



# Maxwell Anderson's song lyric 'Lost in the Stars' and his Ulyssean adaptation of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*

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Received: 15 Mar. 2017

Accepted: 01 Aug. 2017

Published: 29 Sept. 2017

**How to cite this article:**Viviers, E., 2017, Maxwell Anderson's song lyric 'Lost in the Stars' and his Ulyssean adaptation of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Literator*, a1406. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v38i1.1406>**Copyright:**© 2017. The Authors.  
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This article inspects selected thematic and adaptive links between Alan Paton's classic South African novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and its stage adaptation for Broadway by Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill, the musical tragedy *Lost in the Stars*. Particular focus is given to the latter work's title song 'Lost in the Stars', in order to examine a Ulyssean-inspired message contained in its lyrics, which concerns God's purported abandoning of humankind. To understand this message more fully, an earlier and unrealised collaboration of Anderson's and Weill's called *Ulysses Africanus* is investigated, dormant material of which resurfaced in their eventual adaptation of Paton's novel. After a discussion of certain intricacies of adapting *Cry, the Beloved Country* into *Lost in the Stars*, it is demonstrated that Anderson's religious worldview was incompatible with that which permeates *Cry, the Beloved Country*, with the result that Paton was greatly unhappy with *Lost in the Stars*.

**Maxwell Anderson se liedliriek 'Lost in the Stars' en sy Ulysseaanse verwerking van Alan Paton se *Cry, the Beloved Country*.** Hierdie artikel ondersoek geselekteerde tematiese en adaptiewe verbintenisse tussen Alan Paton se klassieke Suid-Afrikaanse roman, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, en die verhoogverwerking daarvan vir Broadway deur Maxwell Anderson en Kurt Weill, die musikale tragedie *Lost in the Stars*. Besondere fokus word verleen aan laasgenoemde werk se titellied 'Lost in the Stars', om 'n Ulysseaans-geïnspireerde boodskap in die lirieke daarvan bevat, te ondersoek, betreffend God se vermeende agterlating van die mensdom. Om hierdie boodskap beter te verstaan, word gekyk na 'n vroeër en ongerealiseerde medewerking van Anderson en Weill, genaamd *Ulysses Africanus*, waarvan dormante materiaal in hulle uiteindelijke verwerking van Paton se roman weer na vore gekom het. Ná 'n bespreking van bepaalde verwikkeldhede betrokke by die verwerking van *Cry, the Beloved Country* na *Lost in the Stars*, word daar gedemonstreer dat Anderson se religieuse wêreldblik teenstrydig is met dit wat *Cry, the Beloved Country* onderlê, met die gevolg dat Paton baie ontevrede met *Lost in the Stars* was.

## Introduction

Before Lord God made the sea and the land  
He held all the stars in the palm of his hand  
And they ran through his fingers like grains of sand,  
And one little star fell alone.

Then the Lord God hunted through the wide night air  
For the little dark star on the wind down there –  
And he stated and promised he'd take special care  
So it wouldn't get lost again.

Now a man don't mind if the stars grow dim  
And the clouds blow over and darken him,  
So long as the Lord God's watching over them,  
Keeping track how it all goes on.

But I've been walking through the night and the day  
Till my eyes get weary and my head turns grey,  
And sometimes it seems maybe God's gone away,  
Forgetting the promise that we heard him say –  
And we're lost out here in the stars –  
Little stars, big stars,  
Blowing through the night,  
And we're lost out here in the stars.  
'Lost in the Stars'. (Anderson 1951:60)

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The song quoted above, with lyrics by the American playwright Maxwell Anderson and music by the German émigré composer Kurt Weill, was composed in 1939, as part of a larger collaboration they undertook shortly after the completion and successful production of their first Broadway musical, *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) (Hirsch 2002:177; Rabel 2007:550; Sanders 1980:337). For their new project, Anderson and Weill had in mind a 'Negro'-play with music, for which the Gershwin brothers' critically and commercially acclaimed opera *Porgy and Bess* would serve as a model for emulation. Extensive work related to the song 'Lost in the Stars' resulted in a repeatedly abandoned and returned-to large-scale project called *Ulysses Africanus*, with evidence of the resuscitation and abandonment of this planned work spread throughout the following decade.

Before presenting this evidence, it is important to mention that the substantial literary and musical thematic material of *Ulysses Africanus* developed over this period of time surfaced in a full-length 'musical tragedy' called *Lost in the Stars*, which premiered at the end of October 1949, and was based on Alan Paton's best-selling novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* (published in 1948). So, even though Anderson and Weill ostensibly based their work *Lost in the Stars* on Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the former turns out to be an adaptation of work that was initiated roughly a decade before the latter had even been written or published.

Although the anachronism of an adaptation that precedes the conception of its original might be viewed as problematic, it seems natural enough that *Lost in the Stars* should carry over some of the narrative and ideological baggage of its pre-*Cry, the Beloved Country* incarnations – *Ulysses Africanus* foremost, but also *Eneas Africanus* (the novella upon which *Ulysses Africanus* was based). What is extraordinary is that it should also draw on the concept for a spaceship musical called *Lost in the Stars* that Anderson and Weill attempted to realise in 1947 (Zychowicz 1994:85).

## Searching for a 'Negro' musical

### *Eneas Africanus* and *Ulysses Africanus*

Anderson adapted the aborted *Ulysses Africanus* from a novella by Harry Stillwell Edwards, called *Eneas Africanus*. This adaptation, which exists in a 99-page-long typed manuscript, was drafted as a musical comedy. It has never been performed, and almost certainly never will be performed, because it presents a 'clichéd and patronizing portrait of black slaves and former slaves around the time of the Civil War' (Rabel 2007:552).

The main character in *Eneas Africanus* is a black slave named Eneas, who has been displaced during the turmoil of an invasion by federal troops of the North. Eneas is entrusted with his owner-family's silver, in particular, a piece known as the Bride's Cup, which has been in the family 'for some six or eight generations' (Edwards 1940:2). He leaves the Beauregard plantation with these heirlooms to foil any

possible looters. However, when the time comes to return them to his owner, Eneas loses his way and spends the next eight years meandering through the South. (This Homeric peregrination was important to Anderson's adaptation, the 'lost voyager' playing into one of his staple literary themes.)

The original novella is in an epistolary form, consisting of letters written in response to an advertisement placed by Eneas's owner, George E. Tomney, in the Macon Telegraph and Messenger, which asks the editor and readers of this fictional newspaper for assistance in tracing the missing slave. The plot unfolds as various readers of this advertisement write to Tomney, informing him of their own encounters with his lost slave. Through these various letters, all written in October 1872, the reader is updated on the slave's existence during the previous eight years: Eneas has married and has fathered children with his wife; he has begun racing horses with the colt he first left the farm with and has won a great deal of money; he has also become a preacher (just like Stephen Kumalo, the black protagonist in *Cry, the Beloved Country*). In effect, Eneas leads the life of a free man. Nevertheless, at the end of the novella, Eneas stumbles on his old home, and dutifully returns the silver heirlooms to his master, along with 'an old scrap pocketbook, stuffed with bills' of money that he won racing horses and collected as a preacher (Edwards 1940:38).

By contemporary standards, the *Eneas Africanus* novella is problematic because of its blatant racism. Words like 'nigger' appear throughout, and all the black characters are patronisingly made to speak in a mock Southern patois; it actually seems extraordinary that such a work could be the point of departure for an eventual adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country*.<sup>1</sup> Anderson reworked the *Eneas Africanus* story extensively, shaping it into a two-act play with definite plans to include music that Weill provided (Hirsch 2002:178; Zychowicz 1994:78–79). He also renamed it and its lead character, incorporating a very 'intricate and ingenious web of connections' with Homer's *Odyssey* (Rabel 2007:552). His considerable alterations to the plot include the following:

When *Ulysses Africanus* begins, Ulysses already has a wife called Pennie (from Penelope in the *Odyssey*).<sup>2</sup> Not only do the hostilities of the Civil War force Ulysses to abandon his owner, his wife and his home when he gets lost, but he also has a run-in with the Ku Klux Klan. This new event in the Anderson plot is an initial point of reference to the so-called *Nekiya* section of the *Odyssey*, where the hero undergoes *katabasis* – this is a death and rebirth, undertaken through a journey into the Underworld which is pivotal to the development and maturation of the hero (Rabel 2007:552, 556–558). Ulysses survives the confrontation with the

1. Stephen Watson (1982:40) criticises Paton's writing in *Cry, the Beloved Country* for an implicit and sometimes explicit paternalistic treatment of his black characters, indicating that the links Anderson constructed between Paton's novel and Edwards's novella might not be as extraordinary as I suggest. Nevertheless, I feel that Paton's language does not compare with the racially explicit and denigrating language in Edwards's novella.

2. Odysseus and Ulysses are the same character. Odysseus is a character in Homer who is foiled again and again in his attempt to return home, to Ithaca, and to his wife Penelope, after the battle of Troy. Ulysses is the Roman version of his name.



Ku Klux Klan by disguising himself in their wardrobe, along with another character, Nicodemus, who is a freed slave. Nicodemus then sings the song 'Lost in the Stars', which is 'a kind of roadmap of the soul'; this is a reference to the directions from Tiresias to Odysseus, instructing him how to return home to Ithaca (Rabel 2007:556).

This song would later become the title song of *Lost in the Stars*; and its lyrics and music in the *Ulysses Africanus* version are mostly the same, except for small details of grammar and spelling. (For the latter version, Anderson eliminated the original 'Negro' patois: spellings like 'Lawsd God' were changed to 'Lord God', and some rhythmic parsing was altered with the new unoffending language.) The last stanza of the lyrics for 'Lost in the Stars' is central to the discussion presented in this article. Its theme of divine abandonment pertains to what is experienced in any 'dark night of the soul'. In *Ulysses Africanus*, this sense of being lost is brought on by an experience of war that obliterates 'any rational belief in a benevolent God watching over his creation [...] with concern for human happiness' (Rabel 2007:559). As it turns out, such an agnostic or atheistic paradigm was inimical to Paton's religious outlook as presented in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Alexander 1995:248).

In the second act of *Ulysses Africanus*, Ulysses runs a minstrel show in which Homer's *Odyssey* is performed to white audiences. Anderson thus creates a play within a play, a reflexive device that is self-referential on three levels: Ulysses is a reflexive mirror of Maxwell Anderson, but in Anderson's play, the character Ulysses also creates a reflexive mirror by staging Homer's *Odyssey* (Rabel 2007:557). This mirroring happens in Homer's *Odyssey* as well when Odysseus returns from the Underworld and recounts his experiences to the Phaeacians. Through this complex mirroring, Anderson created a metaphor which compared the Homeric idea of *katabasis* with the poetic ideal of an artist who is properly tempered, and thus 'equipped with experiences and tools necessary to make narrative art out of the adventures of his or her life's journey' (Rabel 2007:552). Furthermore, in the plot Ulysses is tempted by the black women who perform in the minstrel show (a reference to the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*). His wife Pennie then finds him, after ten years of absence, and she convinces him to return home.

Even though Anderson clearly made many intelligent plot adjustments, the language in *Eneas Africanus* and *Ulysses Africanus* remained condescending. The minstrel show – a plot device that fascinated Weill as a composer – ultimately only served to reinforce negative black racial stereotypes. This much was explained to Anderson in a letter from Eslanda Robeson, on behalf of her husband Paul Robeson.<sup>3</sup> Anderson had wanted Robeson to star in *Ulysses Africanus*, but his request was rebuffed in the following unambiguous

<sup>3</sup>Paul Robeson was an influential American actor and singer, who was involved with the Civil Rights Movement, and who was furthermore blacklisted during the McCarthy era. To Anderson and Weill, Robeson would have been best-known for his role in the musical *Show Boat*, in which he sang the song 'Ol' Man River'.

terms, after he sent Robeson a copy of the novel *Eneas Africanus* to read:

The general public's idea of a Negro is an Uncle Tom, an Aunt Jemima, Ol' Mammy, and Jack Johnson. These types have always been sold to the public deliberately. Well, now they don't exist anymore except in the sentimental minds of credulous people, and we feel that we certainly must not do anything in any way, to prolong their non-existent lives!!! We feel Mr. Robeson must play a Negro who does exist, who has something to do with reality. (Zychowicz 1994:81)

This was the beginning of a decade-long attempt to cast Robeson as the lead character in the Anderson/Weill 'Negro' musical. Already in March 1939, Anderson outlined his plans for *Ulysses Africanus* to Robeson in a letter:

Essentially, it is the story of a man in a chaotic world in search of his own manhood and his own rules of conduct, but I mean to tell it, of course, somewhat lightheartedly with whatever humour and grace I can muster with Kurt's music. [...] I don't know of anybody who could both act and sing in it and the script might be wasted completely if you were not available. (Avery 1977:85–86)

But Robeson rejected the offer immediately after receiving Anderson's letter, along with a copy of Edwards's racist-toned novella, which he read and rejected (Rabel 2007:554). Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson was eventually approached instead but had to decline because of a scheduling conflict, as he was starring in a production of *The Hot Mikado* at the time (Hirsch 2002:178; Rabel 2007:554; Taylor 1991:250). Ironically, with neither of these two men interested in creating the role of Ulysses, the project was foundered without a star. Coupled with the severe difficulties Anderson had in obtaining the rights to the original novella, he and Weill gave up on the project temporarily (Zychowicz 1994:81). Even so, there was a substantial amount of material developed and ready to be salvaged for the later project.

Weill had completed the scoring of at least three songs, all of which eventually were incorporated into *Lost in the Stars* (Hirsch 2002:178; Zychowicz 1994:83–84). These were the title song 'Lost in the Stars', 'Lover Man' (which would later become 'Trouble Man') and a duet 'Little Gray House' (which would be rearranged as a solo number). 'Lost in the Stars' and 'Trouble Man' also both feature on an album of six Weill songs recorded by Boston Records in 1943, with Weill as piano accompanist and his wife Lotte Lenya as the singer. Additionally, 'Lover Man' was registered for copyright in 1944 and 'Lost in the Stars' was published as a piano-vocal score in 1946 (Zychowicz 1994:85).

Because of its dated treatment of racial issues, *Ulysses Africanus* is unlikely ever to be produced. Even though this work has never been staged, it still functions, along with Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, as an originary text for *Lost in the Stars*. And even if *Ulysses Africanus* was abandoned, the character Ulysses did eventually make it to Broadway. Ulysses figured in the 1954 musical comedy *The Golden Apple* by John Latouche and Jerome Moross, which ran for 16 weeks





on Broadway (Rabel 2007:570). But five years before that, Anderson and Weill created an avatar for their own Ulysses in the character of Stephen Kumalo.

According to Anderson's diary, both he and Weill revisited *Ulysses Africanus* briefly in July 1945, almost six years after the project had been initiated (Zychowicz 1994:84). The details of their plans for this new 'Ulysses' are unclear, though an unpublished letter, sent from Anderson to Weill that year, indicates a continued commitment to using the song 'Lost in the Stars' as a musical and dramatic pivot in this production (Drew 1987:311). Anderson was revising his play *Winterset* simultaneously (Zychowicz 1994:84). The last scene of this play contains language usage that bears a striking resemblance to the language of what would eventually become the last scenes in Acts 1 and 2 of *Lost in the Stars*; this type of language usage is referred to in this article as Anderson's 'semantics of abandonment'.

### The spaceship musical

The next serious attempt by Anderson and Weill at a musical collaboration took place in 1947. The idea, this time, was to create a musical with a plot that involved space travel (Sanders 1980:375). A letter from Weill to Anderson on 10 July 1947 outlines ideas for this musical (Zychowicz 1994:85). Weill had discussed the project with John Wharton, lawyer of the New York based Playwrights Company to which both Anderson and Weill were affiliated, after Anderson had come up with the idea of space travel as a plot device. In his letter, Weill relays Wharton's advice to Anderson:

So his idea includes a real trip on the spaceship, and I think he has a nice idea to have the people arrive, after [a] hundred years of traveling, at a place which is really earth again, but a different kind of earth, different not in appearance or in more technical perfection, but in spirit and emotion. He thinks that would give you a good opportunity to say, in an amusing, light way, a lot of things you want to say about the world we live in. (Zychowicz 1994:85)

In Anderson's response to this letter, he cautioned Weill against discussing the project with Wharton any further.

I shouldn't have mentioned my theme, for it's an invitation to amateur suggestions. And I still don't know what I can do with it – or whether. At the moment it begins to seem to me like a plain play – with a few songs in it. That's not a form at all – or not one I've even heard of, yet this seems to fall into it. [...] I know, of course, that the kind of play *Lost in the Stars* seems to turn into may be disappointing to you, but I'm not exactly in control of my imagination – and I have to follow where it leads. (Zychowicz 1994:86)

Anderson's insecurities about the formal aspects of this spaceship version of *Lost in the Stars* suggest a surprising unfamiliarity with Weill's European works – considering that the two men were friends and neighbours, almost from the time of Weill's arrival in America until his death 15 years later. A plain play with only a few songs in it was a form of which Weill had intimate knowledge. Many of his German

works, the Brecht collaborations among them, were in this *Songspiel* format. Beyond the discussion of form and content, the exchange of letters under discussion brings two salient points to the fore. Firstly, the basic theme of a journey (the *Nekiya* and *katabasis* of Ulysses) is still present. Instead of Ulysses wandering through America's deep South and creating a minstrel show (which is his metaphorical journey into the Underworld), someone would now trek across the stars and travel through time (*katabasis*). The spaceship was therefore a new plot device with which to adapt an old idea. Secondly, Anderson gives the project a title in 1947, which is *Lost in the Stars*, the same title he would eventually give to his adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Again he incorporates the song 'Lost in the Stars', this time as the project's title song, with the idea of a 'Negro' singing it while washing dishes as the play opens (Zychowicz 1994:86).

It is unclear if Anderson and Weill were planning an all-black spaceship musical, though – surprisingly – if they were working towards such an extraordinary concept, their plans would have found precedent in another work. The spaceship version of *Lost in the Stars*, if completed, could have borne a strong resemblance to another all-black plain play with music (*Songspiel?*): Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* (1929). One of Weill's biographers has noted similarities of form in *The Green Pastures* and the penultimate version of *Lost in the Stars*, while Anderson's biographer names *The Green Pastures* as one of the plays Anderson most admired (Sanders 1980:376; Shivers 1983:142).

Judging from the evidence, *Lost in the Stars* was a project in development long before Paton had even written *Cry, the Beloved Country*. What is more, Paton's novel was chosen for adaptation when its two adaptors already had a pre-existing framework in mind. Paton was completely unaware of this literary straightjacket. Had he known, he might have objected to the anachronism of an adaptation preceding its original, as well as the conceptual confusion that could result when an adaptation draws on more than one originary text. What did bother him, though, was a lack of fidelity to his original source material in the adaptation of his novel, specifically as pertains to its religious content.

### Adapting *Cry, the Beloved Country*

Even the most cursory glance at Western literature makes it evident that borrowing stories, and then retelling them in various ways, is habitual among cultural practitioners (Hutcheon 2006:4). In this article's context of focussing on the Ulysses myth, one can point out, as the critic George Steiner (1997:23) has, that "'Odysseys" are legion from Homer to Joyce and Derek Walcott'. Therefore, there is nothing unusual about Anderson and Weill's adaptation of Paton's novel into an Ulyssean musical tragedy. What is perhaps unusual, though, is the way that they went about it – how their adaptation was initiated so long before the purported source novel of *Lost in the Stars* had been written. For they ultimately drew on multiple texts to inform their adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and could therefore not strictly remain



'faithful' to their 'original' Patonesque source material. But at the same time *Lost in the Stars* becomes precisely the kind of adaptation that Linda Hutcheon (2006:21–22) calls 'palimpsestuously intertextual'.

The discourse on adaptations, usually referred to as adaptation theory, is concerned with works that have been reworked across different media. In particular, the issue of 'fidelity' rates among the most frequently discussed in the relevant discourse, so that pejorative descriptions of violation, perversion and the like often inform routine and inadequate responses to the adaptations of originary texts (Hutcheon 2006:2, 6–7, 20; Naremore 2000:8–9). Similarly, authors of original works are often unhappy with the adaptations of these works, Alan Paton being no exception in the instance of *Lost in the Stars*. Even though he was able to remind himself that the 'making of a book and the making of a play were two separate creative acts', Paton (1988:20) was nevertheless unnerved by an apparent change of idiom in the musical adaptation of his novel.

The authors of original works are, understandably, within their rights to evaluate the appropriation of their intellectual property with a strict eye, but they also sell their intellectual property to someone else, thus usually foregoing creative control over the resulting adaptations. One of the apparent conditions of modern adaptation theory is an understanding not to privilege adapted texts over their adaptations, on the mere supposition that adapted texts are pristine originals and adaptations derivative and inferior (Hutcheon 2006:xiii). This means that a 'fidelity criticism' that always harkens back to the idealised original work is insufficient for the critique of these interlinked texts. This prevailing line of reasoning in adaptation theory echoes the 'challenges to dominant post-Romantic notions of originality, uniqueness, and autonomy' present in the semiotic and post-structuralist theories of Barthes and Kristeva (Hutcheon 2006:21). Theoretical borrowings like Barthes's 'death of the author' allow the foregrounding of intertextual readings where the original is not subscribed to as an ideal.

The overriding reason for rejecting 'fidelity' as the final arbiter in the criticism of adaptations is an acknowledgement that stories work differently in different media and that the gains and losses made in adaptations are a result of this phenomenon (Hutcheon 2006:16). The process of adaptation thus requires the elimination or changing of parts of the original to make stories viable and effective in their new medium. Anderson did this in *Lost in the Stars* by removing characters from the story and by inserting new episodes that clarify the consequent missing plot elements (Matlaw 1975:268). Dismissing his work outright for its lack of faithfulness to *Cry, the Beloved Country* would be unproductive, as the following analysis, by Myron Matlaw, of the relevant adaptation process suggests.

Comparing *Lost in the Stars* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Matlaw (1975:260–261) has argued for a careful consideration

of their different genres, reminding readers of the 'obvious but all-too-often forgotten generic distinctions' between works of (printed) novels and (staged) plays. Evaluating the novel and musical play within the specific parameters of their distinct genres, and not simply dismissing *Lost in the Stars* as a 'feeble replica of a powerful novel', is the first step in appreciating the different ways in which both works strive for similar emotive effect (Matlaw 1975:262). Firstly, the two mediums have dissimilar creative processes. *Cry, the Beloved Country* has only one author, whereas *Lost in the Stars* was created collaboratively not only through the efforts of a writer and composer but also through the auxiliary efforts of the director, producers, actors, stage technicians, scenic designers, costume designers, make-up artists and orchestra (Matlaw 1975:262). Secondly, the two mediums engage their audiences in distinct ways. Reading a novel is an interior act customarily performed in solitude, at a pace and even in a sequence controlled by the reader, whereas watching a Broadway musical performance is an exterior act that takes place in a communal setting and proceeds at a pace and in a linear sequence determined by the show's creators (Matlaw 1975:262). Thirdly, the mediums differ in length. Writing *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the form of a novel, Paton did not have to express its story in clear and concise language, while Anderson and Weill's success with *Lost in the Stars* was largely contingent on the concise expression of its action and dialogue.

Any adaptor who would want to dramatise *Cry, the Beloved Country* would, from the outset, be confronted by the novel's disjointed narrative. Its chapters are short and nearly always fragmented, and they do not necessarily follow in sequence. Many chapters are purely lyrical descriptions of social and political conditions in South Africa, didactic in their nature, with very little purpose in advancing the action of the plot. This fragmentation also exists on a macro-level, for Paton conceived of *Cry, the Beloved Country* in three broad sections: Book One, Book Two and Book Three. The timeframe of the first two books overlaps considerably, the first being written from the black protagonist's perspective and the second from the white protagonist's perspective. The third book deals with the story's *denouement*, which plots the reconciliation of the black and white protagonist, over a rather lengthy 50 pages. Though by no means intractable, these narrative problems require planning and restructuring if they are to be translated effectively for the stage. Anderson decided to telescope the action of Book One and Book Two in his adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, alternating scenes from the two books in a continuous flow of action (which, incidentally, is the same technique used in the two film adaptations of *Cry, the Beloved Country*). To cope with the problems of the micro-narrative, specifically the descriptive chapters that are not integral to the action, but still contain some of the novel's most moving prose passages, he devised a Greek chorus that would comment on the stage action (Avery 1977:221).

Paton's stylised prose sets the emotional tone more than anything else in his book (Matlaw 1975:262–263). He softens



many important action scenes in the story by only alluding to them. As an example, the violent murder at the centre of the story is conveyed in a newspaper article instead of being described directly. In contrast, theatre thrives on direct action. Things need to happen for the sake of rapid plot advancement. Allusions are too indirect. Instead, 'speech and action, taking the place of the written word, must move more rapidly, simply, and clearly' (Matlaw 1975:267).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the conventional format of Broadway musicals would have presented Anderson and Weill with a further set of limitations. The work could not be too operatic or too serious, lest it estranged its potential audience. Commercial viability necessitated the insertion of comedy, sexual appeal, romance and sentimentality into a novel that had none of these elements (Matlaw 1975:267). Only by inserting generic musical theatre numbers, that effectively broke the flow of Paton's original story, could these moods be incorporated.

Ultimately, Matlaw's analysis argues that Anderson 'strove not only to dramatize Paton's story but also to communicate Paton's attitudes, to recreate the effects Paton had sought, and to evoke comparable responses' (Matlaw 1975:267). While acknowledging Matlaw's valuable insights, this article nevertheless argues the reverse: By superimposing a pre-existing Ulyssean framework onto *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Anderson and Weill specifically undermined Paton's religious attitudes. Their use of *Cry, the Beloved Country* as the container for an Ulyssean story that they could not get off the ground is one of the means with which to criticise their efforts.

## The tragedy of a God (or a Ulysses) who runs away

Maxwell Anderson had a life-long preoccupation with tragic drama, so much so that at a time when verse tragedies were completely out of fashion, he wrote plays such as *Elizabeth the Queen*, *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Mary of Scotland* in verse. Anderson and Weill's choice of tragedy as a dramatic vehicle for *Lost in the Stars* nevertheless is surprising, owing to the mention of a planned 'lighthearted' approach for *Ulysses Africanus* and the spaceship musical in the already mentioned discussions with Robeson and Wharton. Yet it makes conventional sense that an Ulyssean story should be tragic – it being one of the foremost stories of ancient Greek culture which, through countless adaptations, has become one of the pivotal narratives of Western civilisation. In Ulysses's voyage, we find an allegory of the human need for homecoming through the traps and pitfalls of life; but this homecoming, made extremely difficult by Poseidon, also speaks of the irrationality of human suffering at the hands of the gods.

It makes further sense that Anderson fashioned *Lost in the Stars* as a musical tragedy when considering the poet Stephen Watson's (1982:31) excoriating reading of *Cry, the Beloved Country* – which he characterised, using J.M. Coetzee's interpretation of the novel, along with other unrelated

4. Works that do not depend on action were the exception in the 1950s theatre scene.

criticism by George Steiner, as '[t]he predominant example of religious tragedy in South Africa'. Watson's inclusion of Steiner in his classifying the work as a 'religious tragedy' evokes the question of God's presence or absence.<sup>5</sup> The following commentary on Anderson's fetish for writing tragedies in which God abandons the world suggests that Paton's novel was a natural choice for adaptation, yet the theme of divine abandonment that Anderson worked into his adaptation irked Paton enormously when he viewed *Lost in the Stars*.

Anderson's interest in tragedy was in all likelihood connected to the semantics of abandonment highlighted earlier in this article, language usage central in much of his writing. In many of his plays, and in his literary criticism, he makes use of astrological imagery to express a trope of spiritual abandonment, usually indicated with specific images of 'loss' and 'stars'. Thus, Anderson describes the human race as groping around helpless on their small planet without a Creator, who has run away. Many of Anderson's most important characters experience anxiety because of their sense of divine abandonment, of God having absconded his role as caretaker of individuals and of humankind. And so we are all lost in the stars.<sup>6</sup>

In Act 2 scene 6 of *Lost in the Stars*, the priest Stephen Kumalo is uncertain about continuing his work in Ndotsheni as a preacher, out of shame that his son Absalom is a convicted murderer (Anderson 1951):

If I stayed, do you know what I would preach here? That good can come from evil, and evil from good! That no man knows surely what is evil or what is good! That if there is a God He is hidden and has not spoken to men! That we are all lost here, black and white, rich and poor, the fools and the wise! Lost and hopeless and condemned on this rock that goes round the sun without meaning. (p. 94)

This dramatic crisis of conscience undermines the carefully planned surge of hope and salvation that Paton achieves in the third book of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The corresponding scene in the novel portrays a God whose presence is immanent throughout creation: 'And now for all the people of Africa, the beloved country. Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, God save Africa' (Paton 1949:252). In the novel, Kumalo has long overcome his uncertainties about his station, his parish and his faith. The only remaining uncertainty he has is in the very human condition of not knowing the future:

For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why that is a secret. (Paton 1949:253)

*Cry, the Beloved Country* was intended as 'a story of comfort in desolation', a description that is the novel's

5. Watson mentions and quotes from the final essay of Steiner's book *Language and Silence*, raising a similar concern as Steiner's (1961:353) at the end of his book *The Death of Tragedy*.

6. Examples of this trope can be found in Anderson's plays *High Tor* (Anderson 1939:56,81), *Joan of Lorraine* (Anderson 1947:82–83), *Both Your Houses* (Anderson 1935:774), *Key Largo* (Jackson 1973:28), *Winterset* (Zychowicz 1994:84) and *Lost in the Stars* (Anderson 1951:60).





subtitle (Paton 1949:3). 'It is quite true that Stephen Kumalo, when he learned that his son had killed a man, suffered a sense of God's desolation', Paton (1988:20–21) admitted. But it is not the overall theme of the book, whereas it definitely is the overall theme of the musical adaptation. The ultimate religious message contained in *Cry, the Beloved Country* portrays a Christian God who not only cares for the world transcendentally, but who is also immanently present in people's lives (Foley 2009:58). The very idea of a 'Shepherd' abandoning his flock flies in the face of Paton's Anglo-Christian worldview and of the ever-present literal trust in the Christian God that pervades *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

Anderson used the idea of a broken promise in the biblical garden of Eden and turned the doctrine of original sin on its head: God was to blame for breaking an original pledge, and God chose to leave paradise and go into exile. As in *The Brothers Karamazov*, God is held accountable for the faults in creation. According to Anderson, the original contract was made when, supposedly at the time of creation, the earth, along with the stars, ran through God's fingers and fell off to one side, which prompted him to hunt 'through the wide night air/For the little dark star on the wind down there' (Anderson 1951:60). It was then, when God found this little star, that he promised 'to take special care/So it wouldn't get lost again'. Stephen Kumalo sings about the breach of this contract in the title song 'Lost in the Stars': 'And sometimes it seems maybe God's gone away. Forgetting the promise that we heard him say –' (Anderson 1951:60).

Atheists deny the existence of God. Agnostics question it. Anderson, in his turn, seems convinced that there is a God, but he is just not sure if that God is entirely interested in human affairs. Anderson's God is a voyager who has lost interest in humanity. He is Ulysses, gone off in search of new adventures while humanity sits waiting for Godot. This idea of divine apathy is unusual but not unique. Matthew Arnold heard a melancholy, long, withdrawing roar at 'Dover Beach' in 1867, the sea of faith retreating, 'to the breath/Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear/And naked shingles of the world' (Arnold, in Simpson 1972:221). Nietzsche, though universally accredited for declaring the *death* of God, also transmitted the idea of a God who had run away. In *Also sprach Zarathustra*, God is implored to return (Armstrong 1993:420). The idea is also intrinsic to the Old Testament book of Job, echoes of which were felt in the Shoah (Wiesel 1960:73). Even the Son of God sobbed at being forsaken on the cross.

Anderson's religious abandonment anxieties probably date from a traumatic experience in his childhood when he, alone out of his immediate family, was left behind on his grandmother's farm in a one-horse town called Atlantic, Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup> Gilda Anderson, Maxwell's third wife, told his biographer that 'from this incident date[d] a certain dreadful, recurring dream of his lasting well into adulthood,

7. Anderson's biographer recounts the following in his biography of the playwright: 'Someone in the family, in all likelihood Maxwell Anderson's Baptist preacher father, Lincoln, had the idea that Maxwell should remain at the farm with his grandmother and aunt throughout the coming winter, helping to work the land (Shivers 1983:19).

in which he always figured as a child being abandoned' (Shivers 1983:20). Anderson's biographer has traced the origin of two works by Anderson to this traumatic period in his life. The first is a novel, published pseudonymously, called *Morning, Winter and Night*, and the second is a play called *The Star-Wagon*.<sup>8</sup> Anderson's daughter, Hesper, has also described the enormous impact this abandonment had on her father and has furthermore intimated that it bears a connection with his play *The Star-Wagon* (Anderson 2000:175). The present article, however, suggests that it also bears a connection to Anderson's repetitive reference to 'loss' and 'stars' throughout his works, and most especially in *Lost in the Stars*.

## Reflection

Anderson's Ulyssean homecoming, through *Cry, the Beloved Country*, was already confirmed in his first reading of the novel. In chapter 7 of Book Two, the character James Jarvis, confronted with the murder of his son Arthur, reads one of Arthur's political writings on South African race relations, called 'Private Essay on the Evolution of a South African'. In the essay Arthur, like many awakening South African liberals, had criticised his parents for teaching him nothing of the realities of South Africa. James Jarvis reads that, in spite of this, his son had chosen to devote all of his time, energy and talents to the betterment of South African society:

I shall do this, not because I am noble or unselfish, but because life slips away, and because I need for the rest of my journey a star that will not play false to me, a compass that will not lie. (Paton 1949:161)

Anderson would have noticed this navigation by stars. Even more, one sentence later in the essay, Arthur explains his resolve to never ignore morality for expedience:

I am lost when I balance this against that, I am lost when I ask if this is safe, I am lost when I ask if men, white men or black men, Englishmen or Afrikaners, Gentiles or Jews, will approve. (Paton 1949:162)

Like Maxwell Anderson, the character Arthur Jarvis is 'lost in the stars'. Paton had no way of knowing that Anderson would interpret his novel according to an existing paradigm that contrasted so strongly with his own belief in the immanent presence of the Christian God in worldly affairs. Thus, he missed a warning in the very first letter that Anderson wrote to him, which only becomes clear in retrospect, of where Anderson wanted to steer Paton's novel:

It would be our [Anderson and Weill's] task – as we see it – to translate into stage form, without dulling its edge or losing its poetry, this extraordinarily moving tale of lost men clinging to odds and ends of faith in the darkness of our modern earth. For the breaking of the tribe is only a symbol of the breaking of all tribes and all the old ways and beliefs. (Avery 1977:222)

8. In *The Star-Wagon* a young inventor called Stephen Minch (who has the same first name as Paton's protagonist Stephen Kumalo), builds a machine to travel back in time to 'the eastern Ohio of 1902' in order to marry Hallie, who is his lost love (Shivers 1983:21). It is not difficult to see a correlation in plot devices between this time machine and the spaceship musical that was originally planned to become *Lost in the Stars*.



Anderson and Weill did not understand Paton's specifically South African 'tribe' and thus chose to turn it into a spiritual metaphor of the breaking of all tribes at the hands of God. Their interpretation of *Cry, the Beloved Country's* universality was not unique. The feverish reception that the novel had in New York, where it was first published, is evidence already of a universalised reception history. But critical readings of the novel have also stressed this point. Edward Callan, Paton's first literary assessor, has argued that the novel achieves universal value 'by incorporating into the actualities of South Africa's physical and social setting a fundamental theme of social disintegration and moral restoration' (Callan 1968:49). This theme, he concluded, was 'worked out through two complementary, or counterpointed, actions: Stephen Kumalo's physical search for his son Absalom, and James Jarvis's intellectual search for the spirit of his son Arthur'. These two Ulyssean narratives are the catalysts for the story and also serve as inspiration for its adaptation into *Lost in the Stars*. Like Tennyson and Whitman's Ulyssean voyagers, both the protagonists in *Cry, the Beloved Country* sail forth to seek and find, and like Ulysses their course eventually leads them back home, carrying the burdens of material loss and moral gain.

In any dramatic adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, aspects of the original novel would inevitably become 'lost in translation'. This is certainly true of *Lost in the Stars*. Paton's voice had to give way to another person's language and another person's music (Matlaw 1975:272). Yet Paton allowed *Cry, the Beloved Country* to be adapted many times – into a Broadway musical tragedy by Anderson and Weill, into a feature film by the Korda brothers and into a play by Felicia Komai (Callan 1968:22). The feature film adaptation was made in more or less the same timeframe as the musical tragedy, and after seeing it (in 1951) Paton was satisfied that it was a more or less 'faithful' rendition of his novel (Alexander 1995:268). He, therefore, had no objection to Felicia Komai's request, in 1954, to adapt *Cry, the Beloved Country* into a verse drama; verse drama was the kind of literature that Anderson specialised in.

Paton loathed *Lost in the Stars* because it turned out that he and Anderson subscribed to mutually exclusive spiritual paradigms. Paton attended the world premiere performance of *Lost in the Stars* – with his then mistress, the anti-apartheid activist Mary Benson (1989:54) – and did his best 'to join in the rejoicing, but [his] heart wasn't in it' (Paton 1988).<sup>9</sup>

Maxwell Anderson knew it, and so did his wife. I am sure that *Cry, the Beloved Country* had moved him deeply, and that his musical play was 'based on' the book. But his view of life and the world was very different from mine. (p. 23)

9. Paton's biographer, Peter Alexander (1995:251), writes incorrectly that both Paton's wife Dorrie and Mary Benson joined him at the premiere performance of *Lost in the Stars*. Actually, Dorrie was still in South Africa at that time, and – as Alexander notes on the same page of his biography – flew to London during the following week, where Paton also went to meet her; after which they both returned to New York and watched subsequent performances of *Lost in the Stars* together. I have argued elsewhere (Viviers 2014:259) that Paton's discomfort with *Lost in the Stars* is also entangled with his discomfort at his own infidelity towards his wife during this period of his life.

Paton never believed that a Christian should be free from suffering, because Christ also suffered. A line from *Cry, the Beloved Country* is illustrative. 'And I come to believe that he suffered, not to save us from suffering, but to teach us how to bear suffering, for he knew that there is no life without suffering' (Paton 1949:208). Anderson, in his turn, understood human suffering as the breach of an original contract between man and God. But, as Steiner (1997:160) says of a similar device in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'there is, to be sure, not a shred of evidence that any such ticket [promise] was issued to man in the first place'. When Stephen Kumalo sings in 'Lost in the Stars' that 'God stated and promised he'd take special care', it is purely literary assumption on Anderson's part, written in reaction to the fire and brimstone environment of his own childhood. Paton thought that the song 'Lost in the Stars' was far too sophisticated to be sung by his humble protagonist. It also pained him that this song 'belonged to the death-of-God genre, or to put it more accurately, to the desertion-of-God genre' (Paton 1988:20).

Paton was not a purist. If he were, he would not have allowed any subsequent adaptations of his work. Apart from his religious objections, he seems to have had no further problems with *Lost in the Stars*, and even commented on the beauty of its music. Because of Anderson and Weill's efforts, we can now read Paton's original novel with a Ulyssean subtext that was not articulated as strongly in the original. The adaptation loses much of Paton's prose, but it also contains the last music that Weill composed before his death. The argument is to be made that, with an informed and creative director, the characters of *Lost in the Stars* could come alive much more vividly on a stage than they ever would in the interior of a reader's mind. This, of course, depends on personal tastes and on the aesthetics of reading as opposed to those of watching.

## Conclusion

Having seen *Lost in the Stars* in a live production at Cape Town's Artscape Theatre, late in November 2011, I was struck by the two-dimensional melodramatic depiction of black identity and black suffering that was realised out of Anderson and Weill's blueprints (score and libretto) for the work. In the light of Essie Robeson's warning to Maxwell Anderson in 1939, when he set out creating *Ulysses Africanus*, Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, Ol' Mammy and Jack Johnson were all on stage that night. Nevertheless, the audience reception was very enthusiastic, about half of the audience giving a standing ovation at the end of the performance.

That these negative racial stereotypes could still be so enduring and be transmitted from America's Civil War era into South Africa's rainbow nation is a negative testament to the persistence of adaptation. Rather than criticise *Lost in the Stars* as an 'unfaithful' adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, one could critique its perpetuation of these stereotypes. The fact that *Lost in the Stars* began as *Ulysses Africanus*, which was itself an adaptation of a racist-toned novella set in the American Civil War era, is highly suspect. That such





a work could find a performance opportunity in the new South African cultural scene, and in Desmond Tutu's rainbow nation, is bizarre. It indicates a superficial engagement with and celebration of South Africa's struggle history. There should be no solace in peopling a stage with black people while leaving racist stereotypes intact as they are adapted interculturally. Had Maxwell Anderson's Ulysses not got lost in Alan Paton's beloved country, or more properly been forced into that literary landscape, the operatic or musical tragedy version of *Cry, the Beloved Country* might present the narrative of black suffering and protest in a less clichéd manner.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

I declare that I have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced me in writing this article.

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