

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

ALAN PATON: AH, BUT YOUR LAND IS BEAUTIFUL. David Philip, 1981.

Reviewed by Colin Gardner.

Ah, but your land is beautiful is a beautiful and striking book. As its title suggests, it is a book about a particular land, South Africa --- South Africa in the fifties. The country at that period provides the setting, the scene, but it is also the overall protagonist --- this land, with its absorbing, dramatic, frightening variety of people and groups and opinions and emotions, one group of course firmly and fiercely dominating the others. The book is also, in many important respects, about South Africa today, for many of the country's problems and issues are essentially what they were twenty-five years ago. And beyond that, **Ah, but your land is beautiful** suggests a great deal about people and society and politics in general. (Some believe that one cannot make or embody partly ahistorical generalizations about people and society and politics; this work, like all significant imaginative creations, shows that one can.)

The title further suggests that the book is ironical --- and it is, in a number of different ways. But the deepest irony is that the sardonic phrase of the title turns out also to be strangely true. For all the land's ugliness, or rather within it --- the naked or the subtle use of force, the cruelty, the foolishness, the unimaginativeness, the elaborate chain-reactions of incomprehension --- there emerges both the beauty of honest and urgent generosity and the perhaps complementary quality of tragedy, of sadly fulfilled and contemplated failure and suffering --- that complex human experience of which W.B. Yeats wrote:

All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

But what **kind** of book is it? Is it a novel, as it seems to claim? Yes; but it is a novel of a rather novel kind. Alan Paton in his long career has written novels, short stories, poems, history, biographies, autobiographies, essays on religious, political and sociological themes. **Ah, but your land is beautiful** manages, astonishingly, to encompass all of these modes, in a broad, deliberately loose and yet delicately structured framework. Besides being a fresh, lively and immediately accessible dramatic narrative, it is also a **tour de force** of unification, of recapitulation --- the work of a man in his late seventies who feels the need (to quote Yeats again) to hammer his thoughts into a unity. The book is the first volume in a trilogy: as I write this review the second work is being forged. We can only hope and pray that the fire will continue at full heat.

When one reviews a book some months after it has first appeared, it is impossible not to be aware of what some of the earlier reviewers have said. In effect one finds oneself reviewing the reviewers as well as the book itself; one is entering a conversation that has already begun. **Ah, but your land is beautiful** has received many glowing notices;

but some reviewers, even some of those who have praised the book warmly, have raised questions or expressed criticisms or doubts. Because some of these criticisms and doubts seem to me to be interesting, well worthy of consideration, I shall use them as starting-points for an elaboration of what I have said already and for the introduction of some further points.

Perhaps the largest problem that some reviewers have raised is the question of fact and fiction. **Ah, but your land is beautiful** offers us, beside its purely fictional characters, characters that are based wholly or partly on real people (some of them still alive), and historical personalities who are given their actual names or names closely resembling their actual names (for example, Dr Hendrik for Dr Verwoerd); and the events of the book --- its dilemmas, its crises, its public happenings --- are also an amalgam of the fictional, the part-factual and the factual. How exactly can such a book be called a novel? How do we respond --- what area of our minds is called upon? Didn't Aristotle, whose views in these matters retain a remarkable potency, draw a clear distinction between literature and history?

The questions, as I've said, make sense --- though I must add that one or two critics have asked them, or some of them, with an insistence or a self-confidence which suggests, to me, a certain incapacity for open imaginative response (the worst of the critics that I have come across is the person who discussed the book on the SABC: he began his generally uncomplimentary and ungracious review by saying that the book had been described as a novel and then adding: "That it certainly is not"; perhaps the SABC encourages arrogance, in this as in other matters). Aristotle suggested that whereas the historian has to try to stick to and interpret "the facts" as they are known, the poet --- by which he meant the imaginative writer --- can select and invent, and thus has the freedom to create his or her vision of the essence of what human beings and life are: "while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts". That distinction seems to me valid and valuable in many ways, but it doesn't take cognizance of the fact that there are various stations on the route between "pure history" and "pure poetry". All good historical writing, to start with, is rather more creative than Aristotle's formulation seems to allow; and a significant amount of obviously imaginative literature has a distinct historical dimension. Take Shakespeare's plays as an example. In the comedies, most of the tragedies and the last plays, he was almost totally free to devise his own "facts"; but in the English history plays and the Roman plays he was in various ways tied to historical events. For all his imaginative magic, Shakespeare could not have made Julius Caesar kill Brutus or have pictured Henry V as either an atheist or a coward. Why? Because he was dealing with facts and events which his audience knew of, realities which had a power and a

significance independent of, or over-and-above, the literary text in which they appeared.

In the 170 years since Walter Scott began to write novels, there has been a great volume and variety of historical fiction; probably the greatest of historical novels, or partly historical novels, is Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1872). But a distinctive creation of the twentieth century -- a century which has seen, to some extent under the influence or the challenge of Marxism, a growing awareness of the individual as a being caught up in society --- has been the novel of contemporary history, or the "political novel". Occasionally, as in Conrad's works, such novels have managed to retain a fairly high degree of fictionality, but on the whole, inevitably, "political novels" have chosen to plant their feet in clearly recognizable soil. I think one might state as a fair generalization that novels can afford to be very largely fictional when their primary focus is on individual human destinies and relationships (as it is, superbly, in Jane Austen, in Henry James, in D.H. Lawrence), but that the element of fictionality is bound to be reduced or contained when the focus has partly shifted on to societies and their workings --- for, in our world of swift communications and easy awareness, a wholly fictional society is apt to take us to the brink of fantasy. But the decision of many "political novelists" to write about a clearly recognizable society --- usually their own --- is not simply a matter of tactics. It is also, very often, a question of conviction, of passion. Some of the most impressive writing of this century has been the expression of what one might call anguished and analytical patriotism. One thinks, for example, of John Dos Passos's trilogy *U.S.A.* (1938), in which the narrative is interspersed with impressionistic meditations, biographies of prominent Americans, and excerpts from contemporary headlines, advertisements, popular songs and newspaper articles. One thinks too, to come to more recent times, of the impassioned, committed works of Solzhenitsyn, all trained on his loved and hated Russia, and --- at the other side of the world, so similar in seriousness though so different in tone --- of Norman Mailer, who gave the two parts of his book *The Armies of the Night* (1968), which is about one of the great anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, the sub-titles "History as a Novel" and "The Novel as History". In fact a word has been devised to indicate this new way of blending fiction and fact --- "faction".

It is in this context, clearly, that one must locate Alan Paton, though I don't wish to suggest that his writing is derivative. He is a manifestation, a very notable and influential manifestation, of the spirit of the times (in Africa, indeed, he has of course been a forerunner), writing of a country and a socio-political system which cry out for imaginative treatment (in every sense of that phrase --- and it is significant that Paton, like some of the other writers I have mentioned, has committed himself to action as well as to literature). *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) is in many respects an orthodox novel, but it is far from being merely that: the very title alerts one to the crucial fact that, with all its universalizing tendency, it is also a book about South Africa, and it contains (could he have taken a hint from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)?) a good deal of socio-political comment and analysis side-by-side with or as part of the narrative. Paton's second novel, *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), though very firmly rooted in Afrikaner society, is the most orthodox or "classical" of his major fictions. A superbly constructed tale of brooding tragedy, it has a self-contained inevitability a little reminiscent of a Greek tragedy. After that, Paton gave himself for fifteen years to direct

political involvement --- these were the years of the Liberal Party --- and he moved into various modes of writing, all of them related in one way or another to South Africa and its continuing psycho-socio-political crisis. And now, twenty-eight years after *Too Late the Phalarope*, catching up all the strands of his personality and every facet of his complex concern about this country, about its people and about all people, he has produced this novel, a work of passionate and inspired "faction".

He has himself made it clear that what finally helped him back to the novel form, what suggested the possibility of casting his vision of South Africa in the fifties in the overall framework of a story or a group of related stories, was the example of Paul Scott's "Raj Quartet" (1975), the four novels in which Scott dramatizes his sense of people in India in the important transitional years 1942 -- 1947. Paton's book is in many ways different from Scott's books (the chief point of resemblance is the evoking of the complication of certain historical situations and dilemmas through the differing viewpoints of various participants); but a crucial dissimilarity is that while Scott was bringing to life a historical phase which he had lived through but which had come to a fairly clear end, Paton is creating and recreating a series of past situations, tensions and conflicts which reached no proper conclusion and are largely still with us. Both the many interwoven rhythms of the book's style and the canny patterning of its themes constantly remind us of this, constantly carry us forward from the past, which has a shape, towards the fluid present and future.

Another problem that has been raised by a number of critics, a problem in some respects related to what I have been discussing, is that of characterization. **Ah, but your land is beautiful** offers us a great range of people, from a wide spectrum of South African life, and all of them (as far as I can judge) are made real and alive as they are looked at and as they speak to us. But, though some characters are clearly far more central than others, none is developed in full, rich and intimate detail. It is in my view a mistake to attempt to judge **Ah, but your land is beautiful** by exactly the criteria that one would use when reading a work by a more traditional novelist. Paton's characterization has always tended to be functional --- that is, his characters have a vivid existence of their own but this existence is fairly precisely channelled to meet the demands of the story --- and besides, as I said earlier, the true protagonist is South Africa, the beloved and "beautiful" country. What we find, then, is not a set of elaborately interlocking full-length portraits, as in a nineteenth-century novel, but a subtly-ordered succession of inter-related conversations, confrontations, conflicts, crises and commentaries, each having about it something of the feeling and the form of a short-story or a vignette. And yet all of these "moments", and the momentarily vital characters who bring them about, are to be seen as rich, varied brush-strokes in the dynamic, sharply-drawn but compassionate full-scale portrayal of South Africa, past and present. A special, a central feature of that portrayal is the emerging Liberal Party, a group of people of many different types, colours and classes, each one of them dedicated bravely, hopefully, often rather forlornly, to the ideal of an open and free society. Of course some of the crises and confrontations that the book dramatizes stick in one's mind more firmly than others (perhaps each reader will have her or his own impressions and preferences), but the most obviously striking episodes, while being or seeming thoroughly "authentic" and indeed apparently almost matter-of-fact, are gripping, moving and

profound in such a way as to take one to the very heart-beat of the human condition, the condition, here, of human beings locked in social tensions which appear to be un-resolvable.

Having said that, I must move on to another criticism or problem, a criticism that hasn't appeared in many reviews but which lurks, I suspect, within some of the more radical members of the intellectual community. This criticism, or this set of criticisms, might go something like this: "A novel about the fifties, the **people** of the fifties, is hardly relevant to our present concerns. The socio-political problems of this country aren't going to be solved by novels of any kind; but a valid political novel written in the nineteen-eighties should at least offer a structural analysis of the real forces at work in South African society. All that **Ah, but your land is beautiful** can give us are the stale, impotent and slightly sentimental hopes and wishes of the defunct Liberal Party."

One could spend a whole article commenting on that statement --- a statement which seems to me unwise but not unintelligent. I must limit myself to a few remarks. The first is this: nobody imagines that a novel can **solve** socio-political problems, but it may play its part, as the novels of Dickens played their part in nineteenth-century Britain, in helping to produce the attitudes which will contribute towards solutions. As far as the contents of **Ah, but your land is beautiful** are concerned, I must clarify a point and partly concede a point to the radical critics. Paton's new novel has indeed, for a student of contemporary politics, some of the limitations of a work set in the fifties, a period when the dynamics of our society were in some ways different from what they are now (black factory workers, for example, who play no part in the novel, were then rather fewer in number, less skilled and less organized). It is true however that, for all the richness and inclusiveness of its "coverage" of the South African scene, the book doesn't encompass certain types and classes of people, and it doesn't present or dramatize an interpretation of the underlying economic situation in the country --- that aspect of the life of a social formation which for a Marxist is all-important. No book, however, a liberal must add, can hope to do everything; and in fact this novel does at least offer, through the agency of Professor Eddie Roos, a quiet comment on the Liberal Party's not having faced up to the economic dimension of the socio-political problem --- and in this way the novel does, so to speak, delineate its own boundary-lines. Similarly --- the book's mode is, throughout, one of dramatic juxtaposition --- a white judge's washing and kissing the feet of a black woman in a church, an event which is given considerable weight in the novel as a whole, is dismissed scathingly and eloquently by the Marxist journal **New Guard**. The radical viewpoint, then, is not one that the novel's world of discourse is unaware of.

Having made a partial concession to my radical critic of **Ah, but your land is beautiful**, I must go on to say that,

as far as I can judge from the fictional performances that I know, structural analyses of the socio-economic forces at work in society --- which are of course of vital importance for our understanding of society and for our calculation of concrete political strategies for change --- are in general more appropriate in lectures, articles and treatises than in works of literature. More important --- and to give a positive corollary of what I have just said --- the essential task of a novelist (and in this respect Paton turns out to be traditional in his allegiances) is to bring out and to highlight the drama and the variety and the painful complexity of human emotions, judgments and interactions. **Ah, but your land is beautiful** creates and presents many of the problems of South Africa in the fifties (and now), the human problems, and then enacts --- or rather, enacts the enacting of --- an attempted solution to those problems in the form of the Liberal Party. But (it might be asked) isn't the Liberal Party **passé**? And doesn't the known failure of the Liberal Party to transform South African society cast a shadow of gloom over the whole book?

Yes and no. **Ah, but your land is beautiful** is, as I suggested in my opening remarks, an austere, a tragic book. We are never left in any doubt that the story that unfolds before us --- a story that rolls on, in a more literal mode, through our present lives --- is one of extreme gravity. But at the same time, paradoxically (it is like the shot-silk effect of the title), we have a sense --- in many of the main characters, and in Alan Paton himself --- of a certain resilience and indestructibility. In the pages of this novel, but in a heightened and fictionalized way, the Liberal Party and its principal personalities come back to life again. And what is being quietly and artistically suggested, besides so many other things, is that the Liberal Party --- or the frame of mind and spirit that it stood for: love of people, hatred of injustice --- is still alive, for all its past failures and perhaps its miscalculations, and that it is a key to whatever livable future there may be.

"Is that so?" my radical critic may ask. "Is that realistic?" Well, ask Mr. Mugabe. His official policy of reconciliation in Zimbabwe seems to put forward the view that --- when the big changes have come, in whatever ways they may have come --- if a society is to continue and grow as a cohesive communal unit, no matter what precise political and economic policies are being put into action, people are going to have to learn to know and understand and respect one another, and to abandon practices of prejudice, domination and injustice. This is what, from their different starting-points and in their different and partly inadequate ways, the central figures in **Ah, but your land is beautiful** --- Prem Bodasingh, Robert Mansfield, Emmanuel Nene, Philip Drummond, Wilberforce Nhlapo, and the others --- strive for, heroically, sensibly, sometimes pathetically. But this surely, in the end, and at the deepest imaginative level, is what literature is and has always been about, and is also what it means to try to live in a truly human way in South Africa. □