

# Alan Paton's Short Fiction: Authority and Other Quandaries in *The Hero of Currie Road*

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Alan Paton is known chiefly for his novels, biographies, autobiographies and political writings. His short stories have received relatively little attention. At their best, however, they are finely wrought and deeply absorbing. What is more, they encapsulate many of the complexities of his work. The collection entitled *The Hero of Currie Road* (published in 2008), in which Umuzi have gathered together what they call the "complete short pieces" (indicating that several of the prose items are not short stories as such) reveals once more how difficult it is to categorise Paton's writing or to make generalisations about it. Here, as elsewhere, Paton is subtle and heavy-handed, perspicacious and encumbered by blind spots, outmoded and astonishingly, stubbornly relevant.

The Umuzi collection is valuable in that it brings together pieces which – except for the stories that appeared in *Debbie Go Home*, first published in 1961 – have been scattered. This makes it possible, for the first time, to consider all the short writings in relation to one another. What strikes one is a marked inconsistency in quality: the successful stories are as good as anything Paton ever wrote, while others are 'thin,' leaden or preachy. Merely noting this inconsistency does not take one very far. But when one begins to probe the underlying reasons for it, what emerges is a fascinating link between aesthetic achievement and moral complexity. The debate about the respective claims of the aesthetic, on the one hand, and the political or socio-political, on the other, has been present in one form or another ever since literature written in English in South Africa began to conceive of itself as a South African literature. The unevenness of Paton's short fiction suggests a way of approaching or seeking to understand the relationship between the

aesthetic and what may be loosely termed the 'moral' (since, for Paton, politics was about morality).

Alan Paton has always been seen as an intensely social and political writer. Yet one of the paradoxes of his position is that in his writings about literature he argues repeatedly for the claims of the aesthetic over the social. In "Why I Write," a talk originally delivered in the United States in 1949, he characterises (and deprecates) the white English-speaking South African novelist as one in whom "there is a noticeable tendency to blur the clear line of demarcation between literary and political judgements" (Paton, *Knocking on the Door* 80); a decade later, in "The South African Novel In English," Paton asserts that "the novelist may have social purpose, but the novel may not" (144).

It is not difficult to take issue with these contentions: one could argue that no "clear line of demarcation" exists, that the premise itself rests upon a construction of false binaries. But it is much more interesting to explore the ways in which Paton's own work contradicts his creed. And it is in that context that *The Hero of Currie Road* is so valuable. For the very "social purpose" about which he had such reservations is evident in all the short fiction (as it is in the novels) to a greater or lesser extent. What one discovers is that in itself the presence of "social purpose," from the point of view of each short story as a discrete entity, is neither a virtue nor a vice: it does not even begin to explain why some stories are so accomplished, or why others fall so flat. The answer seems to lie instead in the *ways* in which the stories frame questions of conscience; how Paton approaches and represents the vexed issues which, in his view, South Africa foisted upon him, as described in the last lines of the well-known poem "Could You Not Write Otherwise?":

I have no wish to hurt you with the meanings  
Of the land where you were born  
It was with unbelieving ears I heard  
My artless songs become the groans and cries of men.  
And you, why you may pity me also,  
For what do I do when such a voice is speaking,  
What can I speak but what it wishes spoken?

(Paton, *Knocking on the Door* 83)

The weakest stories in the collection are the ones which, in "hurt[ing]" the reader with the "meanings" of a tragic land, do little more than that. They tend to depict incidents of racism and lament the inhumanity it implies.

"Bulstrode's Daughter" is typical of these. The story takes place on board a ship in the Indian Ocean where, although there is no colour bar, Bulstrode, a racist white man, prevents his young daughter from playing with the daughter of an Indian family. At the very beginning of the story the first-person narrator's antipathy towards Bulstrode is conveyed, as is the latter's status as a reactionary and an arch-colonialist: "I didn't like Bulstrode, he was a coarse and insensitive man, whose conversation was limited to the deterioration of India since the British had left" (Paton, *Currie Road* 124). Bulstrode's conduct and views remain unchanged in the course of the story; so too does the enlightened stance of the narrator. The Indian father, dignified to the point of resignation, becomes at the end the mouthpiece of its moral message, which is the exposure of racism as a violation of the intrinsic value of the individual: "It's not what an Englishman does to an Indian, or a German to a Jew. It's what a man does to a man" (128).

The story holds within itself only one surprise: the Indian man quotes some lines of poetry which the narrator takes to be those of an Indian poet: "*O love, return to the dying world, as the light of morning, shining in all regions, latitudes and households of high heaven within the heart*" (127). They turn out to be by Edith Sitwell. Otherwise the story holds no surprises whatsoever, nor can it, for it moves along a trajectory predetermined by the rhetoric of a morality which is as earnest as it is uncritically rendered. The solution to the problem of racism lies, it suggests, in recognising the worth of the individual and in an accompanying change of heart, conveyed explicitly by the appeal to the reader's compassion and sense of injustice, and reinforced by the idea, as suggested in the excerpt from Sitwell's poetry, that the heart may guide one to transcendence. But in Paton's own terms, the story is encumbered, even suffocated, by its "social purpose." Its lack of ambition in the articulation of a moral complaint coincides with what are generally considered weaknesses in the crafting of short stories: a reliance upon heavy explication instead of the suggestiveness and the play of implication; a thinness of characterisation; and a predictable conclusion.

"A Drink in the Passage," a story originally published in 1960, depicts the tragic awkwardness which characterises encounters between people of different races in apartheid South Africa. The frame narrator, a white man, is told the story of how Edward Simelane, a noted black sculptor who had won an award for a work entitled "African Mother and Child," shares a drink with Van Rensburg, a white Afrikaner, after a chance encounter in Johannesburg. The latter is an ardent admirer of Simelane's work, but does not realise that the man with whom he strikes up a conversation is the award-winning sculptor. Van Rensburg is identified as racially progressive: he

invites Simelane to his flat and, ignoring the sign which reads "Whites only. Slegs vir Blankes," "wav[es]" the black man into the lift (119). The tone at this point seems to be one of a happily defiant conviviality, arising from the flouting of laws which prevent people from relating to one another as individuals. But then the significance of the title of the story is revealed in all its irony: Simelane is not invited into the flat. Instead, he is given a drink in the passage and, later, Van Rensburg's wife offers him biscuits – also in the passage.

The drink in the passage comes to signify the narrow straits of human interaction under apartheid. The passage is a meeting-place of sorts, but it betokens chiefly what cannot be shared.

Simelane is extraordinarily magnanimous in accepting the situation:

Anger could have saved me from the whole embarrassing situation, but you know I can't easily be angry. Even if I could have been, I might have found it hard to be angry with this particular man. But I wanted to get away from there, and I couldn't. My mother used to say to me, when I had said something anti-white, "Son, don't talk like that, talk as you are." She would have understood at once why I took a drink from a man who gave it to me in the passage.

(120)

This reiterates the centrality of the individual in the moral calculation: even if Simelane had become angry, he would have exempted Van Rensburg from that anger in an acknowledgement of the latter's good intentions – "I might have found it hard to be angry with this particular man." His mother's advice – "don't talk like that, talk as you are" – has a similarly humanist underpinning in its construction of a core of essential humaneness that supersedes any rhetoric of race and racial antipathy.

The story is effective up to this point because it succeeds in depicting the excruciating ironies of a meeting which is simultaneously an act of separation; of a gesture of hospitality restricted to a drink in the passage. And the fact that Simelane never reveals himself to Van Rensburg as the creator of "African Mother and Child," a work which the white man, according to his wife, "goes down every night to look at" (121), is a significant silence within the story and a suggestive comment on the nature of their relationship: the artwork speaks powerfully to Van Rensburg, but Simelane wishes to interact with him as a man and a fellow human being, not on the strength of his artistic accomplishments.

At approximately halfway through the narrative, the story seems to rest on a cusp: its ironies having been established, it could have deepened them

and teased out their implications. Instead, it becomes mawkish and preachy, and the same weaknesses which may be identified in "Bulstrode's Daughter" now become apparent. The result is that it makes explicit what does not require explicitness. This is evident in Simelane's comparison of Van Rensburg at the end of the story to "a man trying to run a race in iron shoes, and not understanding why he cannot move" (123), as well as in his more extensive thoughts on the encounter between the two of them:

[. . .] I knew that for God's sake he wanted to touch me too and he couldn't; for his eyes had been blinded by years in the dark. And I thought it was a pity, for if men never touch each other, they'll hurt each other one day. And it was a pity he was blind and couldn't touch me, for black men don't touch white men any more; only by accident, when they make something like "Mother and Child."

(122)

There is nothing in this reflection which the story *qua* story requires; nothing that has not already been communicated with sufficient force. It is a form of moral swamping: the ironies which gave the narrative its promise and its power are now submerged by the heavy didacticism. Whether this makes the story more moving to its readers or more likely to persuade them to be progressive in their attitudes to race is debatable. That issue aside, what one can say is that the contrast between the first half of the narrative and the second shows quite clearly that this is a story which *could* have been written otherwise. The didacticism which overwhelms the narrative is a form of textual authority, since the story offers it both as an appeal and as an implicit solution to the forms of separation which apartheid imposes on individuals. But the question to be asked is whether it is the most effective form of authority; and that question can only be answered by making comparisons with other stories in the collection which are more skillfully rendered.

As suggested earlier, what distinguishes the more successful short fiction from pieces such as "Bulstrode's Daughter" and "A Drink in the Passage" is that, instead of merely posing questions of conscience, they problematise them. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the best stories in the collection include the ones which deal with the period (1935-1948) when Paton was the principal of Diepkloof Reformatory for Delinquent African Boys. These are stories about the burdens of authority and the responsibilities of paternalism. In nuanced terms they explore dilemmas of conscience and the disheartening compromises those in positions of authority are frequently compelled to accept. They are marked by a surface simplicity, yet beneath them runs a deep undercurrent of moral complexity.

Peter Alexander describes the bleakness of the school which came under Paton's authority in 1935:

Diepkloof [. . .] had been bought by the Prisons Department in 1906, and until the First World War had been a prison for adults [. . .]. Between the wars the decision had been taken to transform the place into a borstal for black boys below the age of 18 years, but in fact the only change had been in the prison population: the grim, dilapidated buildings, the prison staff, the harsh discipline had all remained unchanged until the Department of Education took it over from the Prisons Department in 1934.

(Alexander 128)

"Diepkloof reformatory in 1935," according to Alexander, "looked like the ramshackle prison it was" (129). He adds that "[p]unishment was the admitted aim of the institution; 'reformatory' was a misnomer" (131).

This meant that Paton was afforded the opportunity to institute, from scratch, a practical and wide-ranging programme for reform, based on "ideas of child-centred pedagogy and penology which by the 1930s were becoming dominant among theorists of prison and borstal reform" (Alexander 133). What is more, he saw Diepkloof Reformatory as contracting within itself many of the wider problems of South African society: Alexander writes that "Paton came to think of Diepkloof as a microcosm of South African society [. . .]. In particular he came to think of Diepkloof's reform as a pattern for change in South Africa as a whole" (134). In similar vein, Andrew Foley suggests that Paton saw his efforts to reform Diepkloof as "a small-scale model of how society at large could be transformed and reconstructed" (Foley 71).

But, as is frequently the case, there is a great difference between the rhetorical confidence of polemic and the qualms that lived experience provokes; and literature seems uniquely well-placed to point us to that discrepancy. Many of the Diepkloof stories are about the misgivings which waylay progressive initiatives. These doubts are notably absent in Paton's views on reformatories and how they should be run. "I had come to Diepkloof," he writes in *Towards the Mountain*, the first volume of his autobiography, "believing that freedom was the supreme reformatory instrument" (Paton, *Towards the Mountain* 148). His polemical writings about the role of reformatories express the same confidence in the benefits of a progressive programme for reform. In "Juvenile Delinquency and Its Treatment," an address given in 1948 at a national conference convened by

the Penal Reform league of South Africa, Paton speaks of a freedom which was two-pronged, since it was freedom not only for the boys, but also for himself. In 1934 reformatories were transferred from the Department of Prisons to the Union Education Department and this step was consolidated in what he called "the magnificent Children's Act of 1937" (Paton, *Knocking on the Door* 45):

This legislation has had a profound influence on our reformatories, and has changed them out of all recognition. I even had the extraordinary experience, almost unknown to Public Servants, of administering the Diepkloof Reformatory for some years under no regulations at all, and this meant a freedom to experiment such as comes to few of us in our lifetimes.

(46)

The theme of freedom is explored in a number of other ways in the address. It includes an emphasis upon the role played by the environment in the moulding of character: Paton attributes what he views as a damaging reluctance to concede that "a law-breaking child [. . .] has to be helped and protected, not judged and punished" in part to "the theories of heredity, which regarded the child as uneducable, and to our ultra-moralistic attitude to the whole question of free-will and choice" (46). In the Diepkloof stories, too, the concern with freedom extends beyond efforts to ameliorate the stringent regime of the reformatory itself; it has also to do with freedom of choice – in the young offenders and in the authority figures – and with the existential freedom which arises from an acceptance that character is not ineluctably fixed and may alter with changes in the environment. But with such freedom comes the weight of great responsibility.

The Diepkloof stories give expression to precisely these issues: the burden of freedom, the risks involved in granting choices, the danger that a recalcitrant character may not respond appropriately to a positive change in environmental conditions. In contrast to the positive tone of Paton's polemical writings about a progressive agenda for reformatories, the stories tend to be about doubt, self-doubt, irresolution and, in some cases, failure. Foley argues that this results in part from the fact that the stories were written a number of years after the Diepkloof experience, during the first decade of apartheid, and that Paton was influenced by what he saw as a serious reversal in the political fortunes of South Africa: "[t]he perspective of these stories is not so much that of a sympathetic reformatory Principal in the 1942, but the tortured mind of a political leader in the 1950s, forced to witness the desolation of his 'beloved country'" (Foley 85). Foley believes

that "[i]nstead of stories of success and achievement, of lives changed and racial barriers crossed, the atmosphere of the stories is despondent and disconsolate, and the language conveys a sense of hopelessness and helplessness" (74).

Although some of the stories are undeniably very bleak, it seems to me that, in general, the tone tends to express anxiety and doubt rather than the "hopelessness and helplessness" discerned by Foley. This alternative emphasis I am proposing is more significant than it may seem at first, for the value of anxiety and doubt lies in the fact that they articulate more effectively the exhilarating burden of freedom and its unpredictable consequences, whereas a "mood of gloom and despair" (Foley 86), in being too pessimistic, would negate possibilities.

The anxieties conveyed in the Diepkloof stories emanate in part from the Principal-narrator's constant anxiety that the progressive agenda will flounder and, with it, all the wider hopes which have been invested in the microcosm of the reformatory. This is why recidivism is a recurring theme in these stories, since in this context recidivism is one of the obvious manifestations of the failure of a programme for reform. "Sponono" and "The Divided House," for instance, depict a troubled and frustrated paternalism. In both the problem is recidivism, especially in boys or young men who yearn with evident sincerity to redeem themselves, but who fall victim, ultimately, to their baser tendencies. The characters here are not simply expressions of the kind of intrinsic value which is attributed in general terms to the individual at the end of "Bulstrode's Daughter." Merely recognising their humanity is an insufficient remedy, for every effort has been made to do so, and to treat them as individuals amongst the many hundreds of boys at the reformatory. Instead, they embody another type of value, which the attribution of singularity in the fashioning of a literary character confers: they are unpredictable, prone to dismaying self-contradiction and as complex as the quandaries they provoke. The "divided house" in this context becomes a metaphor for the inconsistencies that lie within the individual, and for the capacity for self-betrayal, that most enigmatic of actions.

In the character of Sponono, described as "an engaging rascal" (Paton, *Currie Road* 71), there is a chasm-like gap between intention and action, between noble purpose and disreputable conduct. The Principal-narrator foregrounds this in the second paragraph of the story:

[Sponono] expected my conduct towards him to surpass in super-human degree his conduct towards me. How did he ever formulate such noble ideals of behaviour? That I do not know, for he



certainly did not practise them. Nevertheless he knew of them, and while he considered himself too frail to practise them, he expected me to do so, and never failed to reproach me when I fell short of them.

(71)

The narrator constantly tries to get Sponono to bear the consequences of his lapses, but with little result. Yet the boy's "noble ideals" seem to provide him with a perspicacity entirely dissociated from his conduct as a reprobate. This is the source of much ironic humour in the story. One example is when, as a result of a fight with another boy, Sponono's eye is injured:

One of my first visitors was Sponono. His eye had healed better than expected and had given him an incredibly knowing look; it remained half closed, as though he could have seen more of one's weaknesses had he opened it, but as though out of tolerance he would not do so, even though he would continue to give the impression that he knew all.

(81)

Through humour and incongruity, moral authority is displaced to some extent from the Principal-narrator and located in the unlikely figure of Sponono. But at the end of the story the humour has gone and the tone is wistful, even melancholic, as the narrator addresses the absent Sponono, using in this imaginary conversation terms the boy would not understand:

Sponono, we have reached, you and I, what is called, in a game not known to you, a stalemate. You move, and I move, but neither of us will ever capture the other. I gave you your chance, and you would not take it, for reasons that are beyond either of us to explain. You gave me my chance, and I would not take it, for reasons that I thought sound and proper.

(86)

The contradictions within Sponono will never be resolved since they have as their basis "reasons that are beyond either of us to explain." Epistemologically the enigma of Sponono is an impasse. A stalemate, too, is a cul-de-sac since in a stalemate there is no way out and no way forward. From the perspective of a programme for reform, it amounts to a failure. But as a conclusion to a short story it is neither a dead end nor a failure. The power of the story lies in great measure in the intricacy of the characterisation, in the complexity of a character which cannot be made

consistent with itself (and is certainly not to be understood solely in terms of environmental influences). If the humanist ideal is the integrity that such a consistency confers, then Sponono represents the obverse: the self fragmented through self-contradiction to the point of incommensurability. Yet only a skilful writer could succeed in representing a character of such complexity. As the efficacy and authority of the Principal-narrator wane, the efficacy and authority of the writer increase. A quandary in one context becomes an opportunity in another. Seen in that light, the "divided house" is a trope for a narrative which offers what one seeks in good short stories: unexpected configurations and capaciousness in the making of meaning – all lying beneath a surface simplicity.

This is intimated also at the end of the story entitled "The Divided House." The protagonist, Jacky, has, Faustus-like, waged a battle between his better impulses and his self-destructive tendencies. At the end of the story it is clear that the latter have prevailed. The narrator receives a letter from Jacky, who is in prison for house-breaking:

The letter was earnest and penitent, and I had no doubt that the struggle was still being waged; therefore I answered with words of encouragement, telling [Jacky] that he could come back to us if he wished. Yet I knew that the boy who wrote the letter would, so far as men knew, always be defeated, till one day he would give up both hope and ghost, and leave to his enemy the sole tenancy of the divided house.

(51)

The phrase "sole tenancy of the divided house" here betokens diminution, loss and failure. A divided house, it implies, ought to be occupied by several tenants. In such a context, the "divided house" comes to mean something more than a capacity for self-betrayal or the setbacks which recidivism implies. It has become the ontological equivalent of a house with many mansions, of an environment which accommodates conflicts that supersede simple moral categories. A story which can accommodate the multiplicity of meanings which the "divided house" gathers within itself is very far removed from the glib morality of "Bulstrode's Daughter" or the latter half of "A Drink in the Passage." It is locating value not merely in the possibility of a change of heart, but in the knotted fibre of the story itself.

In "The Elephant Shooter," the wistfulness and melancholy apparent in some of the other Diepkloof stories are absent; yet it too contemplates the burden of authority. Like "Sponono" it deals with the beguiling (and, at times, frustrating) inconsistencies of which people are capable. Here the focus is not on the boys, but on Richard Coetzee, one of the members of

staff. Coetzee, who had been "an elephant shooter for the Portuguese East Government" (65), is a temporary member of staff desperate for a permanent appointment. Yet the Principal-narrator has misgivings about him: although "[t]he boys liked him and worked well for him" (65), he gains a reputation for irresponsibility, and is known by his colleagues as "the Wild Man of Komati" (66). This is based largely on his tendency to engage in impulsive and unsanctioned behaviour:

One couldn't help liking him, but his reputation for irresponsibility grew. One day he took the meat from the mess and gave it to the dogs, saying it was unfit for human consumption. He was very hurt when I made him pay for it, a large sum out of a small salary.

(66)

Hence, although Coetzee is not an inmate of the reformatory, he too is the source of dilemmas relating to the exercise of authority, since the Principal finds himself having to discipline him and criticise his conduct.

A permanent post becomes vacant and the Principal is pressurised by Coetzee to give it to him. Despite his misgivings, he relents and appoints the young man to the job. The deciding factor is that Coetzee offers a constructive response to a recurring problem:

At that time we had arranged for each staff house to have domestic servants from the reformatory. It was an ideal opportunity for some kind of training. But the choices were made so badly, and the exceptional freedom offered so many temptations, that this group, about forty in number, produced more absconders and offenders than any similar group in the reformatory. I was reluctant to give up the experiment, and was trying to think of some way to improve the situation. It was then that young Coetzee came to see me.

(66-67)

Just as Sponono, whose conduct is frequently reprehensible, provides moral directives, so Coetzee, in his vexing irresponsibility and capriciousness, comes up with a workable solution to the problem:

"Whenever a new boy comes to the reformatory," he said, "he goes to the new boy's span."

"Agreed."

"Then let the officer pick out those who are docile and obedient, and are likely to make good servants. Make a special

span for them, and train them for their jobs, so that when the time comes for them to be made free, they will be ready for it."

(68-69)

This seems straightforward, even obvious, but it is of great import. The "absconders and offenders" amongst the domestic servants are yet another manifestation of the ever-present danger that the various new freedoms and privileges, introduced as an "experiment" in an attempt to alter the tenor of the reformatory, will be abused and thus cause the programme for reform as a whole to falter. Hence, despite its light-hearted tone, "The Elephant Shooter" expresses a serious concern about the possible consequences of introducing a more benign form of authority in the reformatory. Coetzee's recommendation is sensible at a number of levels: selecting the boys after careful observation and on the basis of their tendency to be obedient is bound to be more effective than the present system, while putting the new boys together in a team of their own may minimise the potential for negative or corrupting influences.

The story ends with the Principal-narrator's admission that he has been manipulated by Coetzee. Interestingly, as in "Sponono," the narrative concludes with the metaphor of a chess game: unlike Sponono, however, Coetzee is deemed to have played the metaphorical game to his advantage and, in so doing, has turned the Principal and Mr Robertson, one of the other members of staff, into "pawns" (70). The Principal-narrator has allowed this to occur. He has found in an unlikely source a practical suggestion which bolsters his agenda for reform, and will therefore tolerate the manipulation. The advice from a young man given to inconsistency is consistent with a serious purpose; and so it is accepted.

"The Elephant Shooter" expresses, finally, the necessity of compromises. The qualms prompted by the exercise of authority are not absent, but they are allayed by a pragmatism which is flexible enough to make the most of a valuable piece of advice, whatever its source. Solutions to problems are represented as residing not in purity of purpose but in a determination to find merit in what people have to offer, even those with considerable flaws.

This espousal of pragmatism is evident in Paton's politics too. His writings on liberalism, for instance, reiterate the view that liberalism is (or ought to be) much more than a set of political principles. In a response to "My Conception of Liberalism," an influential article published in 1938 by J. H. Hofmeyr, he remarks with evident approval that "[Hofmeyr] made it clear that liberalism was in his opinion a philosophy not a policy" (Paton, *Hofmeyr* 295), while in *Journey Continued*, the second part of his autobiography, he insists that "Liberalism is not an ideology. It allows a

freedom of thought and opinion to its members that an ideology does not allow" (Paton, *Journey Continued* 133). Why, one may ask, is it so important for Paton that liberalism should not be a "policy" or an "ideology?" The first reason may be that, as the second quotation suggests, the word "ideology" is associated in his mind with doctrinaire practices and inflexibility (and a concomitant lack of pragmatism). The second seems to relate to the humanist idea that politics should be imbedded in the relationships between individuals, and that the inevitable complexity of such relationships should take precedence over the intellectual loftiness which he ascribes to "ideology."

This notion of the primacy of human interaction, the necessary muddying, so to speak, of the waters of ideological purity by the reality of imperfect relations between people, with all their consequent moral murkiness, lies at the heart of the Diepkloof stories. It accounts for the moral ambiguity which characterises them. And it is the source of the crises of conscience which they articulate, and which result more often than not from a familiar quandary within the practical application of liberal-humanism, which is the partial or complete failure of good intentions. What one finds in the Diepkloof stories is not the gratification of a "pattern for change" (Alexander 134), but the testing of liberal and progressive principles and a stern appraisal of their efficacy.

The disparity between the successful stories and the weaker ones in *The Hero of Currie Road* illustrates the familiar notion that literary writing which tests ideology makes for better literature than writing that is a straightforward vehicle for polemic. For all Paton's reservations about the term "ideology," stories such as "Bulstrode's Daughter" and "A Drink in the Passage" are in fact narrowly ideological in that their moral proscriptions overwhelm the story. They communicate polemic rather than probing it. In that sense, the solutions they propose are not commensurate with the quandaries which they themselves articulate.

Polemic is always a public and "outward" activity, which is why its rhetoric is invariably confident. In striking contrast is the privacy – the intimacy – of introspection, soul-searching and self-doubt. The Diepkloof stories are, in that sense, profoundly intimate stories. They are marked by the characteristics of intimate language as outlined by George Steiner in an essay entitled "Creative Falsehood":

We speak first to ourselves, then to those nearest us in kinship and locale. We turn only gradually to the outsider, and we do so with every safeguard of obliqueness, of reservation, of conventional flatness or outright misguidance. At its intimate centre, in the zone

of familial or totemic immediacy, our language is most economic of explanation, most dense with intentionality and compacted implication.

(Steiner 410)

The Principal-narrator, in expressing doubts and misgivings that could never be shared with the other members of staff, is, as it were, speaking to himself. The Diepkloof stories convey what lies hidden behind the façade of authority. The reader, however, is admitted to the "intimate centre," where the inner conflicts are keenest, and where there are no easy solutions to complex quandaries.

This helps us to understand why polemic is so reductive an element in a number of the stories in *The Hero of Currie Road*. What has been sacrificed in those stories is the fine balancing act which certain literary texts, perhaps uniquely, provide: within the ambit of the outward, the public gesture, they retain the power of intimate language; in Steiner's terms, they are "most economic of explanation, most dense with intentionality and compacted implication." When that balance is achieved, alternative configurations of the relationship between aesthetics and "social purpose" emerge; so, too, the construing of different forms of authority.

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