



Despair as a way to see life more clearly

"THERE is no more terrible condition of the soul than despair. In a way it brings life to an end, yet we continue to breathe, to eat and to drink. But we hope no more."

So writes Alan Paton, the South African author, in a newly published book, *Instrument of Thy Peace*, (Fontana, 80c).

Paton, the leader of the anti-apartheid liberals in South Africa, has known deep despair in his struggle to bring equality for the natives. So one expects much from him.

"When we despair, most of us cannot turn our faces to the wall and die," he says. "Even our despair does not destroy our sense of duty, except in extreme cases. If we have dependants, we must continue to work."

For one who has known the dark night of the soul, he has indeed a very simple attitude to the nature of despair, and he proffers a simple solution: When in a state of despair, he reads a prayer of St Francis of Assisi that moves him then to do some positive act, and from that moment his temptation to despair is ended.

And this is the prayer: "Lord, save me from despair, and, if I am in despair, make me do some work of peace for Thee."

Paton also quotes approvingly Adele Curtis, who says that a person with a "negative" feeling — worry, fear, anxiety, hate, resentment — must, instead of wrestling with that mood, "do an heroic thing . . . make yourself act quickly on the opposite side of that state."

Such a simple panacea. And typi-

cal of our society's response to so-called negative states — they must be eradicated as quickly as possible so we may live a happy life.

This is part of our self-protective mechanism designed to ensure that we all fit as neatly and as happily as possible into the system, our ordered scheme of things.

And, indeed, people must be rescued from self-destructive, paralysing despair. Any psychiatrist will tell you that. But Paton is too glib.

Despair is not something which is only harmful, to be avoided at all costs. A goodly dose of despair gives a person a clearer insight into his own smallness. It enables him to see the world with all the gloss and the cheap icing removed.

Despair comes when we remove the mask we hide behind, when we realise that most of our values and goals are false and dangerous, when we see that life is not a life of glitter but one of shadows — and occasional moonlight.

Then, despair can, in some strange, ineffable way, give us the strength to go out with barriers down as sensitive people to the other lonely cogs in our society, to the comfortless and the miserable.

Despair makes us realise the chronic insanity of man today as he desperately craves and fights for more possessions, more things to own and to manipulate.

It is only when we realise how deadly is our sickness that we can do something positive about it.

The person who does not despair at the way we live, the way society operates, the way we trample people underfoot continually, the way we turn our faces from the starving and neglected — this person cannot be what Paton calls an instrument of peace.

He is almost completely ineffectual.

He cannot cut through the mass of lies with which we surround ourselves, the false assumptions on which our society operates, to strike the raw, dreadful reality of the condition of most people.

Paton's book, a series of meditations profoundly Christian, is written, he says, "for those who with all their hearts wish to be better, purer, less selfish, more useful."

For many it will be a great tonic. They will find in it much to calm their troubled spirit.

Christians have been good at prescribing tonics for one another for nearly 2000 years. They have learned how to comfort their bruised souls and egos, to rescue themselves from the despair that afflicts all men.

It's no wonder Christianity has become such an anaemic, self-protecting cocoon, from which the rescued ones speak with loving paternalism to the distraught, the suffering, the miserable.

I find Paton fits into the mould very neatly. His book is a wish-washy exercise in soul-searching. Paton does not challenge a person

at the root of his being. He does not imbue him with a sense of urgency to act for others.

Such balm for the troubled soul quickly kills any sense of the urgency to act, to really live. Because it comforts a person, allows him to find satisfaction in his present state, it invites egocentricity while attempting to get rid of it.

Paton scarcely mentions the despair, the agony of the vast native population in South Africa. And this despair, I venture to suggest, has a different basis from the white man's despair.

The native South African, like the American Negro and the Australian Aboriginal, despairs because of the terrible reality of his condition, because he is oppressed and cannot free himself, because he is treated like a head of cattle, because he fears for himself and for his family.

Such people, if they are to contain their raging, black despair, find acceptance and hope in Christian spirituality, in preparing themselves for a salvation in heaven they cannot find on earth.

But the white man is in a different category. He belongs to the power structure that inflicts hurt on others, to the modern technological society that, instead of bringing happiness, is increasing our loneliness, our deep sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with our system and our values.

The black man despairs because

his children are under-nourished, because he is underpaid, often out of work, and because there attaches to him a stigma.

With the white man, the despair generally seems to be a deep inner sense that, with all his possessions, he and his society have gone wrong. But he cannot quite put his finger on it.

Despair eventually brings action. The raging despair of the blacks may lead them to try blindly, desperately, to break their bondage. And this is called revolution.

In our society, however, the only people who seem prepared to act in any real way are the students — and so far, they have confined themselves to conscription and Vietnam.

We seem unable to act, to challenge the very basis of our society, because our society and our way of life, at the same time that they destroy something in us, protect and save us.

But there will come a time when we will no longer be able to shield ourselves from the realities of the world. And then despair will be upon us and we may act.

To me, this is not a frightening prospect, but an invigorating, life-giving one.

We need a good measure of lingering despair. But we also need to be freed from the constricting conventions and rituals of our way of life and thinking so that despair can become creative.

1970/03/2/28