

Gordon's paper will be of enormous value to anybody interested in trying to understand the ethical dimensions of struggle or the nature of post-apartheid reconciliation.

Fanon: A Critical Reader is a very well thought-through collection of essays and an excellent tool for stimulating critical thought about Fanon's rich legacy. Readers will occasionally have to remind themselves that a few of the papers collected in this volume are specifically American attempts to harness Fanon to American issues. Nevertheless this is top-class critical reader which should be in the library of every (South) African university.

Three Recent Poetry Collections

Songs of Africa: Collected Poems

by Alan Paton

Durban: Gecko Books, 1995, 218 pp.

ISBN: 1875011153

Ferry to Robben Island

by Alan James

Durban: Eyeball Press, 1996, 105 pp.

ISBN: 0620202564

Tongue Tide

by Geoffrey Hutchings

Durban: Preprint Publishing, 1996, 86 pp.

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The most entertaining part of Alan Paton's *Songs of Africa* is the 'notes and personal recollections' of Douglas Livingstone, with which the volume begins. In a series of anecdotes, Livingstone shows how he eventually got beneath Paton's severe and 'forbidding carapace' (p. xi) and discovered the man who loved poetry 'with a rare and untidy passion'. Livingstone comments on Paton's own poetic talents:

Was Alan a great poet, or even a 'good' one? His passion for poetry was certainly prodigious; at times—it must be allowed—his reach exceeded his grasp. It never ceased to amaze me that a deployer of such sublime prose, a consummate master, would so hunger after the more frivolous and vatic fifth dimension of verse as a channel of self-expression (p. xix).

But Paton could write at times with simplicity and grace. The tone of Paton's 1931 poem, 'The Poet' is primarily one of envious yearning:

You with some trick of phrase
At one leap scale the walls
And tread the heights of truth.
I hear your calls
As I swim moats, climb battlements;
I tell myself
You know not what you do
And all my life of days
Wish I had gone with you (p. 44).

The poet is depicted as having it too easy, of tricking his way effortlessly with language ('at one leap') while the prosy Paton swills through moats and impales himself on various obstacles of what amounts to a sort of literary assault course, the poet safe in his metaphorical helicopter, for which he clearly hasn't paid. And worse, the poet appears to be blissfully ignorant of his levitational abilities ('you know not what you do'). The suggestion is that the poet's success is both enviable in its skill and somehow vacuous in its (fundamentally escapist) achievement, as if the only reality is down there in the muck of the 'moat', and on the bruising, blood-smeared 'battlements'. So, while poetry may be a mode of writing devoutly to be wished, it is also a luxury the nitty-gritty prose writer cannot afford.

Paton acknowledges that poetry, with its ability 'at one leap [to] scale the walls', is the riskier business. And the fear of risk-taking comes through in the envy. It reminds me of the 'poet like an acrobat', of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 'Constantly Risking Absurdity' (Ferlinghetti 1994:181)⁴. Paton's fear is mostly to do with a loss of control over the words, a fear that the words might begin to speak for themselves. In 'To Walt Whitman', this is imagined in terms of the words held safely but uselessly in a locked womb:

⁴ In: *A Coney Island of the Mind*. New York: New Directions.

woke afraid
That the great living host of tumbling words
Was a delusion, a brood of children
Locked within a womb that ne'er would open (p. 67).

Play is a kind of release from control, and poetry a release of 'tumbling words'. In 'I Have Approached', Paton's attitude to linguistic play is stern and ascetic; play is irresponsible, and responsibility is all about control:

there is nothing more meretricious
Than to play with words (p. 65).

In 'The Poet', only the poet can leap the walls: the prose writer is unable to do so. This calls up a theme which pervades Paton's verse, that of imprisonment and escape. To some extent, Paton's professional involvement in and study of penal reforms, especially his period from 1935 to 1948 as Principal of Diepkloof reformatory, may account for an interest in such imagery, and while poems such as his renowned 'To A Small Boy Who Died at Diepkloof Reformatory' (p. 36f) deal with his experiences at this time in the public arena, as it were, the use of imprisonment imagery sometimes has much tougher implications in Paton's work, especially as he appears to use it as a means of investigating the state of his own psyche. In part II of the pseudo-Biblical 'I came to a valley ...', Paton recounts a strange parable:

1. I slept and saw a vision of a certain man that took a wild beast that he feared, and fenced it in with wood and iron. He fenced it in both high and strong, and gave all his mind to his labour.

2. And the beast moved to and fro in the place of its captivity, and filled day and night with its roaring. It ceased not from roaring, nor from moving to and fro in its captivity (p. 59).

The beast keeps threatening to break down the fence and the man builds another. Only when the second fence is built does the beast manage to break down the first one. The man becomes obsessed with building fences and neglects to feed his family. The man is so driven by fear of the 'beast' that he cannot achieve anything. His whole life is wasted in a futile act of containment. Part II of the poem ends:

13. And in my dream I cried unto him, man, thou art in captivity. And taken unawares he woke from his sleep, and stretched out his arms to me, and I

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saw the anguish of his eyes. And he would have answered me, but that the beast was awakened by my cry, and roared with anger and fury, and went to and fro in its captivity. And the man rose and followed him, and had no more ears and eyes for me, and I watched him with pity, till I too awoke, and saw neither man nor beast in the valley (p. 61).

Psychically speaking, at its least threatening, the beast is a huge short-circuit, merely energy wasted, dread sloth and debilitation. But in Christian terms, as signalled by the heavily King-James-Version style, the beast must be a more direct threat, Satan within, no less. In this regard, see also 'The Prostitute' (p. 26). The battleground is the self, the war to be won, that of self-control. And God is the omniscient policeman, the only one who can tame the animal and beastie. In 'My Lord has a great attraction' Paton writes:

He passes through the great gates of Alcatraz, and there is
no searching machine that can prevent him ...

Oh Lord teach us your wisdom, and incline our hearts to
receive your instructions.

Then the maniac would stay his hands from the small girl,
and the drunken man from the throat of the woman (p. 128)

In a poem entitled 'Faith', the beast escapes. The scene is 'a vision of the end' (118) and this dire imagination gives rise to one of Paton's most startling images:

And ruined cities silent on the shores
Of dying seas, hive in their sewers the brood
Of man-faced rodents, Evolution's last (p. 119).

This is a time of cannibalism and fratricide. In 'Heavy with secret knowledge ...', another glimpse of doom is the occasion of another strange figure:

Is the earth dead, and the great meanings
Of the great event perished like rubber
So that none may dare to stretch them out
To cover us again (p. 132)

as if 'meanings' were some kind of carapace, or anorak, or shield against the beast,

perhaps. Paton is at his best when he allows the best of Whitman to shape his verse; tension seems to work against his poetic intentions. His best writing is the most relaxed. Perhaps that is why the song lyrics from the musical *Mkhumbane* (pp. 100-116) that Paton wrote in 1960 look so good on the page, read well aloud, and promise to sound well sung. The more stressful, agonised writing appears more highly wrought, but betrays an imprisoned desperation in a world of violence, rape and torture, with the hopeless hope (Frankenstein's project) to 'get the frozen heart/ to beating'. Here is 'I'll stab the conscience ...' (Is the world a woman who needs to be raped and tortured in order to wake her up?):

I'll stab the conscience of the world awake
 With fine-pointed barbs, and shafts of steel
 Red-hot to follow, I'll uncover her,
 Cut open her cold breast, and with brass gloves
 Steel rasped and diamond-pointed get the frozen heart
 To beating, and I'll hear her cries unmoved (p. 87).

In his 'Afterword' to the poems, Peter Kohler describes Paton as 'willing to speak of the future, to speak in the language of the future' (211) but Paton's English is not nearly risky enough to be able to have much to do with the future. Rather than exhibit the free play that such negotiation with the future must entail, Paton's poetry is generally inhibited and controlled by received language, imprisoned, unable to liberate desire, just as his furious spirit can be seen caged behind the lined skin of his face in the fierce photograph on the front cover of *Songs of Africa*.

Alan James' *Ferry To Robben Island* takes its title from the interesting and varied concluding sequence of 12 poems. Most of the rest of the book is devoted to other kinds of experience in other places. Western Australia is the setting for the opening set of 10. There is a determined effort to shape the language to fit the event. This is how the first poem, 'Dawn in a Caravan Park', begins:

Nothing stirs all black night among
 beetled vans and tents among
 hanging eucalypts among black
 bush-dunes.
 Nothing but a black possum scratching bark as it scrambles,
 its splayed claws rasping as
 they grasp and its white tail
 trailing (p. 2).

Syntactically and rhythmically, an ambitious delight feeds the mockery of descrip-

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tion, yet description is paramount in this touristic littoral. Sharp imagery gets muddled by an over-hesitant, oratorical syntax with too much reliance on repetition ('among' is not nearly mysterious enough). It is as if syntax runs away with description, as the dish ran away with the spoon. This goes against a natural tendency to verbal economy, imagistic conciseness, in James' writing. In some ways it's Whitman against Pound, expansiveness against precision. The vocabulary in this extract, from 'A Coral Reef', also from the opening Western Australia sequence, shows the necessary density and intensity, but it all falls apart at the repeated 'feed on' with its laboured food-chain pedantic semantic antic:

worms burrow into coral, crabs scavenge
among fronds, urchins gnaw at
algae, starfish advance upon
mussels, angel fish chew tissue
from sponges, shimmering gobies
feed on parasitic crustaceans
that feed on hosts that feed on
hatchlings that feed on plankton (p. 7).

Alan James' poems contain a certain amount of jewellery. He nevertheless needs to be more severe, to cut, to resist the grammatical loss-leader. There are elements of Whitman, possibly of Charles Olson, but the energies are diffuse, the rhetorical moves too often cheaply won, despite a good collection of polished pebbles in the form of an image-repertoire.

If we are to take James at his word regarding the knife-edge significance of his own 'littoral zone':

A coincidence of lives at the deadline of
land, at the mute edge of assurance,
at the last station of speech (p. 10),

then his enquiry into language is not rigorous enough to suit the stringencies of his own insinuations. Paul Celan is the only poet I know of, who has approached the security fence surrounding 'the last station of speech'. Again, James is ambitious, and rightly so, but not quite able to carry it through. 'What edge are you on?'. Or as Tom Raworth put it:

listen you said i
preferred to look
at the sea.

everything stops there at strange angles (Raworth 1988:17)⁵.

James is aware of the 'strange angles' and generally able to capture them. He just needs to prune the connectives. Direct, precise observation, combined with the words to get some of it down, seems to be the main aim, but the sense of inscribing nature can be dangerous, and a complacent reading of the descriptive details gets a rude awakening, if the caravan park wasn't enough. Cyclists stop:

at a place of shade above a bay
of rock and sand and blue water (p. 18);

and after a suitable interval spent looking unsuccessfully for dolphins:

Phil takes out his Walkman: 'This calls
for music'.
'What is it?' I ask.
'Led Zeppelin—classic stuff', he grins (p. 19).

Again, if the aim is 'to hurt/ oneself into identity' (p. 48) the language needs to be made of sterner stuff than this. No use the glibly pseudo-sombre Wordsworthian:

And so to dwell in places of remembering:
streets where I have compassed, bridged,
stopped:
suburbs of my planting and of my sleeping:
cities whose frames my eyes have clasped ... (p. 54)

Ferry To Robben Island is an ambitious collection, containing some fine poems, but there is sometimes a lack of purchase at the local levels of collocation, cataclysm, interaction among words.

Geoffrey Hutchings launched *Tongue Tide* in Durban just a few weeks before his death in a car accident in August 1996. He was 59, and looking forward to devoting more time to poetry. *Tongue Tide* represents the author's own selection of work written between 1982 and early 1996. The poems shape up in a variety of traditional forms.

Some of the poems deal with birds, mountains, rivers, plants and forests, others with fishing, loving. Current, immediate experience seems mostly to provide

⁵ Raworth, Tom 1988. *Tottering State: Selected Poems 1963-1987*. London: Paladin.

Sometimes the awkwardnesses of Hutchings' poetry cannot be ascribed to the desire to mimic a clumsy bird, but here, the clear but not overemphasised symbolisation of the hadedas into human god-fodder, by one twist making the transcendent seem possible, as oilslick can turn rainbow, combines with the stumbling gait of the verse and the deliberate trumpeting raspberry 'Ugly buggers', to one splendid, transformed. At its best, Hutchings' verse drives along with the urgency, as he phrases it in 'Touching', of 'a gut-contracting sweet confused alarm' (p. 9). Or exasperation, mellowing into another affirmation of transcendent faith, in his ungainly sonnet for Douglas Livingstone, 'Resurrection Bush':

How on earth, or in air above
Can this so neatly ordered form,
These well-expected rhymes that shove
At us an evangelical swarm
Of glib perceptions bearing designs
Upon us, how can such a bland
Enclosure hold within its lines
The finely-grained uncertain sand?

I know a plant that suffers drought
For years on end, its branches stripped
To brittle sticks—until the rain's arrival.
It wins within the day survival—
A deep genetic plan is tripped
As folded leaves take flesh and sprout (p. 38).
