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Signifying Nothing: Writing About Not Writing in *The Mystic Masseur*

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This essay is about *nothing* and the way in which it can be created, and, in particular, about V. S. Naipaul's representation in *The Mystic Masseur* of how nothingness can be discursively constructed. On one level, *The Mystic Masseur* is about lack of signification. Observations of what are presented as curious facts lead to absence of information, cryptic utterances beneath which gapes meaninglessness, rituals of lost significance, fake honors and letters behind the name that attest to nothing, titles like *teacher* or *Lord* that lack authenticity, directives like RSVP that "don't mean nothing but is nice to have," all "pretty wordings" empty of any signification beyond their niceness. Equally, the discourse contains endlessly undermined commentary, such as, "Later this was to be seen as important," when it is not. On this level, then, the novel conveys that there is not anything created. But on another level the novel seems actually to construct nothingness and the narrator to confer significance falsely on this void. How is the signification of *nothing* inscribed in both senses, that is, both reflected and discursively constructed, and to what end?

In the first place the text draws on various narrative techniques that evoke in the reader an evaluation of falsity. The most obvious of these techniques is the selection of form associated with biography. The narrative adopts the pose of biography grounded on an autobiography, Ganesh's *The Years of Guilt*—assessed by its writer's mysterious admirers as "a spiritual thriller and metaphysical whodunit." The critical acclaim of this autobiography is never grounded by reference to named critics, and this fictive autobiography and fictive criticism are framed within a larger fictive non-fiction—the biographical form adopted in the narration that they support. This use of the "false document" technique, that is, the explicit projection of the narrative as a record of fact, backed up by repeated reference to other records—all of these records being patently fictitious—this false document technique implicitly undermines the normal authenticating function of records and discredits the value of written discourse that is valorized throughout the action of the novel.

Another explicit technique closely related to the autobiographical is the engagement with history. The narrator's claim that the Ganesh story is a "history of our times" sweepingly asserts universal significance. Because the Life must therefore be of wide interest, the narrator acts, from time to time, as audience surrogate, implicating the reader's inevitable eagerness for each shining detail about Ganesh whose claim to fame is, of course, negated by actual (and deserved) obscurity.

Similarly, the roaming narrator who dips into the text, disappears, and travels to Britain parallel to Ganesh's nebulous quest—this roaming narrator delivers his report in such a way as to include widely separated eye-witness accounts. The interrupted eyewitness of the traveler's account suggests the dignified witness of the correspondent, and the account indeed projects a nineteenth-century approach to literary discourse as a record of experience, as an observation of objective reality that demands social commentary by a superior consciousness qualified to make judgments. The narrator adopts such a professional reporter's voice for the biography.

However, these setups of narratorial reliability (biographer, historian, reporter and the like) themselves frame various less esteemed discourse types—the gossiping, twittering, parroting discourses of characters moving within the text. Also, again within the text, parallel to this mindless dialogue, occurs the epiphany of Ganesh’s self-realization as a potential writer, one with something significant to inscribe but also, as a consciousness (himself a text) designed to unfold. In narrative as elsewhere, epiphany (a manifestation of power, illumination or insight of divine brilliance) is triggered suddenly by some object or situation that is essentially ordinary with the experience vastly disproportionate to its ordinary stimulus (Beja 719). Epiphany, however, as in the actual revelation of the mystic in Ganesh, is complemented by revelation of the insignificance of Ganesh; and the revelation of the writer in Ganesh is complemented by the revelation of the *nothing* that he writes. In this way epiphany defers its central irony of disconnection between mundane situations and extraordinary response, to a disconnection between the extraordinary response of the narrator and the mundane reality of his stimulus.

One of the things that prepare us for the negation of significance in one dim epiphany after the other is a dispersal of truth-value. Truth-value is dispersed through the undermining of non-fictionality and indeed the melting of boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional, an interrogation and subversion of the distinction between fact and fiction (or panfictionality).¹ Events unfold simultaneously with narrative interpretation of these events, and the events belie this interpretation, further eroding the fact/fiction boundary. This is one way in which the author contrives an undermining of narrative reliability by dispersing truth-value in these statements.

Foregrounding of falsity is further achieved by manipulating narrative perspective, which is a crucial dimension in constructing the speaker—that fictional self from whose angle events are presented. Perspective, focalization or point of view substantially affects readers’ sympathy and/or identification with characters, and shifting perspective can enable ambivalence.² In the case of *The Mystic Masseur*, the narrator repeatedly embraces the observations of Ganesh’s wider audience, that is, Ganesh’s immediate associates, the general public in Trinidad, the colonial office and, of course, the international forum to which the reader belongs. The reader, however, draws quite different conclusions to those expressed by the narrator, who draws his conclusion through loose references to a circle of admirers—references that remain unsubstantiated. What this discrepancy foregrounds is authorial attention not so much to Ganesh’s nonsense as to the nonsense of social commentary and to critical void, lack of substance in evaluation that William Labov identifies as a component of narrative structure in *Language in the Inner City* (366-374). I would argue that the holes in the narrative implicate an authorial position.

To examine the effect of narrative perspective more closely, I would point out that *The Mystic Masseur* presents a retrospective account of Ganesh’s progress, in that the narrator recounts what *has* taken place, but a prospective account in that he follows his subject from the remote to more recent past—the most usual of narrative patterns. But at particular points in the more remote past, the narrator pauses to point forward to the future (a future in the past, a point

in the more recent past of the speaker to which his account has not yet arrived), a “prophetic” technique often associated with omniscience. The narrator’s view along the way therefore alternates between his perceptions of Ganesh in the remote past, his perceptions of him in the recent past (*both within story time*), and his evaluations current in *speaker time*, or the time of narration. Because his experience of Ganesh begins in childhood, the narrator’s perceptions include those from varied stages of maturity. So *The Mystic Masseur* conveys a narrative view that shifts from child to adult vision and from the innocent to the educated, suggesting prolonged and maturing experience. Nevertheless, whatever the depth of *perceptual* perspective (the view based on physical orientation in space or time), *conceptual* perspective (mental orientation) remains stagnant and shallow. The narrator’s view of Ganesh remains credulous and uncritical, however omniscient a stance he may adopt from time to time.

Commentators on perspective have noted that perspective may sometimes be revealed *after* an event, suggesting or enabling re-appraisal or recontextualization. Catherine Emmot suggests that a text “may force a reader to reinterpret a stretch of narrative or to hold two different interpretations simultaneously” (164). In *The Mystic Masseur*, however, no development of conceptual perspective produces narrative revelation. The narrator’s claim to insight, associated with public recognition of Ganesh, remains hitched to Ganesh’s own epiphanies. The fragmented nature of the narrator’s actual connection with Ganesh, and his dependence on scattered and inexact testimony produce loosely re-remembered rather than coherently remembered events. Ganesh’s life is indeed not memorable but highly forgettable, one on which larger significance can only be artificially imposed—unless one’s narrator, though a successful product of the Caribbean, is of an intellectual capacity to be unable to identify failure when he sees it or is operating in a moral vacuum.

Apart from narrative technique, narrative structure of *The Mystic Masseur* conveys the hollowness of the account. In outlining the essential components of natural narrative, Labov notes that evaluation is a crucial component of narrative syntax. Through this component of evaluation a narrator reveals involvement in or assessment of the action described³ and evaluation in discourse rests on such indicators as desirability, expectability, utility, and so on, but especially on importance or significance.⁴ Narrative is one means through which discourse constructs our perceptions of reality, in which discourse intervenes in the chaos of experience to select, order, re-assemble and package experience for manageability. No account has everything (for that would be boring). Narrative discourse pieces together lives and circumstances fractured in fact, perhaps through observation that is discontinuous or unreliable, a re-remembering on the basis of *criteria*. What the author constructs in *The Mystic Masseur* is *insignificance* in the protagonist and his setting, juxtaposed to that perception of *significance* and expression of admiration that is expressed by the narrator—an inconsistency that evokes ridicule in the reader. The effects are at once comic and tragic, a dissolution of genres. Comic irony rests on an implicated negation of factuality, scope, substance, and so on in Ganesh’s achievements so explicitly lauded by the narrator. Tragic irony emerges in the impossibility of wholeness in the

protagonist and narrator that fractured history and chronic social fragmentation have produced, and in the resulting emptiness of their discourse.

This socio-historical shattering materializes in discourse disconnectivity. Emphasis on time based (sequential or syntagmatic) delivery is explicitly established at once in the opening: “Later he was to be” induces a sense of preordination that is reiterated throughout (46, 50). But indeed (since he is not really to be anything) the events merely follow each other meaninglessly. Disconnectivity in discourse takes the form of irrelevance, of causeless action, or of baseless inference. For example, after insistence on existing outside of the weave, John Stewart returns home to join (of all things) the army. Then, despite Stewart’s rejection of position and formality, Ganesh refers to him as Lord Stewart (41, 42). Disconnectivity in discourse also reinforces a theme of ascetic detachment intertwined in the account of Ganesh’s condition as misfit. From baseless stipulations (the child’s medicine *never* to be taken after meals), through unexplained dependence on signs (31), to indiscriminate walkouts (213), the protagonist progresses causelessly from one stage to the next. Events are *said* to conspire to prevent him from being a “mediocre pundit,” an “unsuccessful lawyer,” a “dangerous doctor,” or one of a number of “penurious mystics”—all actually quite accurate descriptors—and to account for his rise from teacher to masseur to mystic and finally to MLC, a continuous dematerializing to empty acronym.

Underlying the teleological order explicitly projected by the narrator is an implied authorial theory of chaos in the unpredictable unraveling of disparate strands that negates the possibility of identity formation. Not only is there no identity to discover from the shattered past but even the construction of identity (on the Stuart Hall or Arjun Appadurai model) is denied. Instead the novel deconstructs identity through revelation of fragmentation and fraudulence. The failure of identity construction (ethnic, intellectual and so forth) at an individual level mirrors a failure of national construction.

Logical connections are also negated through consistent misinterpretation of circumstances that are pivotal to the action, especially at the end where what appears to be a sugar estate strike, which Ganesh is accidentally called on to mediate, turns out to be a lockout in the slack season and explodes in violence. The narrative recasts misinterpretation as revelation, however. Following on his fortunate escape, Ganesh declares himself to have been used as a tool by “communists,” a label he seizes on in desperation, and becomes a fervent defender of colonialism, Providence having “opened his eyes” (218). Not surprisingly, his full worth comes to be recognized in the award of the MBE.

Narratologists distinguish narrative perspective (who sees) from narrative voice (who speaks), but they are obviously related. The irrelevance, misinterpretation and contradiction that frame the hollow celebration of Ganesh’s achievements are conveyed through dialogic discourse. The narrating “historian’s” voice alternates with the mystic’s dialogue; Ganesh’s discourse debates with the twittering Narayan (The Little Bird); and Ganesh’s address alternates with

others such as Beharry's public statements about Ganesh. This diversity of voices enables a web of tensions between surface claims and underlying voids. The narrative voice is that of the university man, versus the country pundit, whose uneducated voice is also highlighted through contrasts to characters like Indarsingh with his British accent, "Demn good" (22), and the QRC headmaster (23).

For most of the novel, Ganesh's voice locates him geographically and socially, but the narrator's voice is associated with greater social mobility. Although the narrator represents his own voice as the child who is a fellow occupant of Ganesh's space, he speaks mainly in the voice of an external and objective observer, in the official language. However, the authoritative narrative voice is steadily discredited.

In the first place the authoritative tone is implicitly discredited in that its claims are unsubstantiated. In such statements as, "Later that was to be seen as important," the use of a passive form in which agency is suppressed compels the question "seen by whom?" and directs an interrogation of the eye/I and unmasking narrative fraudulence. Secondly the narrator's credulous account is framed in the narrator's own direct experience of Ganesh's fraudulence. Chapter 1 and the epilogue frame the biography with the biographer's two personal experiences of interaction with Ganesh, in both of which Ganesh operates under a faked identity. Thirdly, the testimony is circular: the first person narrative undermines all its possibilities as an eyewitness account for authenticating the record, by citing the very records it should authenticate. Moreover, the direct knowledge of Ganesh is undermined by hindsight competence, a "little did I know" type of awareness that limits our confidence in the experiencing "I" or eye. In a variety of ways, the history of Ganesh *is* a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing. This first person narrator is set up as a filter (as internal focalizer) through which Ganesh is evaluated, while narrative reliability regarding evaluation of Ganesh is continuously emphasized as suspect.

Moreover, this slippage between overtly objective narrative on the one hand and, on the other, the personal experience of the narrator as character goes beyond the *panfictionality*, or blurring of distinction between fiction and fact, noted earlier. The absolute collapse of boundaries between fictional and non-fictional worlds amounts to a transgression of levels or metalepsis that destroys certainty about control over the account. In *The Mystic Masseur* this is a subversive metalepsis because it interrogates, undermines and subverts the distinction between real and fictive in the world Naipaul constructs.⁵

Not only the "I" persona's collusion with Ganesh propagandists, but also his own remoteness from most of the action, destabilize narrative reliability. However, reliability is a function of both commitment to truth-value and accuracy of information. The narrator who propounds that, "the episode is significant" (21), and who hastens to associate his own history with the Ganesh account is morally as well as intellectually implicated in the falsity. This historicizing that employs the autobiographical form is geared to connect the present self to past

experience so as to produce both continuity (through time) and distance (from events and situations).

I have noted that complementing the narrator's disconnection from actual circumstances, are strategies (including those of narrative voice) for distancing events and persons within the text. Ganesh's ascetic remoteness conveyed as distance in space (12), as intellectual distance (332), and as emotional distance (202), is a distance maintained through deictic elements like adverbs (*away* etc.), and through silence, terseness and indirect responses in dialogue (the discursive disconnectivity noted earlier). Disconnection itself is a crucial issue and at various levels the characters employ discourse to recover the irretrievable, to assemble and revision the past, and to construct an identity. However, identity, like the discourse employed to construct it—the proposed discourse that is Ganesh's book and the "I" narrator's biography of Ganesh—cannot be built because the past is irreversibly ruptured, history irrecoverably fragmented. The discourse is fissive both in form and content; the hollowness of the present corresponds to an evaporation of meaning.

The authorial stance in the face of this collective fraudulence is a curious one. For Naipaul, who claims, "I am the sum of my books" ("Two Worlds" n.p.) as he negotiates arrival at a literary discourse through half a century—fiction giving way to non-fictional forms, travelogue, history and autobiography, in an interrogation of roots by routes—arrival at a literary discourse parallels finding his own space: "But home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost" (*A Bend* 117). In *The Mystic Masseur*, the lost homeland, replaced by the imaginary homeland, prompts rituals like the one that sends Ganesh figuratively home to India to study; prompts his reluctance to abandon the journey and his failure to accept it on the figurative level only; and prompts the irritation of his elders when he ascribes meaning to the exercise.

The author shares his narrator's progress from rural East Indian life with its fragments of Indian heritage, through QRC to England, and shares his protagonist's compulsion to autobiography as a re-remembering of the Self in the face of obliteration. Helen Hayward remarks that Naipaul's "multiple re-workings of the materials of his life suggest ... the provisionality of constructions of the self. They lead to the inference that the self is open to variable interpretations and that the writing of autobiography is for Naipaul an ongoing project of self-invention" (72; cf. 56). Naipaul himself elaborates on what Hayward terms his on-going self-invention in pointing to the essence of writing fiction not as a reporting of one's experience but as a distillation: "The beauty of fiction is that one can do it through other people" (Hayward 65).⁶

As a prequel to his later detached and reductive vision, *The Mystic Masseur* deconstructs meaninglessly inflated discourse in consistently metadiscursive commentary (20-21). First, the discourse conveys hypersensitivity to problems of expression. It highlights attention to a withholding of discourse concerning Ganesh "because his gift of healing was a holy thing" (12). Characters are described as speaking guardedly, communication as often cryptic, and matters

relating to ritual as quite properly uninterpretable (30-33). Throughout, meaningless talk is complemented by meaningless written material. From his early years at QRC, Ganesh reads without any apparent connection with or concern for content. Later he reads to Ramlogan who pretends illiteracy so as to maintain communication with the potential son-in-law (34). Ganesh's library comes to be arbitrarily founded on twenty copies of *Science of Thought Review*, on booklets on the Art of Salesmanship and, eventually, on Everyman volumes that are valued in relation to their number and measured by the inch. Scribal discourse remains material that is measurable, decorative and esoteric. Ganesh goes through a romantic attachment to paper itself, appreciated for its smell rather than its utility (76), a fascination that culminates in his appreciation for a gimmicky toilet paper roll towards the end of the novel.

In circumstances in which discourse constitutes a bodily function like eating (Suruj Poopa is accosted by his wife for always having his mouth open, "If it ain't eating, is talking"), Ganesh's writing begins as little more than marks on a surface, starting with his learning to write on a blackboard (83). Later, rather like Leela's writing, which is shattered by nonfunctional punctuation, his words often lack intrinsic meaning and carry only a pragmatic function: "pretty wordings" (49) or "nice wordings" (202). He writes publishers Smith and Smith (how anonymous can they be?) as to whether they would be interested in his writing books, without reference to his proposed content (76), and it is the hugeness of a printer that spurs him rather than anything he has to say. Unaccountably, the author eventually suppresses *The Years of Guilt*, the autobiography published by Ganesh Publishing Company that supposedly lends credence to the narrator's account. The huge nebulous project of writing is taken up without explanation, and also laid down without explanation. "Got to write my book," Ganesh said aloud. "Got to" (82). Yet before the production of this book, he is surrounded by a world of non-signifying signs. Elite Electric Printery tautologically announces on its notice: "When better printing is printing we will print it" (82). The wedding invitation, his first literary adventure, includes *RSVP* as an entirely meaningless flourish, and types of truncated discourse are everywhere invoked, from the telegram with its inadequate information through reference to letters, articles, a calendar and advertisements, the latter an empty frame of carefully ruled columns.

Rather, than an intellectual exercise, writing connotes power, the power associated with magic, writing treated as in its most primitive functions, as a charm (110, 111). Parallel game functions like the acrostic (200) undermine the serious of writing as an undertaking in preparation for enhanced power to heal. In any case, the mystical role of writing changes, as he lays aside the mystic for the politician and moves from Fuente Grove to St Clair (2, 11). Soon, writing gains pragmatic value, that of evidence, of the record (59), then writing becomes a money churner, promising credit and requiring a ledger for account of profit (105). The mystical value of writing gives way to mundane utilitarian purposes.

To the end, Ganesh's own inscriptions of spirituality remain obscure and empty of content, culminating in two discourses. One is *What God Told Me*, which reports that he received a direct address from God, although the message itself is not revealed to us. The other, the

crowning mark of his career, is *Profitable Evacuation*, inspired by the musical toilet paper rack that plays Yankee Doodle Dandee as it dispenses paper (157). While Ganesh the politician is ridiculed in calypso for legislative constipation, the narrator continues to celebrate him as both popular and productive. It is hard to miss the implicature that Ganesh and his indiscriminating narrator commit crap to paper. This implicature (of crap) relates directly the novel's emphasis on lack of signification, and suggests an underlying theory of value in Naipaul's novel, conveyed through his manipulation of narrative.

A crucial role of narrative discourse is its capacity for re-memberment and thus its potential for healing, for reviewing trauma, engaging with fragmentation and addressing dismemberment. Ganesh's vocation of healing, physically by massage, mystically by psychic intervention, and socio-politically by mediation and reconciliation are all fictional even as, in the colonial situation that is the novel's setting, such re-memberment is artificial. This derelict existence, comprising entrapment in a claustrophobic situation and entanglement in sterile customs of forgotten meaning is rendered more desperate by dreams of escape. In *The Mystic Masseur* Naipaul's narrative deconstructs both discourse that is unenlightened and discourse that is enslaved to colonial ideology as cheap and hollow. It plays with the superficialities of naming. Labels, like Suruj Poopa, that deny individuation expose the meaninglessness of titles adopted without basis in achievement as in the redefinition of the BA; as in Ganesh's adoption of the word *mystic* as weightier than *pundit* (121); as in Narayan's inclination to name change (173, 198), and as in Ganesh's ultimate renaming of himself.

Naipaul's metadiscourse interrogates literary discourse itself as an assertion of power, "I go give them this book, and I go make Trinidad hold it head and bawl" (95), as a poorly conceived educational tool for students to learn by rote, as a showpiece that, like Leela's pictures, is allocated space as long as it demonstrates status. "It are not going to hang in my drawing room," Leela stipulates in rejecting non-conformable pieces of art.

In *The Mystic Masseur*, literary discourse by the successful and educated may comprise mindless or irresponsible reporting as in the case of the narrator, or self interest as in the case of the Colonial Office which describes Ganesh first as an "irresponsible agitator with no following" (213), then as the "most popular man in Trinidad" (213). Ganesh demonstrates individual inadequacy; but intellectual fraudulence in the Colonial Office confirms the latter's agenda for contriving and maintaining a local political void, for bequeathing intellectual failure on those who emanate from the society, who claim to think and write on its behalf but do so uncritically, and perpetuate the construction of nothing. Naipaulian discourse in *The Mystic Masseur* represents this nothingness through techniques such as false documentation, inversions of epiphany, interrogations of reality through panfictionality and metalepis, narrative evaluation delivered through explicature but undermined by implicature, disconnectivity in discourse and other strategies that cumulatively project a conceptual void; not a situation in which no one has created anything, so much as one in which nothing (a nothing palpable as crap) has been actively constructed and perpetrated.

The suppressed passion in Ganesh, conveyed with the assumed objectivity of his narrator parallels the absence of passion in the author's dry, wry construction. Naipaul's writing is real autobiography in the sense of self-construction relative to a construction of history and community. In *The Mystic Masseur*, this Naipaulian autobiography assumes the shape of fiction, a fiction about a man who wants to re-member himself through writing, inscribed by an indiscriminating admirer. Both protagonist and narrator are fraudulent writers; one who can in fact construct nothing of significance and the other who ascribes significance to meaninglessness. Both writers cumulatively perpetuate the vacuum constructed by colonialism.

Notes

¹See Marie-Laure Ryan's "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality" for more on Panfictionality.

²As argued by Van Peer and Pander Maat, "Perspectivization and Sympathy: Effects of Narrative Points of View," and Joe Bray in "The 'dual' voice of free indirect discourse: a reading experiment" (46).

³Cf. Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, "Cross-Cultural Representation of Otherness in Media Discourse" (263).

⁴Positive or negative significance is propagated in discourse by devices of scope (especially height); precedence; goodness or divinity/sanctity; logical inevitability/necessity; actuality, truth or substance, and so forth. In representing reality, narrative manipulates such devices. On significance/importance projected in discourse, see Phil Graham "Critical Discourse Analysis and Evaluative Meaning: Interdisciplinarity as a Critical Turn" (115).

⁵See Manfred Jan's *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (N2.3.5); David Herman's "Towards a Formal Description of Narrative Metalepsis;" and Debra Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject*.

⁶Cited in Hayward: Naipaul interviewed by Margaret Drabble, *Bookcase*, November 26, 1977. Transcript of BBC broadcast, André Deutsch Archive, 96, IFS folder.

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