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The Confessional Element in Naipaul's Fiction

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Confession has always assumed the confessant's consciousness of a body of rules or ideals, a prevailing moral and spiritual order against which he or she has transgressed. The process of confession involves acknowledgement of error or crime and taking personal responsibility for having sinned in thought, word and deed. Ideally, the confessant feels sorrow, shame, guilt, and remorse of conscience. The confessant bears a heavy burden of guilt from which he seeks relief. Or he may think of himself as soiled and of confession as the prelude to a cleansing and a renewal of spirit. Confession, sometimes conducted in public before an entire congregation or in private before a single confessor, is meant to be a laying bare, a coming clean.

Among Christians, the doctrine of original sin makes a person responsible for Adam's transgression, though the Incarnation of Christ, a second Adam has absolved humankind of what the seventeenth century Anglo-Catholic poet John Donne complained was "that sin where I begun / Which was my sin, though it were done before."¹ In West Indian literature, the history of discovery, conquest, genocide, enslavement, violation, destruction and erasure has become a type of original sin, a karmic burden that has demanded of Wilson Harris's protagonists' cycles of rebirth and anguished reparation. A need to atone and take responsibility for the past, or alternatively to forget, wipe out and lay the past to rest, has surfaced in the work of several writers and is implicit in the writing of even those writers who seek to deny the relevance of the past.

The persistence of criminal violence and horrible atrocities in several Caribbean societies has led to the thesis that the postcolonial Caribbean is, like the colonial Caribbean, a civilization in trauma. George Lamming's suggestion over forty years ago was that the former colonizers and the neo-colonized needed to confront each other in a Haitian-type Ceremony of Souls:² a cleansing dialogue that would involve not only confession of past-transgression, but release, a laying to rest of the burdensome past towards what Brathwaite calls a refashioning of the future (*Arrivants* 224).

When Apartheid-ridden South Africa that ultimate colony and prison camp, emerged from the shadow of its oppressive police state, it sought national healing through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is a concrete example of the possibility of Lamming's Ceremony of Souls. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is driven by the institution of confession, and some such Commission might well be necessary in places such as Guyana, Haiti, and Jamaica with its recent post Independence history of politically-sanctioned internecine violence, and Trinidad and Tobago where its contesting ethnicities pursue separate and equally fruitless monologues over rights of predation.

V.S. Naipaul is as much concerned as any other West Indian writer, with issues of aboriginal terror, the question of the past and its legacy of crime, guilt and dereliction, and the near impossible ordeal of restructuring and rebuilding what he has termed these "half-made," "haphazard," "crazy" societies, places which though termed new he regards as having already exhausted their possibilities. Naipaul's Africa of "In a Free State" and *A Bend in the River* bleeds

cyclically with the effort of reconciling the bush, a place that is “not yet part of the present,” with such postmodern civilization as is characterized on the one hand by the prefabricated Big Burger joint and on the other by the advanced machinery of mass murder. When Salim, seeking a new life, first arrives at the unnamed town at bend in the river after a drive “from the east coast right through to the centre” his first reaction as he encounters the equatorial forest is: “But this is madness. I am going in the wrong direction. There can’t be a new life at the end of this” (4).

“Confession” in Naipaul has been concerned with the dilemma of constructing identities, defining commitment to or negotiating escape from these dreadful places where green beginnings are strangely identical with dead-ends. Such confession has been both direct—as in his interviews, essays, travelogues and other non-fiction—and indirect as in his fiction, where the protagonists function as complex and manipulable masks for their creator: Naipaul the author. This essay will pursue a chronological pathway through Naipaul’s writings from the 1960’s to the late 1970’s, when the issues of confession were most clearly manifest in his work. These issues included that of the writer’s responsibility to the country of his origin; the necessity for escape and exile and the consequent ordeal of alienation; the quest for personal independence and the fortitude necessary for existence unsupported by the props of nation, ideology or easily accessible guidelines; the impossibility of illumination in an ever-darkening private and public landscape; the irony of intervention and committed action in situations that seem to be historically predetermined to end in disaster.

Both Naipaul and his fictional masks have consistently wrestled with these concerns and, as I hope to illustrate, have found themselves entangled in the processes of confession: self-accusation, condemnation of self, Other, and social milieu; paradoxes of disclosure and concealment, honesty and self-deception, self-judgment and self-exoneration. Naipaul from the very start perceived his haphazard society as being peopled by survivalists, tricksters, picaroons and a whole theatre of amoral hustlers living by the grace of their wits. The trickster with his ethic of survival by any means necessary is a Machiavellian character who cannot afford to listen to the cry of conscience or the remorse central to confession. Naipaul’s primary assumption, stated in *The Middle Passage* and elsewhere, was that Trinidad society lacked moral and spiritual values, order, solidity or firmly lived ideals. Thus Naipaul’s rogues, frauds and self-propelling mediocrities are genuinely unaware of error as they pragmatically measure their gains and losses on the compelling and chaotic stage of life. Characters such as Ganesh or Harbans quite naturally shun the depths of self into which confessional self-assessment would lead them. Like their society, they lack a moral center and thus greet their success with self-congratulation, rather than the self-recrimination of the confessant.

The first truly confessional protagonist in Naipaul’s fiction is Randolph (formerly Choonilal), the narrator of “A Christmas Story” (1962). Choonilal, an aspiring schoolteacher has converted from Hinduism, a religion he had throughout his boyhood until age eighteen seen as consisting of “meaningless and shameful rites,” to Christianity, a religion that he associates with manners, enlightenment, civilization and education. He stresses that he has in no way been

coerced into conversion but has freely chosen Presbyterianism as a superior and civilized religion, over the darkness of Hinduism “with its animistic rites, its idolatry, its emphasis on mango leaf, banana leaf and—the truth is the truth—cowdung” (Naipaul, “Christmas” 33). To symbolize the irreversible nature of his choice, Choonilal accepts the new and aristocratic English name “Randolph,” and can become violently angry if anyone regresses and calls him by his old barbarian name, Choonilal.

“A Christmas Story” like “One Out of Many” or “Tell Me Who To Kill” almost one decade later, raises certain pertinent questions such as: Where is the author located with respect to Choonilal’s self-contempt? Does part of Naipaul, the Indo-Saxon element in him, partake of the self-contempt that he, using Choonilal/Randolph or Ganesh, Ramsumair/G Ramsey Muir as masks, holds up to ironic scrutiny and laughter? Is he employing the narrator to articulate and interrogate his own cultural and aesthetic choice as a self-confessed refugee from what he has termed his barbarous background towards the sterilized sanity of M’Lady’s timeworn boarding house? Or does he simply present Choonilal as an extreme example of what has happened throughout the New World since Columbus’s arrival, namely: cultural erasure, the aesthetic rejection of ancestral names, languages and customs; the eventually willing choice of the more acceptable culture of the ruling class as superior; the unquestioning acceptance of colonialism’s binaries of ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’?

Half of the charm of the confessional mode as here employed by Naipaul is that we can only speculate about the answers to these questions. Choonilal’s confession reveals guilt and shame, but for the wrong reasons. Naïve in the midst of his laboriously acquired education, he is incapable of questioning his choice of cultures. Yet he envies his successful Hindu cousin, a relatively uneducated but highly practical businessman, and twice admits his nostalgia for the family life and ethnic lifestyle from which he has chosen to isolate himself. His self-exposure via confession reveals a pettiness of spirit that he deceives himself is magnanimity, a sense of shame at only his own failure, and an anguished recognition that every apparent gain is accompanied by a correspondent loss: the Mohun Biswas epiphany.

Choonilal confesses (note that he employs the phrase “I must confess” five times altogether on pages 33, 35, 36 twice, and 51) that his deepest shame has been his failure to achieve prestige and significance proportionate to his years of hard work, his spectacular manifestations of religious piety, or his febrile efforts at pulling strings. It takes him ten years to get into Training College and more than twenty to find a proper wife: one that is as civilized as himself. It is a degrading and demeaning struggle, one that requires much maneuvering for him to wriggle his way to the position of Headmaster, a few years before he reaches the age of retirement.

As Headmaster, though, he relishes the respect he is now given by folk, the uncivilized “others”, who used to mock at his change of name and his strenuous efforts to acquire culture. He values in particular the joy of castigation and shares out weekly doses of licks to pupils and

pupil-teachers alike every Friday afternoon. He is especially proud when teachers throughout the island adopt his disciplinary system, even though he seems not to have been accorded the full recognition due to him as a trendsetter in education.

As Headmaster he is also able to augment his starvation teacher's wages by monopolizing the giving of lessons to scholarship pupils. The additional income enables him to marry and support a wife and son; but he soon loses the ability to do so when he retires and has to revert to a pupil teacher's salary. Strategic string pulling by his father-in-law, a school inspector, results in Choonilal Randolph's appointment to the even more prestigious sinecure of school manager. While the normal agenda of the school manager allow for the exercise of considerable power without the real grinding responsibility of being a Headmaster, Randolph sets his sights on higher things. He undertakes supervision of the construction of a new school, a job for which he hasn't the slightest qualification. At this point he joins Ganesh, Harbans and Biswas as representative trickster/survivalist types, whose common talent lies in an ability to adapt to whatever any new situation requires.

"Ability" is, however, a misnomer in Randolph's case. He mismanages the project, overspends his budget and produces a shoddily built atrocity months after the stipulated time. Randolph now lives in dread that his crowning failure will be revealed two days after Christmas when the inspectors from the Church Board are due to visit the building site. To protect himself from this final disgrace, the climax of a life that he describes as "taking two steps forward and one step back" (Naipaul, "Christmas" 44), Randolph decides to burn down the school, pleading that: "The burning down of a school is an unforgiveable thing, but surely there are occasions when it can be condoned, when it is the only way out" (Naipaul, "A Christmas" 50).

It is condonation that he seeks, sympathetic understanding of why the crime had to be committed: exoneration from guilt. This is what triggers his confession, the apparent "frankness" (46) of his self-disclosure. "[T]he time has come for frankness," he declares, as after the fashion of Albert Camus's Jean-Baptiste Clamence, he tries to convince the reader that he is telling the whole truth; laying bare everything, however shameful, however embarrassing. But it isn't judgment he seeks, but condonation. His motives for the crime he is about to commit, he tries to convince the reader, are not only honorable, but also altruistic. He is torching the school and destroying evidence of his failure "not only for my sake, but also for the sake of all those, villagers included, whose fates were involved with mine" (Naipaul, "A Christmas" 51).

In other words, if Randolph respected god and culture-hero for the illiterate villagers and their example of self-emancipation from barbarism were to fall into disgrace—such is his spiel—the whole village will fall with him and suffer his shame. Thus, hilariously, the reader savors the confessant's attempt to delude both himself and the judgmental audience. The act of burning the school, he argues, must not be construed as an act of depriving the children of the poor of education, but one of saving the poor from the anguish of feeling a sympathetic embarrassment at the disgrace of their god and role model. This is rich comedy, particularly since Randolph has

already confessed that at every stage of his evolution from Hinduism into Indo-Saxondom, he has been overtly and covertly mocked by “the others,” the ordinary folk of the village. True, they respect him when he becomes headmaster and school manager; but that is only because of the fearsome power he wields over their children’s destiny. Disrespect and ridicule are never far away, and it is the fear of this ridicule, rather than any altruistic concern for the good name of the village, that drives Randolph—against his conscience, he tells us—to devise the plan of arson that will conceal his errors.

The denouement of the plot is also fabulous. Randolph decides not to burn the school, but to accept his fate with a final saint-like fortitude. His wife and son, who angrily abandon him just before Christmas, interpret this decision as cowardice. Yet the school is set afire, by whom Randolph never discloses, though it could only have been by his wife and son who were privy to the original plot, and who return soon afterwards to his grateful embrace. Randolph is therefore “innocent” (since he can claim that he neither burnt nor witnessed the burning of the school). Randolph has also outwitted the fate that had determined that his every success had to be counterpointed and negated by failure. The “fear, self-reproach, and self-disgust,” “these days passed in sorrow, in nightly frenzies of prayer and self-castigation” the “[r]egret for what might have been” and “for what was to come” that he feels before the school burns, all disappear after the school burns (Naipaul, “A Christmas” 51). For all the Christian moral and spiritual values that Randolph has claimed, throughout his narrative, to have rigorously upheld, he emerges as a pragmatic and amoral, if thoroughly incompetent trickster, who somehow finally manages to rejoice simultaneously in iniquity and in partial, self-deluding truth.

After this light-hearted yet painful anatomy of the confessional trickster, that contradiction in terms, Naipaul progresses by distinct stages towards the darker and more harrowing grotesquerie of the Dostoevskian and Camusian types of confessional anti-hero. The world of Choonilal/Randolph whose schizophrenia is more comical than sinister because the man is more Fool than Knave, is replaced by the darkening landscapes of “A Flag on the Island” (1965), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *Guerillas* (1975), *In a Free State* (1971) and *A Bend in the River* (1978). Located at the vestibule of all of these descents into the Inferno is Naipaul’s personal descent into his own central and decentering darkness, *An Area of Darkness* (1964).

“A Flag on the Island” is less obviously confessional than “A Christmas Story,” yet it does represent a distinctive stage in Naipaul’s experimentation with the confessional mode, the anti-hero, and the marginalized, nauseated, melancholic, malcontent whose grey voice has pervaded confessional fiction from Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* to Camus’s *The Fall*, Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Denis Williams’s *Other Leopards*, John Stewart’s *Last Cool Days* or Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* and *Herzog*. “A Flag on the Island” is narrated by Frank a former marine who during World War II used to be stationed on the American Base that was at the time planted on Chaguaramas Bay, Trinidad. As in *Guerillas* a few years later, Naipaul never gives Frank’s island a name; his aim being, perhaps, to indicate the facelessness, the unformed features and the indistinctness of the island’s emerging post-Independence identity.

Frank, whose name suggests honesty, is in fact a morally neuter yet judgmental anti-hero. During the War he ran a 'racket' in which he supplied a small local clientele with items ranging from canned foods to uniforms smuggled out of the American Base. His greatest success is in the theft of a truck that, somehow, the filthy-rich Americans never miss. They have so many more like that truck. This story, I should warn you, is subtitled "A Fantasy."

In return for the access he provides to all of this largesse, Frank is granted a privileged place in the city's seedy, semi-rustic underworld, where he has his choice of wahbeens and the best of the city's rankly flowering nightlife. The craftiest and most resourceful of the locals grow with Frank's sponsorship, expanding their business from quaint folksiness to plastic petty bourgeois fakery and false sophistication. Frank himself probably grows rich, though he never tells us this, as he modestly excludes himself from his narrative.

The time present of Frank's story is the early sixties, when Frank fortuitously returns to the island on a tourist ship seeking refuge from an imminent hurricane. It is about sixteen years since he left at the end of the War. The country has become independent and the changes initiated by Frank and the ten thousand other Americans during the War have made the country into the sort of "crazy tourist place" that Naipaul constantly deplored during the sixties, ceasing only when the weight of years made him tired, and the lucrative rewards he received for his books in the American market, softened somewhat his opinion of Americans and Americanization. Frank serves as a mask behind which Naipaul condemns neo-colonial Trinidad for what he sees as a loss in autonomy, due to a persistent self-contempt, a failure to cherish genuine aspects of the past, and a consequent surrender to Americanization and modernity. Frank narrates as judge, not as penitent. He never makes the connection between the folksy paradise that he helped corrupt, and the fallen and unreal city that he rediscovers on his return.

Frank shares with the post-Dostoevskian confessant a recoil from the emptiness and mediocrity of the fabricated city. Naipaul signals this through one of his most repeated tropes: the association of eating with nausea. Trying to decide whether to remain on board in the antiseptic cabin of the tourist ship or to indulge in the nostalgia of a return to old familiar pleasure-spots, Frank anticipates the pleasure of consuming plates of local oysters, but then remembers that oysters also used to make him nauseous. When Frank goes ashore he consumes a plate of one hundred oysters and views the city through the ensuing nausea and delirium.

Like Sartre's Roquentin, Dennis Williams's Lionel Froad of *Other Leopards* or Naipaul's Kripalsingh of *The Mimic Men*, Frank experiences a nausea that is simultaneously physical and existential. He is repelled by what seems most to attract him. The act of eating, a pleasurable pastime in most persons, always seems to produce a shudder of recoil in the Naipaul protagonist. Sometimes, as in *A Bend in the River* or *An Area of Darkness* where the protagonist is Naipaul himself, food and faeces are presented as the twinned metaphors not only of life in those ancestral places, but of the protagonist's depth response, his attraction to and repulsion by existence itself. Nausea, I think, is Naipaul's peculiar way of signaling his simultaneous relish

for and recoil from the substance of life. Physical nausea both masks and signals existential recoil.

This ambivalence of attraction and recoil, of attraction to what the individual knows will repel him, might be seen in Kripalsingh's anticipated relish of the adventure of hunting (his word) prostitutes, which is always contradicted by his self-loathing and the violation he feels during and after performance of what he disdainfully terms "the act required" (*Mimic Men* 30). It is also visible in the attraction that both Naipaul the author and many of his creatures feel towards countries, cultures, landscapes and situations that repel them: situations such as the recurrent image of a festering, stinking, perpetually smoking rubbish-heap in *Guerillas*; a symbol of Dante's inferno of concentric circles. The image is indulged in, relished almost, long after the horror it signifies has been communicated to the reader.

The confessant protagonist emerges out of this sencescape, this psychic state of fascinated desire and nauseated recoil. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul's desire to experience at last the landscape of his ancestors is succeeded by a revulsion that centers on the image of overwhelming faeces and a Conradian recollection of the journey to the central station as being a nightmare. Naipaul one time dismissed his critics with the reply that he did not invent defecation and that only six pages of the book were devoted to that particular image and function.

In *A Bend in the River*, Salim masks his deeply traumatized sensibility under the flat grey monotone with which he narrates even shameful scenes of personal humiliation; but like all other Naipaul confessants he is sensitive to the link between food and faeces; the Big Burger palace that signals progress Western style, twinned with the prevailing stench that envelops it; or the native Africans' attraction to toilet bowls because they have proven useful for storing cassava.

The confessant faced with the paradox of faeces festooning the precincts of the Taj Mahal, naturally grows depressed and recognizes his placelessness. But he equally becomes fascinated by the very extremity of the paradox, and may even grow, like Dostoevsky's Underground Man, or Swift's Gulliver in Laputa to relish it. A harsh, mad laughter informs Naipaul's parody of Churchill's "We will fight them on the beaches" speech in that startling passage of *An Area of Darkness* that begins: "Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover" (Naipaul, *Area of Darkness* 70). This grotesque laughter one recognizes as that of the confessional anti-hero. Over-exposure to the food/faeces attraction/repulsion paradox leads naturally to a sense of the Absurd, humor of the grotesque, a relish for caricature, parody and distortion, and a savoring of ugliness. Kripalsingh, secretly devastated by the breakdown of his bizarre marriage to Sandra, becomes attracted to Wendy Deschampsneufs, Sandra's former girlfriend and possibly her lover, because Wendy is so "engagingly ugly" (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 202). This is clearly the humour of the Underground Man, rooted in ugliness and a relishing of whatever nauseates.

Kripalsingh begins his memoirs after living for eighteen months in “the anaesthetizing order of life in this hotel” until “despair and emptiness had burnt themselves out” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 291). Kripal’s beginning as an Absurd confessional writer involves a recognition of “the formlessness of my experiences, and their irrelevance to the setting in which I proposed to recount them” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 292). Writing, this encounter with and attempt to impose order and pattern on formlessness, commences with a feeling of nausea. Kripal recalls that in “the faded light” of “late afternoon,” “my stomach, head and eyes united in a dead sensation of sickness” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 292). This nausea, I have argued, is a Naipaul trope that signals the author’s violent recoil from self and life. Kripal’s sickness of the stomach, head and eyes suggests an equation of writing with pregnancy and childbirth. Senses, reason and vision, major elements in the creation process, are all united in this single sensation of nausea and deadness. Memory grows out of this flat grey deadness.

It is how it happens with Dostoevsky’s absurd confessional narrator who begins his narration with the warning that: “I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man.” Kripalsingh shares in this sickness and resembles the Underground Man in several particulars. He is petty bourgeois, forty years old, an outsider, who resides on the outskirts of a great city: London in the case of Kripal, St. Petersburg in the case of Dostoevsky’s confessant. Both men exist on small precarious incomes; both have withdrawn from active engagement in life; both are full of overweening pride and its opposite, a crippling sense of inferiority. Both live within their heads, relish ugliness, are given to fantasy, self-exposure and self-deception. Kripal confesses to flippancy but is frequently overwhelmed by deep melancholy; the Underground Man speaks of his strange sense of humour as “grinning between clenched teeth.”

Both anti-heroes have been oddities at school, weaklings aware at all times of their nonentity. The process of education increases their alienation. Their friendships with schoolmates are painful and lack candor. If the Underground Man develops a kind of universal scorn, Kripalsingh develops nausea and disgust, which begins as self-disgust, and shame for his eccentric, depressed father. Both fear intimacy, and locked up in their narcissistic selves, both are incapable of the commitment and self-surrender that love demands. Both cherish isolation, but also feel the need to confess, perhaps to themselves, perhaps to an imaginary but hoped-for audience of confessors and judges. Yet neither can really endure judgment and what they seek through confession, while not quite absolution, is an unburdening and a release that Kripal calls “the final emptiness.”

One of the qualities shared by Mimic Man and Underground Man is that of a lack of will or inner motivation; a disinclination to choose to act, surrender to the pointlessness of things. Almost none of Kripal’s engagements with life spring from an autonomous desire to act or perform. Every role he plays, even as a boy, is a reaction to someone else’s idea of how he should represent himself. He eventually arrives at the conclusion that: “We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 25). Here, the confessant seems to valorize and celebrate his lack of will or autonomy. Identity, which in England becomes

“spectral, disintegrating, pointless, fluid” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 61), generally lacks solidity or substance. Salim will confess this as well in *A Bend in the River* and will raise the issue of whether a secure sense of self can ever be achieved in a context of constant political crisis and societal disintegration that is the common situation of those wretched former colonies that have come under Naipaul's withering gaze. Identity for Kripalsingh becomes a series of roles modeled always on an admired or envied Other or on some improbable fictional Hero.

Kripal is Camus's gallery of Absurd types: Actor, Dandy, Lover, Warrior, Conqueror and Writer; men who seek fulfillment and completeness via insistent role-playing, desperate carnality, pointless violence, unending conquest and the imposition of linguistic order on the formless chaos of experience. What Kripal lacks is the energy or drivenness of any of these archetypes as Camus envisaged them. He is too far-gone in deadness for that. But before he discovers the “sickness” and consolation of writing, it is the actor archetype encouraged by one or other of his acquaintances that he seeks most strenuously to fulfill.

Thus the text is littered with terms pertaining to acting: drama, theatre, comedy, fantasy, role, role-playing, game, scene, character, playacting, illusion, minstrel, clown, timing, licensed fool, joker, parody, performance. The impression conveyed by all these references to theatre and role-playing is that life itself, especially life on haphazard anarchic Isabella, is one vast clown show, a day-to-day serial of variety acts. The greatest actors are those hollow men who seek and gain powerless power: people like Kripalsingh the cripple and Browne the clown in *The Mimic Men*, or Meredith in *Guerillas*. Naipaul adds the postcolonial politician to Camus's list of absurd archetypes. The most driven, the most obsessed actors are those bearing, like Kripal, the deepest psychic wounds and those with the greatest deficiencies of character.

The link to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Sartre's *Nausea* is established by the frequency with which terms like ‘absurd’ and others suggesting revulsion and recoil, appear in the text. In Camus, the Absurd is most immediately typified by cyclic, tedious, repeated unfulfilling activity; meaningless routine and the ennui of a hollow life consumed by such routine. Kripalsingh is no more absurd than when he settles into the routine of his hollow anti-septic life in the bleak English boarding house where he now ekes out his days. It is typical of the self-deception of the confessional anti-hero that Kripal should seek to misrepresent this non-achievement as a strange sort of fulfillment: the closure of a cycle of existence in which, acting in accordance with the dictates of his Aryan ancestors, he has been “student, householder and man of affairs, recluse” (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 300). This bland, self-aggrandizing summary of a life in which there has been no willed choice of any of these roles, has itself been mimicked from the widow's sentimental interpretation of the phases of Kripal's father's life (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 153). Kripal is dishonestly appropriating to his own life, meaning that has previously been imposed on his father's madness.

Kripal's absurdity is linked to the themes of void, non-meaning, emptiness, silence, and notions of the futile and the ridiculous that surround his every action. The absurd is conveyed

through a design for anti-climax that informs the structuring of Kripal's narrative, where we know of the failure of all of his schemes and his final exile before we are told about the sequence of incidents that resulted in this exile. Anti-climax marks and mars Kripal's every achievement. For example, the fulfillment and perfection of his youthful sexual desire is marred by the fact that his soul-mate is his aunt Sally, and that the dreadful narcissistic "purity" of his incestuous embrace of what he terms almost his own flesh, destroys forever the possibility of a healthy reciprocal love-relationship with any other woman in the future (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 186-190). What he says he feels after he and Sally are discovered is total blankness: "no shame, no guilt, no anxiety" (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 190). There is seemingly, nothing to confess; yet this escapade damages Kripal forever. It is, in fact, the central trauma of Kripal's life, one that he needs to evade and deny even years afterwards in his supposedly frank confession. Kripal's method of coping with the trauma of lost, incestuous love is to deny and suppress any future feeling. He will eventually confess that he frequently lies to himself by underplaying and undervaluing his own emotional reactions to events (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 220).

Anti-climax also marks the crowning achievement of the Roman House that Kripal builds to herald his remarkable success as a land-developer and business magnate. Kripalsingh's wife and muse, the decentered, displaced drop-out Sandra, a recurrent object of his mocking caricature, leaves him on the very day of the bizarre house-warming party which ends when the guests in an ecstasy of envy and malice begin to smash crockery, furniture and glass-windows, and Kripalsingh in a paroxysm of rage—the first genuine emotion he has felt for well over a decade since his return to Isabella—drives them out of his house. Climax is anti-climax, and anti-climax is built even into the structuring of paragraphs that, if they begin in hope are almost certain to end in flatness, "the gold of the imagination giving way to the lead of reality" (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 13).

The Camus Absurd is illustrated by the recurrent themes of chaos, disorder, disturbance and formlessness. Kripal speaks of "this absurd disorder of placelessness" (Naipaul, *Mimic Men* 184). Camus ends *The Rebel* with the statement that humanity needs ceaselessly to pit its lucidity against "the savage formless movement of history" (265). While there is little of the energy of Camus's assertion in Kripal's conclusions about his own existential or artistic commitment, he does regard the completion of his memoirs as both an imposition of order on a chaotic jumble of events and feelings, and a prelude to fresh encounter with life: "I have cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action. It will be the action of a free man" (Naipaul, *Mimic* 300).

Whether Kripal will be capable of fresh action beyond his now paralyzed gaze at life from the sidelines is debatable. It was a question that worried Naipaul, who in *Guerillas* and *In a Free State* clearly questioned the value of detached voyeurism: the view from the Ridge in *Guerillas*, the detached authorial transient tourist's gaze in *In a Free State*, and in the dozen or so journalistic travelogues that, as imagination waned, he began to consider as more important than fiction.

The link to Sartre is, as we have illustrated, suggested by the term “nausea” and its attendant concepts of sickness, blight, corruption, disease, taint and stench. We have argued that Naipaul confronts the reader with nausea as a physical phenomenon in order to convey the existential dimensions of his protagonists’ and perhaps his own recoil from life. To nausea may be added Naipaul’s own term: “violation” and the attendant words such as rupture, damage, crippledom, frenzy and madness. These words are signposts in the geography of the universe within Kripalsingh’s ridden skull.

Dare one speculate about the connections that may exist between Kripalsingh, the complex mask, and Naipaul who fashioned him and forced the reader to see the world through his eyes? Naipaul adopted the confessional mode and adapted the confessional narrator from templates laid down by Dostoevsky, Camus, Sartre, Ellison and Denis Williams, at the point in time when he was trying to come to terms with his own “placelessness.” In his interviews between 1965 and 1976, that is just after *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and between *A Flag on the Island* (1967), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), *In a Free State* (1971), and *Guerillas* (1975), Naipaul was constantly working out his relationship to the land and region of his birth and to the wider world of letters.

Naipaul’s antipathy towards Trinidad, historical and contemporary, was openly expressed for the first time in *The Middle Passage*. He had been invited home by Premier Eric Williams who was acting on the suggestion of C. L. R. James that both the West Indies and its brilliant novelist would benefit from his return to the region. The islands would benefit from Naipaul’s critical insight into their history, identity and efforts at building new nations, while Naipaul himself would be rescued from alienation through a re-acquaintance with his origins. Naipaul asserted that “the history of this West Indian futility” would not be satisfactorily told because history was about “creation and achievement” and nothing had been created in the West Indies. In so far as identity was concerned, the region lacked that as well. Ancestral identities had all been mutually eroded and violated and no new people had emerged with a character and purpose of their own. Naipaul used the return trip, not to strengthen non-existent roots, but to explain an alienation he had always felt from the land of his birth and to justify his chosen exile abroad.

As a self-justifying confessional, *The Middle Passage* provided the transition between the early Naipaul and the later dark, acerbic, melancholy, doomsday prophet that he became. His statements after *The Middle Passage* record a growing distance from his origins. In a 1965 interview with Derek Walcott Naipaul referred to Trinidad as “a haphazard sort of society” in contrast to India, a society that for all its expanse and variety he saw as “self-contained and unique. It is possible to get at the truth or to appear to get at it” (Walcott 6).

Naipaul noted then that: “I do not think one can ever abandon one’s allegiance to one’s community, or at any rate to the idea of one’s community. This is something I feel must be said” (Walcott 6). On the other hand, he confessed that: “I find this place frightening. I think this is a very sinister place” (Walcott 6). Naipaul’s memory in *The Middle Passage* of Trinidad as a

“nightmare,” had simply been reinforced by his vision of the three-year old nation as “a very sinister place.” “A Flag on the Island” where a tropical island is presented through the nauseated eyes of a decadent American, is Naipaul’s first attempt to write about this sinister place. *The Mimic Men* is his second and quite comprehensive effort at Absurdist confessional. One notes that Naipaul’s uncle, Rudranath Capildeo, one of the possible prototypes for Kripalsingh, was at the time caught up in Trinidad’s racially polarized and darkening politics.

The holocaust of Guyana 1962-1965 with its riots, burnings, deaths and thousands of injuries had cast a shadow over the politics of post-Independence Trinidad and Tobago whose population of Afro-Creoles, Indo-Creoles and a substantial group of Caucasians, mixed races, Syrian-Lebanese and Chinese was sufficiently similar to Guyana’s to make sensitive Trinidadians take note of the warning. Naipaul registered alarm at the growing manifestations of racialism in Trinidadian politics. He also told Derek Walcott that, “the culture has changed” (Walcott 7): “that aspiration has been dropped, that the manners of the proletariat have infiltrated the values of the rest of the society” (Walcott 6).

As Sparrow’s narrator was even then declaring in “Solomon Out” (1965), “This place too damn democratic.” Oddly emerging as spokesperson for the upper and middle class elites, groups he had dismissed in *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul complained that the trouble with both colony and metropole was that, “Political views are now being imposed on the top from below. And fashions. And entertainments” (Walcott 7). Naipaul was firmly against popular politics and popular culture, manifestations that he considered hostile and threatening to what his work represented. Thus while Naipaul asserted *a priori* that one cannot “abandon allegiance to one’s community” and declared: “I have ... grown out of Trinidad and in a way I am grateful to the Trinidad I knew as a boy for making me what I am” (Walcott 7), the Trinidad to which he was grateful no longer existed. The distressing proletariat were on the move not only in the crumbling ex-colonies playing at independence, but alarmingly in England, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Five years later in an interview with Israel Shenker of *The New York Times Magazine*, Naipaul no longer felt he had to acknowledge his place of origin, or show allegiance or gratitude to any community. He explained that:

The society I came from was colonial, and was originally a slave society to which, later, people like myself, from Asia, went. There was a double inferiority about it: the slave society which created nothing, which depended for everything on the master society—and the Asiatic living in this closed society of myth. (49)

Naipaul had gone back to the absolute and uncompromising position of *The Middle Passage*. Such a place deserved no one’s allegiance or gratitude. And what about “the values of the rest of the society” (Walcott 6), for whose deterioration he had in his 1965 interview with Walcott blamed the proletariat. Naipaul had this to say in 1971 about the aspiring colonials of his

youthful years: “The people I saw were little people who were mimicking upper-class respectability. They had been slaves, and you can’t write about that in the way that Tolstoy wrote about even his backward society—for his society was whole and the one I knew was not” (Shenker 49)

So writing about a fragmented, haphazard society required models quite different from ones that could be found in Indian or Russian literatures, the literatures of “whole” societies. Discovering the existentialists, Naipaul discovered modern European models that were not fashioned out of the notion of a “whole” culture, but out of Ezra Pound’s “botched civilization” and “an old bitch gone in the teeth” (64) and T. S. Eliot’s “stony rubbish” and “heap of broken images” (176, 53). The opening chapter of Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* is strongly reminiscent of Eliot’s “Preludes” and “The Waste Land.” Existentialist ideas, particularly those of Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* provided Naipaul with the theoretical base for writing about his own uncreated and uncreative society.

The modernists’ redefinition of Europe had been taking place for at least seven decades before *The Mimic Men*. It inspired him to write *The Mimic Men*, in which Kripalsingh, the confessional protagonist, abandons any notions of allegiance or gratitude to his corrupt little island located in its “tainted encircling sea” and lives the rest of his life as a mixture of refugee and guest in the refurbished once fine now tawdry and tasteless aristocratic castle that symbolizes what Olde England has become for this Indo-Saxon colonial.

One cannot but compare Naipaul, who says that as a colonial he had emerged from “a great vacuum” and that he really had no society with which he could be in dialogue, with Kripalsingh, who is in fact living in a great vacuum, but who weeps with gratitude when his presence as “our overseas guest” is acknowledged by the hierarchy of the English great house. Throughout the sixties Naipaul’s burden was that his talent remained unrecognized; that he didn’t have “an audience” in England, the land he had run to, nor did he have “political backing” from his own society, the people from whom he had escaped. He was now a man in permanent transition. He lamented to Mel Gussow: “The writers who get the attention belong to recognized cultures and societies and countries. That keeps you warm. I thought that my writing would make its way by itself, but there are other things that are needed—a kind of political backing” (19). Trinidad, had not supplied him, could not supply him, with the backing or recognition he needed to find “a way into another world” (Rowe-Evans 57). The place was a cultural desert and, “the writer has no living cultural world about him, and has to make his way into another world, one which is entirely alien to him” (Rowe-Evans 57). So Naipaul set out to discover and speak his own truths, to make his own space, and to establish his independence of people, nations, and external support of any kind: “I come from a small society; I was aware that I had no influence in the world; I was apart from it. And then I belonged to a minority group, I moved away, became a foreigner, became a writer” (Rowe-Evans 59).

Writing out of this exile that was at once imposed on and chosen by him, Naipaul like Kripalsingh, became definable not via his origins, ethnicity or the colony-become-nation-become-neo-colony from which he came, but solely through his writing: "I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name" (Gussow 17). This chosen path led to isolation, freedom and non-involvement in people, ideologies or causes. Naipaul declared with pride in 1971: "I have never had to work for hire; I made a vow at an early age never to work, never to become involved with people in that way. That has given me a freedom from people, from entanglements, from rivalries, from competition. I have no enemies, no rivals, no masters; I fear no one" (Rowe-Evans 59).

In spite of this bold batonnier's litany of pride and defiance, Naipaul also said that he "began with this very romantic vision of the writer as a free, gifted, talented, creative, admired person" but soon grew to recognize writing as ordeal: "In fact writing is just a sort of disease, a sickness. It's a form of incompleteness, it's a form of anguish, it's despair" (Shenker 51). Here, far more than in their common and confessed pursuit of au pair girls and prostitutes lies the link between Naipaul and his mask, Kripalsingh. Both are examples of the writer as Absurd man, seeking completeness and fulfillment of the spirit through the organization of chaotic experience into meaning via the shaping and arrangement of words. Both are examples of man driven to write as if life and sanity depended on it. Both affirm writing as sickness and therapy, as the imposition of order on outward and inner chaos.

Naipaul feels "despair, desperation, and panic" (Op. cit. Rowe-Evans). "All my work begins in panic," Naipaul confesses to Adrian Rowe-Evans:

It's a feeling you can't communicate, explain to other people; you can assuage it only by starting to write, even though your mind is as blank as the next man's; you have no consciousness of anything you want to say. And then, given the panic, the next thing you need is a certain fortitude, a tenacity, to carry on through all the ups and downs. They are very painful, these downs that can hit you even when the work is quite advanced, and you have been practicing for a long time. They can last for years, literally; and the only cure is to lever yourself out of it, bodily, by sheer work. And sheer luck - you need luck all the time. (Rowe-Evans 61)

What lies at the end of all this agony for the writer, the confessant, the writer as confessant, or the confessant as writer? Clarification, perhaps; absolution and catharsis, maybe. But clarification, absolution, and catharsis are gifts that emerge out of having lived and worked through the ordeal with fortitude, and not as bequests from any agency outside of the writer as straitened subject. Whatever the confessant's concern with the community he has been forced to abandon, such absolution as he achieves is private and cannot be transferred to that already doomed world.

Naipaul's Ferdinand, named after the young duke in *The Tempest* whose marriage to admired Miranda signals the birth of a "brave new world" purged of the sins of the fathers, is the least hopeless and most evolved African portrayed in *A Bend in the River*. Yet, his final prognosis is bitterly pessimistic:

Nobody's going anywhere. We're all going to hell, and every man knows this in his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning. That is why everyone is so frantic. Everyone wants to make his money and run away. But where? That is what is driving people mad. They feel they are losing the place they can run back to. (*A Bend* 272)

This place of imagined refuge is, for Ferdinand, not Kripalsingh's defunct European castle in the countryside, but the tribal village in the bush of his childhood. But the village too is being systematically destroyed by the multinational mining companies, and there will be no future in what used to be the world of Ferdinand's past.

The confessional mode has provided Naipaul with a relatively safe vantage point from which to observe these grim scenarios in which dead-ends are already inherent in green beginnings. Such bitter irony is meat and drink for the nauseated confessant, be he underground or mimic man. Confession offers not only the possibility of a partial personal catharsis, but the opportunity to deliver the severest condemnation on both colonial history and the ruined societies it has left and continues to leave in its wake. It is, finally, the Trickster's triumph that Naipaul seeks: the privilege of becoming at one and the same time confessant and confessor; of achieving simultaneously the postures of self-exposure, self-diagnosis, self-healing and the flagellant's self-righteous joy in excoriating the hide of an already doomed old new world.

Notes

¹John Donne, “A Hymne to God the Father,” in Grierson (Ed), (337-338).

²See George Lamming’s *Season of Adventure*; see also, George Kent, “A Conversation with George Lamming.”

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