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FICTION AND HISTORY

Fact and Invention in Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*

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IN THE AUTHOR'S note at the front of the novel appear the following words:

Various persons are mentioned, not by name, but as the holders of this or that position. In no case is reference intended to any actual holder of any of these positions. Nor in any related event is reference intended to any actual event; except that the accounts of the boycott of the buses, the erection of Shanty Town, the finding of gold at Odendaalsrust, and the miners' strike, are a compound of truth and fiction. In these respects therefore the story is not true, but considered as a social record it is plain and simple truth.¹

These statements are not as direct and guileless as they may seem. Indeed, they are decidedly artful. The events referred to are documented historically, but the writer tells us that fictional elements are combined with them in some way. How? As will be seen, the answer is not simple. And how exactly can a 'story that is not true' be considered as 'a social record' that is 'true'? This may look like a contradiction. But when one realizes that the term 'true' is being used with two totally different meanings the contradiction is resolved.

Any invented story is untrue in the sense that it has never happened and never likely to; although, if it ever did, the writer persuades us that this is the way it would happen. Paton's first use of 'true' clearly means this. His use of 'truth' for the social record is a little more complex.

How can an account compounded of actual and invented elements be true? It cannot clearly be literal truth. Does he mean that the described events are true to the 'spirit' of things, although departing from the facts in some respects? The spirit of anything is open to interpretation and argument. His simple truth is not as simple as it sounds. If *Cry, the Beloved Country* is to be seen as both a social and fictional record, one does not have to read far into the novel to spot that there is an ambiguity somewhere in the chronology of events. It is worth looking closely at Paton's 'plain and simple truth' to find out exactly what it is and to see how he exploits the ambiguity of time-scales for his 'record'.

Events that occur within the time-span established by the invented narrative will be referred to as happening in fictional time; events that have actually occurred, and incorporated into the novel, as happening in historical time. Within the novel, fictional time will be seen to be given preference over historical time.

¹ Alan Paton, 'Author's note', to *Cry, the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort in Desolation* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960), 5.

No author can invent a date in the way that he can invent an incident; unlike a character, it either has occurred or will occur. In a novel, a date acquires an ambiguous status. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is set in the year 1946. What does this claim amount to? Is the date merely a device to give an appearance of historicity to a record that has never happened? Or are real events being dressed up to look like some kind of invention? Is the novel perhaps trying to do both? Do we place the date, then, in fictional or historical time, or in both? The following discussion will try to show that it is best regarded as fictional, 'occurring' within the narrative, rather than at a specific point in history; and, will try to throw light on the questions about truth.

A precise time is first emphasized in Book I, Chapter XI:²

At 1.30 p.m. today Mr. Arthur Jarvis, of Plantation Road, Parkwold, was shot dead in his house by an intruder . . .³

This is offered to the reader as part of a newspaper report; one of the characters, Fr Vincent, brings it to the attention of Stephen Kumalo by reading it aloud to him. There is no ambiguity about the given hour and there is no necessity for it to occur historically — until a day and a date are assigned to it. It is not only fictional, but also essentially timeless, because 1.30 p.m. could, within the book, occur last year, this year, sometime, never. Any one moment is as credible as any other.

However, this particular event of the shooting of Arthur Jarvis is not left timeless. In court, at the trial of Absalom and his friends:

A white man stands up and says that these three are accused of the murder of Arthur Trevelyan Jarvis, in his house at Plantation Road, Parkwold, Johannesburg, on Tuesday the eighth day of October, 1946, in the early afternoon.⁴

Now the instant of the murder has become actual; a fictional specificness has become an actual specificness. Also it has been linked to a particular place. But when a writer is so precise about the timing of a single incident in a story, he is not necessarily wanting the reader to believe that he is describing a factual event. The happening could be imaginary, but the timing real. He may wish the reader to understand that an action could have occurred at a precise point in history, and that the reader could have experienced it. Such a blending of the invented and the real gives more convincingness to his story. In such instances, reality and fantasy do not conflict.

But if, for example, a character is described as going to the police with information about a murder that has just happened on the day before the

² Apart, that is, from the date on the letter to Stephen Kumalo sent by Msimangu (25 September 1946) which starts off the entire action of the novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Bk I, ch. ii, 10.

³ Ibid., Bk I, ch. xi, 65.

⁴ Ibid., Bk II, ch. v, 137.

murder occurs, we sit up incredulously. A mistake of this kind—an incongruity in fictional time—would destroy the artistic illusion, and writers take care not to make this kind of error. So, giving a real date and time for any fictional event need not throw up any problem of ambiguous chronology, as long as the invented incidents do not conflict with it. We are, thus able to think of Arthur Jarvis's murder as happening in fictional and historical time simultaneously, thereby giving convincingness to an imaginary happening.

But a puzzling ambiguity can occur if a writer does the opposite; that is, introduce into an imaginary account events that are recorded historically. Real calendars and maps are then superimposed on the mock world of the fiction. Alice can live in the day-to-day world, with its formal logic, its measurable space and its regular tick. Or she can walk through the glass and live in the other, with its zany logic, its unpredictable space and its reversible time. Only when one is forced into the order of the other might a breakdown occur.

Yet it is clear from the 'Author's Note' that Paton has fused history and fiction. What consequences does this have for the temporal structure of the novel? In giving his evidence, Absalom (the murderer of Arthur Jarvis and son of Stephen Kumalo) claims that, after the killing, he walked among the Alexandra Bus Boycotters:

- And on the second day you walked again to Johannesburg?
- Yes.
- And you again walked amongst the people who were boycotting the buses?
- Yes.
- Were they still talking about the murder?
- They were still talking. Some said they heard it would soon be discovered.
- And then?
- I was afraid.³

This places Absalom, an imaginary character who has committed a murder at 1.30 p.m. in fictional time, firmly into historical time. Because the Alexandra Bus Boycott is a documented fact, the imaginary crime has been thrust into the context of history. Flesh and blood boycotters have even talked about the fictional crime, it is claimed. Obviously, merely to accept this much, the reader needs Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith'. Of course, readers willingly give it. However, Paton's claim that his book 'considered as a social record . . . is the plain and simple truth' prompts the critical reader to compare the novel's account with the historical record. This is where the trouble begins.

³ Ibid., Bk II, ch. v, 143.

The Alexandra Bus Boycott began on 14 November 1944⁶ and lasted for seven weeks.⁷ Absalom's crime is committed on 8 October 1946. The fictional and historical clocks are striking at different times. Paton has distorted actual chronology for the sake of his story by placing the boycott two years after its time.

There was, it is true, more than one Alexandra Bus Boycott.⁸ Could Paton be thinking of the other one? Possible, but unlikely, for two reasons. First, it happened even earlier — in August 1943 — and lasted nine days. This would require a delay of three years to fit the novel's chronology, making Paton's account of contemporary problems (he wrote the novel in 1947) less contemporary than need be. Second, the evidence of the novel itself suggests fairly conclusively that it is the boycott of 1944 he is thinking of.

Alexandra was an African location to the south west of Johannesburg within the jurisdiction of the Johannesburg City Council; and Paton also wrote a factual account of it (in addition to the one in the novel) twenty-six years after the writing of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. For the historical record, Paton has had to check his facts; for the fiction, he need not have done so. Nevertheless, that the novel is based firmly on factual details here is one of the conclusions that emerges from the comparison:

African wages were so low that a rise of a penny in any staple commodity was a blow to struggling people. The bus fare from Alexandra Township to the city was raised by just that amount, and the workers of Alexandra, men and women, old men and old women, physical weaklings and cripples, refused to use the buses and walked to and from the city, twenty or twenty-two miles a day. Those who started work at 7 a.m. would have to rise at 3 a.m. and start walking at 4 a.m. If they finished work at 5 p.m. they would get home by 8 p.m. A great part of the distance was the length of Louis Botha Avenue, lined with comfortable white houses, whose occupants had of necessity to watch the daily march. Some white people were deeply moved by the marching protest, and would come daily with their cars to help the old and crippled, often being warned by the police that they were breaking the law. Others were angered by it and thought it should be ended by force. It is a temptation of white authority to this very day to silence black protest by force. Most of the white people of Johannesburg had no conception of the importance of twopence per day to most African people.⁹

The novel's account appears in Book I, Chapter VIII, where Paton makes the old African pastor, Stephen Kumalo (distressed and poor, seeking his

⁶ The dates in E. Callan, *Alan Paton* (New York, Twayne, 1968), 50, 52, appear to be erroneous.

⁷ See E. Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 318-19.

⁸ '... twice during the war the workers of Alexandra had defeated the attempts of a bus company to raise fares by walking the twenty miles to and from work each day ...', E. A. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa* (London, Longman, 3rd ed., 1957), 756-7.

⁹ Alan Paton, *Apartheid and the Archbishop: The Life and Times of Geoffrey Clayton, Archbishop of Cape Town* (Cape Town, Philip, 1973), 143.

lost son Absalom in the squalid locations around Johannesburg) face a walk of eleven miles into Alexandra, and another walk out again of the same distance. In fictional chronology, it happens on 7 October 1946. The similarities of detail in the two accounts will be apparent. The novel reads as follows:

... But here they met an unexpected obstacle, for a man came up to them and said to Msimangu, Are you going to Alexandra, umfundisi?

— Yes, my friend.

— We are here to stop you, umfundisi. Not by force, you see — he pointed — the police are there to prevent that. But by persuasion. If you use this bus you are weakening the cause of the black people. We have determined not to use these buses until the fare is brought back again to fourpence.

— Yes, indeed, I have heard of it.

He turned to Kumalo.

— I was very foolish, my friend. I had forgotten that there were no buses; at least I had forgotten the boycott of the buses.

— Our business is very urgent, said Kumalo humbly.

— This boycott is also urgent, said the man politely. They want us to pay sixpence, that is one shilling a day. Six shillings a week, and some of us get thirty-five or forty shillings.

— Is it far to walk? asked Kumalo.

— It is a long way, umfundisi. Eleven miles.

— That is a long way, for an old man.

— Men as old as you are doing it every day, umfundisi. And women, and some that are sick, and some crippled, and children. They start walking at four in the morning, and they do not get back till eight at night. They have a bite of food, and their eyes hardly close on the pillow before they must stand up again, sometimes to start off with nothing but hot water in their stomachs. I cannot stop you taking a bus, umfundisi, but this is a cause to fight for. If we lose it, then they will have to pay more in Sophiatown and Claremont and Kliptown and Pimville.

— I understand you well. We shall not use the bus.

The man thanked them and went to another would-be traveller.

— That man has a silver tongue, said Kumalo.

— That is the famous Dubula, said Msimangu quietly. A friend of your brother John.¹⁰

The aged, the crippled and the sick are referred to in both; the times given to cover the distance correspond exactly; and the distance itself tallies.¹¹ Furthermore, references to the lifts offered to Africans by Whites, and references to Louis Botha Avenue, appear in both. Here is the novel again:

¹⁰ *Cry the Beloved Country*, Bk I, ch. viii, 39-40.

¹¹ I suspect that the reason Paton says 'twenty or twenty-two' in the first and not simply 'twenty-two' as he does in the novel is that he used Walker's *History* when he came to write the later account; Walker appears frequently in the bibliography to *Apartheid and the Archbishop*.

So they walked many miles through the European City, up Twist Street to the Clarendon Circle, and down Louis Botha towards Orange Grove. And the cars and lorries never ceased, going one way or the other. After a long time a car stopped and a white man spoke to them.

— Where are you two going? he asked.

— To Alexandra, sir, said Msimangu, talking off his hat.

— I thought you might be. Climb in.¹²

The similarities in the two accounts clearly help to enforce the conclusion that it is the second Alexandra Bus Boycott, of November 1944, that Paton is writing about in the novel.

There is a further piece of evidence to support the view. The first boycott was a totally spontaneous affair and lasted only nine days. The second boycott was quite a different kettle of fish. The first owed almost 'nothing to political leadership',¹³ the second owed everything to it. An 'emergency committee' was set up (the main reason the Africans held out for seven weeks) and according to Roux, '... The leading figure on the committee was Gaur Radebe, himself a resident of the township'.¹⁴ Gaur Radebe may indeed be a possible prototype for Dubula of the silver tongue.

There was a third Alexandra Bus Boycott; but as that did not take place until March 1957, it can be clearly ruled out. It seems reasonable to conclude that the boycott intended in *Cry, the Beloved Country* is that which began on 14 November 1944.

To return to the matter of fictional and historical time. As there is a discrepancy of two years between the real boycott and the fictional walk of Absalom, the question arises: How shall the incident be regarded? They cannot be simultaneous events. Fictional time has to be regarded as predominant, because it measures the dimension in which the imaginary events of the novel occur and in which the invented characters act out their lives; and it is measured consistently. Thus, the proposal made earlier: it is best to regard the date of the murder, 8 October 1946, as a purely fictional date and not a historical one, as the reader inclines to do at first. The clock of the novel provides the Greenwich Mean Time, and the clocks of history must be made to agree with it.

The foregoing analysis illustrates a technique that is characteristic of the entire novel. Paton uses it first in Book I, Chapter VIII, with the incident discussed above. He uses it almost immediately again in Chapter IX. On occasion its use is even more noteworthy. An examination of the second instance tells a lot about the structuring of the novel, the intention of its author, his beliefs, and the meaning of the work.

Chapter IX is the first of the remarkable choric sections of the book.¹⁵ They are dramatic and lyrical and poetic in a way that helps to give the novel

¹² *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Bk I, ch. viii, 41.

¹³ Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 319.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Other 'choric' examples occur in Bk I, ch. ii, xii; and Bk II, ch. v, vi and ix.

its distinctive flavour and style. Let us consider the temporal function of the section and how it fits into the two chronologies.

The marker of Paton's choric sections is the use he makes of the present tense. He writes in what may be termed the present historic. In English, narrative is normally marked by the use of the past historic in the third person. Indeed, Paton himself uses it orthodoxly for his own purely narrative sections (for example, Book I, Chapter V). The 'tension' that Paton sets up between the narrative sections (in the past tense) and the choric sections (in the present) helps to give urgency, width of reference and social relevance to *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Chapter IX begins thus:

All roads lead to Johannesburg. If you are white or if you are black they lead to Johannesburg. If the crops fail, there is work in Johannesburg. If there are taxes to be paid, there is work in Johannesburg. If the farm is too small to be divided further, some must go to Johannesburg. If there is a child to be born that must be delivered in secret, it can be delivered in Johannesburg.¹⁶

The sense that this is happening now implies also that it will continue. Not only do all roads lead at the moment to Johannesburg, they will do so in the future, as they have done in the past. Social problems are thus given a property of timelessness, illustrative of the eternal human situation and eternal dilemmas. This effect is part of what Paton wants, and may be termed the aftermath, or future, function of the present tense.

So, together with this 'aftermath' function, the illusion is kept up that the events are also happening right now. Often, the 'nowness' of the present tense is emphasized by small linguistic changes that suppress or play down the 'aftermath' function. By the use of a simple demonstrative 'this', for example, the 'nowness' of the night is brought vividly out and the 'aftermath' effect diminished:

This night they are busy in Orlando.

Again, the insertion of 'tonight' has the same effect:

Let us go tonight and cut a few poles quietly.¹⁷

Now, we are in the middle of the African slum building itself around us, witnessing the actual process of the erection, subtly made part of it and partly responsible for it.

This night they are busy in Orlando. At one house after another the lights are burning. I shall carry the iron and you my wife the child, and you my son two poles, and you small one, bring as many sacks as you are able, down to the land by the railway lines. Many people are moving there, you can hear the sound of digging hammering already. It is good that the night is warm, and there is no rain. Thank you, Mr. Dubula, we are satisfied with this piece of ground. Thank you, Mr. Dubula, here is our shilling for the committee.

¹⁶ Ibid., Bk I, ch. ix, 48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

Shanty Town is up overnight. What a surprise for the people when they wake in the morning. Smoke comes up through the sacks, and one or two have a chimney already. There was a nice chimney-pipe lying there at Kliptown Police Station, but I was not such a fool as to take it.

Shanty Town is up overnight. And the newspapers are full of us. Great big words and pictures. See, that is my husband standing by the house. Alas, I was too late for the picture. Squatters, they call us. We are the squatters. This great village of sack and plank and iron, with no rent to pay, only a shilling to the Committee.

Shanty Town is up overnight. The child coughs badly, and her brow is hot as fire. I was afraid to move her, but it was the night for the moving. The cold wind comes through the sacks. What shall we do in the rain, in the winter? Quietly my child, your mother is by you. Quietly my child, do not cough any more, your mother is by you.¹⁸

Each separate cameo (enclosed between asterisks in this chapter) is a part of the Africans' general plight, as well as episodes in the account of the building of Shanty Town; we are made to realize that the general points to the particular; all is tending towards the focal point of this particular night. Although earlier the reader was persuaded to accept the situations as timeless, and the comments as those made by the author on an eternal human predicament, he is now made to accept it as an immediately urgent dilemma of one particular night, 7 October 1946, an event of weight and importance in the chronology of the novel. Paton has it both ways: both timeless and timeful. The events happen on his fictional clock, and on no clock at all, for the eternal is timeless.

Roux's account of the historical Shanty Town runs as follows:

The war [i.e. 1939-45] industries had drawn large numbers of African workers into the urban areas. Since Native housing schemes automatically came to an end in 1940, the resulting congestion in the urban locations can be imagined. On the Witwatersrand there were literally thousands of people without homes. Things came to a head at Orlando in April, 1944. The location had become super-saturated with human beings; it could no longer hold all those who were trying to live there. Some thousands of men, women and children left the location and camped on vacant municipal ground nearby. They built themselves shelters of sticks, sacking, old tins, and maize stalks. Thousands of other homeless persons came to join them from other parts of the Reef. Thus was Shanty Town born.¹⁹

The difference between the two purposes is clear: Roux is out to record the social and historical fact that Shanty Town was built. Paton wants to show Shanty Town in a process of becoming; a variety of aspects emerge, but it is not seen as a sociological phenomenon primarily. Human drama and personal hardship are foregrounded by using the persona of Mrs Seme, an African wife and mother. She seeks lodgings with an Orlando family

¹⁸ Ibid., 52-3.

¹⁹ Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 322-3.

but is turned away. She hears 'the uncrowned king of Shanty Town' (in real life, Sofazonke Mpanza)²⁰ propose the building of their shelters:

- And where do we put the houses?
- On the open ground by the railway line, Dubula²¹ says.
- And of what do we build the houses?
- Anything you can find. Sacks and planks and grass from the veld and poles from the plantations.
- And when it rains.
- Siyafa. Then we die.²²

Mrs Seme goes to see an African official of the Johannesburg Housing Committee. He turns out to be corrupt and asks for five pounds.

The whole sequence illustrates the way Paton can bring out the 'aftermath' function of the present, as well as its 'nowness'. In a section that is primarily choric and static, he is nevertheless able to suggest a narrative by exploiting the temporal ambiguity of the tense. From the point of view of fictional and historical time, however, what is important to notice is that Shanty Town is firmly fixed in history in April 1944, whereas, fictionally, it happens on the night of 7-8 October 1946. Paton has again distorted historical time in the interests of fiction by an amount of two years. In fact, the Bus Boycott and Shanty Town were seven months apart. In the novel, this is compressed into about twenty hours. This is the second distortion of time for the sake of the fiction.

Finally, there is another and possibly more revealing discrepancy. The month of the Bus Boycott was November; Shanty Town thus happened first. In the novel, Paton reverses this sequence: Shanty Town follows the boycott.

One of his aims is clear from the extracts given: he wishes the physical upheaval, social suffering and individual misery depicted in the Shanty Town²³ episode to be placed alongside a climatic fictional event — the murdering of Arthur Jarvis by Absalom and all its consequent misery. The two events are thus associated in our minds. This deliberate juxtaposition — the real against the fictional — is fruitful in suggesting that the two are causally related, that the murder of a white man (who, ironically, happens to be active

²⁰ Ibid., 323.

²¹ It is worth noting that, in the novel, Dubula organizes both the Bus Boycott and the building of Shanty Town. In fact, they were two different men; Gaar Radebe and Sofazonke Mpanza respectively. Another example of artistic distortion.

²² *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Bk I, ch. ix, 50.

²³ There were other 'shanty town' incidents that occurred in 1946 at Pinville and Albertynsville, which were recent in Paton's memory when he wrote *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1947. Roux says that over '25 000 Africans have built themselves shanty towns of some thousands of huts roughly made of hessian stretched over a framework of split poles', *Time Longer than Rope*, 324. These events could account only for some of the details of materials used in the novel's descriptions, such as hessian. But Shanty Town itself was the proper name of one place. The others had different names. Thus, Paton conflates at least two events — a process at work throughout the social-historical events described in the novel. One of the other shanty towns was called Tobruk, which is mentioned specifically by Paton in connexion with Michael Scott in *Apartheid and the Archbishop*, 153.

on behalf of Africans) by an unknown Zulu drifting rootlessly about the African locations around Johannesburg has been directly caused by the society that produced Shanty Town. Paton does indeed believe that African crime can be largely attributed to the conditions in which Africans are forced to live.²⁴ Arthur Jarvis left a paper on Native²⁵ crime half-written at the time of his murder, directed at the consciences of the white population of South Africa. The irony of his murder is thus sharpened and deepened.

The foregoing analysis illustrates the use Paton makes throughout the novel of actual social events. They are not there simply for their own sakes, as important as they are. They do not simply add background or convincingness to the whole by making sociological 'facts' concrete (although they do this in passing). They are tied to particular fictional events, characters and consequences. They work functionally.

First, Stephen Kumalo leaves the remote Natal village of Ndotsheni and travels hundreds of miles in a train to the thoroughly (for him) alien and bewildering city of Johannesburg. He searches for days amongst the soulless townships for his son, scurrying from Sophiatown to Alexandra, to Claremont, to Pimville, to Orlando, back and forth, unsuccessful, tormented, tired and depressed. It is during this fruitless endless searching that he encounters the Alexandra Bus Boycott, as we have seen. The boycott is a kind of analogue of his own emotional and physical journeying that is getting him nowhere. It is a suitable metaphor of frustration for both Stephen Kumalo, the fictional individual, and the actual African workers. It is a crisis point for Kumalo: he begins to suspect and fear the truth about his son. Later, he confirms this:

—At first it was a search. I was anxious at first, but as the search went on, step by step, so did the anxiety turn to fear, and this fear grew deeper step by step. It was at Alexandra that I first grew afraid, but it was here in your House, when we heard of the murder, that my fear grew into something too great to be borne.²⁶

By causing Kumalo to encounter the Bus Boycott, Paton associates a private and personal trauma with a social one, linking an imagined and a real crisis. Later, ironically, Absalom is able to hide himself among the walkers; it helps Absalom and hinders his father, another significant linking. While Absalom mingles with the boycotters, his father, at the Mission for the Blind, at Ezenzeleni, suddenly has his eyes opened to the truth about his son. Thus, the entire incident is made to work on more than one level.

²⁴ See series of articles by Paton on the relation between society and the offender in *The Forum*, quoted in Callan, *Alan Paton*, 145-6; and Paton's *Tales From a Troubled Land* (New York, Charles Scribner, 1961: published in London in the same year by Jonathan Cape as *Debbie Go Home*), *passim*.

²⁵ 'Native' was the term used in Government papers, in official documents, in newspapers and in ordinary parlance at that time. Post-Verwoerd, it became 'Bantu' [sic]. Recently the South African Broadcasting Company, which is Government controlled, has begun to use the term 'African' and to refer to particular Africans by name in news bulletins. Paton himself never used 'native'. It is employed here for obvious reasons.

²⁶ *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Bk I, ch. xv, 94.

Second, Shanty Town: its relation to the murder we have already examined. Its function in relation to Stephen Kumalo is twofold: it helps to convince the general reader of the dispiriting extent of Kumalo's search, and to impress the South African reader with the extent of social injustice in his own land. Further it makes another 'step' in the search Kumalo describes in the extract just quoted.

Chapter VIII ends with Msimangu and Stephen Kumalo returning to Sophiatown from Alexandra. The main story-line (of their search) continues at the beginning of Chapter IX:

While Kumalo was waiting for Msimangu to take him to Shanty Town, he spent the time with Gertrude and her child.²⁷

As far as the main narrative of the quest is concerned, the story could have been taken up from this point, without Kumalo having to be shown in Shanty Town. But the need for psychological convincingness means that we must watch Kumalo's fear growing throughout his search in Shanty Town. We are thus persuaded of Shanty Town's fictional reality, besides knowing that it is also a historical reality. Not only that; immediately after his sojourn in there, Kumalo returns to the Mission only to discover that, while he has been searching for his son, Absalom committed murder at 1.30 p.m. on that very day, and his fear 'grew into something too great to be borne'. The social and the personal have become aspects of a single reality: the fictional event has been encapsulated in the social event, the outward becoming the mirror and the metaphor of the inner.

What then, does Paton achieve by altering historical events to occur either later or earlier, and by putting the events themselves out of historical sequence? The answer seems to be that his artistic purpose necessitates the reader in grasping the point that personal tragedy (especially of the Africans) and social evils are inextricably linked. Such an interpretation of social events obviously implies a certain kind of programme to remedy such social evils. In other words, one infers a positive political stance in the writer which, he hopes, will bring about a change in his readers' political and social attitudes. And, as Paton's historical 'distortions' clearly show, political attitudes and social tragedies are human ones first.

Paton's 'plain and simple truth' of the 'social record', then, is neither as simple or plain as he claims. Nor, indeed, is his 'truth' quite as obvious as he implies. The plainness and simplicity of his 'truth' depends very much on the placing of a specific interpretation on the political and social events concerned, and on seeing their relationship to personal dilemmas in a particular way. Many will accept his 'truth' as axiomatic; many will not. It is clear, too, that in the South Africa of 1947, when Paton wrote the book, he himself believed that his plain and simple truth was far from obvious. For who would bother to write a novel to persuade people of the obvious? The 'Author's Note' was just the first shot in his arsenal of persuasive rhetoric, which is the novel itself.

²⁷ Ibid., Bk. I, ch. x, 55.