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## Naipaul's Sense of History

Bridget Brereton

[anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com](mailto:anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com)

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“How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? ... Shall he, like the West Indian historians, who can only now [1962] begin to face their history, be icily detached and tell the story of the slave trade as if it were just another aspect of mercantilism? The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies” (Naipaul, *Middle Passage* 20). No passage in Naipaul’s vast corpus of published work has been more frequently quoted and reviled than this; it has been justly criticized both for its sheer rhetorical excess, and for the disdain and dismissal it seems to reflect: a dismissal not only of the possibility of West Indian creativity, but also of the value of the historian’s project, at least when applied to the Caribbean.

Yet the need to understand the past, the imperative to confront one’s personal, national, and regional histories unflinchingly, seems to me to be absolutely central in Naipaul’s work and worldview. On the basis of a highly selective reading of some of his fiction and non-fiction, I argue that, for Naipaul, the erasure of the past, the failure or refusal to develop well researched and reasonably objective historical narratives, are key indices of underdevelopment and intellectual impoverishment for any people, nation or region of the world. A society which cannot, or will not, examine its past with scholarly rigor is, in his view, a society doomed to be static and uncreative. It is a society which substitutes tradition, barely understood ritual, fundamentalisms of various kinds, for a critical examination of its history. Naipaul admits that this examination is difficult and painful, involving, as it must, the loss of a sense of enclosed security that the traditions, the rituals and the fundamentalisms engender. But it also opens up the possibility of creativity and development. So far from dismissing the historian’s project as futile or a mission impossible, he effectively validates the need for sound historical scholarship and for the critical self-awareness, which that scholarship can and should help to develop.

Over and over again, Naipaul has written of the Indo-Hindu Trinidadian community into which he was born, and among which he spent his first eighteen years, as one that was abysmally ignorant of its history, and utterly incurious about it. He told a University of the West Indies, St Augustine conference audience in 1975 that “we [Indo-Caribbeans] came from a culture that has not been much given to self-examination or to historical enquiry... [we] have become people who live as though the past can be denied. [we] have become people without a past” (Naipaul, *Introduction* 4). They inhabited a world in which “all the questions had already been answered and all the rituals perfected.” Naipaul went on to insist that “self-examination” and “self-awareness” through historical research were not only necessary for this community to move out of its self-absorbed and static world, but positively “revolutionary” in their implications (Naipaul, *Introduction* 5). A quarter of a century later, in his 2001 Nobel Lecture, he makes the same point: “What was past was past. I suppose that was the general attitude. And we Indians, immigrants from India, had that attitude to the island. We lived for the most part ritualised lives, and were not yet capable of self-assessment, which is where learning begins” (Naipaul, *Nobel* 4). To live within such a worldview was “to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world”

(Naipaul, *The Return* 216); but the loss of that security and fixedness, through learning about the past, was essential for creativity and development—whether for the writer himself, or for a society.

“I grew up with two ideas of history, almost two ideas of time,” Naipaul wrote in 1984; “there was history with dates ... [which] affected peoples and places abroad” (Naipaul, *Finding* 58). This was the history he learned at Queen’s Royal College, of Rome, England, Europe. “But Chaguanas, where I was born ... had no dates;” beyond personal memories was “undated time, historical darkness. Out of that darkness (extending to place as well as time) we had all come ... I lived easily with that darkness, that lack of knowledge. I never thought to inquire further” (Naipaul, *Finding* 58). “To discover the wonder of our situation as children of the New World we had to look into ourselves; and to someone from my kind of Hindu background that wasn’t easy” (Naipaul, *Finding* 58). “I had no idea of history,” he writes again, this time in his autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*; “it was hard to attach something as grand as history to our island” (143). In 1950, when he first came to England, he was “like the earliest Spanish travellers to the New World, medieval men with high faith,” lacking curiosity about what they found, without any impulse to enquiry: “True curiosity comes at a later stage of development”—for the writer as for a society (Naipaul, *Finding* 143).

Naipaul has stated unequivocally that historical research—scholarly, based on the evidence, as objective as this mode of enquiry can be—is in his view essential for the self-knowledge that all individuals and societies must have if they are to create and develop. “I think that it is through scholarship and a wish to understand through scholarship, and not through sentiment, that we can arrive at some understanding of all the strands in our upbringing ... I think that through scholarship and intelligent inquiry we will understand more about the past and more about the culture of our grandfathers than they themselves did,” he said in 1975 (Naipaul, *Introduction* 6). In his own journey to self-knowledge, he has often acknowledged that the years he spent researching and writing *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), his only full-length work of formal “history,” were enormously important in helping him to locate his place in the world. He has returned again and again to material he studied in the British Museum and the Public Records Office in London for that book. In his Nobel Lecture, Naipaul describes almost as a personal epiphany his discovery, sitting in the British Museum in 1967 reading old Spanish documents, that his birthplace Chaguanas was named after a small Amerindian ethnic group, the Chaguanes, mentioned in a letter from the King of Spain to the governor of Trinidad in 1625. “And the thought came to me in the Museum that I was the first person since 1625 to whom that letter had a real meaning ... . We lived on the Chaguanes’ land” (Naipaul, *Nobel* 3; also Naipaul, *Finding* 50).

His arduous work in the archives, researching the history of Trinidad from the 16th to the 19th centuries, endowed him with a sense of “historical wonder” which never left him, and which he clearly believes is essential for intellectual and social development. “True knowledge of geography, and with it a sense of historical wonder, began to come sixteen years after I had

left Trinidad, when for two years I worked on a history of the region,” he wrote in 1984. He was “trying only to understand how my corner of the New World ... had become the place it was” (Naipaul *Finding* 49). In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul describes his two years in the archives as “a great packed education;” “for the two years that I lived among the documents I sought to reconstruct the human story as best I could ... discovery, the New World, the dispeopling of the discovered islands [like the disappearance or obliteration of the Chaguanes]; slavery, the creation of the plantation colony; the coming of the idea of revolution; the chaos after revolutions in societies so created” (101). Coming from a community and an island with little interest in its past, where “history” happened only in other places, Naipaul was energized by a new understanding of his place—and therefore his way—in the world: “I was amazed, reading the documents of my island in London, by the antiquity of the place to which I belonged. Such simple things! Seeing the island as part of the globe, seeing it sharing in the antiquity of the earth! Yet these simple things came to me as revelations” (Naipaul *Enigma* 157). He says much the same in *A Way in the World*, the Naipaul book that resonates most strongly with his earlier archival researches. So much in this “sequence” (between novel and non-fiction) reflects his profound feel for the early history of Trinidad, his deep understanding of its tragedy, the degradation of slavery and racial oppression; especially, in my view, the section entitled “In the Gulf of Desolation.”

To achieve the self-awareness on which creativity and critical thought rest, Naipaul believes, writers and societies must face up to their past through serious historical examination. Caribbean people, including his own Indo-Trinidadian community, will need to go through this process, even if the price is a loss of ancestral tradition and atavistic security. The terrible ravages wrought by imperialism on the former colonies must be rigorously researched and explicated—for the damage done by the colonial powers is a central theme in nearly all Naipaul’s work; he is no “imperialist stooge” as some of his cruder critics have argued.<sup>1</sup> But the crimes and follies of postcolonial elites and others must, equally, be unflinchingly exposed. Societies that fail or refuse to go through this rigorous self-examination may be doomed to remain uncreative and dependent. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ralph Singh, the flawed protagonist of *The Mimic Men*, wanted to write a history of “the empires of our time ... [which] have altered the world for ever,” but does not, in the end, try very hard to do so (Naipaul, *Mimic* 32).

One nation of the New World which Naipaul finds has failed to confront its past—and has paid a heavy price for that failure—is Argentina, which he visited and wrote about on many occasions:

A million square miles, an enormous country, twenty-three million people, everything in the world, so rich, and now [1975] in its death throes. Its failure is not a failure of wealth or education. It’s an intellectual failure, a failure of people who have been unwilling to face their history. That was a history of genocide, occurring quite recently, followed by the seizing of Indian lands and the

establishing of enormous estates ... The labour was imported from Europe to service these big estates. These people were fed on special myths. The most debilitating was that they were not South Americans, that they were really Europeans, that their culture distinguished them from the rest of the continent. But they were in fact living in a borrowed culture; they had created nothing; and when the British Empire that protected them withdrew, the whole thing just fell apart. (Naipaul, *Introduction* 8-9)

This basic point is reiterated in his essays about Argentina written between 1972 and 1991. “There is no history in Argentina,” Naipaul wrote in 1972, “there are no archives; there are only graffiti and polemics and school lessons” (Naipaul, *Writer* 360). The War of Independence and its heroes are celebrated but the event “stands in isolation; it is not related, in the text books or in the popular mind, to what immediately followed: the loss of law, the seeking out of the enemy, endless civil wars, gangster rule” (Naipaul, *Writer* 360). Even the nation’s great writer, Borges, substitutes “ancestor worship” for “the contemplation of his country’s history”—and “Borges is Argentina’s greatest man” (Naipaul, *Writer* 360). It was, in Naipaul’s acerbic yet not entirely unsympathetic view, “a collective refusal to see, to come to terms with the land: an artificial, fragmented colonial society, made deficient and bogus by its myths.” (Naipaul, *Writer* 361). It was a refusal to “see” the Indians destroyed in a fairly recent (1870s-80s) genocide, which is “dismissed in a line or two in the annals:” “the Argentine terror is that people in other countries might think of Argentina as an Indian country” (Naipaul, *Writer* 385). The Indians “disappeared” from the history and the memory; so did the Africans, descendants of slaves from Spanish times. Until the nation confronted its past, and put aside the myths and the disappearances in favour of critical self-examination, Naipaul implies, it would continue to be static and uncreative, failing to live up to its potential.<sup>2</sup>

He makes much the same kind of point about India, Pakistan and Africa. As Nana Wilson-Tagoe points out, Naipaul believed that Hindu India, as he first encountered it in 1963, was enmeshed in a “medieval” worldview, in which history was not researched and few were interested in understanding the past. In the first of his books on India, he wrote that myth and binding tradition substituted for critical self-awareness through historical research, much as in the Indo-Trinidadian community he had known in the 1930s and 1940s. These were enclosed societies with an undeveloped sense of history, which—both in India and in Trinidad—impeded the possibility of creativity, imaginative vision and progressive change.<sup>3</sup> The same was broadly true of Islamic Pakistan. Here, Naipaul writes, “the faith abolished the past. And when the past was abolished like this, more than an idea of history suffered. Human behaviour, and ideals of good behaviour, could suffer” (Naipaul, *Writer* 509). He illustrates his argument by referring to the 1979 commemoration of the Arab conquest of Sind, the conquest of a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom, occupying much of today’s southern Pakistan, by Arab Muslims in the eighth century. A newspaper article about an Arab general tried to be fair to the armies of both sides. It drew an official rebuke from the chairman of Pakistan’s National Commission of Historical and Cultural

Research (no less) for appearing to “sympathise” with the Hindu defenders of Sind and for employing the wrong “phraseology” when describing the Arab “hero.” “After 1,200 years,” Naipaul comments, “the holy war is still being fought. The hero is the Arab invader, bringer of the faith. The rival whose defeat is to be applauded—and I was reading this in Sind—is the man of Sind. To possess the faith was to possess the only truth; and possession of this truth set many things on its head . . . . The faith altered values, ideas of good behaviour, human judgements” (Naipaul, *Writer* 511). Such a society was shutting itself off from “the ideas of inquiry and the tools of scholarship” and “whole accumulations” of knowledge (Naipaul, *Writer* 12). As to Africa, Nana-Tagoe points out that the protagonist of *A Bend in the River*, Salim, sees the capacity to separate the past from the present, to recognize the past as distinct territory from the present, to be historically aware, as crucially linked to the ability to change and grow. To have it, in Salim’s view, is to be able “to assess the consequences of the past with an eye on future action and thinking” (Wilson-Tagoe 71). Salim believes that “Africans” lacked this capacity, for the “tribal world” (like Naipaul’s Indo-Trinidadian community of his childhood) did not need historical awareness. Such an enclosed world, lacking all sense of the past, was secure only until it was exposed; then it was defenceless, leading directly to the “disorder” Salim saw in the Africa of his present (Wilson-Tagoe 71).

Famously (or infamously), Naipaul often seems to see “order” only in Europe, the “metropole,” and disorder or half-made societies everywhere else. To the extent that this is true, it is clearly linked to his notion that these “older” societies have come to be on easy terms with their history, have invested in scholarship about their past as well as, inevitably, creating their own national myths. This sense of antiquity is movingly expressed in Naipaul’s meditations about the Wiltshire countryside on his solitary walks in the largely empty stretch of downs near his house in *The Enigma of Arrival*, the most “personal” of his novels:

my feeling for the age of the earth and the oldness of man’s possession of it, was always with me . . . . That sense of antiquity gave another scale to the activities around one. But at the same time—from this height and with that wide view—there was a feeling of continuity. So the idea of antiquity, at once diminishing and ennobling the current activities of men, as well as the ideas of literature, enveloped this world which . . . came to me as a lucky find. (20)

The sense of human possession of the land in this “historical” corner of England, stretching back thousands of years, moved Naipaul. And the older ideals of “[h]istory, glory, religion as a wish to do the right thing by oneself—these ideas were still with some people in the valleys round about . . . [who] still had the idea of being successors and inheritors” (Naipaul, *Enigma* 50-1). But, of course, even in his pastoral Wiltshire countryside, there can be no “pure” sense of historical continuity and progress. Change, decay, renovation are all around. And Naipaul is sharply aware that that the “order” and “security” he finds in his corner of England rested on wealth, empire and the exploitation of people like his ancestors; that in the “glory days” of the landed estate, from which he was renting a cottage, there would have been no place for “people like me.”<sup>4</sup>

Like most historians working today, Naipaul doesn't subscribe to any overarching Grand Theory which purports to explain all of the vast, chaotic human past:

"I have no unifying theory of things," he told a New York audience in 1992. "To me situations and people are always specific, always of themselves. That is why one travels and writes: to find out. To work in the other way would be to know the answers before one knew the problem. That is a recognised way of working, I know—especially if one is a political or religious or racial missionary. But I would have found it hard." (Naipaul, *Writer* 503)

He said much the same thing in his Nobel Lecture: "I have always moved by intuition alone. I have no system, literary or political. I have no guiding political idea" (Naipaul, *Nobel* 7).

But one "guiding idea" that seems to underlie much, if not all, of his work is the belief that critical self-awareness, born out of the hard and painful work of examining the past, is vital for individuals, peoples and nations. A historical sense allows for creativity, the full exercise of the imagination, and the capacity for change and growth. "Men need history," Naipaul writes at the end of *The Enigma of Arrival*; "it helps them to have an idea of who they are. But history, like sanctity, can reside in the heart; it is enough that there is something there" (353). We must be able to make the connections if we are to find our way in the world. Contemplating the city of his youth, Port of Spain, as it appeared after the fires and looting that followed an attempted coup in 1990, he wrote: "You could see down to what might have been thought buried forever: the thick-walled eighteenth-century Spanish foundations of some buildings. You could see the low gable marks of early, small buildings against higher walls. You could look down, in fact, at more than Spanish foundation: you could look down at red Amerindian soil" (Naipaul, *A Way* 43). Earlier in the narrative, he wrote in a similar vein: "we go back and back, forever; we go back all of us to the very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings" (Naipaul, *A Way* 11).

History is vital; critically examining, and unflinchingly facing up to the past is a necessary process for all individuals—but especially writers—and for all nations, perhaps especially those of the postcolonial world. This seems to me to be one of the key Naipaulian ideas. And I believe it provides a good reason for historians (and others, of course) to respect and read and reread Naipaul, whatever their individual judgements on his worldview. Is it time to forgive him for the rhetorical excess of that famous statement with which I began this essay, written all of 45 years ago when he was just 30?

Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Stefano Harney's *Nationalism and Identity* (pp. 145-9).

<sup>2</sup>See Naipaul *The Writer and the World* (pp. 394-426).

<sup>3</sup>See Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* (pp.113-117 and 133-7). Also see Wilson-Tagoe *Historical Thought and Literature Representation in West Indian Literature* (pp. 5, and 54-6).

<sup>4</sup>See Wilson-Tagoe (pp. 75-6).

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