political mentor, Clayton had been his spiritual guide for many years. And the Clayton book, like *Hofmeyr*, was more than a biography: it was a history of the rise of apartheid, and a vivid account of the battle that had been waged against it by people like Paton. He saw Clayton's life clearly as a series of narratives:

It carries forward the history of South Africa from 1948 when Hofmeyr died to 1957 when Clayton died. It is a book about a churchman but it is also a book about South Africa... essentially a historical biography.<sup>20</sup>

And he summarized the book's themes for an American scholar:

It has five main themes: the church, the conflict between church and state, the incompatibility between the Dutch Reformed Churches and the others, the politics of the times, and the strange personality of Archbishop Clayton, with many anecdotes. My job was to keep the first theme within bounds.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Letter to Trevor Huddleston, 28 September 1961, Peter F. Alexander, *Alan Paton: Selected Letters* (Cape Town: Van Riebieck Society, 2009), p.292.

<sup>19</sup> As Peter Walshe has remarked, 'it was therefore natural for Paton to turn from the tragedy of Hofmeyr's death to this second eminent liberal. Clayton, like Hofmeyr, had exercised a seminal influence in Paton's own spiritual and intellectual odyssey'. Peter Walshe, review of *Apartheid and the Archbishop: The Life and Times of Geoffrey Clayton*, in *The Review of Politics*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1975), p.428.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Helen Suzman, 23 September 1973, Peter F. Alexander, *Alan Paton: Selected Letters* (Cape Town: Van Riebieck Society, 2009), p. 387.

<sup>21</sup> Unpublished letter, Paton to Edward Callan, 1 November 1973: EC.

Clearly Paton saw his biographies in terms of his autobiographical narratives as I've adumbrated them. And in a later letter, Paton added that Clayton's life was 'an allegory of the Christian way',<sup>22</sup> which was exactly how he saw his own life

The Clayton biography was a way of keeping the ideals of Liberalism before the South African public. When I spoke to Laurens van der Post, after Paton's death, he was dismissive about the years Paton had spent on 'that big book about his bishop'.<sup>23</sup> Yet his two biographies allowed Paton to trace and record the major political movements in his time, and to link them to his own concerns. They constitute what I could call an autobiography of context, with the central figure, the biographer himself, almost entirely invisible. Surely no more modest autobiography has been written.

Between these two books Paton produced an overtly autobiographical book, triggered by his own persecution by the South African state, and under the influence of overwhelming grief. The volume he wrote after the death of his first wife Dorrie, *Kontakion For You Departed*, is almost entirely autobiographical. In it, however, one notices a change in Paton's self-analysis. Coping with intense and fresh grief, he was not inclined to convict himself of faults as readily as he had done in his earlier writing. In many ways *Kontakion* is a self-justification rather than self-accusation, as he looks back to the

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<sup>22</sup> Unpublished letter, Paton to Edward Callan, 13 August 1974: EC.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Sir Laurens van der Post, London, 4 December 1977.

beginnings of his relationship with Dorrie, and suggests that he has been sinned against more than he has sinned himself.<sup>24</sup>

Even in this volume, however, he convinces us that he is telling the truth, even though it is not necessarily the whole truth:

Your husband died. How I heard, I cannot now remember. I cannot even remember if I thought I should like to marry you. Nor can I remember what I said to you when I saw you again. I cannot even remember if I called you by your Christian name. But I remember the grim black clothes.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that Paton acknowledges his inability to remember many details gives the reader confidence that what he does remember is accurate.<sup>26</sup> A similarly skilful autobiographical technique is his copious use of questions, which convey a willingness to trust and involve the reader, and an openness to other interpretations than the ones he gives of seminal events. An example comes when Dorrie flirtatiously reads his palm:

What were you doing, reading my hands?...Did you know? Did you not remember that you were a three-month widow, and that you were a woman who had loved and I was a boy who had not? Did you know what you were doing?<sup>27</sup>

The repeated questions become increasingly sharp and judgmental, even puritanical in tone, and the judgment is directed against

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Rubin remarks that 'it takes a personal as well as a literary courage to set it all out...the flat tones of this account do not hide from the reader how ineffably painful it must have been for Paton to write anew'. Martin Rubin, review of *Towards the Mountain* in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer, 1983), p.264.

<sup>25</sup> *Kontakion For You Departed*, published in America as *For You Departed* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1969), p.7.

<sup>26</sup> As Martin Rubin has noticed, the honesty and simplicity of Paton's style is a major part of his charm and effectiveness as a writer. Martin Rubin, review of *Towards the Mountain* in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer, 1983), p.262.

<sup>27</sup> *Kontakion For You Departed*, published in America as *For You Departed* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1969), p.9.

Dorrie.<sup>28</sup> Clearly this narrative distancing was one way in which Paton sought to cope with his grief: autobiography can be healing as well as structuring, and writing *Kontakion* was a form of grief-therapy for him. The volume continues in this vein at considerable length until Paton feels impelled to a defense of what he is doing:

I did not mean to write this down... Then I thought to myself, *why leave it out? This is how it was, this is how you were, this is how I was.* So here it is written down.<sup>29</sup>

The earlier impetus to use autobiography as a form of the confessional is fading in Paton by the time he writes *Kontakion*. His previous severe self-analysis gradually gives way, particularly after his marriage to his second wife Anne, to something approaching self-acceptance. His style mellows and he is increasingly inclined to extend sympathy to others and to his younger self.

But it is not just in the books he wrote that one can trace both Paton's personal narratives and their evolution. They also strongly influenced books he did not choose to write.<sup>30</sup> The most telling of these unwritten books is the biography of Roy Campbell, and in glancing at this, I hope you'll forgive me venturing into autobiography on my own account. By the early 1970s Paton had established himself as one of South Africa's outstanding biographers. At the same time he had given up all hope that another great novel would come to

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<sup>28</sup> Yet as Martin Rubin has noted, Paton 'shows a formidable capacity for unflinching self-criticism'. Martin Rubin, review of *Towards the Mountain* in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer, 1983), p.261.

<sup>29</sup> *Kontakion For You Departed*, published in America as *For You Departed* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1969), p.75.

<sup>30</sup> I would include in this comment a range of ideas for novels he played with but did not carry through, such as one about Christ visiting Johannesburg.

him. Having written two biographies of men who closely conformed to his own spiritual and political beliefs, he began to consider casting his net wider. In January 1970 he began to think that he would like to write the biography of South Africa's greatest poet, Roy Campbell.

Paton had written a well-researched lecture on Campbell, which he delivered at the University of Natal in 1970, and though he had met Campbell only once, he wrote to Campbell's old friend Laurens van der Post, 'I feel that I could do justice to his life'.<sup>31</sup> To do this work he would need to consult the poet's widow, Mary Campbell, who lived in Portugal. Paton traveled to Europe to see her.

He found her a difficult subject to interview, and as the work progressed he became less and less happy about doing it. Roy Campbell had been a great teller of tall stories, boasting in his autobiography *Broken Record*, 'I am not the one to wish to bore you with a list of facts'.<sup>32</sup> Mary Campbell took the same attitude to the truth, particularly where it affected her marriage, which had been a difficult one, and her husband's political views, which had been confusedly right-wing. Campbell's younger daughter Anna was not much help either: deeply emotional and poorly educated, she alternated between truculent boasts about her father's greatness, and sudden outbursts of sobbing. Anna's wealthy companion Rob Lyle, who had befriended Campbell in his last years and supported him financially, was a man of icy reserve and sudden suspicions, of whom

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<sup>31</sup> Unpublished letter, Paton to Colonel Van der Post, 7 February 1970: APC.

<sup>32</sup> Roy Campbell, *Broken Record* p. 11.

Paton was to remark that he would rather interview an iceberg in a typhoon.<sup>33</sup> 'To put it bluntly', Paton was to write, 'I found Mary Campbell devious and the other two not much better.'<sup>34</sup> Campbell's elder daughter Teresa was Paton's main source of information, but there was much she did not know.

By 1973 Paton had begun to realize that Mary Campbell had had lesbian lovers during her marriage, and perhaps he suspected that Campbell had been bisexual too. But the puritan in Paton meant that he was too embarrassed to ask questions about such matters with the degree of directness that would have elicited direct answers, and Mary Campbell evaded him. Harold Nicolson once memorably remarked that a good biographer needs to be 'a snouty little man', but Paton was unable to snuffle through the Campbells' private lives. Even when dealing with Clayton, he had had to be prodded, by Tony Morphet, into saying that Clayton was a homosexual, and having stated the bald fact, he had said no more. 'I don't want to go into that', he had growled at Morphet.<sup>35</sup>

He grew more unhappy about the Campbell project, partly as a result of these difficulties, partly because of the cost of writing it, but chiefly because a life of Campbell did not fit the pattern into which all his writing fell: in fact did not fit his narrative. As I have been arguing, all Paton's writing carried the same religious and political message. His biographies of Hofmeyr and Clayton had been

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<sup>3333</sup> Unpublished letter, Paton to the writer, 26 October 1976: PFA.

<sup>34</sup> *Journey Continued* p. 289.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Tony Morphet, Cape Town, 12 June 1991.

structured by the same narrative, with their analysis of the rise of apartheid and the fight of just and deeply moral people against it.

But Roy Campbell was a much more ambiguous figure than Hofmeyr or Clayton. After a period of youthful rebellion against the 'colour bar' of the 1920s he had left South Africa, lost interest in the country's racial problems, and become a right-winger who supported General Franco and Mussolini before the war, and who all his life made occasional anti-Semitic comments. His life and his values directly contradicted Paton's. 'Am now contemplating that fascist anti-Semite, Campbell', Paton wrote gloomily to a friend, Leslie Rubin.<sup>36</sup>

When I, as a young student, visited him at Botha's Hill in 1974, he quickly recognized me as the salvation he had begun to seek for, and asked me if I would like to write the Campbell book instead of him. Would I! It was the kind of thing every young researcher dreams of. At the time neither he nor I could foresee that he had changed the course of my career decisively.

Like Professor W.H. Gardner before him, Paton had not written a word of the biography, but he had collected a mass of papers and manuscripts, and he generously passed these on to me. During the next eight years he supported me in all my struggles to get at the truth about Campbell's extraordinary life, and sympathised with me when my attempts to tell the whole truth led to threats of legal action from Rob Lyle, as a result of which part of the Campbell biography

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<sup>36</sup> Unpublished Christmas card, Paton to Leslie Rubin, December 1972: LR.

had to be cut, in particular that portion in which I told the extraordinary story of Campbell's self-mutilation in 1952. Paton was fascinated to hear the account Teresa Campbell had given me, of how her father had struggled against sexual temptation and had tried to evade it by the radical methods of St. Origen, by castrating himself in the bathroom of his home after a drinking bout. This is the most dramatic example of artistic self-harm since Van Gogh's ear. Paton felt that he could never have dealt with this material, nor could he have elicited the information. The threats of legal action with which I was menaced, and which delayed my book for years, convinced him that he had had a narrow escape. From the start he had thought of me as his 'rescuer';<sup>37</sup> as he watched me struggling in the toils he increasingly congratulated himself on his escape.

The truth, I believe, was that Campbell's life was completely intractable to Paton, because it simply did not fit his personal narrative. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the need for a biographer to choose material which is in some sense sympathetic to himself. Few writers would choose to spend the seven years of their life required for the writing of a major biography on a subject they detest.

A much more sympathetic task of reevaluation he embarked on next was the first volume of his autobiography, which he called *Towards the Mountain*. The title indicates clearly the central myth

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<sup>37</sup> *Journey Continued* p. 290.

that informed Paton's view of all life, and certainly his view of his own. He saw his career as an allegory of the spiritual way.<sup>38</sup> Life was a Bunyanesque pilgrimage, and the goal was that holy mountain spoken of by Isaiah, where none would hurt or destroy.<sup>39</sup> 'The pursuit of this "holy mountain", though very imperfectly done', Paton said in a sermon I heard him deliver in England, 'is the story of my poor life as a Christian.'<sup>40</sup> And he wrote an account of his country, as much as of himself. As Peter Titlestad has remarked, Paton's autobiographies, which Titlestad rightly called 'a masterpiece', are a feature of his times and an historical record of recent South African history'.<sup>41</sup>

The Holy Mountain could never be reached in this life, but to cease to strive for it was a failure of faith. Paton might turn aside from the path; he might fall into what he thought of as sin; but he would never forget what he was struggling towards, or pretend that it could be reached by ignoble or violent means. It was this philosophy of life which allowed Paton to see all of his existence as integrated and significant, and to sustain hope even when hope seemed dead. 'The question of hope or despair is one which Christianity has answers to,' Colin Gardner was to say.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Unpublished letter, Paton to Edward Callan, 13 August 1974: EC.

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah 11.9.

<sup>40</sup> Sermon delivered in Great St Mary's, Cambridge, 27 April 1975: PFA.

<sup>41</sup> Peter J.H. Titlestad, 'Alan Paton's Autobiography: A Neglected South African Masterpiece' in *English Academy Review*, vol. 23 no. 1, 2006, pp15-22.

<sup>42</sup> 'The need to maintain hope even in hopeless circumstances is one of the things he got from Christianity.' Interview with Colin Gardner, Pietermaritzburg, 21 June 1991.

Maintaining hope however, did not require the telling of the whole truth, and Paton considered that he had a duty not to hurt the living unnecessarily. One of those Paton spared from embarrassment in his autobiographies was himself: he said nothing about his reputation as a flogger while he was a teacher and Principal of Diepkloof; he concealed much of the sexual frustration of his first marriage; he appeared quite unaware of his sons' views of his deficiencies as a parent; and though he gave details of one extra-marital affair, that with 'Joan Montgomery', he drew a discreet veil over his friendship with a second lover, Mary Benson. Of the events surrounding his assault and the public accusation of immorality against himself in July 1968, he said nothing at all.<sup>43</sup> His honesty had grown beyond the need for detailed public confession, and increasingly he saw himself in the larger context of history.

And it is this context that comes to dominate his second volume of autobiography, *Journey Continued*: in it, Paton himself gradually withdraws from centre stage, and the history of his country comes to dominate the book, the beloved country moving forward as Paton steps back.

Let me conclude. It is clear, from this rapid survey of Paton's output (although there is much I have been forced to omit) that almost all of Paton's writing is in an important sense autobiographical. More

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<sup>43</sup> David R. Penna, in a review of *Journey Continued* in *Africa Today* vol. 38, no. 1 (1991), p.72, remarked that *Journey Continued* shows a considerable falling-off in quality from *Towards the Mountain*. Given Paton's advanced age when he wrote the second volume, this is not surprising.

than that, I would argue, all his writing is a *livre composé*, a single multi-generic production which focuses on his three linked personal narratives. These gave shape not only to his own life, but by his profound literary influence, they helped shape the historical account of the central structure of South African liberalism. If 'autobiography is not merely something read', as Eakin argues, but is 'a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves, day in and day out',<sup>44</sup> Paton's entire writing life can be seen as unified by the narrative that formed his physical and spiritual existence. His life shaped all his writing, and his writing shaped his life. And both that life and that writing had a profound influence on the national narrative of the strange country which gave him life, and to which he gave his love.

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<sup>44</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How we Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p.4.