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“The history that had made me:” The Making and Self-Making of V.S. Naipaul

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Possibly, too, this mode of feeling went deeper and was an ancestral inheritance, something that went with the history that had made me....

V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*

And since no one can really see himself, I am sure that we would have been surprised and perhaps even wounded ... by what the others saw.

Willie Chandran, *Half a Life*, by V.S. Naipaul

I saw him as a very early colonial, someone with a feeling of incompleteness ... someone who ... had to reinvent himself. I saw in him some of my own early promptings (and the promptings of other people I knew).

V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World*

My title and the epigraphs are intended to signal two aspects of V.S. Naipaul's literary personality that I should like to speak about. By literary personality I mean the personality that is embodied in the art of his books. One aspect is his acknowledgement, an analytical acknowledgement, of that personality as the product of historical circumstances, including, crucially, the time and place of his birth and early life. The other is the idea that the process of self-realization, of the recognition of one's self as the product of one's origins and circumstances, is also, with Naipaul as with the rest of us, a process of self-invention. Further, these two aspects are integrally related in the matter of the recognition and construction of identity. And in the identity-performance feature we may also read a made-in-Trinidad stamp. There is in Naipaul, never mind the dispassionate, "objective," undemonstrative, transparent style for which he is famous, a subtle manifestation of that flair for the histrionic which he illuminates in his characters.

Naipaul's derogatory view of the West Indies is only too familiar a talking point, as is the outrage with which many West Indians have responded to that view. He would seem to have relished the role of goad to West Indian conscience and ego, and in this he is applauded by some critics, largely from the First World West, who see the outraged response simply as what is to be expected from insecure people afraid to look squarely at themselves. But the popular construct of an absolute opposition of extremes is an over-simplification. There is some truth on both sides. Naipaul's apparent rejection of Trinidad and the West Indies is not so unqualified as it may at first appear.

His bleak report on the West Indies, whether, say, in *The Middle Passage* (1962) or *The Mimic Men* (1967) or in statements made to interviewers over the years, would seem totally dismissive, working to distance him from the region and to deny any debt to it. He has explicitly rejected the label “West Indian writer” for himself. In a 1958 article, he argued, “The only way out [of a too-limited audience and reputation] is to cease being a regional writer” (“London”14). Later he would be more cutting: “‘West Indian’ is a political word. It’s all the things I reject. It’s not me” (Michener 108). We may ask, “Why is ‘West Indian’ a political word, as against, say, ‘British,’ ‘Russian’ or ‘Japanese’? But that’s for another time.

So Naipaul, fifty years ago, in the first flush of success for his very Trinidadian “social comedies” (to use his term) was preparing to aim for wider horizons of subject matter, to cease being “regional.” He had by 1958 published *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), and *Miguel Street* (1959) was imminent. Curiously enough, though, his next novel, his next book, which did not appear until 1961, and which was to be considered by many his greatest work and a classic of world literature, was the very Trinidadian *A House for Mr Biswas*. It was only after he had published his West Indian travel book, *A Middle Passage* (1962), which started the “tracing match” between him and the region, that he seemed to make a clean break and produced his “English” novel, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963).

So he took to the road, to become what the Jamaican painter and poet Gloria Escoffery mischievously called “Mr. Big Time Naipaul,” who “has left [his] home shores behind” to “become the rootless internationalist he now claims to be”(3). Naipaul had ended his 1958 article on the handicap of the regional writer by saying, “Unless I am able to refresh myself by travel—to Trinidad, to India—I fear that living here [England] will eventually lead to my own sterility...” (*Barracoon* 16-17). He has indeed traveled, not only to Trinidad and to India, but to the world of Islam, to Africa, Argentina, the U.S. South, and to other places in the Caribbean, and his works, both non-fiction and fiction, continue to be the products of those travels. Of particular interest to my argument, though, is that at the outset, in as normal a statement as we could expect from any writer, he had identified Trinidad and India as “source,” as the places to which he needed to travel for creative refreshment. He returned to Trinidad (and behind Trinidad India) repeatedly and in different ways, whether literally, or for fictive locale and subject matter, or by way of research into the history of the place. Taken together, these returns dramatize his effort to understand himself as the product of his beginnings. His work, taken as a whole in process, is a quest for that self which, to adapt Wordsworth’s dictum, we simultaneously “perceive” and “half create” (Wordsworth 146-150).

There has been a certain touchiness about West Indian umbrage at Naipaul’s derogatory remarks on the region, a touchiness that may be a sign of the sense of insecurity inherited by the ex-colonized. By contrast, Naipaul’s sneering comments on contemporary English society or the Tony Blair government or Oxford University have raised no more than a ripple of amusement, perhaps a patronizing ripple, in the British. There is no evidence that they feel threatened. One unfortunate result of all this is that some West Indians, in reaction to Naipaul’s harsh, dismissive

representations of the West Indies, his apparent dissociation of himself from the place, have for their part denied him any relevance to the region and dismissed him virtually unread. But there have been West Indians over the years who have continued to read Naipaul seriously and discriminatingly, recognizing bias and limitation where they see it, while benefiting from his shrewd and challenging insights into our world, and delighting in his artistry. Running through this continuing attention is the conviction that Naipaul has not lost, cannot lose his West Indian connection.

The argument for Naipaul's indelible connection with his native place takes various turns. For example, Gloria Escoffery quotes from *The Mimic Men* two paragraphs in which the narrator-protagonist describes himself as a schoolboy in Trinidad being transported through rain by his father on his bicycle. Then she asks:

How can a writer who can give the essence of an emotional experience between father and son in such a translucent, simple, deeply perceptive way be accused of being unsympathetic in his attitude to the people with whom he grew up? The same merits ... appear in that masterpiece of humanity, *A House for Mr Biswas*. (Escoffery 3)

Taking a cue from Escoffery, one may find all sorts of other examples to support the same question; to select just two: Naipaul's review of C.L.R. James's *Beyond A Boundary* and his short story "Tell Me Who To Kill," remarkable not only for its masterful use of Trinidadian Creole, but also for its intense compassion for the individual victim of society.

Mervyn Morris, commenting on one of Naipaul's more notorious pronouncements, "Africa has no future" (Hardwick 36), says:

We know he doesn't literally mean what he has said, but we may bristle at what sounds like gratuitous rudeness ... Some of these moments may perhaps be seen ... as delightfully Trinidadian—Naipaul giving rein to verbal playfulness, outrageously following where the straight-man questioner has led. (12)

In other words, even at some moments when Naipaul may intend to be absolutely serious, we may read him as engaging in a kind of picong. There have been moments when, strange as it may seem, reading Lovelace and Naipaul, I have been struck by what seems to me a delightfully Trinidadian consanguinity between the two, notwithstanding important differences in their overall projects. At these times I sense an expressiveness characteristic of the land of "mas," and a flair for the moment when performance turns into pappyshow.

A leading idea in John Hearne's long-ago review of *The Middle Passage* is that Naipaul is never more West Indian than in his embarrassment at the West Indies and in his readiness to put down the region. The idea is there, for instance, in Hearne's conceding that, "Naipaul is a great deal more than just another West Indian scholarship winner, bitterly ashamed of his

origins” (66). What perhaps stands out most from this statement is not the qualifier but the basic assertion, that Naipaul *is* “another West Indian scholarship winner, bitterly ashamed of his origins.” Hearne posits that Naipaul, “is too intelligent not to recognize how many of these limitations he shares with his fellow West Indians” ... “many of [the] limitations he finds in them” (66).

Still, Hearne began his review by conceding Naipaul’s sharp eye for “all that is pathetic, and so often contemptible, in our society” (65), suggesting in effect that West Indians need to pay attention to Naipaul, notwithstanding any shortcomings and biases in his way of seeing. Raoul Pantin is strong on this need to pay attention. He observed, cynically:

Naipaul’s painful misfortune may not only be his having looked Trinidad and Tobago and half the Third World straight in the eye and described what he’s seen: the havoc colonialism leaves in its wake, all those “half-made people and half-made societies,” so frail, so insecure, so full of mimicry, so mired in confused values. (8)

Early in *The Enigma of Arrival* there comes a paragraph germane to my argument. Reflecting on his feeling of the “perfection” of the Wiltshire manor house in whose grounds he has come to live, and on the seemingly paradoxical idea that such signs of “decay” as it presented were essential to his sense of the place’s perfection, Naipaul wrote:

To see the possibility, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament. Those nerves had been given me as a child in Trinidad partly by our family circumstances: the half-ruined or broken-down houses we lived in, our many moves, our general ancestral inheritance, something that came with the history that had made me: not only India, with its ideas of a world outside men’s control, but also the colonial plantations or estates of Trinidad, to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century—estates of which this Wiltshire estate, where I now lived, had been the apotheosis. (52)

First, then, there is the basic acknowledgement that he was made by his history, and that Trinidad is a central fact of that history. Then there are some details which signify definitive factors in that making and in the product made: the references to “nerves,” to “the possibility, the certainty, of ruin,” to “the half-ruined or broken down,” to his family’s “many moves,” and to “colonial plantations.” These signifiers are consonant with major, characteristic features of Naipaul’s writings, and they are key factors in the disposition and action, or inaction, of his characters. He haunts himself in his characters, even when he seems to distance them so markedly from himself.

These factors combine to produce the particular set of nerves that constitute the writer V.S. Naipaul. I use “set” in two senses: as group or collection and as disposition, as in “mindset” or “set of face.” So the nerves are a result of the colonial condition. As Naipaul states in *Enigma*,

"I had taken to England all the rawness of my colonial's nerves, and those nerves had more or less remained ..." (95). Again:

The history I carried with me, together with the self-awareness that had come with my education and ambition, had sent me into the world with a sense of glory dead; and in England had given me the rawest stranger's nerves. (52)

"Nerves" connotes a certain anxiety of self, an existential dread of the violation and reduction of self. This heightened sense of "the possibility, the certainty of ruin" has a causative link to the reduced circumstances of his beginnings, to the impoverishment of his "Indian ancestors [who] had been transported in the last century" to satisfy the greed and ego of the colonizer and the plantation system of indenture that had succeeded slavery. This original transportation and uprooting were followed only too inevitably by the "many moves" of the family within the small space of the island, a movement, a restlessness and rootlessness fictionalized from early in the story of Mohun Biswas and repeated in his fictions on a global canvas, right up to the drifting of Willie Chandran, protagonist of his two latest novels, *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), from India to London to Mozambique to Berlin to India to London. This movement, fictive, fictionalized or autobiographical, is an antiheroic, postmodern, globalized variation on the picaresque.

This Naipaul, this personality, this particular set of nerves accounts for Naipaul's choice of the characters and societies which have been his focus. Frank Kermode has noted that, in *A Bend in the River*, "a somewhat Naipaul-like character speaks of experiencing 'a colonial rage ... a rage with the people who had allowed themselves to be corralled into a foreign fantasy'" (11). It is hardly surprising that Naipaul's artistic focus has been largely on the colonial, ex-colonial, neo-colonial, quasi-colonial Third World. To take the most recent example: Willie Chandran, of *Half a Life*, is a confused, ineffectual throw-off of British colonialism in India. Named, by laughable accident, after the British novelist W. Somerset Maugham, he ends up in a Portuguese African colony (really Mozambique) when colonial rule is sputtering rudely to its end. The last third of the novel is a persuasively fictionalized report on the rude end of colonial rule in the country, and on the seemingly inevitable breakdown, decay and abandonment that ensue for what was already only a half-made, half-ruined society.

The set of nerves that is Naipaul makes a virtual fetish of wholeness and purity. It expresses itself in a horror of any violation of self, of hybridity, of damage or taint to pristine or wished-for completeness. It is deeply disturbed by anything "half-and-half." In labeling the life of Willie Chandran *Half a Life*, Naipaul was retrospectively labeling all the metamorphoses of the protagonist of all his books (and note "protagonist," singular). And they all relate to Naipaul. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, in quest of himself, reflecting on the fact that Jack, his English neighbor, "lived among ruins, among superseded things," he had written: "That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself, attached to myself, a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a

half-neglected estate ...” (19). In *Enigma* too, recalling his first journey away from Trinidad, he recalls how “close [he was] to the village ways of his Asian-Indian community,” despite the fact that, “Unhappy in his extended family, he was distrustful of larger, communal groupings” (102-103). “But that half-Indian world, that world removed in time and space from India, and mysterious to the man, its language not even half understood, its religion and religious rites not grasped, that half-Indian world was the social world the man knew” (*Enigma* 103). Incidentally, the tactic of referring to himself in the third person, as “the man,” dramatizes the notion of autobiography as fiction, as self-construction.

Willie Chandran, a half-caste man with a half-and-half name and a half-Portuguese, half-African wife, finds, in the Portuguese African colony, that “the world [he] had entered was only a half-and-half world, [where] many of the people ... considered themselves, deep down, people of the second rank. They were not fully Portuguese and that was where their own ambition lay” (*Half a Life* 150). So, for instance, Jacinto Correia, who “had told his children, who were studying in Lisbon, that they were on no account to use public transport in Lisbon. ... People must never think of them as colonial nobodies” (*Half a Life* 179). There were in the colony “Portuguese and Africans and people of the half-and-half world.” It is the last named, his immediate circle, who are the focus of Willie’s scrutiny. They are a fairly well off clique of “estate people,” but insecure in their half-and-half status, an insecurity deepened by the imminent collapse of such colonial order as exists.

To feel that one is a colonial nobody, a half-and-half person, to have one’s individuality violated, one’s wholeness tainted, or to suffer what Willie calls “racial diminution” (*Enigma* 117), is about the gravest degradation that the Naipaulian persona can experience. Here again the roots of this feature may be found in Naipaul’s childhood experience, as he himself relates it:

I have always been fighting a hysteria that plagued me as a child. ... I mean the fear of being reduced to nothing, of feeling crushed. It’s partly the old colonial anxiety of having one’s individuality destroyed. And it also goes back to the family I grew up in—a typically Indian extended family. (Michener 108)

This near-pathological horror at feeling that one has been thus tainted may occur in a variety of situations. In an interview with Margaria Fichtner, Naipaul once told of having been sent by someone a review he had written of one of Naipaul’s books:

It was meant to be very kind, but it was trivial, and I was so appalled at this kind of schoolboy attitude to this work that I felt, you know ... sullied ... I felt really so violated ... and for one day I was cast down into a kind of gloom of feeling sullied. (2D)

This feeling has something in common with young Biswas’ feeling ashamed of his place of domicile at Pagotes.

The nerves, the precariousness, the intimations of ruin, the dread of violation, taint, damage to the self—these are features of the self that Naipaul writes as he moves between autobiography, reportage and fiction. The travels and dislocations of the Naipaul persona at one and the same time represent the quest for self-knowledge as well as the self that is discovered or constructed.

The idea that people fashion identities for themselves has run through Naipaul's work from the beginning. This self-making has involved theatricality, performance. This feature has manifested itself at different levels. At first it was largely comic and satirical, an escape, for the characters, from the pressures of circumstance into play-acting and fantasy. But it has also and increasingly been presented as an inevitable mode of the assertion of individuality. One performs one's idea of one's best self. Alternatively, one may collude in the violation of one's self by performing the degraded self which others more powerful impose on one. This collusion is painfully illustrated in the documentary opening and closing narratives of *In A Free State*: "Prologue, from a Journal: The Tramp at Piraeus" and "Epilogue, from a Journal: The Circus at Luxor."

In the former, Naipaul is enraged by the mocking cruelty meted out by his fellow passengers to the tramp; in the latter by the waiter with the camel-whip, for the pleasure of the tourists, to the boys groveling for apples and bits of sandwiches tossed to them in sport. But Naipaul is also enraged at how, in both episodes, the victims seem so self-degradingly to accept the role of abject inferior and victim. The same principle is at work thirty years later in *Half a Life*, most strikingly in the brief episode of the "big, light-eyed mulatto" tiler "abused and shouted at by the Portuguese owner" (154) of the restaurant on which the tiler is working. Willie Chandran's (and Naipaul's) sense of outrage is heightened by the tiler's compliance: "He never replied to the shouts of the owner, whom he could so easily have knocked down. He just kept on working" (*Half a Life* 154-155). And Willie asks, "Who will rescue that man? Who will avenge him?" (*Half a Life* 155)

In *A Bend in the River*, role-playing, as both idea and image, is essential. When the protagonist, Salim, visits London and falls in love with Kareisha, she shows what seems like a natural affection towards him, and he remarks: "I luxuriated in this affection of Kareisha's, and acted out my man's role a little. It was wonderfully soothing. ... Acted—there was a lot of that about me at this time" (248). Here we see a major aspect of Salim's view of human behavior—the idea that people, out of chronic need or weakness, are always prone to play-acting their lives.

When he says that, "there was a lot of that about me at this time," he no doubt means that his behavior at this time involved much role-playing. However, there is also a lot of acting about him all the time, in the sense that he is always noticing that people around him are putting on an act. Besides, it is not only on this occasion that he finds himself play-acting. One may even argue that the ultimate irony is that Salim's projection of himself as the painstakingly honest lifter of masks, exposé of the truth, is the novel's most elaborate instance of role-playing.

As is made explicit at the end of “Prologue to an Autobiography,” the purpose of that narrative is to show how, by working back into his Trinidad history—into the family from which he emerged, and particularly into the stressful life of his father and his struggle to assert his individuality in the face of humiliating circumstances—he became V.S. Naipaul the writer, whom he was destined or willed himself to be. The process is in effect one of producing an identity by excavating and interpreting the history by which one sees oneself as having been made. The process of identity quest, of developing the idea of oneself, is reenacted and extended in a subtle manner in *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*.

Enigma is centrally about Naipaul’s view of his development, his journey as a writer, and how all that he has written has contributed to that quest for himself which he sees his writing as having been: “Every exploration, every book, added to my knowledge, qualified my earlier idea of myself and the world” (154). The main movement of *Enigma* is towards the narrator’s revision of his initial and indeed persuasive view of Jack’s garden. The initial need and satisfaction were to see Jack’s garden as a natural emanation of its locale, and Jack himself as an extension of that emanation, engaged in a natural, timeless activity instinct with the sacredness of antiquity. So initially it is with “wonder” and “envy” that Naipaul contemplates “the satisfactions of his life—a man in his own setting, as I thought (to me an especially happy condition), a man in tune with the seasons and his landscape ...” (*Enigma* 31). However, Naipaul comes to see that this view of Jack and his garden is like his picture of a Trinidad beach in a “world before men, before the settlement,” that this view is also “romance and ignorance.”

So much that had looked traditional, natural, emanations of the landscape, things that country people did—the planting out of annuals, the tending of the geese, the clipping of the hedge, the pruning of the fruit trees—now turned out not to have been traditional or instinctive after all, but to have been part of Jack’s way.
(*Enigma* 47)

“Jack’s way.” Each of us must *construct* our life, not merely live it or endure it, must construct it according to our best idea of ourselves, *must*, in our way, make it, in the best sense, a fiction. Which is why I think that Naipaul is precisely and provocatively right to call *Enigma* a novel, when it is so transparently an autobiography. He is acknowledging that every autobiography, every biography, is ultimately a fiction, a construct, something shaped according to an idea, as indeed is every life. “Jack’s way.” So also does the Chaplinesque, losing Biswas have *his way*, even though in another sense he never has his way. Jack, even Jack, lives in the midst of ruin, of decay and flux, of newness and change; but he imposes his idea of himself on this futility, he shapes a garden, a world out of the seeming chaos, as the writer shapes a world.

A Way in the World incorporates the idea that the apparent truths that we see depend on our way of seeing, our way of looking. We each *make* (construct) our way in the world. In this collection of narratives, labeled “a sequence” in the English edition, but, teasingly, “a novel” in the American, the travel trope works to articulate the idea of personal self-invention, and how

this idea connects with the issue of identity and the *agon* with history, the issue of understanding and coming to terms with the past, issues which have been virtual obsessions with so many West Indian writers of Naipaul's generation.

One of the links between the characters—real, historical or imaginary—in *A Way in the World* is that they are all travelers of one kind or another, or that their identities have been in some way determined by journeys of one kind or another. Take, for instance, the first one depicted in the book, a relatively minor personage, who might seem at first glance not to fit this pattern, but whose story introduces what are to prove central concerns of the book. He is Leonard Side, who "dresses" dead bodies at Parry's Funeral Parlor, but also does flower arranging "on the side" and teaches the members of the Women's Auxiliary Association to make bread and cakes. This is just the sort of bizarre juxtaposition that Naipaul delights in. There are others. For instance, although the schoolteacher who tells the story to Naipaul knew that Side "was a Mohammedan," he was at the same time "so much a man of his job—laying out Christian bodies, though nobody thought of it quite like that—that in that bedroom of his he even had a framed picture of Christ in Majesty, radiating light and gold, and lifting a finger of blessing" (8). The schoolteacher's shock involves the knowledge "that the picture wasn't there for the religion alone: it was also for the beauty, the colours, the gold, the long wavy hair of Christ" (8).

Ultimately the sense of the incongruous, the bizarre, even the morbid, that attaches to Side is symptomatic of an incompleteness of self-knowledge, an incompleteness related to his loss of ancestral inheritance, his displacement, his loss of history:

He knew he was a Mohammedan, in spite of the picture of Christ in the bedroom. But he would have had almost no idea of where he or his ancestors came from. He wouldn't have guessed that the name Side might have been a version of Sayed, and that his grandfather or great-grandfather might have come from a Shia Muslim group in India. From Lucknow, perhaps; there was even a street in St James called Lucknow Street. All Leonard Side would have known of himself and his ancestors would have been what he had awakened to in his mother's house in St James. In that he was like the rest of us. (10)

That last sentence—"In that he was like the rest of us"—is crucial to my argument about Naipaul's understanding of how Trinidad made him.

Further, Naipaul drops hints, here and there throughout the book, of his sense of identification with these characters, and of the idea of himself and his own quest for self, inheritance and "home" as also being subjects of *A Way in the World*. (The title of the Side chapter is "An Inheritance.") The first sentence of the book is "I left home more than forty years ago" (3). That word "home," uttered so easily, so "normally," has a remarkable ring, coming as it did at that point in Naipaul's writing journey, and the narrative that follows, through the stories of the various characters, is threaded by Naipaul's various returns to Trinidad. These returns

mark stages in his own self-invention. Perhaps it is significant that the final chapter, which ends with the grimly ironic return of another Trinidadian, as a corpse in a coffin, to be “dressed” in Parry’s Funeral Parlour—perhaps it is significant to Naipaul’s own story that this chapter is entitled “Home Again.” And what is Naipaul’s Nobel Lecture if not another return, to construct a succinct explanation of the trajectory of his life’s work? “I was born in a small country town called Chaguanas, two or three miles inland from the Gulf of Paria” (Postscript 183).

“In that he was like the rest of us.” Naipaul includes himself in the collective dilemma. Later, having introduced another character, the talented Trinidadian “Blair,”—who is to be assassinated in the African country where he went to work as an adviser to the Government, Naipaul says to the reader:

Remember him (like me) trailing all the strands of his own complicated past, animated by that past, feeling the current running with him ... and feeling (again like me) as he studied after work that he was at the most hopeful time of his life. (*A Way* 27-28)

Again, having given his reading of the new black consciousness which he encounters on one return to Trinidad, his take on “the sacrament of the square” (Woodford Square), Naipaul writes:

Much of this feeling might have been in me—I was full of nerves on this return, for all kinds of reasons—but I believe I was only amplifying something that was true. The history of the place was known, its reminders were all around us; scratch us and we all bled. (*A Way* 333-34)

So one may recognize in others undesirable aspects of oneself, aspects which derive from one’s history and which one might instinctively wish to suppress. While the recognition bespeaks a kind of maturity, at the same time it may help to explain one’s “hang-ups.” When I contemplate Naipaul’s “put-down” of African-Caribbean people and black people in general, remembering these sentences from *The Enigma of Arrival* steadies me:

In Puerto Rico there had been the Trinidad Negro in a tight jacket on his way to Harlem. Here was a man from Harlem or black America on his way to Germany. In each case there were aspects of myself. But, with my Asiatic background, I resisted the comparison (126-27)

Might it be that the similarity of shaping experience is so uncomfortably strong that it provokes a countervailing compulsion to establish distance between the two subjects, for fear of taint, loss of self, and, to use Naipaul’s term, “racial diminution”?

If Leonard Side does not “understand his nature” because he does not know his history, Naipaul also concedes that full self-knowledge may be an impossibility, as is anyone’s knowledge of another, including the writer’s knowledge of his characters:

... I cannot really explain the mystery of Leonard Side's inheritance. Most of us know the parents and grandparents we come from. But 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. I might say that an ancestor of Leonard Side's came from the dancing groups of Lucknow, the lewd men who painted their faces and tried to live like women. But that would only be a fragment of his inheritance, a fragment of the truth. We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves. (*A Way* 11)

That is as poignant and as resonant a chord as one will hear in all of Naipaul. Here is the acclaimed truth-sayer telling us that the truth is fragments.

"Few of us," writes Naipaul, "are without the feeling that we are incomplete" (128). So we must, as it were, invent complete selves in order to make some purposeful way in the world. Indeed, in order to live we must construct our worlds—to each person, each generation, each culture, each civilization its own: "We all inhabit 'constructs' of a world. Ancient peoples had their own. Our grandparents had their own; we cannot absolutely enter into their constructs. Every culture has its own: men are infinitely malleable" (159).

Ultimately, in the journey that is his writing, a writing that repeatedly returns to his past as he moves forward in the present, Naipaul seeks to construct a complete, inviolable self, which can report with authority and dispassion on the fragmented, uneasy selves that he sees through his writer's eye. As Michael Gowra remarked:

Virtually all his work since the 1984 "Prologue to an Autobiography" has burnished the shield of his own myth, revisiting the scenes of his earlier travels, recapitulating the story of how he stepped from colonial Trinidad into the history of English literature. (9)

Or again, this from John Bayley:

Naipaul thoroughly understands the romance of himself—what the novelist John Cowper Powys called his life illusion—the inner saga of himself and his destiny which each person secretly carries alongside the physical circumstances of his existence. (3)

This self-in-performance, this "life illusion," which is not really all that secret, is built, one might say simplified, around a few key characteristics.

To try to draw together the different threads that go to make the discovered or constructed self is to see how Naipaul's books play off against, speak to and with one another. It is to understand all the better his own summary of himself, that is, the self realized in the writing: "I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book, intuitively sensed and, in the case of the

fiction, intuitively worked out, stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it” (“Postscript” 182-183). So, for instance, as James Woods remarks, “Many of the elements in [Naipaul’s] memoir *Finding the Centre* are repeated in the novel *Half a Life*,” and in the latter “Naipaul seems to be writing a very dark variation on his own circumstances” (34). Similarly, *A House for Mr Biswas* is subsumed in *The Enigma of Arrival*, and the two are mutually illuminating. *A House for Mr. Naipaul* would have been a not-inappropriate title for the latter.

In 1993, when V.S. Naipaul became the first recipient of the David Cohen Prize, Britain’s then newest and biggest literary prize, I wrote a small piece for *The Jamaica Observer* to mark the achievement. In it I said, among other things:

Naipaul is quoted as having remarked, on hearing of his latest award, “It is the British Literature Prize and I like that, because this writing career of mine has been conducted here.” This sounds like a perfectly decent and reasonable gesture of thanks, but it is also the sort of Naipaul statement that is likely to set some of us off again, on the tedious argument about whether Naipaul has betrayed the West Indies, let the side down, gone over to the colonizer. (49)

That was eight years before Naipaul won the Nobel Prize, and we all remember how true to form he was in his first public statement on being told that he had won, and the shock, disappointment, hurt, and even outrage with which his failure to acknowledge Trinidad was greeted. At this point I have to insert an aside, citing a new item that appeared in the *Daily Express* on Tuesday (17 April 2007) under the heading “I’m to blame, not my husband.” But even this story burnishes the Naipaul myth. Here is the first part of the sentence that begins Lady Naipaul’s explanation: “When he got the Nobel, we were completely taken aback and my husband went to sleep.” Who else, having heard that they had won the Nobel Prize, would have been so completely taken aback they went to sleep?

Anyway, one relic of that moment in 2001 is a letter to the editor of *The Trinidad Guardian*, October 31, 2001. The letter, by M.F. Rahman of Woodbrook, reads like a letter that a character in a Naipaul novel may well have written. I quote most of it:

Despite his disavowal of the land of his birth, the world knows the fatherland of Sir Vidia is Trinidad and Tobago. T & T, therefore, has no need to rush to embrace a churlish son who spurns the land of his formative and impressionable youth whence flowed all of his insights that conceived his literary works. / The loss is Sir Vidia’s ... by his own hand he is orphaned from his land. / We bestowed upon him, in proper time, our highest honour before his latest crowning prize, and at that time he yet retained some filial gratitude now vanished with the years. / It ill becomes our land to slight this son, ungrateful though he may be, for we cannot disown him in return. Yet we also should not rush unseemingly to grasp a share of his recent glory and seek to bask grinningly in his selfish fame. A

fatherland deserves more seemly consideration. / So honour him we must, for generations will forget his ego and wonder how we could have been so shallow as to deny him some sort of name. / Yet we must make it plain to all that sons of our soil should better comport themselves on the global stage or face paternal censure.

There we have life, Trinidad and Tobago life, imitating Naipaul.

I like to think that there is a nice irony in the theme of this symposium, since the phrase "created in the West Indies" occurs in Naipaul's notorious statement that "nothing was created in the West Indies" (*Middle Passage* 29). So set beside that the conference theme: "V.S. Naipaul: Created in the West Indies."

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