

## Interview with Himself



*A*h, Mr Paton. Thank you for agreeing to let me interview you. Let me tell you, I have a high opinion of your work. Do you also?

PATON: Some of it. When I read past work, I say to myself, that was good and that was not. I am glad to say that, in general, the better was published and the worse not.

*When did you last read Cry, the Beloved Country?*

PATON: Not since 1948, the year it was published.

*Why is that?*

PATON: I can't quite answer you. One reason, I think, is that I have lived twenty years since that time and, though the book still speaks to many people, it could not speak to me now. Another reason is that I am now too old for that kind of emotion, which is the same reason given by the English poet A E Housman when he, although he was in his prime, published a volume called *Last Poems*.

*And your second novel, Too Late the Phalarope?*

PATON: I think the answer is the same.

*Then what past work can you read again?*

PATON: Many articles which I wrote in the past, on all kinds of subjects, crime, racial discrimination, civil liberty, the rule of law. Many of these I could not improve; however, they would not usually be called works of art. There are, however, two poems both of which deeply satisfied me when I wrote them. One is 'To a Small Boy who Died at Diepkloof Reformatory', which was published by Professor Rolf Italiaander, I think in the annual publication of the Free Academy of Hamburg, of which I am a proud member, having received the literary award in 1961. The other poem is 'Meditation for a Young Boy Confirmed', which to this day can arouse in me the same emotion with which I wrote it. There is

another book I can read again, and that is *Debbie Go Home*. If someone writes to me about one of the stories, I go back and read it, most often with enjoyment.

*How do you rank yourself as a writer?*

PATON: I don't think about it.

*Is that true? Now I could tell you . . .*

PATON (hastily): Yes, I'm sure you could. No, it isn't true, but it's more true than false. My greatest pleasure is to write something that I know is good, and I think to myself, that was good, but I don't think to myself, Jones and Smith and Brown could never have written anything as good as that.

*Is that completely true? Now don't get angry. Think carefully.*

PATON (thinking carefully): No, it isn't completely true. There is one exception. If I wrote a book on a certain theme, and later someone else wrote another, then if a critic were to say that the second book was superior, that would hurt my pride. But I wouldn't think about it long.

*Are you sensitive to criticism?*

PATON: Yes, I am. Especially at the time of publication. I've met writers who say they don't care what the critics say, but I don't believe it.

*Could they break your heart?*

PATON: Yes, if they all damned me. But I've never had such an experience.

*Are you apprehensive when a new book is coming out?*

PATON: Yes, I am. I want to go out and buy the newspaper and I don't want to go out. When my life of Hofmeyr was published in October 1964 I was afraid to buy *The Sunday Times*, which is South Africa's biggest newspaper. But the review was magnificent, and tremendous too, because it occupied the whole front page of the magazine section, and more after that.

*How many times did you read it?*

PATON: You know, don't you?

*Yes, I know.*

PATON: Then don't ask foolish questions.

*Are you vain?*

PATON: Yes, but not peacock-vain. My vanity is like an iceberg.

*You mean enormous.*

PATON: No, I mean mostly concealed.

*I've heard you say you're not a true writer. What do you mean by that?*

PATON: It probably is not a good way of putting it. I don't mean I am not a lover of writing. Yet I have never done what other writers have done. I have never made it my life's work, I have never put it above every other obligation. I have envied those who did so, and who went to live in Cuba, and Hand's Cove, and the Big Sur, and the solitude of Cornwall and such delectable places.

*You got caught up in politics, didn't you?*

PATON: Yes, I did.

*Why did you do a silly thing like that?*

PATON: Duty, plain simple duty, the kind of duty that makes you feel bad when you do it, and worse when you don't.

*Don't you like politics?*

PATON: No.

*Then you would rather have been like the man in Cuba?*

PATON: No.

*Why not?*

PATON: Because I would then have been false to myself. I have these two mutually antagonistic characteristics in me, the desire to write and the desire to do.

*Which is the stronger?*

PATON: The second obviously. But when I'm actually writing, I resent the second.

*What is it like, being like that?*

PATON: Not very satisfactory.

*Do you resent being like that?*

PATON: No, I accept it. I'll tell you something. When I left my job as

principal of Diepkloof Reformatory, I fancied it possible that I would never wear a formal suit of clothes again. I'd be free of all the old obligations that I had served so long, and, if I might say so, so faithfully.

*But it didn't work out, did it? You had to get up there on that public platform again, didn't you? You ruined yourself, didn't you?*

PATON (with surprising mildness): No, I didn't. Whatever reasons I had for getting up there, one of the reasons was that I had to get up there because I had something to say. You knew that, didn't you?

*Don't ask me. I'm only an interviewer. Do you know that some people say that your fictional writing, your biographical writing, even your poems, were really just getting up there again, making a kind of propaganda? What do you say to that?*

PATON: It's nonsense. I told you I was two men. But when I pick up that pen to write a story, the second man is dead. I have an utter respect for the craft of writing. When I pick up that pen I am utterly obedient to the rules of the craft. I believe that if I break those rules my story is lost. I may have other purposes, but I know that the moment one of those purposes, however lofty, becomes dominant, I have destroyed my work.

*Then why do some people say you're a propagandist?*

PATON: Because they don't like the themes, of course. They don't want to see their country as it is. So they dislike the stories and call them propaganda. Such people aren't true critics. They would condemn the most perfect story in the world if its theme was unpalatable.

*Do you know, I find myself believing you.*

PATON: And I'll tell you something else. There's another way to destroy one's work, and that is to run away from the themes altogether, so that your stories bear no relation to life as it is. Some of our South African writers are like that. They do in fact have a secondary purpose that dominates the primary purpose of writing, and that secondary purpose is to avoid the disapproval of the State or the Volk.

*Do you find life hard in South Africa?*

PATON: Any person of my kind finds life hard. But some of my friends have paid a much heavier price than I for holding the views they do. Their movements and actions have been rigorously restricted, not by a court of law, but by a Minister of Justice who has been placed above the law. Also I have another advantage not enjoyed by many. When a writer writes about a tragic and frustrating situation, the tragedy and the frustration are lightened by the creative act of writing about it.

*Why don't you leave South Africa?*

PATON: Why? So that you can leave too?

*Well, thank you, Mr Paton, for this interview.*

PATON: What are you sighing for?

*I was thinking, you are now getting rid of me, but I can't get rid of you.*