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A Study of Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*

The role of the White South African novelist is often assumed by outsiders to be primarily that of keeper of the national conscience. We may be surprised at the number of important writers — André Brink, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton and Laurens van der Post come quickly to mind — who have been nurtured in that beautiful and troubled land, but we expect their work to be, as it often is, a vehicle for social protest: fiction is one doorway to truth not yet quite closed in the blank wall of censorship.

Alan Paton's best known novel, the unforgettably compassionate *Cry, The Beloved Country*, is such a book. Published in 1948, its protest at the iniquities of apartheid has lasted well: it moves us still, sixteen years after the political party headed by its author was forced to disband rather than comply with the apartheid laws. Paton's latest novel, *Ah, But your Land is Beautiful* also tells a story of the interwoven struggle of South African men and women to assert the dignity of the individual. It has an intensity of purpose that suggests the author has begun to despair of change. *Too Late the Phalarope*, another early work that was first published in 1955, is also a novel of protest. It matches the elegiac beauty and power of the earlier novel and the intensity of Paton's most recent one and deserves greater recognition than it has yet received.

The story is a simple one. The van Vlaanderens are a well established and conservative family in a small town deep in the heartland of the Afrikaaners. They are sober and religious, and the hopes of the family rest with the son Pieter. He is a promising police officer of considerable charm and presence, with an enviable war record behind him. His ability and the family connections should ensure his success. In the meantime he is achieving the pinnacle of fame in South Africa: he plays rugby for the Springboks. People say he will captain them. To complete the picture, he is married to the shy Nella and has two children whom he adores. This tranquil picture is shattered when Pieter becomes obsessed, against his will it seems, with a black girl, Stephanie. He is seen with her by a jealous subordinate, informed upon, arrested, tried and sent to prison. In that conservative environment, his shame spells the downfall of his family as well.

The nature of Pieter's downfall may be in doubt, but its inevitability is not, for the book opens with the words: "Perhaps I could have saved him . . . Perhaps I could have saved us all". Once Paton has assured us of the hero's ultimate fate he is free to concentrate on the cause of it and this is at the heart of the novel.

At first glance Pieter seems to have committed two wrongs. The first one is a moral wrong; he commits adultery with Stephanie in spite of the mutual love which he and Nella share. The second is a legal wrong: he breaks the fundamental rule of South African law and crosses the racial barrier. In the conservative religious environment that the book describes, either action appears sufficient to cause his destruction. But Paton appears not to think so. If the theme of the book is "a wife wronged", Nella plays a curiously remote part. Although they love each other, there is a distance between them which seems caused in part because Nella cannot easily keep pace with Pieter's development; "For he was the one that was like a god, not she". There is also a strong suggestion of sexual incompatibility:

She was frightened of Johannesburg, and of the evil things that men and women do, even of staying in an hotel. She was frightened even of the laughter that came out of the Royal Bar, where men like her father and brothers were jesting a little coarse and rough. Therefore when he in his extremity asked for more of her love, she shrank from him, thinking it was the coarseness of a man.

Later, when Nella goes to the coast with the children to visit her father, she exchanges letters with Pieter and he is more explicit:

And perhaps one day when you are convinced, and know that my love of your body is part of my love of you yourself, and when you are no longer afraid of it . . . I believe too that you would give me more sweetly of your body (I mean more sweetly than you do, which is almost enough already) not because you wished to be kind or suffer me, but because you too would wish to do so.

Nella's reply is loving but constrained, and "he sat and read her letter with a face of stone".

On the other hand, the story strongly suggests (even to someone unfamiliar with Paton's political viewpoint) that the colour bar is too arbitrary a law to justify the tragic tone of the book. The nature of the Afrikaaner who made the laws and of the Dutch Reformed Church which supported them are expressed in the character of Pieter's father, Jacob, and his attitudes are frequently contrasted unfavourably to those of Pieter, his mother and the narrative judgments of Tante Sophie. Moreover,

this is not a story of someone who crosses the colour bar at the urging of an irresistible love, a Romeo pursuing his Capulet Juliet, but of Pieter drawn against his will into a furtive and unfulfilling relationship. Pieter is a victim, not a martyr.

Paton also takes pains to show that he is not concerned with a moral wrong. Very early in the book, Pieter apprehends a young rugby-playing friend running suspiciously after Stephanie in a dark side street. When he speaks to Dick later he is concerned only with the power of the law and the unforgiving nature of public opinion: "whether you're a Cabinet Minister or a predikant or a headmaster or a tramp, if you touch a black woman and you're discovered nothing'll save you . . . The court may give you a year, two years. But outside it's a sentence for life". This unmoralistic approach to the law on interracial relationships is explored further in the report of the farmer Smith who makes one of his servants pregnant and kills her to conceal the fact. His act is contrasted with the morality of the black race, ". . . who would have gone shamefaced to her father, to confess and make reparation, as was their custom", and the climax of the story is not a moral judgment by Tante Sophie, who admits to confusion, but an emphasis on the "great machinery of the law . . . this sudden manifestation of the certitude and majesty of the white man's law". This law, and the morality that created it, is summarized at the end of the novel in an exchange between the police Captain and Nella's father, who exclaims: "I would shoot him like a dog . . . he has offended against the race". The Captain replies: "as a policeman I know an offence against the law, and as a Christian I know an offence against God; but I do not know an offence against the race".

Paton uses the effects of the apartheid laws to explore issues of universal significance and he emphasises this universality by using both a dramatic structure and language that transcend the setting of the story. The novel carries very significant echoes of Greek tragic form and the language has the simplicity and repetitive devices of epic poetry or the phrases of the Bible. These emphasise that Pieter is threatened by some powerful and destructive inner force. Tante Sophie says he "shut the door of his soul [and] behind was a man in danger". The nature of this danger is the heart of the novel.

There are four elements that echo classical Greek tragedy. First, the classical authors wrote on well-known themes. Since the audience knew from the start what tragedy would unfold, they were free to concentrate on the dramatic skills and interpretative glosses of the playwright. Paton takes a contemporary and unknown theme but moves at once to reach the starting point of his classical counterpart: the inevitability of the tragic fall. He sustains dramatic tension from that notable first sentence, "Perhaps I could have saved him, with only a word, two words, out of my mouth"; by withholding the exact nature of the tragedy, adding touches of explanatory colour rather as an artist might sketch the outlines of his picture before he starts to paint.

Secondly, the book also enjoys in large measure the classical unities of time, place and action, for it is a retrospective novel set in a small Boer township. It is written (except for the final page) in the past tense to underscore the inevitability (though not the finality) of the destruction. The story is related by Pieter's aunt, Tante Sophie, so that the main vehicle of the plot is the narrative of an onlooker: this sense of the onlooker who sees what others fail to notice, but who is powerless to change the course of events, helps build the claustrophobic atmosphere within which Pieter feels himself trapped.

The role of Tante Sophie is the third echo of classical form. She is an elderly woman, and her deformity of a harelip means that she has never married. She thus has a sexless quality which is reminiscent of the old and hermaphrodite prophet, Teiresias. Her perception is intuitive. Of Teiresias it is said: "In your heart, if not with the eye, you see our city's condition". Tante Sophie says:

Yet because I am apart, being disfigured, and not like other women, yet because in my heart I am like any other woman, and because I am apart, so living apart and watching I have learned to know the meaning of unnoticed things.

She does not know what is the matter with Pieter until the moment when she encounters him in the kitchen with Stephanie and then her knowledge is intuitive: "for now suddenly, and it unwanted, I found what I had searched for all these years". It is clear from the context that she sees beyond the dangerous but technical illegality of a relationship between black and white. Instead, she sees the unconscious forces that push relentlessly against the shores of Pieter's conscious world and, though broken again and again by habit and discipline, build into new and more dangerous waves. Like Teiresias, Tante Sophie has the inner intuitive vision but, also like him, she is rejected by those who fear the implications of her knowledge.

Finally, Pieter is also a classical figure; one of heroic proportions. He is highly talented and seems to those around him to have a classical balance and proportion. He is loving but austere; passionate but aloof; able but modest; strict but compassionate and just. Paton develops these qualities so that he

seems uniformly excellent except for his one flaw and the black mood, the *swartgalligheid*, which assails him. His heroic stamp is enhanced by the language used in the last days before his fall. He has indeed been selected as captain of the Springboks — a position of God-like authority to the Boers — and, as Agamemnon was "sacker of Troy", so Pieter is "the Lion of the North".

If we look for a classical antecedent, however, it is not to be found in the story of Antigone, although there appears to be a parallel in her struggle to reconcile personal honour with the unbending rule of the State. The true parallel is with the *Bacchae* of Euripides which explores the influence of the unconscious personified in the form of Dionysus (the god who can inspire a person but from whose rejection springs madness).

Before examining the way in which Paton develops this study of the unconscious mind, we should first establish how he came to choose such an unusual title for the book. Why select the phalarope, a bird which is only rarely seen ashore in South Africa on its migratory passage? At one level, the answer is straightforward. Pieter has boldly given his father a book about South African birds — boldly because his father "read only the One, and the newspapers". Jacob is delighted by the present despite the unpromising fact that the author is an Englishman and not an Afrikaaner, and he is especially pleased when he discovers an apparent error in it. To prove it, he promises a picnic near the coast to show Pieter the phalarope. At the picnic, Jacob sees the bird and

because the son could not see, the father went and stood behind him, rested his arm on the son's shoulder, and pointed at the bird. But the son could see no bird, for he was again moved in some deep place within, and something welled up within him that if not mastered could have burst out of his throat and mouth, making him a girl or a child.

The phalarope is one of the very few birds in which the traditional roles of male and female are reversed. Once the female has laid the eggs they are incubated by the male who rears the young. The female is, unusually, the more colourful of the pair and determines their territory. The bird is therefore a vivid image of the development of characteristics predominantly associated with the instinctive behaviour patterns of the opposite sex. Furthermore, the bird is associated with the shore and its movement between sea and land symbolises the movement of ideas between the conscious mind and the subconscious, for which the sea is an enduring symbol.

So the title prepares us for a novel that examines the polarities of human existence within the framework of a Jungian psychology. It is a book about the importance of a man respecting and developing the "feminine" qualities within himself, such as the emotions, intuition and imagination (and, similarly, for a woman, her masculine qualities such as reason, control and discipline). Tante Sophie seems to realise that this is the heart of the issue on the first page of the book when she observes that:

His father was a giant of a man, and the boy grew as tall and broad as he; but the boy Pieter had something of the woman in him, and the father none at all until it was too late.

Paton characteristically enters a quiet warning against taking the book as an excessively simplistic argument in favour of living out all one's subconscious desires. Pieter has been attracted by Stephanie for some time before he breaks the law by having a sexual relationship with her. When he does, it is after an evening when he has been drinking (most unusually) with his cousin Anna and when he "knew that he had drunk too much. But he did not care, for the world was good and happy, and the black mood of the day seemed foolishness, and he was full of power".

The language has a lapidary quality, but also a warmth, that makes this a book for the ear as well as for the eye. The language constantly mirrors the structure of the novel and throws back light on to the development of the plot. A striking feature is the use of repetition. It is used in three ways.

First, repetition is used to give emphasis to a word. The most effective example of this is when Sophie sets the scene and explains why she is telling the story. She writes with a determined purpose:

. . . it is not only that [these events] trouble my mind . . . nor is it only that men may have more knowledge of compassion. For I remember the voice that came to John in Patmos . . . Therefore I set aside my fears and am obedient.

She cannot understand God's ways: "small strength, small weakness, that I understand; but why a man should have great strength and weakness I do not understand . . ." She expresses this perplexity by a constant repetition of the word "strange". This word is used casually in everyday English, and at first glance it seems that this repetitious use of the word reflects the narrow imagination of a woman who probably received no formal education. But the repetition — seven times in the opening three pages — gives the word a prominence that demands a more forceful meaning. Given the classical awareness which the structure of the novel seems to demonstrate, the word may be used with some of the force

which its Greek counterpart, *deinos*, held. The earlier uses of *deinos* carry the meanings of "fearful" and "powerful" (either for good or ill). It is the characteristic adjective for Dionysius, who inspires men but from whose rejection springs madness. Tante Sophie's language suggests that the power that Pieter had over her from childhood, and her inability to speak out to avert disaster, were more than curiosities of behaviour: they were the strange manifestations of unconscious forces which had been denied their natural, untrammelled expression. At the same time, almost with an ironic awareness of her language, she uses the word in its most casual sense, but in a context that reveals how fully she understands the nuances of English as well as her native Afrikaans:

Strange is it that one could run crying to the house of a man that one loved, to save him from danger . . . And strange it is that one should withdraw, silent and shamed . . . and because of the power he held over me, I held, in the strange words of the English, I held my peace . . . There were strange things in the boy's mind that none of us knew or understood . . . One could not tell whether [Pieter's father] were proud and pleased or angry, for the truth was that he had fathered a strange son, who had his father's will and strength and could ride and outshoot them all, yet had all the gentleness of a girl, and strange unusual thoughts in his mind . . . and [of his mother] the black moods and the coldness, the gentleness and the tenderness, the shooting and the riding and the books, the strange authority, she pondered them all in her heart . . .

Repetition is also used in the manner of epic poetry to emphasise key characteristics and to give a sense of universality. Thus, Pieter is first described as "the bravest and gentlest of them all" and these words, separately or more often together, are frequently used to describe him. His father is often described as a lion. On his birthday, when his daughter kissed him, "he growled like a lion", and at the picnic "we packed him in with rugs, for he was still weak from the influenza . . . and it was like packing a lion into the car, for he growled and threw his head about just as a lion does".

Paton uses repetition in a third way: to express the way a person's mind can be obsessed by a single idea. When Pieter acknowledges the attraction that Stephanie holds for him, and has made love to her, he is filled with guilt and fear of discovery and the narrative tells us again and again how he "vowed and prayed" that he might resist her in future, and escape discovery.

The author uses a simple symbolism that is more accessible than that of the title to develop further the universality of the tragedy. Tante Sophie recalls the end of the picnic:

So we drove back to Venterspan when the sun was almost down, and the world was filled with beauty and terror. And darkness came down over the grass country, and over the continent of Africa, and over man's home and the earth, and over us all. And the sun went down, and never rose again.

Finally, the language is full of biblical echoes, as befits a story told by a woman for whom the Bible was almost her only reading and attendance at church a major occupation (she calculates that she had heard "three thousand sermons, and could have heard five thousand, except that at Buitenverwagting we had to travel far, and went to church only in the mornings").

The book is thus structured around three parallel dynamics. Classical form underlies the more flexible form of the novel; an epic universality underlies the small-town particulars; and the unconscious mind underlies and influences the conscious mind. Each of these dynamics sheds light upon the tensions that underlie Boer society and make it so resistant to change and progress.

There is another dynamic that is central to Paton's theme: religion. Jacob's is legalistic in form and is essentially a non-redemptive creed. It is "a matter for obedience and not for tears". He reads mainly from the Old Testament, using it as a touchstone for his judgement. He uses the Bible as the ledger where all family events of consequence are entered. As we have seen, he scores out Pieter's name as though that act alone can confirm the legitimacy of his rejection. In the end, however, his narrow faith cannot support him and he dies "bowed over the Book of Job".

Tante Sophie's faith is more generous and her references are more often to the New Testament. She writes "and I too, having lived this story in grief and passion, close it in some kind of peace, remembering God's mercy, Who gave us all such friends". Earlier on, she cannot accept the retributive attitude of the whole community towards the wretched Smith. She compares the words of Christ to other writings urging obedience to the law and although she admits to some confusion she concludes on a note of compassion: "yet I grieved for the man in my heart, that did such evil because he was in terror". This, as well as her inability to condemn Pieter, is in sharp contrast to her brother who read about Smith's case "with a face of anger and revulsion".

Pieter's mother represents a yet further move beyond the constraints of the Dutch Reformed Church and this is made clear early in the book by the unmistakable echo of St. Luke's gospel as she watches her son's different moods and the strange authority: "she pondered them all in her heart . . .". She also works fearlessly, with her son, among the black people during a smallpox epidemic. She appears only

rarely in the book and at first she appears a minor character. Yet it is her standards against which most of the actions in the book are assayed. We never learn her name, so that she is both Pieter's mother and a representative of a universal feminine nature. Whereas at the end of the book Jacob dies defeated, the others survive, "borne on the deep river of this woman's love, that sustained us all".

Within this framework that compares two strong faiths, one grounded in the Old and one in the New Testament, Paton explores the relationship between Pieter and Tante Sophie. It has been a complex one since he was a child. Sophie refers to it on the opening page of the novel and later describes it in terms which convey an astonishing relationship between a young child and a mature woman:

I took him in my arms, with all the passion of a hungry woman that would have had this child if God had given her one . . . Then he stiffened in my arms and looked away from me, as though there was something of which he was ashamed. And the passion went out of me and I was afraid . . . And from that day he had the power over me.

The importance of this passage is reinforced by the moment when she recalls it; when Pieter for an instant "opened the door of his soul". His power lies in his dark gift for self control, the withholding of himself, which quenches her passion (the word is typically thrust into prominence in this key paragraph by repetition). He is unable to respond to her love and expresses it in behavioural terms by looking away from her. This is an early demonstration of the deep similarities between Pieter and his father, similarities we tend to overlook because of the emphatic differences between them. But Sophie had asserted on the opening page of the book that "he and his father both had the power over me". Later we learn of Jacob that "that was a habit of his, to start to leave a room, and then to stop and to talk with his back turned". Nowhere is this unwillingness to see the true meaning in the eyes of others more obvious than when, after Pieter's arrest, his mother says that she must go to him. Jacob stopped "and without turning he said to her 'you must do what you wish, but if you once go out of this house you shall not enter it again' "

The corrosive effect on Pieter of being unable to respond, of being unable to free his unconscious urges from the twin shackles of society and his own consciousness, is revealed in the intense guilt he feels when he sees the note left by his friend Japie as a joke: "I saw you". This phrase, in its present tense, is the traditional greeting amongst the Zulus, one of the main black races subjected to apartheid, and it is a greeting that acknowledges and respects the identity of the other. Pieter's reaction is a measure of how far apart he has drifted from those around him. He is unable to see the real love of those around him; instead he feels slighted by his father and sees the possessiveness of Sophie's love and the shortcomings of Nella's shy offering rather than the warmth and commitment that underlie them all, albeit so deeply in the case of his father that it is almost hidden. He is also unable to see himself as others do and is conscious only of the "black mood" and the desperate acts to which it drives him.

There is no suggestion in Pieter's relationship with Stephanie that they meet on any conscious level at all; his conscious efforts indeed are spent on resisting her. He seeks a fulfilment that cannot be found there. The social constraints make their meetings furtive and guilt-ridden. The imagery reflects this: they meet in darkness, upon waste ground amongst the rank smell of the Kakebos weed. The several voices of his reason, his faith and his social code tell him that his search will never end in these secretive encounters. It is as though he acts despite these warnings because it is the only course left open to him and it is thus a measure of his despair.

In these meetings there is the same layering of meaning which pervades the whole book; the meeting of white and black; of the conscious mind with the unconscious; the altruistic giver who gives everything except himself and the instinctive sharer who gives herself, having nothing else to give. The blackness is the dark of the night, of his own fear, and of the Afrikaaners' suppression (transposed on to the black races) of the dark forces that they cannot so easily quell in the apartheid of their own souls. Only once does Tante Sophie uncharacteristically misjudge Pieter, when she sees him as a man who "could now afford to come out from his armour, it being complete", but she chooses a military metaphor that is so clearly absurd that it highlights the falseness of her premise. Pieter's armour can never be a complete protection, for it guards him against the wrong threat. He will not be safe until he can hold the feminine qualities within him in balance with his own masculine characteristics and those of the culture in which he lives.

Much of the tragedy centres on the fact that, while he might be able to reach this balance in different surroundings, (for he respects the dichotomy in himself,) the society he lives in prevents it. His attraction to Stephanie is rooted in his admiration for the fierce, instinctive pride of motherhood which she shows towards her child and which is in sharp contrast to Jacob who can dismiss his son from his heart with that single, ritualistic and highly conscious act: striking Pieter's name from the flyleaf of the great Bible.

Paton's message in *Cry, the Beloved Country* was concerned primarily with the suffering inflicted by apartheid on the Black people of South Africa. The emphasis in *Too Late the Phalarope* is different. Stephanie is the only black character, and she does indeed suffer; she is imprisoned and deprived of her child because she brews illicit liquor to support her mother whom no one else would help. But it is the suffering of the white Afrikaaners on which Paton concentrates. He argues that Pieter's weakness is inseparably bound up with the repression of the spirit which is inherent in the rigid codes of apartheid. By dominating the Black races, the Afrikaaners are repressing vital forces in their own souls and they thus destroy not the blacks, but themselves. If even the "bravest and the gentlest" can be struck down, how can there be any hope for the proponents of the system, such as Jacob?

At the end of the book, Pieter is in prison while his mother, Nella and Sophie wait for his release and the limited hopes of a new start. Pieter's younger brother Frans now lives in the family home with his wife. Their son, Koos, had always admired Pieter and on the final page Sophie hints that the pattern of repression may be about to repeat itself: "The boy Koos is tall and dark, and seems to have some special mark of solitariness". And the pattern is already being repeated in other families: "Yet my grief can still come back when I read of some tragic man who has broken the iron law".

Despite these two warnings, the last pages are written with a clear sense of hopefulness. Jacob dies, and after the funeral his wife reads the diary in which Pieter has recorded his version of events. Then, as Tante Sophie wonders about the future, she writes for the first time in the present tense, giving the reader a powerful sense that at last the mould of inevitability has been broken. That hope is very fragile. Pieter and Nella will have to go abroad to rebuild their lives and nothing has changed in South Africa to make life easier for the solitary Koos. The hope is confined to the hearts of the main actors of this tragedy. They have been brought face to face with the logical conclusion of the "old" ways: the Old Testament religion, the iron law, the social pattern that exemplifies the inner determination to subdue the feminine spirit. Through the suffering that Pieter brings on his family, and through the lead given by his mother, they have some hope of finding more balanced lives. Tragically late though it is, they have seen the phalarope.

This, Paton's finest novel, thus operates with great success on several levels. It is a convincing story of crime and punishment. It is a strong study of individuals who, despite their pronounced characteristics, are always more than stereotypes. As a psychological novel, it is a powerful depiction of the corrosive effect of guilt and the destructive power of a repressed subconscious and it provides a lively model of Jung's understanding of the human spirit. In this respect it uses South Africa as an allegory for the path of western culture. And it turns out to be what we perhaps first expected: a devastating critique of apartheid and the spirit that underlies it. Paton's commitment to social justice and compassion, which rise so movingly from the pages of *Cry, the Beloved Country* here find such unity of composition, such austerity of expression, such integrity of faith and such universal meaning that *Too Late the Phalarope* stands as an exceptional book both in comparison with Paton's distinguished peers and within the wider context of recent literature.

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NICHOLAS H.Z. WATTS