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V. S. Naipaul. A World in Tension
Judith Misrahi-Barak

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CENTRE D'ÉTUDES ET DE RECHERCHES
SUR LES PAYS DU COMMONWEALTH

V. S. Naipaul
A World in Tension
Une œuvre sous tension

Texts collected by Judith Misrahi-Barak
Textes réunis par Judith Misrahi-Barak

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INTRODUCTION

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Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III

This collection of essays springs forth from a conference held at Paul Valéry University, Montpellier III, in November 2002, organised by the Cerpac (Centre d'étude et de recherche sur les Pays du Commonwealth / Research Centre on the Commonwealth). I wish to thank the University and particularly the Conseil scientifique as well as the Pôle universitaire européen du Languedoc-Roussillon for making the conference possible, along with the Équipe d'accueil for giving financial support for the publishing of the proceedings.

The conference was organised around the general concept of *tension*, a theme that the research team (Équipe d'accueil EA 741 "Étude des pays anglophones") has decided to keep as its main axis of study until 2006. A few academics among the specialists of V. S. Naipaul's work delivered papers on different aspects and periods of the writer's œuvre, and the papers were selected so as to reflect both the evolution between 1957 and 2002, and the

richness of the writing. V. S. Naipaul not only writes fiction and non-fiction, he covers a wide spectrum of the literary practice, writing short stories and novels, essays and travel writing. But while listening to the speakers and reading their papers, it is easier to understand how generic boundaries are not what matters here. The sense of form and creation is simply at work in every text, going well beyond the outside shape. It is the same furrow that is being ploughed with different tools.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul has been either praised to the skies or held up to public obloquy; he is considered as the greatest writer in the English language, or as a writer whose prose is *scarred* by the *scrofula* (to use Derek Walcott's terms) of what is sometimes considered his dubious ideological and political attitudes—there is no golden mean when speaking of Sir Vidia and steering a middle course seems to be a tricky endeavour. His being knighted in 1990 for services rendered to literature and his obtaining the Nobel Prize in 2001 only made matters worse if possible . . . The winner of the Nobel Prize may often be at the centre of heated debate, but few writers have been as controversial as V. S. Naipaul. If the tensions that surround the man and his *œuvre* are numerous, they are only echoed by the multiple strands and shapes that his writing has been taking over the past fifty years—multifarious and yet paradoxically more and more centred.

V. S. Naipaul's biography is now well-known—he was born in a very poor rural, Hindi-speaking, area in Trinidad on 17 August 1932; his Brahmin grand-father had come from India as an indentured labourer, forced by a near-destitute situation in Uttar Pradesh. V. S. Naipaul first left Chaguanas on a Trinidadian scholarship that took him to Port of Spain. When he came to Eng-

land in 1950 on a British scholarship, he had already had the experience of exile through the displacement of his family and thousands of other Indians who had come to the plantations of Trinidad and British Guiana as cheap labour in replacement of the recently freed slaves, on what should have been short-term contracts between 1840 and 1917. He spent four years at University College, Oxford, lifted out of his family background by literary ambitions, both his father's—Seepersad wrote articles for the Trinidad Guardian, but also short stories about village life—and his own. He soon became a freelance writer for the BBC and edited until 1956 the influential "Caribbean Voices" which launched postcolonial writing and particularly Caribbean literature on to the literary scene of the time. Bruce King says of him that he is "a former colonial who has become a homeless cosmopolitan".¹ Indeed, as early as the mid-1950s, England had already become one of his homes; the Caribbean would offer him his first writing material and he was to turn into one of the modern world's most efficient postcolonial circumnavigator and chronicler of clashing worlds.

V. S. Naipaul's need to make sense of the world and achieve order through writing, was first to find its expression through the mode of comedy. His first four books are often lumped together by critics, as the first steps of the writer searching for his material and focus. *The Mystic Masseur*, a very funny comedy on the rise of a West Indian politician, was the first book published, in 1957, and it is also the one which finds another lease of life through the medium of the cinema: Bénédicte Ledent (University of Liège, Belgium) in her paper "The Same, Yet Different: Caryl Phillip-

1. King, Bruce. *V. S. Naipaul* (London: Macmillan, 1993): 2.

s's Screen Adaptation of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*", confronts the major differences between the novel and the screenplay written by St Kitts born younger novelist Caryl Phillips for the film adaptation directed by Ismail Merchant in 2000. The tension between the different choices and diverging world views of the two writers is meaningful and enlightening. *The Suffrage of Elvira*, published in 1958, another comedy, this time on suffrage corruption, also concentrates on the Indian community in Trinidad. Rita Christian (London Metropolitan, UK) in her paper "'Coolie' Come Lately: the making of *The Suffrage of Elvira*" brings forward the modes of the comic, even farcical and grotesque, used by Naipaul to describe and caricature the entry of the Indian community into the arena of Trinidadian Black-dominated political life.

The dates of publication are misleading though—these two novels were written after *Miguel Street*, published only in 1959 but written first, a collection of linked short stories in which Naipaul's own growing up in Trinidad is made use of. No paper has taken *Miguel Street* as its main subject, and yet, one cannot but keep this collection in mind when reading V. S. Naipaul. So much is already contained in those bitter-sweet, sometimes acid, stories, that would find its development in the later writings. Naipaul's sense of the portrait can already be found in the short stories—a portrait of an impoverished area of Port of Spain, a replica of the area he grew up in, but mostly a high-definition portrait of the characters inhabiting Miguel Street, Bogart, the man without a name; Popo the carpenter relentlessly working at the thing without a name; Man-Man of whom the whole street is both afraid and proud; B. Wordsworth, the poet whose fate it is not to have been born William; and of course Hat, the father figure to the

fatherless boy narrator, the one who helps him in the process of his maturing consciousness but also provides the ultimate disillusion. It is already there—this double perspective on the world that is going to be at the heart of his later works; this unique angle of vision; this gaze that is at once scathing and amused by this cycle of aspirations, trial, disillusionment and despair; this voice that is at once that of the observer and that of the participant, at once outside and inside; it is already there. V. S. Naipaul was already the ironist he would later be known as.

A House for Mr Biswas was published in 1961 when he had already been living in England more than ten years. Like the previous books, it reconstructs the East-Indian experience in Trinidad, taking as a basis the writer's earlier life and his relationship with his father Beena Anand (University of Nancy I) in her paper "Entrapment and release in *A House for Mr Biswas*" argues that it is in this major novel that Naipaul explores in depth for the first time the many different and dichotomic levels of root and rootlessness, the paradoxes of exilic selves torn between clashing interactions. It is also interesting to note that this exploration is carried out in a book that already questions generic boundaries, straddling as it does fiction and autobiography, personal experience and collective history. Thus it is not surprising that Naipaul's next book should be a travel narrative. *The Middle Passage* was written and published in 1962 after a travel grant was given V. S. Naipaul by the government of Trinidad to tour the Caribbean and write about it. These first steps into travel writing were followed by a trip to India, Naipaul thinking that he could maybe settle in his ancestors' country. Instead, the traveller went back to England and wrote *An Area of Darkness*, the conflict between the idea of India and the concrete India remaining

unsolved. This is the idea developed by Alexis Tadié (Paris VII) in his paper "V. S. Naipaul: the writer as anthropologist", in which he cross-examines what is referred to as the trilogy—*An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), assessing the way style commands Naipaul's vision of the world.

If the first books about the Caribbean were written while in England, following the pattern of numerous writers who had left the Caribbean in the 1950s but continued to take their native island as the subject of their writing (George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Michael Anthony, Sam Selvon, Edgar Mittelholzer, for instance, among the same generation of writers), his first book about England was written while he was in Kashmir in 1962. *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) can be seen as the English echo to *A House for Mr Biswas*, with the recurrent motifs of home, marriage, family, dissatisfaction, written in a still amusing but more sober tone. *Mr Stone* provides a hinge in the writer's progress and opens on to a less humorous mode of writing. His second major novel, published in 1967, *The Mimic Men*, is no longer written in the comic mode, far from it, it can be sardonic at times, bringing together as it does several threads putting mimicry at the heart of the definition of postcoloniality. Hédi Ben Abbes (University of Franche-Comté) in his paper "The Creative Tension of Emptiness in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*" explores the emerging sense of self out of unfittedness, placelessness, incompleteness. It is a complex, multi-layered novel, consisting of the supposed memoirs of an East-Indian Caribbean politician now exiled in England because of political strife in his country. It is also a novel which mirrors in many respects the situation of the author himself and in which the labyrinth of the

personal becomes entangled with the histories of the colonized, formerly colonized and decolonized peoples. The same themes are also treated in a different way in the short stories collected in *A Flag on the Island*, written and published at the same time as *The Mimic Men*. What Pankaj Mishra calls Naipaul's "bleakly realistic view"¹ also surfaces in *The Loss of El Dorado* published two years later, a book which, focusing on several events of Trinidad's past, merges history, fiction, reportage and analysis in a way that is uniquely Naipaulian.

The 1970s is a period in which V. S. Naipaul tackles in a more determined way the issues of the individual in a decolonized world; he chooses to do it through short stories, *In a Free State* (1971), through essays, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972), through novels, *Guerillas* (1975) whose backdrop is the 1970 attempted revolution in Trinidad, and *A Bend in the River* (1979) based on his observation of Zaire and East Africa, as well as through travel narratives, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) & *Among the Believers: an Islamic Journey* (1980) which is the result of a seven-month trip through Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. It is as if all his reading, writing and travelling were shaping up indifferently in fiction or non-fiction. The writer is constantly reexamining the same material in order to assess how it has evolved along the years. In his paper "Not part of the gang: Naipaul's hostile portrayal of non-Indian characters", Jesús Varela-Zapata (University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain) concentrates on the short stories and novels of that period and examines the way in which the treatment of the characters often differs according to their origins. Not only is Naipaul often accused of making disparaging

1. Mishra, Pankaj. Introduction to *V. S. Naipaul, The Writer and the World* (New York: Knopf, 2002): x.

comments on Islam, Africa, India and the Caribbean, he is also accused of being a misogynist, and in such cases, it is always good to go back to the nooks and crannies of the texts . . .

In 1984 however, a new phase opens up with the publication of the much more intimate and personal *Finding the Centre*, digging at the emergence of the writer, a book that will find echoes in *Letters between a Father and a Son* (1999). In this extremely creative period, *Finding the Centre* is followed by two more travel books: *A Turn in the South* (1989) and *India: A Million Mutinies* (1990), as well as three more novels: *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), *A Way in the World* (1994) and *Half a Life* (2001). Florence D'Souza (University of Lille III) in her paper "A Turn in the South: Playing Devil's Advocate or a step towards a more inclusive serenity?" analyses the strategies of V. S. Naipaul in his viewing of the Southern states of the USA, helping us to understand the author's construction of Otherness in his travelogues. Jean-Paul Engélibert (Département de Littérature Comparée, University of Poitiers) in his paper "L'écriture hors l'histoire ou les histoires non écrites" brings under closer scrutiny the tension between Naipaul as writer and as ideologue, as well as a paradox that is present throughout Naipaul's writing but which comes closer to the surface in *A Way in the world*, i.e. the apparent contradiction between the idea that colonisation means the effacement of history and the necessity to fix history through writing. Florence Labaune- Demeule (University of Lyon III) devotes her paper "V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*: Moving Away from Tension?" to the exploration of all the tensions that have been overwhelming in Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction, wondering if *Half a Life* could be seen as a possible reduction of those tensions or even a reconciliation.

What is brought forward through this new selection of essays about a writer already much written upon, is the singularity of vision coupled with the multiplicity of perspectives that shape Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's œuvre, as well as the multiplicity of the angles that can be adopted to read him. Éric Tabuteau (Université Stendhal, Grenoble III) in his paper "La moitié d'une vie entre deux mondes: V. S. Naipaul, prix Nobel controversé" casts light on the decision of the Nobel Foundation to give the Nobel Prize to a writer as controversial as V. S. Naipaul, compared with Derek Walcott ten years earlier, and confronts the two writers' stances on multiculturalism and hybridity. Since the writer's assertion that "Nothing was created in the British West Indies"¹ Sir Naipaul has never balked at provocation, but even among his most ardent enemies, his quest for a more acute understanding of the world is always acknowledged as one of the most original ones of the 20th century, paralleled only by his unrelenting quest for self and wholeness. As this book is going under press, another collection of his essays *Literary Occasions* has just been published (2003). The tension is yet unresolved between the image of the Nobel Prize winner and that of the "dancing dwarf on the tarmac".²

1. *The Middle Passage* (1962. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978): 27.

2. "I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a dancing dwarf on the tarmac." It is the last sentence of *Miguel Street* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1959): 172.

**LA MOITIÉ D'UNE VIE ENTRE DEUX MONDES :
V. S. NAIPAUL, PRIX NOBEL CONTROVERSÉ**

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Dans un numéro de la revue *Commonwealth* consacré à l'impact des prix littéraires sur les littératures originaires de l'Empire britannique et du Commonwealth, Brigitte Hervoche, l'une des contributrices, rappelle qu'à « l'occasion du bicentenaire de l'Académie Suédoise chargée de décerner le prix Nobel, Kjpell Epsmark, membre de ce prestigieux cénacle, étudie les critères idéologiques et esthétiques qui ont présidé à l'attribution du prix Nobel de littérature depuis sa fondation en 1900. Le résultat de ce bilan [...] donne à penser que le prix Nobel [...] intronise des imposteurs que la postérité se charge de désavouer¹ ». Il est vrai que les choix de ce jury ont parfois été difficiles à saisir. Ainsi le prix Nobel de littérature de 1953 fut-il attribué à Winston Churchill, selon la formulation officielle « for his mastery of histori-

1. Brigitte Hervoche, « Lire ou ne pas lire Kipling : "Bienfaiteur de l'humanité" ... », *Commonwealth* 16 :1 (automne 1993) : 47.

cal and biographical descriptions as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values¹ ». Il semble néanmoins que tout le monde n'ait pas été convaincu par ses qualités littéraires et l'on sait que la remise du Nobel au Premier Ministre britannique donna lieu à un certain nombre de débats. Le roi de Suède de l'époque, Gustave VI Adolphe, qui jouissait d'une réputation de sagesse et de grande culture, se félicitera en privé de l'absence d'un prix Nobel de peinture qu'on aurait pu être tenté de décerner à Winston Churchill.

Il faut toutefois reconnaître que l'attribution d'un prix littéraire se place le plus souvent sous le signe de la polémique. Les multiples tours de scrutin nécessaires pour départager deux candidats lors de la remise des prix Goncourt ou Renaudot en sont la preuve tangible. Il semble que même les candidats dits consensuels ne fassent que très rarement l'unanimité. Lorsque Derek Walcott, poète et dramaturge originaire de Sainte Lucie, reçut le Nobel en 1992, le consensus fut très large. Son élection allait de soi pour une majorité de critiques littéraires qui approuvèrent la décision de l'aréopage scandinave. Quelques voix dissidentes se firent néanmoins entendre pour critiquer les raisons ayant conduit à l'élection de Derek Walcott, à savoir, selon la formulation de l'Académie Suédoise, la création d'une œuvre poétique « of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multi-cultural commitment² ». Il semble que ce soit le choix des deux derniers termes qui déclencha l'ire de plusieurs commentateurs. Certains journaux britanniques (et si l'on en croit Paula Burnett³,

1. www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1953, 16 juin 2000.

2. www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1992, 16 juin 2000.

3. Paula Burnett, « Hegemony or Pluralism? The Literary Prize and the Post-Colonial Project in the Caribbean », *Commonwealth* 16 :1 (automne 1993) : 4.

surtout le *Times* dans son édition du 9 octobre 1992) s'en prirent à l'Académie qu'ils accusèrent de correctitude politique.

Quand V. S. Naipaul, romancier et essayiste né à Trinidad reçut le prix Nobel de littérature quelque dix années plus tard, en 2001, le consensus fut tout aussi large, mais cette fois-ci pour dénoncer sa sélection par l'Académie Suédoise. Plusieurs censeurs soulignèrent que, justement, Naipaul n'était pas politiquement correct, pas plus que ne l'était la justification du jury qui l'avait retenu « for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed history ¹ ». Ainsi, à dix années d'intervalle, deux écrivains originaires de la même région du monde, la Caraïbe anglophone, furent soit encensés pour avoir gagné le Nobel, soit critiqués pour les mêmes raisons.

Pourtant, leurs œuvres présentent des similitudes : elles font notamment toutes deux référence à la notion de multiculturalisme. En effet, les écrits en question évoquent une région du monde caractérisée par la multiplicité ethnique. Les Antilles constituent la toile de fond d'un grand nombre de pièces de théâtre, de poèmes, de romans et d'essais des deux auteurs qui s'attachent à observer et analyser les sociétés créoles où ils ont vu le jour. Et même dans les œuvres qui ne traitent pas directement des Antilles, les auteurs conservent ce qu'on pourrait appeler une distance critique multiculturelle. Qu'il s'agisse d'ouvrages faisant référence à l'Inde, l'Afrique ou l'Europe, c'est-à-dire de régions du monde dont sont originaires les Antillais, l'approche de Walcott ou de Naipaul est toujours productrice de multiculturalisme dans la mesure où elle tend à appréhender les sociétés en ques-

1. www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001, 2 septembre 2002.

tion d'un point de vue à la fois intérieur et extérieur, indigène et étranger, bienveillant et critique. On peut donc se demander ce qui a pu déclencher une telle différence de réaction lors de la remise du Nobel aux deux écrivains.

La réponse tient essentiellement à ce que leurs visions respectives du multiculturalisme ou des sociétés multiculturelles sont opposées. En ce qui concerne l'écrivain de Sainte-Lucie, Gilles Macarie fait remarquer :

[L'écriture de Walcott] est ancrée dans une région, l'archipel antillais. Elle s'appuie sur différentes langues parlées dans la région. Elle emprunte majoritairement à l'anglais certes, mais aussi à l'anglais créolisé, au créole, à l'espagnol, à des langues amérindiennes à l'occasion. Elle se veut brassage linguistique, résultant lui-même du brassage des populations. Il s'agit d'une illustration linguistique de la situation de la région. Une étude plus vaste pourrait recenser les différents parlers utilisés, leur fréquence, et montrer qu'ils reflètent la diversité linguistique du lieu. Cette utilisation de différents parlers renvoie bien sûr à la volonté d'en finir avec une langue qui serait la référence unique, langue qui ne pourrait pas rendre compte de la spécificité de la région¹.

L'œuvre de Walcott fait donc l'apologie du multilinguisme et par extension du multiculturalisme. Comme Gilles Macarie le souligne à juste titre, l'archipel antillais « est toujours placé dans un entre-deux, il est équidistant de deux mondes. Il n'appartient entièrement ni à l'un, ni à l'autre. Il est en revanche le lieu qui se situe entre ces deux mondes, qui permet un contact, que celui-ci

1. Gilles Macarie, « Derek Walcott et la "réalité archipélique" », in Jean-Pierre Durix (ed.), *Literary Archipelagoes / Archipels littéraires* (Dijon : Éditions Universitaires, 1998) : 52.

soit facile ou non. [...] Cet archipel est donc doublement un lieu de passage et de brassage¹ ». Il est évident que Walcott perçoit cette position médiane comme positive et l'exalte. Elle implique un enrichissement dû à un héritage multiple, et pour le poète antillais, le multiculturalisme est un atout.

Les premiers ouvrages de Naipaul, ceux parus de la fin des années 1950 au milieu des années 1970, décrivent également le mode de vie caribéen. Mais le point de vue est différent. Naipaul est d'origine indienne, vit en Grande-Bretagne, et il se reconnaît davantage dans ses origines brahmaniques que dans le brassage ethnique antillais :

Les ouvrages de Naipaul sont, pour la plupart, intimement liés à la notion de multiculturalisme ; il est aussi vrai qu'ils sont le plus souvent organisés autour d'une réévaluation de ce concept. [...] L'auteur remet en question la société multiculturelle telle qu'on la trouve en Afrique [et aux Antilles], la mise en contact, forcée au départ, consentie ensuite, de mœurs et coutumes qu'il juge trop éloignées les unes des autres. Une organisation sociale axée sur de tels principes est à son avis artificielle. Elle n'est pas le résultat d'un désir de vivre ensemble, d'une prise de conscience de l'avantage qu'il peut y avoir à communiquer ses valeurs respectives².

L'auteur est convaincu qu'une telle juxtaposition de pratiques ou de valeurs, entre lesquelles il n'existe aucun lien, favorise l'installation d'une certaine anarchie. Pourtant, « le joyeux fouillis de peuples dont le romancier brosse le portrait, et dans lequel cha-

1. « Derek Walcott et la "réalité archipélique" », 45.

2. Éric Tabuteau, *Images du multiculturalisme dans le roman antillais anglophone* : Wilson Harris, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon (Villeneuve d'Ascq : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1997) : 186-188.

cun semble pouvoir évoluer à sa guise, prend l'exact contre-pied de ce qu'était la société coloniale marquée par sa rigidité d'organisation¹ », et Naipaul qui a lui même été colonisé devrait s'en réjouir. Mais cette nouvelle organisation sociale reposant sur une grande liberté n'est pas à son avis la solution la mieux adaptée pour succéder à la société coloniale. L'image offerte par l'auteur caribéen des contacts interethniques est loin d'être optimiste, son jugement sur les rapprochements entre groupes d'origine différente est morose.

On comprend mieux pourquoi les deux écrivains n'ont pas reçu le même accueil et on se rend également compte qu'au début des années 1990, le concept de multiculturalisme était en vogue, alors qu'en 2001, il ne bénéficie plus de la même popularité. La question qui se pose est de savoir ce qui a pu provoquer ce revirement idéologique. S'il semble difficile aux universitaires d'expliquer pourquoi la notion de multiculturalisme rencontre un moindre succès à l'heure actuelle, ce que soulignerait la décision d'attribuer le Nobel de littérature à Naipaul, la presse n'a apparemment pas rencontré les mêmes difficultés, surtout dans les deux pays que Naipaul a identifié comme ses patries, à savoir la Grande-Bretagne et l'Inde. La réponse a été rapidement trouvée : ce repli idéologique a été en grande partie dû à l'impact des attentats du 11 septembre 2001 qui se sont déroulés un mois avant la remise du prix à l'écrivain. Plusieurs organes de presse ont laissé entendre que le choix de l'Académie Suédoise trahissait une attitude défensive de l'occident qui souhaitait récompenser un auteur ayant envisagé le rapprochement interethnique sous un œil critique. Ainsi le *Hindustan Times* du 12 octobre 2001 faisait-

1. *Images du multiculturalisme dans le roman antillais anglophone*, 189-190.

il remarquer :

Naipaul, 69, has always maintained that the Swedish Academy prefers politically correct writers and argued that his pro-Western views and criticism of the third world rendered him unacceptable. Naipaul has been much in the news recently because of his critical remarks about Muslims. So the timing of the award is certain to be controversial. Engdahl conceded that Naipaul might be seen as a political winner¹.

La controverse a pris davantage d'ampleur lorsque Naipaul (nul doute volontairement) a fourni les preuves permettant de justifier ce point de vue. Certes, les éditorialistes ont vite sacrifié à la tendance actuelle qui consiste à s'intéresser davantage à un écrivain qu'à son œuvre, à ce qu'il dit ou déclare dans des interviews plutôt qu'à ce qu'il écrit, que ce soit dans des romans, des récits autobiographiques ou des carnets de voyage. Les journalistes se sont plus appuyés sur les déclarations que Naipaul a pu faire dans la presse que sur ce qu'il a exposé dans ses ouvrages, contre l'avis même de l'auteur qui a tenu à rappeler dans le discours qu'il a prononcé lors de la remise du Nobel qu'il ne fallait pas accorder d'importance à ce type de propos². Mais force est de reconnaître que les journalistes ont été aidés dans leur entreprise par la personnalité de l'écrivain qui est un polémiste né. S'il sait

1. www.hindustantimes.com/nonfram/121001/detFR005.asp, 12 octobre 2001.

2. « It is the secretions of one's innermost self, written in solitude and for one-self alone that one gives to the public. What one bestows on private life—in conversation... or in those drawing-room essays that are scarcely more than conversation in print—is the product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self which one can only recover by putting aside the world and the self that frequents the world ». www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-lecture-e.html, 7 décembre 2001.

faire preuve d'indépendance dans ses écrits, Naipaul sait aussi outrepasser les limites dans ses déclarations ou ses interviews. Extrêmement provocateur et hautain, il a à son actif une série d'annonces sulfureuses sur des sujets particulièrement brûlants qui ont amené de nombreux critiques à le présenter comme un réactionnaire arrogant et élitiste. Il s'en est par exemple récemment pris au Premier Ministre britannique Anthony Blair qu'il a comparé à un pirate à la tête d'une révolution socialiste :

Every day you hear on the radio some minister from this appalling government saying something about things no longer being for the privileged few. This has destroyed the idea of civilisation in this country. [...] We now have a full socialist revolution and the bizarre thing is that it does not mean high culture becomes available to everybody. It is terrible, this aggressively plebeian culture that celebrates itself for being plebeian¹.

Il va de soi que l'arrogance de Naipaul n'a pas toujours été bien perçue par le grand public ou par le critique littéraire et de surcroît, Naipaul s'est fait une réputation de jalousie et de cupidité. C'est l'avis de l'écrivain Paul Théroux qui a fait partie de ses amis intimes avant que les deux auteurs ne se brouillent définitivement. Théroux aurait dernièrement affirmé que ce qui intéressait le plus Naipaul dans le Nobel, c'était les un million de dollars alloués au récipiendaire². Il est vrai que Naipaul s'est dit surpris de recevoir le Nobel³, alors que son nom circulait dans

1. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,342171,00.html>, 11 juillet 2000.

2. www.hindustantimes.com/nonfram/121001/detFR005.asp, *op. cit.*

3. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,568131,00.html>, 12 octobre 2001.

les cercles proches de la fondation depuis plusieurs années¹. Il semble donc que sa surprise était toute relative. Naipaul pourrait donc s'avérer particulièrement calculateur, et on peut se demander s'il ne s'est pas sciemment servi des attentats du 11 septembre 2001 pour amplifier l'événement que devait constituer la remise du prix Nobel, et si les journalistes qui ont rapporté ses propos ne se sont pas naïvement laissé abuser.

Bien sûr, certains de ses ouvrages ont porté un regard critique sur le monde musulman, en fait sur quatre pays (l'Iran, le Pakistan, la Malaisie et l'Indonésie) qui, selon lui, ont été véritablement colonisés par l'Islam. John Ezard rappelle qu'au début des années 1980, en particulier dans *Among The Believers*², Naipaul avait déjà fait scandale en déclarant : « modern life has shaken up static or retarded islamic societies. It is the late twentieth century, and not the islamic faith, that could supply the answers, in institutions, legislation, economic systems³. Gavin McNett souligne pour sa part qu'il récidivera une vingtaine d'années plus tard en des termes toujours plus provocants dans *Beyond Belief*⁴, puisqu'il affirmera alors : « Islam produces countries and peoples without ties to the past, and with only the crudest notions of the future—countries with an element of neurosis and nihilism⁵ ». Ces ouvrages, lorsqu'il sont parus, ont évidemment suscité un

1. « Hegemony or Pluralism ? The Literary Prize and the Post-Colonial Project in the Caribbean », 2.

2. V. S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers : An Islamic Journey* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

3. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,568131,00.html> », *op. cit.*.

4. V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond belief : Islamic Excursions among the Converted People* (New York : Random House, 1998).

5. <http://dir.salon.com/books/feature/2001/10/14/naipaul/index.html>, 14 octobre 2001.

certain nombre de réserves de la part de la communauté musulmane, en particulier en Grande-Bretagne, mais la polémique est restée relativement discrète et est rarement sortie des cercles littéraires ou intellectuels. Cela n'a rien eu de comparable avec la controverse qui a vu le jour environ une semaine avant l'annonce de la décision de l'Académie Suédoise, le 4 octobre 2001.

À l'occasion d'une conférence donnée au Queen Elisabeth Hall pour la sortie de son dernier roman *Half a Life*¹, Naipaul a affirmé que l'Islam avait eu un effet calamiteux sur les peuples convertis, et a comparé une fois de plus l'Islam à la colonisation occidentale, ne manquant pas d'ajouter que seuls les effets de l'Islam étaient pires². Naipaul récidive quelques jours plus tard en déclarant avec son épouse à un journaliste du *Sunday Telegraph* que les Talibans n'étaient ni plus ni moins que de la vermine³. La remarque provoque un véritable tollé. S'il est vrai que beaucoup d'intellectuels rejoignent Naipaul sur ce point précis, la formulation, outrageuse, n'en a pas moins été mal reçue. Les responsables des communautés musulmanes en Grande-Bretagne et dans le monde ont taxé Naipaul de racisme, confirmant des jugements négatifs déjà émis quelques jours auparavant, comme ceux de Said Ahmed Versi, rédacteur en chef de *Muslim News*, pour qui l'écrivain n'est qu'un nationaliste hindou hostile aux musulmans⁴.

Mais ces propos reflètent-ils réellement les idées de Naipaul ? Il est difficile d'affirmer sans se tromper que Naipaul soit particuliè-

1. V. S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (Londres : Picador, 2001).

2. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,563203,00.html>, 4 octobre 2001.

3. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2001/10/14/nnaip14.xml, 14 octobre 2001.

4. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,563203,00.html>, *op. cit.*

rement opposé à l'islam. Il semble surtout, pour qui connaît son œuvre littéraire, qu'il se méfie de toutes les religions, et particulièrement des intégrismes. V.N. Narayanan le note avec justesse, Naipaul s'est tout autant attiré les foudres des dignitaires hindous quand il a émis des réserves sur la personnalité de Gandhi :

Gandhi used religion to marshal people for the cause of independence. Though he invoked Hindu scriptures to mobilize people for the freedom struggle, many of his social reformist ideas drew inspiration from christianity. But Indian academics and Intellectuals had a distorted vision of history and the common people had no awareness of their own history ¹.

Peut-être est-il utile de garder en mémoire qu'en fin de compte, Naipaul s'en est pris à peu près à tous les peuples de la terre, et ce chacun leur tour : aux Antillais dans les années 1950 et 1960, aux Indiens dans les années 1960 et 1970, aux Africains dans les années 1970 et 1980, puis aux musulmans dans les années 1980 et 1990. Naipaul a indéniablement tendance à formuler des critiques tous azimuts. Les remarques dirigées contre Gandhi pourraient se rapprocher d'autres injures proférées à l'encontre d'intellectuels célèbres auxquels on aurait osé comparer Sir Vidia, à l'instar d'E.M. Forster dont il a stigmatisé l'homosexualité :

Forster, of course, has his own purposes in India. He is a homosexual and he has his time in India, exploiting poor people, which his friend Keynes also did. Keynes didn't exploit poor people, he exploited people in the university ; he sodomised them and they

1. www.lifepositive.com/Mind/arts/new-age-fiction/naipaul.asp, novembre 2001.

were too frightened to do anything about it. Forster belonged to that kind of nastiness really ¹.

Alors, le débat qui a précédé puis suivi la remise du Nobel à Naipaul n'était-il que le résultat de l'exploitation par l'auteur d'une situation dans le seul but de faire parler de lui, ou reflétait-il réellement le racisme d'un écrivain talentueux mais renégat qui aurait déserté la cause du Tiers-Monde ? La décision de L'Académie Suédoise était-elle motivée par la nécessité de soutenir le modèle occidental ou simplement de refuser le politiquement correct ?

Les éléments de réponse les plus objectifs se trouvent sans nul doute dans les écrits de Naipaul, et non dans ses déclarations à l'emporte-pièce destinées à choquer journalistes et lecteurs. Peut-être se trouvent-ils aussi dans le discours prononcé à l'occasion de la remise du prix Nobel. Rien dans cette allocution ne fait allusion ou renvoie à ce que Naipaul a pu dire dans la presse. L'auteur y souligne au contraire (à la demande de l'Académie Suédoise ?) sa bonne relation avec le monde musulman. Lorsqu'il parle de son enfance à Trinidad, il évoque les liens qui l'unissent aux deux mondes hindou et musulman ². Mais Naipaul reste Naipaul : adepte des variations énigmatiques, il conclut à quelques lignes d'intervalle que, malgré tout, il ne connaissait rien des musulmans. On note tout de même dans son discours que le ton employé n'est pas celui du Naipaul arrogant et provocateur qui défraye la chronique, mais qu'il est proche de celui du narrateur

1. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,530947,00.html>, 2 août 2001.

2. « This was my very small community. Hindus and Muslims, nearly all of peasant origin, and nearly all from the Gangetic plain ». www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-lecture-e.html, *op. cit.*

de *A House for Mr Biswas*¹, racontant l'existence émouvante d'un ressortissant d'une ancienne colonie, héritier d'un monde dépolarisé, multiculturel, sans cesse à la recherche de ses marques et de ses origines. Naipaul, comme dans bon nombre de ses œuvres, ne devient alors pas l'apologiste du racisme ou de l'eurocentrisme, mais du pessimisme. D'avoir été écartelé entre deux mondes (*V. S. Naipaul : Two Worlds* est le titre de son allocution), Naipaul est devenu misanthrope et une grande partie de son œuvre s'en trouve profondément marquée. Naipaul soutient finalement qu'il est futile de penser que d'une société multiculturelle puisse naître le meilleur des mondes, et il refuse de s'y intéresser². Le contact réussi entre civilisations n'est pour lui qu'une vue de l'esprit, un mythe de la fin du vingtième siècle. Que l'on approuve ou que l'on critique son approche le laisse indifférent, il est prêt à payer très cher son désir de rester indépendant, d'être libre d'asséner des reproches quand il l'entend.

On est alors en droit de se demander si le choix de Naipaul pour le Nobel de littérature correspondait vraiment aux critères définis par Alfred Nobel. Brigitte Hervoche le rappelle : « En vertu du testament de Nobel, les œuvres couronnées doivent être de tendance "idéaliste". Le prix doit être décerné à ceux qui ont apporté "les plus grands bienfaits à l'humanité". Le lauréat est donc choisi "pour la noblesse de sa philosophie, pour des qualités qui font progresser l'humanité sur la voie de l'idéal et la rendent meilleure"³ ». Il est clair que dans ce contexte, l'œuvre

1. V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (Londres : André Deutsch, 1961).

2. « I suppressed the child-narrator's background. I ignored the racial and social complexities of the street. I explained nothing ». www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-lecture-e.html, *op. cit.*

3. « Lire ou ne pas lire Kipling : "Bienfaiteur de l'humanité" ... », 47.

de Derek Walcott semble davantage correspondre aux critères du Nobel que celle de V. S. Naipaul. Mais toujours selon les mêmes critères, le choix de Naipaul vaut bien celui de Kipling, ou de Winston Churchill. Alors, laissons à l'histoire le soin de stigmatiser les imposteurs.

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ENTRAPMENT AND RELEASE IN *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*

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The academy of the Nobel Prize said about Naipaul: “he is to a very high degree a cosmopolitan writer, a fact that he himself considers to stem from his lack of roots: he is unhappy about the cultural and spiritual poverty of Trinidad, he feels alienated from India, and in England he is incapable of relating to and identifying with the traditional values of what was once a colonial power”.¹

A House for Mr Biswas (*AHB*) is reputedly and avowedly a fictional look alike of Naipaul’s earlier life and a mirror of his relations with his father. In building this novel on his father’s and his own family’s life in Trinidad, Naipaul resuscitates in his brilliant acerbic prose the trials and tribulations of paradoxical exilic

1. www.cnn.com/20001/world/europe/10/11/nobel.literature.

selves in quest of that material and intuitive space of belonging called home. Exile is a predominantly recurrent theme in post colonial fiction and in Indian diasporic writing. Naipaul's fiction conjures in concise, painful and humorous prose the self destructive plight of his protagonist's existential search for "a portion of earth". The latter develops along inextricably intertwined dichotomic planes of roots and rootlessness. This paper explores the overlapping and distancing tensions that surface during Mr Biswas' struggle as he espouses and rejects the diverse worlds (homes) he is forced to inhabit. Entrapment and release for this migrant caught in tectonic interactions (between societal traditions and transitions) lies in his desperate aspirations to an identity that is at the crossroads. We shall examine (to quote Naipaul's comments on his writing), the degrees of removal and degrees of involvement in the narrator's portrayal of the protagonist's states of dislocation in this oeuvre where fictionalised autobiographic recounting and ethnographic insightings intermingle. Other blends of paralleled and reversed literary devices reverberate and interweave to form a coherent whole. In a consummate literary universe where fiction and non fiction abound, Naipaul has successfully blurred generic boundaries. Travel narratives, fictionalised autobiography, journalistic accounts and meditation on historical events and processes form the bedrock. *AHB* is a saga (denominated by euphoric critics as Naipaul's epic and masterpiece) which voices acutely not only the struggle for survival of imported communities in foreign lands but also their strivings to preserve ancestral cultures as well. Minutely personal and collective themes are projected symphonically, trivial details of a harsh life are observed in a developing, national, poor albeit tropical and exotic, multicultural context. It also bathes in the colonial

transitions that insular Trinidad experiences as the painful pangs of postcolonial nationhood awaken.

The deliberate structural and stylistic interweaving of the historical, and the ahistorical elements in the novel has been read variously. The personal register of the novel's emotional canvas has been stressed in the obvious similarity between the portrayal of the protagonist's life and that of Naipaul's father and their family's life in Trinidad. Another interpretation familiar to Naipaul scholars is built on Mr Biswas' quest for a house. Linked to this reading is the "colonial" rendering wherein Mr Biswas represents the colonial subject and the oppressive factors in his life are analogous to the empire's hold on its colonies. Fawsia Mustafa¹ enlarges, most interestingly, the interpretative spectrum in stressing also the hitherto ignored depths of filial implications in the narrative, which come to light as one associates the recasting of episodes from earlier books in *AHB*. Our exploration of the tensions displayed in Mr Biswas' fight against all odds is three pronged. We shall focus on the Naipaul-Biswas autobiographical duplication (fictional remodelling). This also suggests the larger familial and social span which encapsulates not only the specific historical processes of East Indian Trinidadian lives but also the larger insular diachrony in which the story is enmeshed.

Fictionalising Autobiography: Reconstructing Selfhood

Beyond the relationship between Naipaul and his father which *AHB* depicts in the ambivalent links between Mr Biswas and his son, the autobiographical facet is also mirrored in the resem-

1. Mustapha, Fawsia, *V. S. Naipaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

blance between Mr Biswas' portrait and life and Naipaul's own father's biography and their family's existence in Trinidad. Some similarities are apparent and barely concealed. In *AHB* Naipaul combines family myths with his own memories to recreate a life and a culture.

Despite the caustic humour that characterises Naipaul's narration the poignancy and angst of moving house constantly, depending on the maternal grandparents for sustenance and striving for independence from extended familial stranglehold transpire nonetheless. V. S. Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, a small town in Trinidad, 1 August 1932. He was the grandson of Hindu immigrants from India. During Naipaul's first six years, his family lived in his maternal grandparents' imposing home which was known as Lion house and which formed the model for the Tulsi home in *AHB*. Much like the children of Mr Biswas, the Naipaul children moved with their parents several times before finally settling in Port of Spain, the ethnically and racially mixed capital of Trinidad and Tobago. Like Anand in *AHB*, Naipaul went to Oxford to read English Literature and got his degree in 1954. *A House for Mr Biswas* appeared in 1961. Naipaul was 29. Anand's reactions to his father—longing, attachment, fear, rage and reconciliation—are autobiographical aspects since Mr Biswas like Naipaul himself, draws comedy from frustration and pain. Naipaul splits various facets of his personality among his narrators and characters including some very seemingly different from their creator. Many of his protagonists are writers. As he depicts them composing their narratives, he discloses how the authorial self begets itself, in the creation of his fictitious progeny. In doing so poignant versions of his father's struggle are recreated and his own plights and career, and the father-son relationship

also transpire. Several early and later novels emerge that chiefly from these sources describe a man who was paradoxical in many respects, yet consistent in defying the barriers of his personal and social history in order to make himself a writer and finally to live in his own home. Naipaul has observed that *AHB* is “very much my father’s book written out of his journalism and his stories, out of his knowledge. It was written out of his writing”.¹ Naipaul has also added that it was *AHB* that was “his most personal” book that “changed” him. In reconstructing his father’s life he was also tracing the inception of his own process of self-creation.

Symbolically speaking and at a very elementary level the Tulsi household represents the Empire and Mr Biswas the colonised; Mrs Tulsi is called “the old queen”, a reference to Queen Victoria; his ill fated attempts at house building, i.e. assertion, assimilation and integration, like the colonies’ attempts at autonomy and independence are doomed. His attempts to run the store at the Chase is a disaster, and he is ill-suited to oversee sugarcane workers. Some critics also consider the Tulsi family as representatives of the first colonial slaveholders of 1800s. This does not exclude the autobiographical implications. Mr Biswas was an outcast from his homeland, representing Indian immigrants in Trinidad. Naipaul is never nostalgic like his fictional counterpart, he was convinced at an early age that everything about Trinidad was transient and England was “surely where real life was to be found”. His family’s past to him was part of a historical darkness. Naipaul’s writing deals with states of dislocation and cultural intermixtures both of his protagonists and the colonised countries they inhabit and all the more acutely the problems of an outsider, borrowing

1. *A House for Mr Biswas* (Penguin, 1992): introduction, xiii.

on his own experiences, that of a translated man, at first an Indian in the West Indies, and then a West Indian in England—a roving intellectual lost in a postcolonial world. As in many post colonial novels, the portrayal of exilic selves in *AHB* occurs in the context of comminglings of chronological history and personally experienced events. Mr Biswas is presented as a legendary figure—an Indo-Caribbean archetype.

Envisioning selfhood in *AHB* is also mapping Trinidad's colonial life and post colonial future. The plight of Biswas, i.e. owning a house, mirrors the quest of colonised peoples for a nation and an identity of their own and to understand Biswas' misfit identity is to relate it to the unique positioning of the Caribbean at the crossroads between its own multicultural hybridised traditions (embodied in the diasporic cultures of imported communities) and the cultures of the East and its colonial heritage and the promises embodied in it by all imperial colonising powers to their outlying colonies. The portrayal of Mr Biswas is that of a translated man and his quest for an identity, in other words sustaining a vision of the mutant self (despite and in accordance with social dictates) and an evolving nation. One of the central themes in Naipaul as in S. Rushdie's oeuvre is the quest for an identity, in other words sustaining a vision of the mutant self despite and in accordance with social dictates. It also involves projecting an accompanying vision of ephemeral nationhood. The construction of selfhood in the vortex of public and private social and historical institutions is equally a reflection of circonvoluting colonial nationhood.

Our appraisal of the historically and personal autobiographically motivated narratives in *AHB* is informed by the narrator's detached observation of the protagonist's life and his involve-

ment too in this narrative. Whatever the resemblance between the narrator and Naipaul, the narrator and protagonist disappear momentarily as emotions seep through. Dramatisation oversteps fictional boundaries and overlaps with the real. This is manifest in the beginnings, endings, titles, subtitles, epilogues and prologues that frame and are interspersed in the narrative. In Naipaul's work the development of selfhood, (real or imaginatively conceived), is continuous foraging and forging secretive narratives with referential affiliations among autobiography, journalism and fiction. Often, when his characters write, their words reveal desires and motives they have not previously acknowledged, even to themselves. Even when the narrators are omniscient the ways in which characters reveal themselves in relation to social history suggest that his knowledge is not given but gradually acquired, when he is unreliable he remains predictable. *AHB* is a highly symbolical study of a Trinidad family coming to terms with the dissolution of a colonial way of life and the conflicts within the struggle for independence that really put him on the map. Once he had established for himself a secure place in the world of contemporary letters, Naipaul set out to explore his past spheres of darkness (the lost India of his childhood and the rejected colonial worlds of his adolescence), first in fiction and then almost as importantly in travel books like *An Area of Darkness* and *India, a Wounded Civilisation*. As the literary circumnavigator of the Nobel citation, a cosmopolitan writer a sense of security that was entirely new, the security of a man who had at last made himself what he wanted to be.

Order and disorder: narrative structure

The symmetrical structure of the novel has also been seen by some critics as having been adapted from the tradition of the Victorian novel. It is voluminous and its picaresque form is flavoured with comedy and melodrama. Like a neat pack of cards the interdependent and oppositional halves are pall bearers. As the reader follows their unshuffling he discovers interlinked strands albeit in a disjointed world. The book is divided into two parts; each part offers the reader climaxes and catharses matching in their intensity, punctuating the routine existence of Biswas' life.

The first part is situated in Trinidad and in the second the metropolitan facet of life in Port of Spain is revealed. Despite the contrast that is highlighted between these two traditionally rural and urban polar opposite landscapes, there is continuity in the leading theme of Biswas' uphill task. He fails to achieve his ideal in the first, succeeds with difficulty in the second, but lives too briefly in his houses which cannot withstand the onslaughts of Nature. Each part is built around violence wreaked on beauty. In the Tulsis home, the doll's house offered to his daughter is destroyed in the first and Shorthills in the second. Biswas' drowning in the first is matched by Biswas' son's near drowning. As part one ends, Biswas, in the only finished room of his unfinished house, is in the throes of a nervous breakdown. Early in the novel Biswas is beaten by Govind for insulting Owad, at the end of the novel Owad slaps Biswas' son for being rude to him. Each part builds up to a significant climax. During this breakdown his fear of extinction is crystallised in a symbolic death. His re-entry into Hanuman House after this event for recovery suggests the inescapable ancestral matriarchal hold. While he is ill in the

Blue Room his wife (in the Rose Room) gives birth to their fourth child. Birth and Death suggest an evanescence and a renewal of traditions and modernity, thus crossing over Indian and Western thresholds in a universal cycle. Also as part two commences with a renewed Biswas, part two ends with his actual death. As the birth of daughters occurs at every end of Biswas' symbolic and actual end, one wonders whether the matriarchal hold augurs its metamorphosis into modernity.

The son of Mr Biswas, Anand, endures domestic strife and poverty, his father's illness and absences, frequent moves from Hanuman House, the home of his grandmother in Maracas (the fictional Chagunas) to Green Vale, to Port of Spain, from there to Shorthills, and then back to the city, all of which are fictional versions of experiences Naipaul has recalled in later autobiographical recollections. But the "truth" that Naipaul has said that this novel evoked concerned not only events and feelings Seepersad Naipaul could not bear to face, but the son's ambivalent relationship with his father, his mother, and her extended family, in whose houses he lived for much of his youth. In various contexts Naipaul has disparaged the clan with its emphasis on caste, a system he denounces. Yet, he acknowledges that it could also be a psychological advantage. Mr Biswas regards Shama and the children as "alien growths, alien affections which fed on him and called him away from that part of him which yet remained purely himself, that part which had long been submerged and was now to disappear".¹ As he moves into sign painting to make a living he also drifts into marriage with Shama, a daughter of the Tulsi, "the world was too small; the Tulsi family too large. He felt

1. *AHB*, 461.

trapped.”¹

Mr Biswas, a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad is determined in his tragicomic quest to retain his misfit identity of an intellectual at odds with his family and the society at large. In *AHB* the protagonists have smothered their natural sense of the larger social reality instead of providing a passage to it. The social reality which surfaces in their fantasies, indicates its hidden presence as the need for a vision of self. The protagonist’s alienation from their societies and their social reality is seen to be moving without a sense of direction. Paradoxically the standards of their respective societies are also the limits of their individual horizons. The opposition in this novel is not only between the marginal man and his society, but also between the latter and the wider social expanse in which it is willy-nilly entrenched. In his construction of concentric social webs in which his protagonist and the narrator’s subjectivities and objectivities are entrapped, the writer depicts their inescapable dilemma since their release into their fantasies (which stem from their subjectivities) is also dependent on the social spiral that engulfs them. Their desperate attempts at self definition are circumscribed by oriented society — enforced and self chosen exiles. The latter is but one objective condition of enlarging self definition and restricting it at the same time. Straddled between roots and rootlessness Mr Biswas is “a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis”.²

Like *A Bend in the River* in a post colonial world, Biswas spends his entire life looking for a place to live which feels like his own,

1. *Ibid.*, 91.

2. *AHB*, 40.

something which is already complicated by his place in the large Indian community in Trinidad. He is poor but of high caste and this creates asymmetrical relationships with his entourage and his marriage into the Tulsi family, rich but of low caste, and trying not to become impoverished by the provision of dowries for 14 daughters. Hanuman House is a paradigm of social hierarchy represented by the Gods, Seth and Mrs Tulsi. "With the Tulsis, you have no choice except accepting their meagre generosity and becoming an anonymous Tulsi. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis. There were daughters who had, in the Tulsi marriage lottery drawn husbands with money and position; these daughters followed the Hindu custom of living with their husband's families, and formed no part of the Tulsi organisation Mr Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. 'At once he rebelled'".¹

His jobs as shopkeeper at the Chase and as a sub-overseer at the Greenvale sugar estate accentuate the process of waiting which characterises the frustrations of Mr Biswas' alienating attempts towards assimilation and independence. He builds his own house at Greenvale, where unfortunately even after six years of living "the window could trap, and mangle. So could the door".² He is taken to Hanuman House to recover, and then ventures to Port of Spain to "real life and its special sweetness".³ Biswas' life is a series of minor disasters each of which can be seen as his angry rebuttal of an uncongenial society which exhausts him in early middle age. And his final peace is as much a consequence of a personal triumph as of exhaustion, sickness and

1. *Ibid.*, 97.

2. *Ibid.*, 227.

3. *Ibid.*, 229.

failure, rationalised and accepted. Yet in the mood of despair at “imminent extinction” which is the crucial experience of each protagonist, alienation i.e. the protagonist’s unfolding insecurity compared to the enfolding security represented by traditions for the other members of their family becomes the very unlimited condition of his self definition, distinction and extinction. “As one of the Tulsi sons-in-law and as a journalist, he found himself among people with money and sometimes with graces; with them his manner was unforcedly easy and he could summon up luxurious instincts; but always, at the end, he returned to his crowded shabby room”.¹

Mr Biswas with his family and furniture, accumulating both in a haphazard fashion, moves through various Tulsi houses in the areas surrounding Arwacas, with Hanuman House as a frequent transfer point. His decisive journey to Port of Spain from Hanuman House after his recovery from the Greenvale disaster becomes a fresh start to a more successful life. He will not allow fear of failure, fear of Tulsi mockery, to immobilise him. His aesthetic development is naturally limited by his economic and social handicaps. But though his sensitivity to his environment and his imaginative capacity to identify with heroic characters in books is a major cause of his problems, these qualities also enable him to strive for aesthetic fullness in his daily life thus helping him to overcome his fear of death and his desire for continuity through Anand.

The protagonist of *AHB* struggles to define himself by a sense of achievement to build his house, to succeed as a journalist, and to prepare his son to leave home for study and a new life abroad.

1. *Ibid.*, 49.

He cuts a pathetic and a grotesque figure as he battles with the constraints of his immediate and extended backgrounds, i.e. his family and his society and his own character to succeed and even when he has to compromise, he does not harbour any illusions. The quest for selfhood is shaped by an equally significant attachment to truth. The autobiographical element in *AHB* which is reflected among other elements in the relationship between Mr Biswas and his son Anand and Naipaul and his father has been suggested by Naipaul. His father, like Mr Biswas, initiated him into writing. Like Mr Biswas' attempts to rise above the lot that has befallen him within his own poverty-ridden inscribed status and an immediate rigid custom driven social circle, and a wider colonial society.

If the Tulsis and the destructive impregnability of Hanuman House (dominating the novel to the end) embody the immediate social circle they also freeze into an artificial eternity, an ambivalent ancestral past, which is emblematic of colonised countries and of post colonial nations in the making. The inability of contemporary society to make life meaningful for its most ordinary members becomes apparent. Society's basic orientation to the past makes it resistant to the individual's existential needs and awareness.

The novel ends on the dual note of hope and despair. Although Anand is psychologically hurt, his education in England embodies the hope Naipaul's father foresaw for him in England too. The feudal structures of the civilization that cradled him in the East Indian community of Trinidad, symbolised by the Biswas household (and the joint family system) collapses and experiences the transitions of colonial Trinidad towards modernity and greater autonomy for individual lives. However, Biswas is trapped with

no means of escape. The disparity between his dignified address and the comico-pathetic failure of many of his endeavours conveys alienating despair.

Familial and national change lies in the disintegration of Tulsi power into smaller units and family feuds occur as Mrs Tulsi's death approaches. The elder Tulsi son Shekhar quarrels with Seth who now feels he is being treated as an outsider. The latter moves into a bigger house next to Hanuman House and purchases a bigger store and threatens to buy up the whole family as well. Other sons-in-law move out. Shekhar marries a Christian girl Dorothy in Port of Spain. Later they set up to buy a separate home. W.C. Tuttle buys his own home after Owad's return from England. Biswas is forced to move away from the Tulsi clan into his own home. The old order gives way to the new.

Despite Mr Biswas' fulfilment, there is a fatal absurdity as regards the imbalance between home and happiness, despite the glimpses of hope in the continuity of Biswas' educated ideals in the promises that Anand and Savi's futures portend.

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THE CREATIVE TENSION OF EMPTINESS IN
V. S. NAIPAUL'S *THE MIMIC MEN*

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Tension as a concept lies in the bringing together of incongruous elements. Like tectonic plates (layers), they may collide, slide over each other and shake both what is above and what is underneath. These elements at work are both familiar and alien, here and elsewhere, being both real and unreal, “authentic” and “unauthentic”. Though they are not welded together, these elements interact, flow into each other sometimes with tension, some other times harmoniously but never indifferently.

Within such deterministic context, Ralph Singh endeavours to pave his way loaded with all the contradictions history—both collective and personal—imposed on him. But in the very eye of his cyclonic existence, he manages to forge something poignant out of the ambient chaos.

Much has been written about the pessimistic vision pervading the novel, about self-hatred and even racism, as if dealing with

such crucial issues as identity, history, existentialism could be achieved without going through contradictory, violent but sometimes salvatory attitudes. Where there is no tension, there is continuity, and where there is continuity, there is no newness. Joyce says that a creator is like an olive: it only produces its juice under pressure. So anchoring the self to a rocky ground is preventing it from acquiring that “lightness” which is necessary for creation. In this sense *The Mimic Men* is the very place from which springs a creative sense of the self. Following Ralph Singh’s steps on the path of upheavals, one comes to understand that he did not choose the security of radicalism nor that of conformism. He, willingly or unwillingly, decided to struggle—probably on behalf of Naipaul himself—against past and present tides, looking for an eventual flow. As such a purgatorial investigation required, Singh gave voice to his contradictions.

Most postcolonial writers of the 50s and 60s wrote *against*. Against an oppressive, dominant, traumatic and canonical system. They were engaged in the process of reviving their own past, tradition—both secular and religious—as a reparation and/or revenge. Though momentarily satisfactory, this settling of account favours the emergence of an identity that artificially casts a veil on its dual, ambivalent nature. Ralph Singh, on the other hand, is caught within that particular moment in human experience when as Gramsci puts it, the old is not dead whereas the new is not born yet. Instead of turning his back to the past, he makes the difficult choice of facing it assuming Orpheus’ posture when confronting Hades and determined to come out of the underworld of history lighter than ever. But such adventure could not be carried through without scathes. Let’s examine what Singh encountered once he dived deep into that personal and collective history.

The pervading tension in the novel fuels Ralph's tormented being and propels him to test all the means available. He will go through different stages. He first establishes a comprehensive diagnosis of his present situation, spotting the weaknesses and responding to them. Politics, sexuality, social and cultural commitment are part of that experience which will culminate in writing. In the tension between the "unauthentic" and the "real", lies the very secret of writing. Ralph is the embodiment of fiction itself: a "fake" and a "lie". In so being, he anchors his life on the creative uncertainties of writing. Between his craving for "the hard and concrete where everything becomes simple and ordinary and easy to seize"¹ and his standing on the shaky ground of impermanence, Ralph Singh finds the secret of his art. Embracing his unfittedness and placelessness, he became "fluid" and "weightless" two necessary qualities for creativeness.

Ralph Singh discovers that his life is a succession of "lesser": groundless, historiless, childless, tasteless, humourless, placeless, homeless—despite his success in real estate—anchorless, friendless, fatherless, motherless, sisterless—not that he did not have any family, but because his ties are loosening: "as much as I suppressed my father, then, I suppressed my sisters. They grew away from me as a result, they never again became close." (*MM*. 113)

Everything around him testifies to his entanglement in corruption and chaos. Making such bleak diagnosis, he loses the security and comfort of the "nativistic" approach to history. Nativistic discourse as Said puts it:

1. Naipaul, V. S., *The Mimic Men* (London: Picador, 1995): 75. All the references to the book will be represented in the following way (*MM* and page number).

reinforces the distinction by reevaluating the weaker or subservient partner. And it has often led to compelling but demagogic assertions about a native past, history, or actuality that seems to stand free not only of the colonizer but of the worldly time itself.¹

Far from being an act of self-hatred, it is an “authentic”² approach to an “unauthentic” past and a disturbing present. His personal experience is meant to be representative of the collective one. He paradoxically discovers that in that very insecurity and groundlessness lies the originality of his life. That insecurity unites his “cell” to other cells and gets it ready to be fertilized. This feeling pervades both his body and his mind, be it in Isabella or in the great city of London:

Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me. And this was what I felt I had encountered again in the great city. This feeling of being adrift, a cell perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter. (*MM*. 26)

Alteration is nothing but fertilization, both physical and intellectual. But before emptying that cell and unloading it in order to allow it to cross the emotional, mental and physical barriers and acquire the necessary lightness, Singh knows that he has to carry that diagnosis to its finest level. He then, discovers that his world does not inspire any “assurance, or any feeling of pride in his citizenship”³ (translation mine); that his colonial society is

1. Said, E.W., *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992): 82.

2. “Authenticity” is a much debated concept in a perpetually changing world where metamorphosis and mutability determine to a greater extent our evaluation of the “truth” and obliterate any hierarchical hegemonic order.

3. Memmi, A., *Portrait du colonisé* (Paris: Payot, 1973): 126.

“unhealthy, where internal dynamics cannot give way to a new structure”.¹ He reaches the conclusion that nothing can come out of nothing. Neither sex, nor politics or business can procure him that satisfactory feeling of achieving something that may bind him to a land, a nation, history or people.

This personal assessment corresponds to a larger extent to the psychological portrait of the colonized as sketched by Albert Memmi. Published in 1957 it is unlikely to be unknown to Naipaul whose novel was published ten years later. When we read that the colonial society “lacking national structures, unable to imagine a historical future for itself, must content itself with the passive bewilderment of its present.”² This statement befits Singh’s assessment when he declares: “we were an intermediate race, the genes *passive*, capable of disappearing in two generations.” (MM. 58) (emphasis mine). Reaching such a bottom line is a necessary stage in Singh’s response to his social, political and historical environment. It mirrors that of the colonial writer who, as Albert Memmi explains, plays a very difficult part because he incarnates all the ambiguities, the impossibilities of the colonized while pushing them to the limits. Those limits were reached when Singh recognises bitterly that he is placeless, unfitted and unable to accommodate himself to such a disorder and chaos. Should he jump off that drifting ship, or feign solidarity and risk his life? Singh’s response to the vacuum around him is flight to another place, claiming his right for a fresh start, to become another, or more accurately to explore the other hidden part of him. What cannot be cured must be endured, says one of Salman Rushdie’s protagonists in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. But Singh ignores so far that

1. *Ibid.*, 127.

2. *Ibid.*, 130.

the current disorder should be taken back to the colonial intervention itself, the way Chinua Achebe demonstrates in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. But at this stage of his existential experience, what matters is the attempt itself, the positive response to the call of the “centre”. This response is a mere compliance to a deeper call, to what the colonial system had left in the very fabric of the colonized psyche, what the social, educational, economic and political system engraved on the mind of the colonized child. No wonder then, if Singh the adult is still haunted by the memories of his school days and their inadequacy with the present. Because this latter is not satisfactory, the need to link it with the past grows more pressing, hoping that in the process Ralph Singh might find an answer. His dream of snow and mountains is less a craving for the unknown than an attempt to substitute the promise of the past with the emptiness of the present. Though he knows that his childhood was a period of incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies (*MM*. 97) it is still the only repository he can lean on to get out of the vacuity of the present. Failing to exchange the English “apple” with the Trinidadian “orange”, he decided to go for the first. Its solidity and exoticism may satisfy his hunger for “the hard and concrete”. “Beaches and coconut trees” (*MM*. 105) seem to recede, leaving room for mountains and snow. When he “sets the pictures next to one another” he knew that he had no choice but to respond positively to the deterministic call of exile.

The diagnosis led to the most obvious therapy at hand for Singh. That of flight to the antithetical site wherein he will accomplish that necessary second step towards self-fulfilment. There is no contradiction in undertaking such a step as a positive response to the call of history. Consciously or unconsciously, Singh cannot

ignore the English voice inside him, lurking there for generations, insidiously introduced into the very fabric of his body and mind. Isabella is no longer the place that may bind him. His ties are loosening, so neither family nor friends or house can bind him to a place that is growing smaller and unsatisfactory. His scope is enlarging in concentric circles moving from the narrowest part of it to a larger one. To London where "there was no one to link [his] present to [his] past, no one to note [his] consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to [him] to choose [his] character, and [he] chose the character that was easiest and most attractive. [he] was the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship." (MM. 19)

This willingness to have a fresh start, to turn his back on the unsatisfactory life on Isabella is less an attitude of submission to the hegemonic call of the "centre", than a refusal to surrender to the present *status quo*. The frame fixed around him and his people by the colonial system is too small for someone whose dreams are bigger. He then decided to step out of the frame to explore what may seem at that stage of his experience, a more fitting landscape.

Archetypal Ralph Singh is not a man of mild attitudes. He needs to live his experience to the limit. In London he puts on the "white" mask, the one that may lead him to the core of the colonial experience. He will be the perfect candidate for assimilation, the most interesting case in point for the colonial mimic man. He will change his name, put on different personas. His attitude will range from shame to self-hatred, as Albert Memmi puts it. He became "what [he] see[s] of [himself] in the eyes of others . . . It was disquieting, yet at the same time oddly faltering, to be cherished as a substitute; and it imposed no obligation." (MM. 20)

Indeed, what he mimicks is himself, the ambivalent character

he is. He is the faithful echo of what is inside rather than the pejorative self-deprecating attitude. Mimicry is then, a necessary step towards liberation as defined by Said when he says: “*Liberation, and nationalist independence, is the new alternative, liberation which by its very nature involves, in Fanon’s words, a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness.*”¹ To reach that goal, Singh had to go through assimilation to become Lien’s pupil, to anglicise his name and to marry with the “sacrosanct” white woman and reach the hardcore of sexuality the way Jimmy Ahmed did in *Guerrillas*. His authenticity lies in his unhypercritical response to his contradictions. Assuming them, even relishing their sweet and sour tastes. He opposes contradiction to manicheism, ambivalence to dogmatic exclusivism. His body and shadow make one, however difficult the situation maybe for both the beholder of the mirror and the changing figure reflected in it.

Though lived fully and unequivocally, assimilation is a failure too. The second phase came to an end revealing another hidden side of Singh’s personality. It gave voice to a suppressed self. Polyphonic Singh cannot be satisfied with the predominance of one voice over all the others. He has to sing his own partition that is to be written out of his life experience and its contradictions. A distinctive voice will emerge to celebrate the coincidence between the colonized and himself. The coincidence between the model and its antithesis. From within the tension that underlies such process the artist’s authentic voice will emerge.

London’s spell over him vanished into thin air and turns as chaotic and unsatisfactory as Isabella:

1. *Op. cit.*, 83.

Coming to London, the great city, seeking order, seeking flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality. It was something I had tried more than once before, and waited for the response in the eyes of others. But now I no longer knew what I was; ambition became confused, then faded; and I found myself longing for the certainties of my life on the island of Isabella, certainties which I had once dismissed as shipwreck. (MM.26)

Singh is by now detached from both Isabella and London, hovering above both centres with a hawkish eye ready to pick up what may be of use for the forging of his art. And what may feed it to satiety. "It is writing which foregrounds and celebrates a national or historical rootlessness"¹ says Elleke Boehmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. It is that feeling of impermanence, and of always being "out of place"² that will provide the final dwelling place for the artist once he is free of the compelling commitment to a place, a nation or an ideology. It is that very feeling of insecurity which made Jimmy Ahmed commit the act of writing: "This was how he usually wrote, out of disturbance, out of wonder at himself, out of some sudden clear vision of an aspect of his past, or out of panic"³. Relieved of the grounding weight of such commitment, he can enjoy his newly discovered lightness. He then may coincide with Said's conception of the role of the intellectual when he explains in his Reith lecture that detachment is the best way to achieve one's autonomy from political,

1. Boehmer E., *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Opus, 1995): 240.

2. Said, E., *Out of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1999): 3.

3. Naipaul V. S., *Guerrillas* (London: Penguin Books, 1975): 38.

economic and social pressure. It is also this attitude that Naipaul praises when he declares that he never marches or sign petitions.

When the double journey from Isabella to London and back revealed nothing significant, when escape proved to be vain, Singh found himself in the middle of nowhere, in that place that does not bind and paradoxically found his way, that of the artist:

I felt I had known a double failure, and I felt I continued to live between their twin threats. It was during this time, as I have said, that I thought of writing. It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which great upheaval has brought about . . . It was my hope to sketch a subject which, fifty years hence, a great historian might pursue. For there is no such thing as history nowadays; there are only manifestos and anti-quarian research; and on the subject of empire there is only the pamphleteering of churls. But this work will not now be written by me; I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject. And it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied. (*MM*.32)

The artist's conception of history depends a great deal on his narrative. He will move from a microcosmic vision of the world to a macrocosmic one which he then delivers, in an act of othering, to the reader to decipher. In the process described by Henrietta Moore, "if narrative makes the world intellegible, it also makes

ourselves intelligible"¹ This intellegibility is perceived through the isomorphism between the narrative voice in the text "I", and the individual who writes the text. In the coincidence between this *mise en abîme* and the "I" the author rises as an anthropologist concerned both with the "I" and the "others". Both are affecting each other in a decentralised world where frontiers are tumbling down. Despite the claimed feeling of being "spectral, disintegrating, pointless and fluid" (MM. 53) Singh is central to his story that is part of a bigger History. As a writer, he acts like a historian "who detects the seed of disaster in some minor and unregarded action" (MM.53) The writer acts both as an anthropologist and a psychotherapist. He tames the tension created by the encounter between the "I" and the "Other" through the process of writing itself that is the authorial process. Singh confesses: "I have given a flippant account of this episode. Flippancy comes easily when we write of past pain, it disguises and mocks the pain." (MM. 101). Fiction demystifies the pain that was generated by the encounter with the colonial system of domination on the one hand and his powerlessness to overthrow it. Singh discovers the curative effect of writing. Only fiction can achieve that as Naipaul puts it: "facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally."²

The historian, the writer and the psychotherapist are merging to give shape to the newly uncovered self. In the process different parts of the world are linked through the textual order springing from the chaotic discrepancies of places. Singh the writer—biographer—bridges the gap while underlining differ-

1. Henrietta Moore, "Master Narratives: Anthropology and Writing", in *What is an author?* (Manchester University Press, 1993): 204.

2. Naipaul V. S., *The Return of Eva Péron* (London: Penguin Books, 1980): 67.

ences. "I was deeply impressed. I felt that Mr Deschampsneuf's story has brought the past close. It was possible to believe in the link between our island and the great world." (MM. 188)

If disorder is drama as Singh acknowledges, it is drama that feeds humanity with meaning. It is from that place in-between, within the limits of a gravitation-free space that meaning may spring: "At the edge, in-between the black body and the white body there is a tension of meaning and being"¹ claims Homi Bhabha. In writing, revelations cascade and even corruption acquires a positive meaning. All that Singh wanted to escape from turns out to be of the utmost importance for his art. Singh's body is like that of the text, made out of the same thread: "We are made by everything, by action, by withdrawal; and those relationships, begun in corruption, which I thought I could shrug off when the time came, turned out in the end to be able to imprison." (MM. 142)

Stories have that transformational capacity, they create through irony that tension which, as Dona Haraway puts it, lies in the holding of incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.² But irony has its virtues and serves as a relevant device for the hammering of some discovered verities. Irony disturbs as Kundera puts it: "not because it mocks or attacks, but because it deprives us of some certainties by revealing the world as ambiguity."³

For Singh writing is less a refuge than the final stage in the process of self-righting. The emptiness, that paradoxically fills his

1. Bhabha H., *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 62.

2. Haraway D., "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and Socialist feminism in the 1980s", *Socialist Review* 15,2 (March-April, 1985): 65-107.

3. Kundera M., *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986): 164.

being, the disorder and corruption turn out to be the basic material for his art. The spell of notions such as place, past, home, belonging, order are dissolving through the desacralising process of writing. "Perhaps it is the effort of writing . . . certain emotions bridge the years and link unlikely places. Sometimes by this linking the sense of place is destroyed, and we are ourselves alone: the young man, the boy, the child. The physical world, which we yet continue to prove, is then like a private fabrication we have always known." (*MM*. 166)

Is it not wholeness that he achieved by bringing together the atomized debris of the self through the textual artifact? Is it not the message that revealed itself to him "ending in dots" telling him that all his "notions of shipwreck were false" creating thus his past "against his will" (*MM*. 194), that he managed to liberate himself from past trauma? What cannot be cured must be endured and rendered fruitful.

The gap Singh managed to bridge is not only between past and present, close and remote landscapes, but also—and maybe above all—between the new and the former self. The scattered parts of himself are held together by the magic of writing, celebrating the mythical figure of the writer while demystifying the too much sacralized myth of the "centre". It is once again the power of writing and the creative effects of the word that gave him a sense of wholeness. The wholeness he craved for and never succeeded to achieve for neither politics, nor business did provide him with the necessary cement for his growing unbearable fragmentation. Wholeness is achieved in the very process of exposing its antithesis, that is unwholeness. Singh achieves what Terry Eagleton considers as: "Trying somehow to go right through those estranging definitions to emerge somewhere on

the other side.”¹ If otherness can define the “I”, things may also be defined in themselves. Through the exploration of the very nature of loss for example, he deluded the spell of that loss. Face it or leave it. Singh faced it and threw a new light on it:

AS I WRITE, my own view of my actions alters. I have said that my marriage and the political career which succeeded it and seemed to flow from it, all that active part of my life, occurred in a sort of parenthesis. I used to feel they were aberrations, whimsical, arbitrary acts which in some way got out of control. But now, with a feeling of waste and regret for opportunities missed, I begin to question this. I doubt whether any action, above a certain level, is ever wholly arbitrary or whimsical or dishonest. I question now whether the personality is manufactured by the vision of others. *The personality hangs together. It is one and indivisible.* (MM. 199) (emphasis mine)

Singh manages to answer that crucial question which sets his experience beyond the much debated “pessimism” when he asks how could anyone, wishing only to abolish himself, go beyond a statement of distress? (MM. 163) It is in the murky equivocal depths of the self that one may find the answer. When one manages to reduce what Albert Memmi calls the gap with the self. When one becomes “committed to a whole new methodology, dark and alien, committed to a series of interiors [one] never wanted to enter” (MM. 205)

Entering the cave of horrors and stumbling across past and present frightful figures, Singh learns that in “conditions of chaos, which would appear hostile to any human development, the human personality is in fact more varied and extended.” (MM.

1. Eagleton T., *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, op. cit., 24.

234). Singh's scope is widened through the magnifying effect of his introspective approach. From a "spectral" being of "lesser", he manages to become a doer, a creator who adds his own link to the human chain Kundera deals with in *The Art of the Novel*, through the ability to convey his own vision of the world. The very materiality of the writing process tames the events and makes reality surrender to the contingencies of art: "By this re-creation the event became historical and manageable, it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me" Singh confesses. (MM. 266)

The big History is nothing but the conjunction of different personal histories. Their coincidence creates that necessary tension which in turn brings about creation. Acquiring that quality of lightness, Singh can make of writing his dwelling place while aware of its unsettling effects. That tension extends life rather than belittles it. Weightless and fluid, Singh can assert that writing about one's life can "become an extension of that life" (MM. 267) and that despite "its initial distortion" writing "clarifies, and even becomes a process of life" (MM. 274)

Through Singh's life and experience, Naipaul situates his novel far beyond the nationalistic concern and consciousness of post-colonial literature. The courage which he denounces the lack of on Isabella, seems to find its embodiment in Ralph Singh. To liberate the self is the new alternative as Said puts it. A liberation that may take the shape of a desperate fight of the one against the multitude, that may seem as swimming against the tides of history. But in the end Singh reached the unsettling shores of writing after having got rid of despair and emptiness (MM. 265) and managed to embrace his detachment.

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**“COOLIE” COME LATELY: INCOMPLETENESS AND THE
MAKING OF *THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA***

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Sir Vidia Naipaul's second published novel, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, appeared in 1958. This was written at a time when he was still green and feeling his way as a writer.

Naipaul says that his ambition to be a writer came from his father. In his narrative, *Finding the Centre*, he recalls that:

The ambition to be a writer was given me by my father . . . ¹and then, somehow, without any discussion that I remember, it seemed settled in my mind as well as my father's, that I would be a writer . . . I had given no sign of talent, but I was to be a writer.²

So from a very early age, the idea of a becoming a writer was very much a part of Naipaul's consciousness. On leaving

1. V. S. Naipaul, *Finding The Centre* (Penguin, 1985): 29.

2. *Ibid.*, 37.

Oxford University, where he had been studying on a scholarship, he began to write while working part-time for the BBC World Service, an occupation which enabled many other established Caribbean writers, like George Lamming and Samuel Selvon, to pursue the often precarious occupation as a writer.

Naipaul has chosen the context of the elections in the late 1940s in Trinidad in which to set this novel which can be viewed as a satirical portrait of the Indian community there. Here he attempts to present a caricature of the Indian community in Trinidad as they try to enter the world of politics. It is a little more than two decades after the end of Indian indentureship, and the East Indian community is trying to gain entry into the mainstream of life not only in the colony of Trinidad and Tobago, but also in British Guiana. This projection into the mainstream of these two colonies is going to bring them into open competition, and sometimes direct conflict, with the African community in these two territories.

Many changes were taking place in Trinidad and Tobago society at this time. During and after the Second World War, there was a strong American presence in the colony, partly in the form of an American military base. This significant American presence, or, as Ivar Oxaal points out, "'The American Occupation', as this period is called in Trinidad, brought about a tremendous acceleration in the exposure of Trinidadians to the outside world."¹ Indians in the community were therefore caught up in, and contributed to, this change as "Tens of thousands of local people were employed in the construction and maintenance of the

1. Ivar Oxaal, *Black Intellectuals Come To Power, The Rise of Creole Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* (Schenkman Publishing Company Inc., Massachusetts, 1968): 81.

wartime facilities."¹ There is no doubt that many in the Indian community were employed here and were part of this exposure to the outside world. The process of "creolization" among the Indians in Trinidad, therefore, was more easily facilitated than those in the then colony of British Guiana (Guyana).

Naipaul's novel irreverently shows their attempt to gain entry into, and make their mark on, the political scene in Trinidad.

Democracy had come to Elvira four years before, in 1946; but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn't until 1950, a few months before the second general election under universal adult franchise, that people began to see the possibilities. (*SE*, 13)

Naipaul depicts a community being catapulted totally unprepared into an alien world of politics under British domination, which is far removed from plantation life and obsessions with family. This latter is something for which the Indian is well known and a point which Naipaul himself makes. He remarks that "Indians are family minded. That makes them very different from everyone here."² The novel manages to capture the Indian emerging from plantation life into a life of politics with all its intrigues, the world of the village headman.

This is how he describes this world:

Living by themselves in villages, the Indians were able to have a complete community life. It was a world eaten up with jealousies and family feuds and village feuds, but it was a world of its own, a community within the colonial society, without responsibility, with authority doubly and trebly removed. This has been

1. *Ibid.*, 81.

2. Lieve Joris, "Home to the Snakes and the Sensitive Plants", Interview with Naipaul in *NewStatesman*, 17 December 2001 - 7 January, 2002.

responsible for the village headman type of politician the Indian favours, and explains why Indian leadership has been so deplorable, so unfitted to handle the mechanics of party and policy.¹

This, therefore, is the community that Naipaul attempts to portray: an unsophisticated people playing at politics, but having no real sense of political organization. The Indian community had just been released from plantation bondage and began to participate in Trinidad society. Ivar Oxaal discusses this advancement of Indians into the business sphere as well as their “rapid strides in achieving professional status.”² Indians, therefore became part of an emerging force with mobility into the professions, and the civil service, which left many in the African community feeling threatened. Naipaul aims therefore to show the Indians’ need to become a part of this society which is now to them, home. So we have this “just come” community, these late-comers, the most recently arrived sector of Trinidad society, not yet creolized, and Naipaul’s novel shows them being dragged along by the changes in society, brought about by the introduction of universal adult suffrage.

Political unrest throughout the Caribbean during the 1930s spurred the British Government to launch an investigation with the help of the Moyne Commission, set up for this purpose. “As a result of their recommendations, a local franchise was appointed in 1941 and they recommended the granting of universal adult suffrage to the Colony in 1945, and establishment of County Council in 1946.”³

1. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (Picador, 2001).

2. Ivar Oxaal, *op. cit.*, 88.

3. Brinsley Samaroo, “Politics and Afro-Indian Relations” in John La Guerre (ed) *Calcutta to Caroni, East Indians in Trinidad* (Longman Caribbean, 1974): 92.

The Suffrage of Elvira depicts with some hilarity the Indians' response to this new "democratic" process. There is some hint of a contradiction here in this notion of "democracy", and one cannot help but feel that Naipaul is being ironic in his portrayal of this "democratic process", for in a colonial polity this democracy is really no democracy at all. Trinidad and Tobago, despite the introduction of adult suffrage will continue to be a colony. Therefore, this lack of democracy continued to stultify aspects of this community, maintaining it as the kind of society that Naipaul disparages as "backward".

So, behind this caricature and absurdity of the Bramhin leadership playing on the religious and other emotions of hierarchy and caste of the Indians in the district of Elvira, we are presented with serious notions of "the outsider" and a need to belong; to be a real part of society. This is the real politics of the village headman in the guise of Chitteranjan, the goldsmith, and Baksh, the tailor, the two most important men in the district of Elvira – one Hindu, the other Muslim; but both Indian. The fact that the two most important men here are Indian illustrates that Indians were in the ascendant, for Elvira must have at least been a racially mixed district. The implication here is that in order to emerge as the two most important men in the district, these two Indians had overtaken and risen above the Africans at all levels. Bribery and corruption are going to play an important part in these elections as each of these two men, in his own way, tries to persuade a reluctant Harbans to run for the leadership of the Council in Elvira. Baksh is the leader of the Muslims in the community and Naipaul describes him thus:

It was a puzzle: how Baksh came to be the Muslim leader. He

wasn't a good Muslim. He didn't know all the injunctions of the Prophet and those he did know he broke. For instance, he was a great drinker; when he went to Ramlogan's rumshop he made a great point of ordering white puncheon rum, the sort you have to swallow quickly before it turns to vapour in your mouth. He had none of the dignity of a leader . . . in Elvira they called him "the mouther." (*SE*, 13)

Indeed, Baksh is mouthy, brash and untrustworthy, and the portrait painted of him could be Naipaul's perception of the members of the Muslim community. "Baksh drank with everybody and quarrelled with everybody" (*The Suffrage* . . . 13). Here, Naipaul paints a portrait of a religious and community leader who does not seem to be deserving of this role, or one who does not even realise the importance of this role. Indeed, how can any self-respecting community look up this man who does not seem to take his role of leader in the community seriously when he cavorts in the basest possible way with everyone?

Of the Hindu, Chitteranjan, he says:

Easily the most important person in Elvira was Chitteranjan, the goldsmith. And there was no mystery why. He looked rich and was rich. He was an expensive goldsmith with a reputation that had spread beyond Elvira. (*SE*, 14)

In the character of Chitteranjan, we have a general stereotype of the Indian. He is portrayed as wealthy, but he is tight-fisted. He owns the largest house in Elvira, but his personal appearance belies his stated wealth:

Chitteranjan's white shirt was mended and re-mended; the sleeves had been severely abridged and showed nearly all of Chitteran-

jan's stringy arms. The washed-out khaki trousers were not patched, but there was a tear down one leg from knee to ankle that looked as though it had been there a long time. This shabbiness was almost grand. It awed at once. (*SE*, 29)

One cannot help but feel that Naipaul is poking fun at Chitteranjan. A man of his means, especially one with such clout in the community, is endowed with enough presence to "awe" despite his shabby appearance. "Chitteranjan . . . the other power in Elvira, was aloof and stiff, and whenever he talked to you, you felt he was putting you in your place." (*The Suffrage* . . . 13)

There is a marked contrast here in the portrayal of the two leaders. One who leaves much to be desired as a leader and the other, despite his shabby appearance, commands respect. Naipaul's Bramhanic background cannot resist this comparison where the Hindu is depicted as morally upright and the Muslim "other" is viewed with disdain. Nevertheless, in these two characters we are shown in the most irreverent and anarchical way two rugged individualists and their dabble into politics.

Naipaul's novel manages to treat the serious subject of not only the political development of the Indian in Trinidad, but also the picture of the individual Indian participants, in an extremely farcical way.

Like his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, this second work of fiction is built on caricatures. One is led not to take it too seriously. Gordon Rholehr also makes this observation of Naipaul's early writing in an interview with Selwyn Cudjoe. His remarks specifically refer to *The Mystic Masseur*, but this can equally be applied to *The Suffrage of Elvira*. He says:

Like Dickens, Naipaul is fascinated by the notion of the grotesque. Caricature often implies a perception of a certain incompleteness of character – (it may be the extension of an incompleteness in the writer, for all you know) – and a desire to reduce the character to the gesture or the thing. This is one of the limits you will find in Naipaul from his earlier works.¹

Rohlehr is establishing here an incompleteness of the characters in Naipaul's early fiction. He comments that that may be due to an incompleteness of the writer's own character. The possibility of this incomplete aspect in Naipaul is somewhat endorsed by Clem Seecharan, who views him as essentially pessimistic. It is this incompleteness of character coming from an incompleteness in upbringing which has bred this pessimistic outlook in the man. This can certainly be traced back to the writer's Bramhanic origins and the extended family which both "imprisoned and protected." Seecharan explains that there were many childhood and adolescent experiences lacking in Naipaul's upbringing. The narrowness of this upbringing to some degree, stunted his sensibilities. He argues that Naipaul's childhood was narrow and confining, where the range of childhood experiences which provide that balance so essential in growing up a rounded personality, was absent. Naipaul, he believes, is someone who did not engage in the normal boyhood pursuits that one associates with growing up in the Caribbean; it was a childhood which, despite its precocity, was incomplete. In short, he was a total stranger to the idea of childhood and adolescent fun. Indeed, as Seecharan shows, this

1. Gordon Rohlehr, "The Space Between Negations", interview in Gordon Rohlehr (ed) *The Shape of that Hurt and Other Essays* (Longman Trinidad Ltd., 1992): 102.

was no real childhood at all, and relates all of this back to the writer's restricted Bramhanic family life:

The man had come too soon to the child. He lacked a sense of the absurd, which comes out of grounding, belonging, security: roots. Even those works of humour and irony of the early years, "when the jokes came fast", as he recalled disparagingly, are a cover for an essential pessimism:¹

Seecharan continues: "Pessimism came early: laughter did not come easily; when it did it was sardonic".²

There is more than just a hint of the burlesque in the characters in *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Naipaul's characters are portrayed as shallow and superficial and this can be viewed as another level of incompleteness. They are sketchily drawn. There is no major figure of substance or credibility portrayed and there is no one whom we can envisage making a mark in this strange new world of constitutional politics. For example, none of the characters seems to be endowed with the means or depth to really understand this politics and we have no real way of assessing their role. Politicians without gravitas, there is no one with any charisma, and the characters seem to spring out of a kind of frivolity that cannot be taken seriously; this vacuous community strongly demonstrates Naipaul's own cynical perception of Trinidad society.

The sketchiness of these characters is not to be wondered at, for Naipaul's knowledge of the society in which he grew up was

1. Clem Seecharan, "In The Shadow of Sir Vidia, Out of Historical Darkness", Introduction to his *Tiger in the Stars* (1997. London: Aeneas Press, 2003): 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

second-hand. He had had very little experience of it and acquired much of his knowledge about it from his father.

If it were not for the stories my father wrote I would have known almost nothing about the general life of our Indian community. These stories gave me more than knowledge. They gave me a kind of solidity. They gave me something to stand on in the world. I cannot imagine what my mental picture would have been without these stories. The world outside existed in a kind of darkness, and we inquired about nothing.¹

But Clem Seecharan dismisses this notion of “solidity” in Naipaul. He says: “Naipaul has had amazing mileage from this second-hand knowledge, but outside of *A House for Mister Biswas*, the absence of experience, the thinness of the ‘solidity’, shows.”²

This novel presents us with a society that is half-made, one that requires no talents or gifts of any kind, and there is no solidity, all of which emphasises the notion of incompleteness. There is a certain perverse logic in this, for those without gifts or talents cannot be expected to build something solid, even just after a century of trying. This is consistent with Naipaul’s view that this society can never amount to anything, for he has never made any secret of his contempt for Caribbean society in general, and Trinidad society, in particular. He views it as a “half-baked” society, out of which nothing of any substance or worth can evolve.

Incompleteness is a product of half-made, half-baked societies, societies which, in Naipaul’s view equate to “nullity”, a term which recurs in *India: A Wounded Civilisation*.³ The term applies

1. V. S. Naipaul, “Two Worlds”, Nobel Lecture, 7 December, 2001.

2. Clem Seecharan, *op. cit.*, 11.

3. V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (Penguin, 1979).

not only to peoples, but societies, and one cannot make achievements out of "nullities", which is the Naipaulian mantra for the Third World.

In *The Middle Passage*, he says:

I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical . . .
It was a place where the stories were never stories of success but
of failure . . . For talent, a futility, the Trinidadian substituted
intrigue . . . ¹

Such is his pessimism that there is even no real development or cohesion in the Hindu community that he depicts in *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Naipaul is reinforcing the idea of incompleteness, for what we see depicted here is a fragmented community which seems to be moving beyond the collective to the world of the individual. This emergence of the individual is expressed in the novel where one of the most frequently expressed words among the characters is "pussonal" (personal). This is a word which Naipaul says "had enormous vogue in Elvira in 1950." (*The Suffrage* . . . 19) This was around the time when aspects of Indian family structure were beginning to change, and the growth in individualism was beginning to manifest itself in the weakening of village and family ties. This is a period according to J.C. Jha, when " . . . the insistence of family solidarity and cohesion is being replaced by a growth of individualism. The old attachment to the village is weakening; and the intra-family relations are no longer governed by regard for age and kinship status."²

1. *The Middle Passage*, 34-35.

2. J.C. Jha, "The Indian Heritage in Trinidad" in John La Guerre (ed), *Calcutta to Caroni, East Indians In Trinidad* (Longman Caribbean): 3-4.

This is, indeed, a confirmation of the emphasis on the personal, manifesting itself in the weakening of village and family ties. This is what emerges in Naipaul's fictional community, and is clearly demonstrated in the characters of Lorkhoor, the Hindu and Foam (Foreman), the eldest son of the Bakshes, whose mother is increasingly alarmed at his lack of respect for his parents.

Naipaul is therefore historically accurate in reflecting the growth in individualism. In the characters of Foam and Lorkhoor we have unrefuted examples of a new young emerging generation in which this individualism is beginning to be established. They are beginning to integrate into the host society as generally happens with second and third generation migrants. This generation is usually able to move between their own and the host culture with greater facility than their parents and this is what brings them into conflict with the older generation. In Trinidad, and perhaps more so in British Guiana, the older generation was able to keep many of the old values and traditions intact while on the plantations, but found it increasingly difficult to do so on leaving the estates. This created tensions between the old and new generations; the older one trying to hang on to old values and viewing society with some hostility, while the young embraced the new culture and attempted to assimilate into it. Their relationship with the community at large meant that creolization began to take place.

The two main candidates fighting this election in Elvira are Harbans, a Hindu, who doesn't live in Elvira, and Preacher, an African who does. Both Chittaranjan and Baksh attempt to control Harbans, each for his own ends, and they virtually promise him the election. Chittaranjan is hoping that once Harbans wins the election with his help, the newly elected will be so grateful

that he will permit his son who is a doctor in Port of Spain to marry his daughter, Nelly. And Baksh believes he will be able to manipulate him and obtain favours once he is elected. In fact, he has not only persuaded Harbans to engage his son Foam as his campaign manager, but he manages to secure a van and loud-speaker for himself from the candidate. Harbans himself is a reluctant politician in some ways. He seems to be seduced by the idea of power and the trappings of power, but he is a bit in awe of the responsibility, and becomes increasingly alarmed at the vast expenditure that his campaign will entail. He is emotional and weak and is easily manipulated.

One of the most surprising and puzzling characters in the novel is Preacher. He is an African and, like all the others who are paraded as major characters, Preacher is peripheral, and like them, he lacks depth. As the name implies, he is a pastor and is well known in the village where he conducts his regular worship. But in the novel we very rarely see him and he hardly ever speaks. This character bears no resemblance to the reality of an African preacher and would-be politician at the time. By the late nineteenth century there was a small but emerging African middle class who had begun to enter into the professions, the police, the civil service and the local legislature. Many were also school teachers and preachers in the community. By the 1940s, therefore, Africans had projected themselves as leaders; many were generally charismatic.

But Naipaul's lack of knowledge of Trinidad society did not really equip him with the means to paint Preacher as a plausible character, for he had no way of comprehending the world of the African. Preacher therefore emerges as more incomplete than the other characters. He appears to have just been "thrown in", and

the sense of him is less than the Indians. So Preacher, as Naipaul depicts him, is an anomaly. His reticence and shadowy existence is one of the weaknesses of the novel.

There is no evidence that Naipaul modelled his character on real people, but in the character of Preacher there are some resonances of the Trade Union leader of the 1930s and 40s, Uriah Butler. Butler was an African leader in the community and he also was campaigning for election in 1950 in Trinidad. Of Butler's politics Oxaal has this to say:

Butler the radical forces might unite, and he did attract to the ranks several young East Indian professional men, but he lacked finesse, was obviously the logical popular hero around whom organisational ability and the education which might have attracted a wider middle class following.¹

So although Butler has always been portrayed as a charismatic leader it was also thought that "his leadership was always personal."² Thus, if Preacher's character is based on this leader, then it is clearly another of Naipaul's caricatures.

For, as Brinsley Samaroo points out:

The period dating from the First World War was one of a renewed African consciousness. The Pan- African movement of which the Trinidadian lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams was a founder, had started the search for a black (African) identity; then there was Marcus Garvey's powerful "back to Africa" movement of the immediate post-World War One era, against which special legislation had to be passed in 1920. In the 1930s African consciousness

1. . Ivar Oxaal, *op. cit.*, 88.

2. Selwyn D. Ryan, *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* (University of Toronto Press, 1972): 92.

was encouraged by the *Beacon* group which spoke of the role of the black man and conducted debates on the alleged inferiority of the African. This was a time, finally, when men like C.L.R. James and Learie Constantine were proving that black men were no less equal than white.¹

This would have been in marked contrast to the Indians who were "late-comers to education and politics in the British West Indies."² Not only would the Indian have been inexperienced, but he would have lacked the grounding of the African in Caribbean society. To some degree, Indians in both Trinidad and the then British Guiana had no real rights in society, they were discriminated against by both Africans and whites; they were often stigmatised and insulted as "coolies" and much of the sentiment in society was anti-Indian. In fact, much of the legislation too, was anti-Indian. Jha's article, for example, mentions the fact that Muslim marriages in Trinidad were not recognised before the 1930s and this would also have been true of Hindu marriages up until 1946.³

Lorkhoor is a young Hindu whom Preacher has appointed as his campaign manager. He is a great speaker and although he is the envy of Foam, he is deeply unpopular in Elvira. It is said that, "He offended most Indians, Hindus and Muslims; and Preacher's negro supporters looked on him with suspicion." (*The Suffrage . . .* 66) There is much rivalry between Lorkhoor and Foam, not least because the former has pretensions to education and is articulate, but also because he is Hindu and Foam is Muslim. In these two characters, there is a reinforcement of the Hindu-Muslim rivalry

1. Samaroo, *op. cit.*, 94.

2. Seecharan, *op. cit.*, 14.

3. Jha, *op. cit.*, 4.

as is represented in the two most important men in Elvira; it is emphasised too by Naipaul's vision of the better-educated Hindu over the not so well educated Muslim. Therefore, Lorkhoor's role as Preacher's campaign manager is viewed by the Indians as an act of treachery.

However, for Lorkhoor, it is a means to an end for his agenda is to leave a parochial Elvira and obtain a job with the *Guardian* in Port of Spain. So, the votes he has amassed for Preacher are quietly sold to Harbans, enabling the Hindu to win the elections. There is a kind of contradiction in this Hindu-Muslim rivalry, for Naipaul manages to consolidate this Indian opposition by promoting in this instance, a Hindu-Muslim unity. In doing so, he again reinforces the notion of the stereotype of the Indian in the community by showing that despite their religious animosity, they will always find a way of supporting each other and uniting against what they perceive to be a common enemy. This situation though, as Samaroo explains, came about because of the mutual distrust between Africans and Indians which "forced the East Indian deeper into himself and reinforced the fears of dominance that minority groups generally developed."¹

Naipaul's novel, nevertheless, also presents us with the two novice candidates—Harbans and Preacher—and the narrow world in which they live; this again raises the question of incompleteness. The candidates never meet to discuss any issues, indeed, no election issues are really mentioned and one is not really sure if the good people of Elvira are aware of their reasons for electing a candidate. We are not even sure that the winner will know what is expected of him once he has won. The shallowness of

1. Samaroo, *op. cit.*, 94.

their characters reflect the shallowness of their politics. This in turn reflects the shallowness of Trinidad and Tobago society and by extension, Caribbean society—all of which is consistent with Naipaul's view of the Caribbean. What we notice, however, is that Harbans cannot depend on the Muslim vote without the help of Baksh, who ensures that he and his family are going to benefit from this favour. So the two Indian rivals are clannish and cooperate in the end against the African; this brings out yet another stereotype of the Indian.

One of the most interesting aspects of the people of Elvira is that they seemed to be eclectic in their own way in that they participated in each other's religious festivals. Sam Selvon, another Trinidadian writer of Indian origin, also maintained that this eclecticism was an integral part of his upbringing. In his essay, "Three Into One Can't Go—East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian,"¹ he explained that everyone in his community celebrated everybody else's religious festivals and affirmed that he was unaware of being different until he actually left his community for the wider world. Naipaul's view of Elvira is that:

Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindu, Muslims and Christians, owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything with greater awe. Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. The Spaniards and some of the Negroes celebrated the Hindu festival of lights . . . Everybody celebrated the Muslim festival of Hosein. In fact, when Elvira was done with religious festivals, there were few straight days left. (*SE*, 66)

1. Samuel Selvon, "Three Into One Can't Go—East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian" in David Dabydeen & Brinsley Samaroo (eds), *India in the Caribbean* (London: Hansib Publishing, 1987). See Chapter 1.

It is not surprising then that the world of obeah plays such an important part in this novel, and we note that this manages to transcend the African-Indian divide. Superstition is rife and when we are first introduced to Harbans entering the district of Elvira, we find him a very worried man who is convinced that two incidents which occurred will bring him only bad luck and put paid to his chances of winning the elections: "That afternoon Mr Surajpat Harbans nearly killed the two white women and the black bitch . . ." (*SE*, 9)

The two white women are two beautiful young Jehovah's Witnesses who are anti-elections and the "black bitch" here is referring to a dog. Harbans believes all of this to be a sign of bad luck and it makes him depressed about fighting the elections. Baksh also falls victim to this superstition and believes that the dog, which he finds under his house, to be sent by Preacher in order to stop him winning the elections for Harbans. Throughout the novel the dog is seen as an evil spirit, and even Ms Baksh takes her son to the pundit so that he can be "jharayed" or cleansed. This was the boy who had found the stray dog and was responsible for bringing it into the home; he was therefore thought to be unclean. But it wasn't unusual at this time to think that your political opponent would use some kind of magic against you and put obstacles in your way to prevent you from winning. Naipaul is again showing us an unsophisticated community, one that has not yet emerged out of darkness and superstition. Selwyn Ryan makes the point that

There were other commentators who felt that the election merely provided an occasion for the venting of the latest primitivism in the society. In their view, the campaign was a vast exercise in

"obeah", "voodoo", and other forms of religious magic.¹

Chitteranjan, too, for all his standing in the community, and his experience of a wider society, falls victims to this superstition. He refuses to eat the breadfruit and avocados that fall into his yard from his neighbour Ramlogan's tree because he thinks that some harm will come to him if he does. And when a mangy dog appears in a cupboard in his house, (hidden there by his daughter) he is convinced that Ramlogan has put "obeah" on him.

Herein, however, lies both the crux and the paradox for Naipaul is himself unable to move away from this world of petty superstition, a world his father often described in his own writing. The difference is that the kind of compassion which comes from one's own observation of this world is missing because he had no real contact with the world he is describing.

There is a contradiction, too, in the way that women characters in the novel are presented. They are depicted as strong, fully developed and positive. Mrs Baksh, for example seems to be the one in her household who is stronger than her husband. It is she who is sceptical about this "democracy business" and warns him that "this election sweetness is going to turn sour." Nelly, Chitteranjan's daughter's ambition is to go to London to study at Regent Street Polytechnic, and he eventually bows to pressure since she has lost out on marrying Harbans' son, and lets her go.

But the strongest character that emerges is *doolahin*, Dhaniram's daughter in law, for whom we must have the greatest admiration. She has lived with her in laws since the disappearance of her husband two months or so after the wedding, and there is some mystery surrounding his disappearance. Dhaniram, the pundit, has it

1. Ryan, *op. cit.*, 77.

that he is studying “something” in England. But everyone knows that she has been abandoned. The word *doolahin* means “bride”, and her situation doesn’t seem to have gone beyond that as there is some suggestion that the marriage might well not have been consummated. She is therefore forced to live with her in-laws and, in typical Hindu tradition, she is a virtual slave there. In fact, it seems as if she marooned there, both in her physical location in the household as well as in her status as a permanently unfulfilled bride. It is significant too that we do not even know her name.

When we first meet *doolahin* she seems compliant, morose and unassuming, and most certainly knows her place in the household. But as she develops we notice that she is wilful and spirited. In short, she has “spunks.” She begins to answer back her father-in-law from time to time and occasionally stamps her foot in annoyance. Her final and most decisive act of resistance in this household where she must have been totally oppressed comes when she runs off with the young Lorkhoor to live in Port of Spain; in doing so she has liberated herself. This act of defiance and independence somewhat reminds us of many Indian women who were resourceful and independent enough to turn their backs on arranged marriages, abusive husbands and in-laws and even widowhood in India during the 19th century, and chose a life of indentureship in the Caribbean and elsewhere.¹ Naipaul has, on occasion, mentioned his paternal great grandmother who left this oppressive society in India with a young son; and Clem Seecharan often pays homage to his maternal great grandmother, Kaila, who left India at the age of twenty for a seemingly bet-

1. Clem Seecharan, “The Shaping of the Indo-Caribbean People, Guyana and Trinidad in the 1940s”, *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 14, Nos 1-2 (Fall 1999-2000).

ter life beyond this environment. It is in the character of *doolahin*, therefore, that we have greatest demonstration of strength in the novel.

Naipaul has often been criticised for his attitude towards women. One wonders, therefore, how intentional the characterisation of these women is, for his novel demonstrates that the most oppressed in this society, the women, are endowed with the capacity to be independent minded, and shows that their journey to arrival at equality is greater. It is important to add here, however, that in many Indian households the woman has far more say, more power and influence than is often suggested.

It is not surprising that Naipaul's early characters and the world they inhabit are generally so superficial and lacking credibility, for although he grew up in a Hindu community he knew very little about it beyond the confines of his own family circle. So although he had a sense of what it was like, there is a limitation of that knowledge. One can argue that Naipaul's lack of knowledge in growing up was decisive in shaping both the incomplete world that he portrays, and the idea of incompleteness in the characters that he created. He admits to being a stranger to the world outside of his maternal grandmother's house where he grew up:

Away from this world of my grandmother's house . . . there was the great unknown in this island of only 400,000 people . . . As a child I knew almost nothing, nothing beyond what I picked up in my grandmother's house.¹

He also talks about the claustrophobic atmosphere of the environment of the Hindu society at the time. He says:

1. Naipaul, "Two Worlds", Nobel Lecture, 7 December, 2001.

More important than religion was his family organisation, an enclosing self-sufficient world absorbed with its quarrels and jealousies, as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. It protected and imprisoned, a static world¹ . . .

Therefore, as Seecharan so clearly points out: "The young mind became attuned to distancing itself."²

But distancing himself acquired another dimension. It is perhaps from this distancing that he developed his acuity of observation and his famous "attention to detail" as many of his travel writings were later to demonstrate.

However, for all this acuteness of observation and attention to detail, Naipaul's disdain has only always been for developing societies. One of the main criticisms often levelled at him is that he has never turned his gaze onto Western cultures and the "developed" world with a critical eye, perhaps because he believes them to be superior. It can be argued that this is part of his incompleteness that Rholehr implies:

Virtually everything he has written . . . has affirmed the notion of the West Indies as chaotic, anarchic, unfinished and a sort of outpost in which you find the dregs of whatever Western civilisation has tried to do or be. These are areas which have remained in his writing . . .³

There is an incompleteness in the way he portrays his characters of the developing world be it the West Indies, Africa or India, because he doesn't ever care to show their human side in

1. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 79.

2. Seecharan, "In The Shadow of Sir Vidia, Out of Historical Darkness", 6.

3. Rholehr, *op. cit.*, 125.

terms of their dignity, their will to survive and their struggle. Nor does he ever show that it is the Western world that often bedevils their efforts. If Elvira is a microcosm of Trinidad society and by extension, Caribbean society, then it can be said that Naipaul's gaze has rejected the human drama, the deprivation and suffering as well as the dignity and will that humanized this environment. The characters he created are exaggerated and he is viewing their behaviour from a Eurocentric, biased viewpoint. He satirizes their attempts to enter into politics, and there is a failure or unwillingness to realise that they are as yet unlearned in the subtleties of this process. There is also the fact, too, that the value system by which he is judging is part of a culture and history more complete, by virtue of its domination and impoverishment of others, than the one he is ridiculing.

In a recent interview in the Trinidad *Sunday Express* to mark the anniversary of his 70th birthday, Naipaul remarked:

If I do another book, it might be some kind of book about England where I have spent so long . . . But I would need to arrive at a narrative, and I don't know how one does that, how it comes to one.¹

Part of this incompleteness within him seems to recognise that if he is going to write about an aspect of Western culture, there must be the need for another narrative. So the narrative of the "developed" world must necessarily be different because it is a world that he has striven to be part of, and one that he perceives to be superior. As we have seen, his need to be part of the developed world and his long sojourn in that world has always led him

1. V. S. Naipaul, Interview in the *Sunday Express* (Trinidad), August 16, 2002.

to portray the developing world disparagingly and as a kind of inferior "other." It is for this reason that the Caribbean community and the Indian community within it can never be anything, in his opinion, even after a little more than a century and a half of trying.

The notion of the caricature therefore becomes important for the writer whose satirical depiction of a community in his early writing could be viewed as a reflection of his incompleteness, and his own insecurity. Naipaul's powers of observation had yet to be developed, but in *The Suffrage of Elvira* he sets out to portray the life of a district and paints an unflattering picture of a community struggling for recognition and one that is undeserving of his contempt. It makes for a narrative that works. And yet this disparaging portrayal of the "coolie" is grotesque and incomplete, and in no way does it acknowledge or become a tribute in the human struggle for a voice, representation, credibility and acceptance in a new and difficult environment.

The incompleteness of *The Suffrage of Elvira* is deeper and beyond the use of language. It is an incompleteness that seems to be an extension of the writer's own incompleteness that will beset him all his working life to date. *The Suffrage of Elvira* offers us a double observation. A caricature is not a portrait, and the author can become the subject of his own creation in ways that are not always readily apparent.

Because of the narrowness of Naipaul's upbringing which endowed him with no real mode of assessing Trinidad society while he was growing up, his notion of this world has been somewhat warped, and it is this warped vision that he has taken with him wherever he has gone. Therefore, despite the strength of his later writings he still manages to come across as a man incom-

plete. This is evidenced by his latest novel, *Half A Life*, often referred to as *Half A Novel*. Naipaul's genius as a writer is undeniable, but it is a genius that is without a question, flawed.

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NOT ONE OF US: NAIPAUL'S NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF WESTERN CHARACTERS

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I

The abundance of critical studies on V. S. Naipaul has served to shed light on his whole production, although the main emphasis has been placed either on ideological questions concerning his attitude to the Third World, or on personal issues such as his chosen life as an exile. Authors such as A. Sivanandan, A.C. Derrick, Selwyn Cudjoe, Rob Nixon, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and, in his later pronouncements, Paul Theroux evince a negative bias against the author, largely blamed for his supercilious, arrogant and prejudiced attitude towards the large areas of the world covered in his fiction, essays and travelogues.

For all this criticism, Naipaul has been positively appraised on technical and stylistic grounds and, even among some of his opponents, he is regarded as a master of the English language

and an able literary craftsman. Thus, Derek Walcott is not reluctant to admit that Naipaul has created stories which are masterpieces and that he is capable to command different linguistic registers, from the dialectal to standard English.¹ This makes it more surprising that some aspects of V. S. Naipaul's work have attracted less attention from critics, as is the case with the analysis of his fictional characters.

Their relevance in Naipaul's production should be gauged in relation to the writer's avowed preoccupations, namely his concern for human beings as individuals and his desire to explain the circumstances of the contemporary state of affairs in the world. This has led him to create complex and highly profiled characters, the most representative and favourably featured being displaced Indians like himself, sensitive individuals who are the protagonists of stories of oppression and survival through isolation or exile.² Such is the case with Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*;³ Santosh in "One out of Many" and the unnamed protagonist in "Tell Me Who to Kill;"⁴ Salim, in *A Bend in the River*;⁵ and the unnamed protagonist of *The Enigma of Arrival*.⁶

1. Baer, William, ed. *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996): 7.

2. Varela-Zapata, Jesús. *V. S. Naipaul: El retrato de la sociedad post-colonial desde la literatura de la Commonwealth*. (Santiago de Compostela: Servicio de Publicaciones U. Santiago de Compostela, 1998): 83-105.

3. Naipaul, V. S., *The Mimic Men* (1967. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969).

4. Both stories are included in Naipaul, V. S., *In a Free State* (1971. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973).

5. Naipaul, V. S., *A Bend in the River* (1979. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980).

6. Naipaul, V. S., *The Enigma of Arrival* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Viking, 1987).

However, such as we will explain in this paper, we can also identify a different category of fictional characters who can be readily labelled, in contrast with those mentioned above, as non-Indians. They are led to misery due to their inability to understand the Third World territories they have chosen as places of ill-defined feelings of adventure and they are portrayed in a way that evinces the existence of a negative bias.

Within this typology, the most prominent characters are Jane and Roche (*Guerrillas*),¹ Linda and Bobby ("In a Free State"), Yvette and Raymond (*A Bend in the River*). These three books are generally considered as a group in itself within Naipaul's fiction; Bruce King believes that their main focus is on individuals and their deep psychological analysis (John Thieme makes this perception extensive to Naipaul's whole production, stating that he is "much more interested in the psychological effects of colonialism on the individual than in its broad political consequences.")² However, King admits that this personal aspect also serves to emphasise political turmoil;³ along this line, Timothy Weiss states that these three works act as a kind of survey of the geography of what he has called Naipaul's Fourth World, typified by fear, violence and horror: "It derives from a particular ideological realm and literary-language consciousness, from a myth that exists before Naipaul, and that, in his novels, is reshaped by his colonial background, exile, and travels in the Third World, in conjunction with the historical contexts of the

1. Naipaul, V. S., *Guerrillas*. (1975. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976).

2. Thieme, John, "V. S. Naipaul's Third World: A Not So Free State", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 10:1 (1975): 10-23; 13.

3. King, Bruce, *V. S. Naipaul* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1993): 83.

1960s and 1970s.”¹

Likewise, Madhusana Rao has said that *Guerrillas*² is an example of the blend of psychological and political concerns: “The political situation in the novel is described not directly through political action, but obliquely through the psychological reflexes of individuals drawn into the vortex of revolution.”³

In the following pages we will consider the way Naipaul portrays these Western characters, so as to expose their inadequacies and lack of understanding of the Third World context they have voluntarily chosen as an appropriate locus to give vent to their anxieties, repressed desires or fake personalities. Thus, Roche is presented in *Guerrillas* as a white South-African sponsoring the revolutionary adventure of a Caribbean gang, until political and personal circumstances reach a critical point. His lover Jane has come from Britain to feel the thrill of involvement in the political ebullient activity of a new nation; escaping what she interprets as the decay of Europe, only to find that there is a gap between her idealistic perceptions of Third World politics and the bleak physical and moral landscape she finds. In *A Bend in the River* Salim, the Indian East Africa-born protagonist, faces the enigma of post-colonial Africa as well as his personal ordeal as an expatriate within his own continent. He introduces us to Yvette and her husband, a presidential advisor and a symbol of the last remnants of the European colonial establishment, now in the transi-

1. Weiss, Timothy F., *On the Margins. The Art of Exile in V. S. Naipaul* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992): 167-8.

2. Naipaul, V. S., *Guerrillas*. (1975. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976).

3. Rao, Madhusadana, “V. S. Naipaul’s *Guerrillas*: A Fable of Political Innocence and Experience.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 14: 1 (1979): 90-99; 93.

tion to the devolution of power to the native ruling elite. Their political fortunes are declining and their ancillary role within the regime comes to an end when the back-to-roots policies render their presence uncomfortable or redundant. Finally, in the story entitled "In a Free State", we can see two models of European response to post-colonial Africa; Bobby represents the liberal who embraces enthusiastically the new political status quo and expresses naively his desire to comply with the rules of the new society; Linda, on the contrary, plays the role of the arrogant European who is ill at ease under the new terms and conditions.

II

Naipaul, commissioned to write on the story of political upheaval and murder that took place in Trinidad in the early 1970's, published two long articles in *The Sunday Times*.¹ In this report, he writes about a middle-class divorcee born in Canada who is enthralled by an American Black Power narcissistic opportunist trying to exploit racial and political tensions in Trinidad. Allusions to Gale Benson, the female protagonist, revolve around the image of the burial hole being dug at the revolutionary commune. Murder is anticipated in the very first paragraph of the story in cold technical terms: "A corner file [...] is used in Trinidad for sharpening cutlasses [...] The file, bought from Cooblal's Hardware, cost a Trinidad dollar, 20p." (11). In the following two pages Gale's unsympathetic characterisation as "a fake among fakes" (14), who changes her name into Halé Kimga and wears extravagant African costumes, is enough to understand that she is loom-

1. Later collected in the volume entitled *The Return of Eva Perón; with The Killings in Trinidad* (1980. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981).

ing as the likeliest and deserving victim, in Naipaul's code, of the spiral of violence that is about to set loose. In fact, we are already given an explicit account of the outcome of events at the very beginning of the story, when we are told that Gale Benson is stabbed to death and buried. In the final section, "Postscript", we will not be spared the macabre details of the murder, described step by step, as it is performed in the most clumsy and cruel way. Even more desolate is the account of its aftermath: nobody misses Gale Benson once she is dead, and when her belongings are being dug up and enumerated "One brown leather sleeveless jacket; one brown leather hippy bag; one pair of lady's pink mod boots; one pair of brown shoes; one pair of brown slippers; three silver bracelets; one empty small bottle; one tube Avon Rose-mint cream [...]" (91), we hear the echo of a forensic post-mortem ritual.

These echoes of 19th century naturalistic novels resonate again in *Guerrillas*, a fictional elaboration of the story, whose female protagonist is reading Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. As we will further explain, Jane is an archetypal non-Indian character in Naipaul's fiction, the unconscious Westerner tired of the boring stability of social European conventions. She is apparently trying to shed her middle-class role as a "Doris", the generic name she uses in a derogative way to refer to the average British housewife.

However, right at the moment she starts her journey into the Caribbean, she becomes aware of the change of status she is undergoing. London airport will no longer be a familiar place after she checks in; a fog alert and a prolonged delay in take off create a peculiar microcosm and the first feelings of entrapment. The ensuing night flight with a stopover at New York becomes a Conradian journey into a dark vacuum and soon after her arrival

at the Caribbean island, Jane has the feeling of “having made the wrong decision. She awakened to darkness; she was momentarily confused” (47). Similar images of confusion and nightmare are recurrent in the story; thus, at a private party Jane is reported to be “withdrawn, in a haze of rum-punch and heat which was like a sense of the adventure she had committed herself to” (74). Once more, her tragic end looms large when we read that “She came out of sleep to the dark, enclosed room, to that sense of the nightmare journey and of an unstable, dissolving world; and to the half- knowledge of a catastrophe” (178).

Roche and Jane’s short downtown trips, either from the airport or from their secluded house in the uphill bourgeois borough, bring about unexpected epiphanic visions of desolation. The road to the city centre is bordered by rubbish dumps, ravens, unpainted concrete and corrugated iron and naked children running among backyard clotheslines. Description turns more and more symbolic of the impending turmoil; dust and the crackle of flames intrude into the car and even the apparent comfort of being secluded inside has to be set off against the images of fields strewn with rusting junk vehicles.

It is at the very beginning of the story that we guess at Jane’s personality traits and her reasons for her Caribbean foray: “I used to think that England was in a state of decay” (11). We are also witnesses to her early change of mind: “nothing had happened to alter the conviction she had had, at the moment of arrival, that she had made a wrong decision” (47). This idea is reinforced when she notices that other expatriates and the local bourgeoisie have their passports and visas ready to take to flight to North America or Australia, should political tension grow. Eventually, she will find comfort in the feeling of security provided by her

British passport and a return ticket in her handbag. The ideas of entrapment/escape are emphasised in an ironic way, when Jane and Roche watch the planes taking off at the airport from the porch of their home or when their frequent leisurely drives round the island take them to the airport where they silently observe the hustle of air traffic. However, the fact that she has not passed any border controls on arrival makes her technically an illegal resident whose departure will not depend on her free will. This subtlety is later exploited to foreground the drama of such feelings of security and self-confidence, explicitly mentioned in narrative passages or in dialogues, as her desire to get away from the island builds up:

Jane thought how lucky she was to be able to decide to leave. Not many people had that freedom: to decide, and then to do. It was part of her luck [...] She would leave; she would make use of that return air-ticket the immigration officers hadn't bothered to ask for the day she had arrived (55).

When considering the negative portrayal of characters such as Jane, we should pay especial attention to physical description. In fact, there are many references to her appearance; some seem merely unflattering: not very tall; clumsy, dragging walk; arms too short for her body; big mouth; top lip puffy (69-70). On other occasions, the descriptive focus is centred on physiological functions, and this results in a negative presentation, such as when we read that she is "chalky-white from her period, and with little red spots at the side of her mouth . . ." (122). Chapter V is illustrative in this respect since Jane's sexual encounter with Jimmy Ahmed contains, among others, references to her tobacco-tasting tongue, the sweat and smell on her armpits and her pale buttocks. Other

allusions offer a close and demeaning scrutiny of the female body and sexuality, such as when we read "With what care she had rendered that leg hairless! The skin looked abraded; but already there were the beginnings of new hairs" (80), or when we learn that her breasts are pressed against Jimmy but he is only aware of them as flesh. On another occasion her partner is startled when "she threw herself backwards in an apparently abandoned attitude, opened her legs, raising her feet up against the wall, and inserted what Roche now realised was the tampon she held in her hand" (127). Also uncomplimentary is the comment that her vulva "was like a dumb, stupid mouth" (78) or the derogatory "You are rotten meat" (239), uttered by Jimmy after raping her.

Furthermore, Jane's sexuality seems driven by a kind of animal instinct. Jimmy verbalises this idea by saying that "She is starved" (77). Once she has become Jimmy's lover, he perceives in her the manners of a prostitute, such as when she is coming out from the lavatory in their room. From this perspective it is only to be expected that her reluctance to comply with Jimmy's whims will lead to make her deserving of physical aggression and sexual abuse. Her submission to humiliation by men had been anticipated in an earlier scene when her husband (twenty years older than her) slapped her repeatedly and she rushed to the seclusion of the bathroom but kept waiting for him to come and "rescue" her. Once she realised that he had left she discovered with dismay that this affair was even more unfortunate as she found out that she was sexually aroused. This sequence of events seems to lead inevitably to her killing at the revolutionary commune in a way that Rama Devi has interpreted as "an offering of herself up for murder [...] What appears to be more painful than the acts of degradation carried out by Jimmy on Jane is the way in which

she accepts them."¹

Looking for further clues as to how Naipaul characterises women in such negative terms, we can consider how the portrayal of Yvette, a minor character in *A Bend in the River*, follows, to a great extent, the model discussed above. She is the wife of a European scholar, acting as an advisor to the dictator of the Central African country they live in. She becomes infatuated with the professor, who is much older than she, and is blinded by his intellectual prestige. However, the narrator will question his reputation and points out that, although he is thought to be the most important historian in the country he does not seem to be really acquainted with his subject. The criticism is more evident because he is presented as a scholar merely looking for a suitable topic to write papers on. By the end of the story, he will give up his life-long task of writing the history of the country and turns to collecting the president's speeches. In the city by the great river (easily identifiable with the Congo) Yvette will have a love affair with Salim, a young, sensitive Indian from East Africa whose loving experiences are limited to random encounters at brothels. He feels stranded in the stagnated Central African city and thinks his connection with Yvette will open for him the doors of the local elite: "My wish for an adventure with Yvette was a wish to be taken up to the skies, to be removed from the life I had" (191).

Salim is soon disappointed at finding that Yvette fails to comply with his expectations. The house where she lives soon loses the connotations of luxury and aloofness "the flaws that lamplight had hidden were noticeable in the midday brightness" (176). In this context, with plaster on the walls cracking, cardboard ceiling

1. Rama Devi, N., *The Novels of V. S. Naipaul. Quest for Order and Identity* (New Delhi: Prestige, 1996): 102-3.

panels bellied and air-conditioners leaking down the wall, Yvette loses her glamour and appears as an ordinary person. We will see her cooking scrambled eggs or dutifully making the bed after every sexual encounter with Salim; even after he beats and humiliates her twice she rings him to soothe and urge him to have some hot milk and tranquilizers to get to sleep. However, the fact that she insists on playing this role means to Salim their relationship is overtly adulterous: "This housewifely attention reminded me—painfully, already—of attentions like this that she gave elsewhere" (182). In fact, his first outburst of anger and violence came after she had mentioned her loyalty as a wife to Raymond: "[He] will want to make love to me when he sees me looking like this" (224). Salim, who had looked for friendship with intellectual overtones, is confronted with someone who is just a body to him: "She knew she was attractive to men" (200); "All my self-esteem came from being Yvette's lover, from serving her and pleasing her in the physical way I did" (205).

In spite of having several scenes with Yvette naked on the bed, we scarcely get any descriptions of her physical appearance, only passing references to her slanting eyes and her not particularly well made legs. One of those passages is concerned with aspects which depart from the poetical conventions of feminine beauty: "Her left leg was drawn up; her right leg, bent at the knee, lay flat on the cushion on which she sat, so that her right heel lay almost against her ankle. Beautiful feet, and their whiteness was wonderful against the black of her slacks" (135).¹ Deprived of all

1. This description also reminds us of another of Naipaul's female characters, Sandra from *The Mimic Men*. She is portrayed in such a way as to see her from below so that her physique is subjected to closer scrutiny: "Her legs are apart and her hands, between her legs, are pressed on the edge of the settee; the very

ennobling associations, she will fall into the category of sexual object, close to the whore figure Salim had wanted to escape from, because in prostitutes he perceives “the woman as the willing victim, the accomplice in her own degradation” (180). In fact, brothel images recur whenever he meets her and although he wants to avoid the manners of pornographic magazines he admits: “It became a brute physical act, an act almost of labour” (181); at other times Yvette’s naked body appears as “corrupt with pleasure” (199). One of Yvette’s jokes is deemed by Salim as “so much the kind of thing I had heard from whores who thought they should pretend to be jealous in order to please” (226); when she kisses Salim on the front of his trousers, he interprets this as a prostitute’s gesture. It is clear Salim wishes for a different kind of relationship and, in spite of his undeniable moments of physical pleasure he confesses that “the photographs of Yvette that I preferred were the chastest” (192).

Negative characterisation of women does not always rely on unpleasant allusions to their feminine body or sexuality. There are some references to Linda’s physical appearance, namely to her unassuming breasts; Bobby seems uneasy at other moments when her body or sexuality is more explicit; this is the case with his violent reaction at seeing her underwear and some product of intimate hygiene (a similar allusion occurs in *Guerrillas*). However the main source of Linda’s characterisation will come from dialogues. They will provide the occasion for her portrayal as

thin low-carat Willesden second-hand wedding ring is barely noticeable. Her feet are tapping in time to music from the gramophone; the heels of her gold Indian sandals flap loose setting off her finely-veined, well-shaped ankles, part of the slender elegance of her feet, whose shape and colour are further heightened by the red paint on the nails of her long underformed toes and by the gold straps of the sandals” (62).

an anti-intellectual, distracted by minor details in her environs, apparently irrelevant when set off against the dramatic events taking place in the country, such as the murder of the king and the virtual civil war that is going on. Her ideas are framed within set phrases and clichés, sometimes repeated literally in different paragraphs.

Linda and Bobby are driving across a newly independent African country devastated by civil war and widespread violence. She is presented as a superficial snob, an archetypal Western colonial who despises Africa and its inhabitants. When they take two hitch-hikers who later attempt to take them as hostages she is not reluctant to mix courage with racial prejudice: "‘What a smell.’ Linda said. Absolute gangsters. I’m not going to get myself killed simply because I’m too nice to be rude to Africans" (138). Her alienation from the continent is aggravated by the decay and turmoil that is taking place as a sequel to decolonization. For characters such as Linda this is a clear indication of the superiority of Europeans and the need for the Africans to remain under the imperial umbrella.

Although the female characters discussed above are clearly disagreeable, this is not always the case with Naipaul's fiction, a fact that should be taken into account before we talk about misogyny. One of the exceptions is provided by Zabeth in *A Bend in the River*. She is an African woman who gets a much more appreciative treatment than Yvette in the same novel. The most striking difference between both is their relationship with men. The European woman needs her husband or a lover for protection or sexual fulfilment, her role in life is limited to that of a wife or a mistress. On the contrary, Zabeth is the main earner of the household. She has long lived without her husband and she is not

dependent on men in any way. Her resourcefulness and physical strength enable her to carry out her business in spite of the difficult environmental conditions; good memory compensates her lack of education, an asset which notwithstanding she appreciates. Unlike the Westerners who find themselves at odds in the Third World countries they have fled to without any clear purposes, Zabeth is totally integrated in the African milieu, making full use of traditional customs, wisdom and magic, still valid in the changing post-colonial society: "Africans noticed her smell. If they came into the shop when Zabeth was there they wrinkled their noses and sometimes they went away . . . But the smell was meant to keep people at a distance" (15-16).

She is exceptionally cunning to understand and overcome the unstable socio-political situation; actually, she realises, sooner than the narrator himself, that the head of state is becoming more of a dictator: "He is a jealous man, Salim. He will allow nobody to get big in this place. It is only his photo everywhere" (231).

Unlike the negative portrayal of Naipaul's other feminine characters, the narrator of *A Bend in the River* sympathises with Zabeth and she is devoted a long section of the first chapter where praise of her is overt: "Zabeth the good and direct businesswoman, that unusually for an African, she was" (11), "No one liked going outside his territory. But Zabeth travelled without fear; she came and went with her vanity case and no one molested her. She was not an ordinary person" (15).

Several authors such as Pyne-Timothy¹ or Robinson² claim that

1. Pyne-Thimothy, Helen, "Women and Sexuality in the Later Novels of V. S. Naipaul." *World Literature Written in English*, 25: 2 (1985): 298-306.

2. Robinson, Jeffrey, "V. S. Naipaul and the Sexuality of Power", M. McWatt, ed. *West Indian Literature and its Social Context* (St. Michael, Barbados: Cave Hill,

she is probably the only woman who deserves Naipaul's respect and admiration. However, not only do we find at least one positive portrayal of women in Naipaul's fiction but we also have to point out that the characterisation of some males is even more negative than that of the females discussed above. For all the disagreeable traits we find in Linda's characterisation in "In a Free State", Bobby, her male companion appears in even less favourable terms and his contradictions are soon exposed. As Andrew Gurr states: "Bobby's insistence on knowing his world is belied by his mistakes. Time and time again the settler attitudes of Linda turn out correct."¹ He admits to have come to Africa out of love for the continent and its inhabitants and wears their traditional costumes; he even declares he would like to be born again as a black man. He acts as a liberal who sympathises with the independence process; however, we soon learn that his African stay is probably meant to be an escape from British middle-class society that frowns upon his homosexuality. Africa seems to provide him with greater sexual opportunities, especially because he looks for engagements to his social inferiors. His love for the continent is only qualified; under pressure he gives vent to his repressed feelings of superiority and goes to the extent of brandishing his condition as a government officer to intimidate an inefficient black worker.

The political turmoil is more and more evident as the story develops and it is suggested by the roar of helicopters and army checkpoints. Once more in Naipaul, Bobby will appear as a deserving victim of his ideological incongruity and he falls a prey

1985).

1. Gurr, Andrew, "The Freedom of Exile in Naipaul and Doris Lessing", *Ariel* 13 (1982): 7-18; 11.

to the unleashed violence: “[The soldier] tore again and again at the shirt and the vest below the shirt, and with the right hand that had held the cigarette he clawed with clumsy rage at Bobby’s face as though wishing to seize it by the nose, chin and cheeks alone” (231).

Bobby is not the only male to be exposed as a fake liberal. In *Guerrillas*, Roche is portrayed as a white exiled South African who published a book on his experiences as a victim of repression before settling in the Caribbean to promote revolutionary groups. The narrative leaves little doubt about his negative presentation and his contradictions are exposed very soon. His liberal credentials are blemished when we realise that the leader of the local political group he is supporting addresses him as “massa”. This is not mere rhetoric since we also observe Roche bullying the members of the revolutionary gang: “they’re only dangerous if you start playing with them. That’s another reason why I always try to lose my temper with Jimmy at least once” (28).

Some elements in Roche’s description are used as symbols of his flawed personality. Thus, we can interpret sentences such as “He took off his dark glasses and looked less of a clown” (15); or “shut in behind his dark glasses” (22). Narrative subtly points out, from time to time, the oddity of Roche wearing his dark glasses even when they are deemed unnecessary or even disturbing, as happens when he is driving through a coconut grove at dusk (159-160). For a character who evolves in the story as a deceiver, deluding others into making them believe he is a freedom fighter who has come to the Caribbean to support revolution, the pretence is exposed and his mask is ripped off his face by the end of the story. Thus, it is becoming that when he is about to admit that he has deserted all previous ideological commitments he is presented as

“swinging the glasses between his thumb and forefinger” (249), and in the following paragraph we see him again taking “the arm of his glasses out of his mouth and, swinging the glasses between his thumb and forefinger” (249).

It is soon clear that the narrator cannot spare any sympathy for this character and the first reference to his physical appearance was already associated with ideas of decay and death: “Roche laughed, and Jane saw his molars: widely spaced, black at the roots, the gums high: like a glimpse of a skull” (13), the same image is scattered throughout the story in similar terms, with a further expansion of the theme:

Roche laughed, and the corners of his mouth rode up over the receding gums on his molars, which showed long, with black gaps between them. It was like a glimpse of teeth in a skull, like a glimpse of a satyr; and she felt it was like a glimpse of the inner man (50).

Physical descriptions are scarce and throughout the first three chapters they are limited to vague allusions to his slender, undistinguished look, later on he is portrayed unassumingly as “a small man in his mid-forties, sad-faced, with sunken cheeks, deep lines running from his nose to the corners of his mouth, and with eyes that were slightly mocking and ironical” (49).

At some time Roche had thought of himself as a doer; so had Jane, only to be disappointed at finding he was a fake. Rather than a political fighter Jane will come to think “Roche was a refugee. He was a man who didn't have a place to go back to” (53). This can explain why she deserts him and becomes engaged with the leader of the revolutionaries, although she neither loves nor likes him.

Roche's feelings of failure in life are clearly expressed in chapter VIII; the same words can be read in the initial and final paragraphs: "In the mornings Roche thought: I've built my whole life on sand" (91); "Every morning he thought: I've built my whole life on sand" (102). In between we are given an itemised account of the things he needn't have done or experienced (his torture in South Africa, his disappointing book, his involvement with the gang in the Caribbean (92).

As happens with Bobby in *Guerrillas*, Roche's liberalism and left-wing ideology is exposed when he is confronted with real working-class people, such as Mrs Stephens. The visit to her house evinces how distant he is from that world he is apparently fighting for. Even the environment seems hostile to him, the desolate streets under a relentless midday sun look menacing and the hiss of a little boy startles him and makes him wear his protecting dark glasses. Tension builds up when he thinks the area is under surveillance, although he does not identify who is behind it. When he reaches Mrs Stephens' house he is scared enough not to dare ask about her son, the real goal of the visit. He is made uneasy by the cracked and dingy room, by the miniature furniture which he sets against the comfort of his house in the secluded residential area. "The room depressed him and made him uneasy; he felt alien" (107).

This is one of the epiphanic moments in the story; in parallel with the process inside the character, it is clear that his acting as a liberal intellectual engaged with leftist activists is no more than playing a role which is coming to an end. From now on, Roche will face his true status in life from more sincere bases, although this will betray all his incongruities and pretensions in the past. The man who had come to help redeem the Caribbean is now

willing to admit that he would like to share Jane's decision to leave (61) because of his lack of adaptation: "I can't read these people" (179). Talking to Meredith, a local politician, he confesses with regret having walked into a trap by committing himself to a single cause in life, forgetting that "There is so much more to the world" (209). His sincere recollections and reappraisal of his past will further expose him as a pretender, as happens when he admits that the book that has elevated him to the category of political prisoner has been outlined with the idea of concealing his ideological confusion from readers. By the end of the story we realise, as John Thieme has stated, that "though he has the best of white liberal credentials (having been imprisoned and tortured in South Africa) [Roche] is revealed as a man lacking in ideology or any form of personal belief."¹ However, even at the moment when he concedes his defeat, pervaded by "the sense of the end of the day, a feeling of futility, of being physically lost in an immense world" (215), he is cynical enough to involve the rest of the world in his wreck. When Roche realises he has lost Jane's respect he will also allow for the tragic outcome of his former lover; as Rama Devi points out: "one is bound to feel that Jane gets murdered also because of Roche's callousness. His cowardice allows him to cover up what he knows about Thrushcross Grange [...] he allows her to go to her doom because she had hurt his pride earlier" (103).

1. Thieme, John, "Searching for a Centre: The Writing of V. S. Naipaul", *Third World Quarterly* 9: 4 (1987): 1352- 1365; 1363.

III

We can conclude that the recurrence of negative allusions which seem particularly focused on the female body and sexuality leads to pose the question of Naipaul's alleged disregard for women ("it is clear that the main focus of Naipaul's involvement is the male,"¹ or even his reputation as a misogynist. The view that Naipaul's treatment of fictional women is demeaning has been put forward in several articles by Consuelo López and Martha Lewis. Along the same lines, at the Fourth Annual Conference on West Indian Literature,² several papers were given on this topic, with such significant titles as "The Woman as a Whore in the Novels of V. S. Naipaul," where the exaggerated focus on physiological aspects as symbols of impurity, particularly related to the female body, leads C. Griffith to compare this attitude with Jonathan Swift's, and conclude that "Naipaul has a horror of the human body and therefore for him sex is dirty."³ This critic further states that: "The neurotic hostility which Naipaul evinces towards the woman germinates from his brahminical obsession with purity [...] Naipaul's horror of impurity is manifested also in the nausea at the uncleanness of flesh [...] He encourages criticism of the white woman whose sexual freedom he regards with growing horror" 95-6).

Other contributors to the volume, such as Robinson, point out that sexual relationships are a model of power relations, mainly a symbol of female oppression. Elaine Fido refers to the examples

1. Pyne-Thimothy, 299.

2. McWatt, M., ed. *West Indian Literature and its Social Context*.

3. Griffith, Cheryl, "The Woman as Whore in the Novels of V. S. Naipaul." Ed. M. McWatt. *West Indian Literature and its Social Context*, 97.

of sado-masochism in the works by Naipaul we are discussing, comparing them to those by Mailer and Oriana Fallaci. In all these, women accept pain and dependency. Fido points out that, in the case of Linda, Yvette and Jane, they are even romantic about their own submission to humiliation.¹

In contrast with the negative treatment accorded to females, we have to emphasise that the male body and sexuality are seldom accorded such a negative presentation; only occasionally, such as when Jane is looking at Jimmy Ahmed getting up from bed he is described as "barely tumescent, little springs of hair scattered down his legs; his hair more negroid down there. And now, only in his Mao-shirt, and looking absurdly like one of the children in the shanty towns, who wore vests alone, their exposed little penises" (79). However, we should take into account that, as many authors admit, men's sexuality in these works by Naipaul does not have an enhanced presentation either, and can be associated with varying degrees of ambiguity or frustration. Thus, the sexual problems suffered by Bobby, Roche, Salim or Jimmy Ahmed might provide a suitable explanation for their, more or less explicit, misogynist attitude.

We soon realise that, while the presence of Roche, Bobby or Raymond is presented as futile and ill-advised, their female counterparts have arrived in the Third World countries without any other purpose than accompanying their male partners. None of them have entrepreneurial attitudes; they depend on men for their survival. Jane appears as a parasite depending on Roche even for her political ideas:

1. Fido, Elaine, "Psycho-sexual Aspects of the Woman in V. S. Naipaul's Fiction", Ed. M. McWatt. *West Indian Literature and its Social Context*.

He talked little; he had no system to expound; but simply by being what he was he enlarged her vision of the world. He seemed to make accessible that remote world, of real events and real action, whose existence she had half divined (49).

Likewise, Yvette adapts her life to her husband's and even models her behaviour so as to mimic him in the finest detail: "She was sitting with her back to the wall. She made a small arresting gesture—like Raymond's—with the palm of her hand against the edge of the table, and gave a slight tilt of her head to her right" (175). Somehow, we can say that the male characters mentioned above have come to the Third World on false expectations of revolution or personal fulfilment, their causes seem absurd. Their female partners are subject to the same contradictions but their adventure is presented as more futile or irrelevant, the fact that their presence is only justified by that of their husbands or lovers turns them into fakes among fakes, hollow characters who are reduced to their physical appearance and the particularly derogative allusions to their sexuality.

Although several authors have pointed out that Naipaul only shows sympathy for male characters in his fiction, this is only true in the case of the Indian protagonists who are endowed with ennobling causes or personal features. When dealing with the non-Indian characters discussed above, we have to accept Jeffrey Robinson's statement that "Naipaul's emphasis is more on the consciousness of Bobby than on that of Linda" (73), but we should realise that such concentration on the male is not connected with any attempt to provide a positive portrayal of Bobby or other similar figures such as Roche in *Guerrillas*. This, coupled with the fact that Zabeth, a native African female, escapes Naipaul's harshness,

leads us to consider that Naipaul's criticism is aimed at all Western intruders, whatever their gender.

All these Western characters have ventured into the Third World deluded by their ill-defined revolutionary ideologies or considering it was a suitable trial ground for a second chance in life, so as to redress previous personal failures. Hilary Mantel has summed up Naipaul's negative perception of these Westerners by stating that he believes that "Tenderness toward the bush is an emotion only the secure can feel. Only those who are free to leave them can be sentimental about the wild places of the earth."¹ In Naipaul's work, this feeling of aloofness from the turmoil outside, leading to the characters' final plight, can be compared to the ill-fated adventure of Conrad's Europeans in works such as *Heart of Darkness* or "An Outpost of Progress". All of them have travelled into the African or Caribbean darkness to suffer from external violence or self-destruction because of their inability to keep their emotional balance in a territory they once thought of as their own fief. As we have already pointed out, Conrad's imagery and symbolism can be traced in all the works discussed. This inscribes characters such as Bobby, Roche, Jane or Yvette, in a role anticipated by the Polish writer, who had portrayed the Europeans not as triumphant conquerors but rather as victims of the imperial enterprise.

Likewise, Naipaul delves into the issue of the white man's burden in the post-colonial era. We realise that, in spite of their seclusion and return tickets, Westerners will not be immune to turmoil and violence, which easily jumps into their private lives and

1. Mantel, Hilary, "Naipaul's Book of the World", Rev. Of *The Writer and the World*, *The New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2002 (www.nybooks.com/articles/14680): 2.

minds, deepening their personal drama, sometimes their tragedy. This is the case with Jane who is involved, out of naive curiosity, in the activities of a revolutionary Caribbean group whose ideology—should they have any—she fails to understand: “But the personalities were so many, the principles on which they acted were so many, the principles on which they acted so confusing, and the issues so evanescent, that she had soon lost interest, had closed her mind to talk of new political alliances” (51).

Naipaul is denouncing these liberals’ lack of a real commitment to the land they have arrived at. The writer has clearly stated that

The Killings in Trinidad is a parable about simple people who think they can separate themselves from the crowd. [Gale Benson] took, on her journey away from home, the assumptions, however little acknowledged, not only of her class and race and the rich countries to which she belonged, but also of her ultimate security (74).

Their security is guaranteed and, at the same time, symbolised in the physical seclusion of their segregated residential areas (the Ridge, the Compound, the Domain). Thus, in “In a Free State”, the ordeal of Bobby and Linda in their drive across the African country is made more vivid by the recurrent allusions to violence such as the roar of military helicopters escorting them or the military checkpoints. The brutal aggression that the soldiers inflict upon Bobby makes them fear for their life, and the account of the final moments before they arrive home is tinged by the tension of a thriller. Once they reach the settlement we realise that the description has been clearly outlined so as to emphasise the contrast with the chaos outside; all indicates that this is a haven under siege. Naipaul criticises Western characters such as Linda

“for whom the compound was her setting” (237) but also those who, like Bobby, pretend they have found their place outside, only to run for shelter when feeling frightened:

The compound was safe. The soldiers were there to protect it. The wooden barrier flew up, and the watchman, in his old-fashioned red-and-blue uniform, ran to open the gate, as though anxious to display his zeal, and the authority of the people he served, to the watching soldiers. He pushed half the gate inwards and held it open; he saluted as the car passed in; and then he ran with the gate to close it again (237).

This seclusion in designated areas not only is inscribed in the colonial binary separation from the *other*, once more presented as primitive and violent, but also represents a hierarchical organisation of space, and an implicit recognition of Westerners' assumptions of elitism. In Abidin Kusno's book on post-colonial land planning we find that this perception of separation and exclusiveness has survived in present-day Indonesia, where advertisements for middle-class real estate projects picture: “houses located in self-enclaves and beautiful environments [...] Their immediate outdoor spaces are represented by images of women and children in an environment characterised by a sense of tranquility, security, cleanliness, and order,” this is set off against the surrounding popular boroughs or *kampung*, so that

A spatial hierarchical ordering of class is certainly intended in the way the city is planned. But [...] the disciplinary ordering of space is applied primarily to the fixing and surveillance of privilege, under conditions of luxury and liberty.¹

1. Kusno, Abidin, *Behind the Postcolonial. Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 115.

This bears a surprising resemblance to the description of the comfortable residential area of "In a Free State": "The neatly labelled streets, artificially winding through the compound's landscaped grounds, were well lit. Fluorescent light fell on hedges and gardens [...] The little clubhouse was crowded" (237).

However, this feeling of privilege is ridiculed in *A Bend in the River* when we read that, as fellow Westerners become deserters, overwhelmed by the social and political unrest, those left behind try to assuage their feelings of panic by indulging in their feelings of comfort, afforded by their "luxuries that only millionaires had in those other places". Ironically enough, the narrator informs us that some of these tokens, such as swimming pools, are made redundant by the lack of basic infrastructures such as water supply or filtering machinery. Eventually, we are said that, as part of the nonsense, most Europeans value "the idea of the swimming pool better than the thing itself" (207).

To sum up, we can truly wonder about the reasons for the particularly negative characterisation of Westerners. Criticism of women is focused mainly on physical aspects, with frequent unpleasant allusions to physiological functions. It is only to be expected that those who are keeping the records of the long list of the wronged by Naipaul should pose the question of the misogyny in his work. Needless to say, some revelations by the writer about his sexuality (his experiences at brothels, his adulterous relationship with a married woman) can be related with several passages in his work.

However, V. S. Naipaul has often said that the duty of the writer is to explain the world; as a man of his time, and given his personal circumstances, he tries to address what he considers the enigmas of the post-colonial world, an era that was being

born precisely at the time he was beginning his literary career. He has even expressed his view that his early fiction books on the Caribbean are apprenticeship works:

I was simply recording my reactions to the world; I hadn't come to any conclusion about it. But since then, through my writing, through the effort honestly to respond, I have begun to have ideas about the world. I have begun to analyse.¹

Naipaul will justify the almost exclusive attention to non-fiction in the later part of his career as an effort to grasp better the meaning of things, suggesting the need to rethink all literary forms "not only fiction: academic work, history, and travel books especially";² his is a repeated effort "to find the correct form for expressing what I feel and what my experience has been of the many mixed worlds in which I have lived."³

Thus, critics unanimously admit that "Interest in the political process as a means of revealing relations and stresses within a society is indeed the most immediate evident aspect of Naipaul's writing."⁴ Along this line, we can say that when we consider the way Western characters discussed above are portrayed we realise they share so many common traits that we suspect that they correspond to stereotypical models, in such a way that the personal loses importance in favour of a global presentation of the individ-

1. Rowe-Evans, 25.

2. Hussein, Aamer, "Delivering the Truth", *Times Literary Supplement* (September 2, 1994): 3-4.

3. Niven, Alistair, "V. S. Naipaul Talks to Alistair Niven", Feroza Jussawalla, ed. *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul*. (Jackson: University P. of Mississippi, 1997): 162.

4. Woodcock, George, "V. S. Naipaul and the Politics of Fiction", *Queen's Quarterly*. 87:4 (1980): 679-692; 680.

ual caught in complexity of post-colonial societies. Thus, Naipaul criticises those who nostalgically claim the old colonial order but, above all, he is baffled by those who have come to the Third World full of certainties.

V. S. NAIPAUL'S *HALF A LIFE*: MOVING AWAY FROM TENSION?

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V. S. Naipaul has often mentioned that the vocation to become a writer had come to him early, as the only future he could consider.¹ But this vocation, together with his experiences as a reader, were to him “a kind of sham”:² he did not particularly enjoy writing, and he had nobody to write to in Trinidad. Furthermore he found it hard to understand the situations and societies described in books, and to know precisely what the language referred to.³

1. “And then somehow, without any discussion that I remember, it seemed to be settled, in my mind as well as my father’s, that I was to be a writer.” *Finding the Centre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984): 37; “I was eleven, no more, when the wish came to me to be a writer; and then very soon it was a settled ambition.” *Reading and Writing. A personal Account* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000): 3.

2. “With me, though, the ambition to be a writer was for many years a kind of sham.” (*Reading and Writing*, 4)

3. Concerning the discrepancy between his own experience in Trinidad and what books from afar (mostly from England) reported, see V. S. Naipaul’s “Jas-

Therefore, the very idea of his vocation was, from the outset, linked with different kinds of tension. Before becoming a writer, the young Naipaul had to work hard to win a scholarship in order to escape from the island which did not offer him any real opportunities;¹ when trying to become a writer, he had difficulty finding material and a reading audience;² but above all, he suffered from the deep anxiety that his father had known before him:

And what is astonishing to me is that, with the vocation, he so accurately transmitted to me—without saying anything about it—his hysteria from the time when I didn't know him: his fear of extinction. [...] That fear became mine as well. It was linked with the idea of the vocation: the fear could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation. (*Finding the Centre*, 72)

Only writing could help Naipaul discover himself and gradually, help him build a coherent picture of himself. As he said in *Finding the Centre*, “So step by step, book by book, though seeking each time only to write another book, I eased myself into knowledge. To write was to learn.” (27-8); and he added, in his Nobel Lecture, that “[...] everything of value about me is in my books. I will go further now. I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book, intuitively sensed and, in the case of fiction, intuitively worked out, stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been

mine” in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, or *Reading and Writing*, 9-10 or 20, for example.

1. V. S. Naipaul often mentions this in his interviews or writing. See, for instance, *Reading and Writing*, 21, or *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul*, University Press of Mississippi, 1997 – (French edition: *Pour en finir avec vos mensonges. Sir Vidia en conversation*, Paris: Anatolia / Editions du Rocher, 2001).

2. See V. S. Naipaul's article “London” in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*.

said that the last book contained all the others.”¹ Writing, then, is what has finally given Naipaul, after many years of hard labour and of incredible tension, a feeling of wholeness, of completeness.

Such serenity seems to be new for V. S. Naipaul. In fact the theme of the void, the fear of nothingness and insignificance as well as omnipresent manifestations of tension haunt the lives of most of Naipaul's fictional characters, among whom stands Willie Chandran, the protagonist in Naipaul's latest novel, *Half a Life*. This very title suggests incompleteness, some breaking point, some kind of suspended life, and finally tension.

Willie is yet another of the “little men” about whom Naipaul so often wrote in his fiction.² Disappointed with life in India and unwilling to live his father's pitiful “life of sacrifice”, he tries to seek better opportunities abroad. His move westward leads him to England. There he drifts along, meeting people with different pasts and perspectives, from various parts of the world and from different social classes. After an attempt at writing a book of his own, which proves half a failure, Willie meets a girl from Africa, Ana. As he realizes that he belongs to no particular world and finds himself somewhat alone, he asks her to take him to her East African country. This is a move to an almost timeless society, a microcosm on the margin of the real world. They settle down in

1. V. S. Naipaul's Nobel Lecture. Speech reproduced by the Nobel Foundation, 2001. On the Internet: www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-lecture-e.html.

2. “The protagonists of Naipaul's fiction may be different persons but there may be sensed a thread of continuity in their fate and their limbotic status. Willie in Naipaul's twelfth novel may be in many ways different from Mohun Biswas [...], Ganesh Ramsumair [...] and Ralph Singh [...] but essentially they are all one as they present different aspects of the same cultural mindset.” A. Choubey, “A Critique of Naipaul's *Half a Life*: Searching for Identity in Limbo”, <http://65.107.211.208/caribbean/naipaul/choubey3.html>.

Ana's grandfather's estate house and live in a very remote area, in their own "Heart of Darkness", in colonial times. But this experience proves once more to be a mere deadend and, when the novel comes to its end, Willie is living on a temporary basis in Germany, in his sister's flat.

Tension is thus once more at the heart of the novel, omnipresent and overwhelming. As the reader follows Willie's progress in the world and the different stages in his voyages, he can only witness that Willie always feels adrift, never completely shedding his nerves as a stranger. His future is uncertain and blurred, and he acts on the spur of the moment when confronted with a crisis. Half his life, which is reported in the novel, is given no real direction, and he often seems to fall prey to external circumstances. Although he is aware that something is wrong, Willie seems to be partially out of control.

Two things, however, arise to grant him some satisfaction and a degree of fulfillment: writing, or more precisely story-telling, and sexuality. Even if these remain ambiguous throughout the novel, they may be viewed as potential means of releasing tension at particular moments in Willie's life. They are Willie's only attempts at modifying the course of his life.

But the key to the "success" of Willie's life might very well lie elsewhere. The ending of the novel is itself very ambiguous, providing no definite conclusion. Nothing seems to be settled in Willie's life when the reader reaches the last pages because no clue whatsoever is given him as to what Willie's future life might be. The reader is once more faced with tension: he is left on his own, confronted with an unfinished, suspended life-story. Yet, the narrative itself may hint at some reduction of tension, and also perhaps at more optimism concerning Willie's "half a life" to

come. Story-telling may be his own way of releasing tension. As his father had done before him when he told Willie the story of his life, Willie's narration of his own half-life in the novel may be viewed as an opportunity to give shape to his existence. Indeed, his father, who had always stood in between extreme positions, aspiring for a life that would be different from his ancestors', had found himself torn between a very materialistic life on the one hand, and a life of spirituality and asceticism on the other hand. His meeting with Somerset Maugham was the one marking event in his life, his only way out. It helped him live through the hardships of life and helped him perceive his existence in a new light. By telling his son about his experience, he lent significance to his otherwise trivial and insipid life. In the same way, Willie's great piece of writing may not have been written yet when he tells his sister about half his life in the course of the narrative (chapter 3). However, when the reader opens the novel *Half a Life* he is confronted with the telling of Willie's story in various narrative voices, some events being narrated in the third person while others are related in the first person. These may help to throw a new light onto his experiences and may lead the reader to discover some manifestations of the lowering of tension.

This article will tackle the different manifestations and sources of tension in *Half a Life*, as well as the ways in which Willie tries to reduce tension, that is to say mostly through story-telling and by indulging in sexuality. Finally, some of Naipaul's narrative strategies in the novel will be analysed leading us either to find further ambiguity and suspended meaning in the novel, or to provide us with a key to a new understanding of *Half a Life* and of Naipaul's evolution in fiction.

Willie's half a life of tension

From the very first days of his life (and one could even say before he was born), Willie found himself prey to different kinds of tension. His very existence is in fact the materialisation of the main tension that governed his father's life – the tension between ideals and reality, the tension between spirituality and materialism. When he was young, his father chose to call into question his past lineage as a Brahmin and the comfortable and settled life that had been laid out for him. By so doing, he tried in his own way to answer Gandhi's call to rebellion against established principles. He therefore tried to outline a "life of sacrifice" for himself.¹ But the father's rebellious acts turned out to be petty and shameful: when he tried to burn his English books, the event went almost unnoticed, and when he decided to live with a "backward" girl to challenge the social organisation based on the caste system, he felt only repulsion and disgust, and found himself at the centre of dissent.

Ironically, his only possible refuge was the temple, where he had to pronounce a vow of silence to escape from pursuits. Further irony also springs from the fact that although he took a vow of sexual abstinence, Willie's father had two children with his backward wife. Willie's father's life, then, was torn between two conflicting desires: rebelling against all kinds of established order, thus inscribing himself in the wind of change that was blowing over India at the beginning of the century, and falling back

1. "It would have made a public statement of my rejection of old values. It would have broadcast my adherence to the ideas of the mahatma, my life of sacrifice." *Half a Life* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador/Macmillan Ltd.: 2001): 16. All references to the novel will be to the Picador edition referred to at the end of this article. The abbreviated title *HL* will be used from now on.)

into ancestral, Brahmin ways which privileged spirituality. Ironically enough, Willie's father is also introduced in the novel as the epitomization of Indian spirituality after S. Maugham's visit to him. One more ironical fact is that Willie's father's life was given importance only because of the English writer's visit, while as a young man he had introduced English literature as something he could not understand, as a mark of the imperialistic power that he rejected.¹

Therefore when Willie was a boy, such tensions in his father's life were easily noticed, and they were perceived as evidence of falsity. His father's life of sacrifice was no more than make-believe, his father being a sadhu only because such external conditions were imposed on him. Willie refers several times to his being "ashamed" of his father, who was an object of mockery in society. Willie even despised him:

But now when the question was put to him Willie found he didn't know what to say about his father's business. He also found he was ashamed. [...] the class laughed. They laughed at his irritation and not at what he had said. From that day Willie Chandran began to despise his father. (*HL*, 37)

During his childhood, Willie was also the subject of tensions because of his parents' mixed couple, because of the difficulty he faced when trying to identify his own place in society. Mixity meant exclusion from different social classes and castes, as his

1. "I didn't understand the BA course. I didn't understand *The Mayor of Cast-erbridge*. I couldn't understand the people or the story and didn't know what period the book was set in. Shakespeare was better but I didn't know what to make of Shelley and Keats and Wordsworth. When I read those poets I wanted to say, 'But this is just a pack of lies. Noone feels like that.'" (8-9)

experience at school proves. Willie soon realized what going to the mission school meant:

But gradually as he grew up he understood more about the mission school and its position in the state. He understood more about the pupils in the school. He understood that to go to the mission school was to be branded, and he began to look at his mother from more and more of a distance. The more successful he became at school [...] the greater that distance grew. (*HL*, 39)

Such social tensions are also echoed by more philosophical and political ones. While he had been very trusting in the Canadian missionaries and had thought of becoming a missionary himself as a way out of his bleak situation at home, Willie finally understood the reality of the fathers' purposes: to destroy other people's culture and impose their own power over the defeated:

There was a magazine on the table. It was a missionary magazine. There was a colour picture on the cover. A priest with glasses and a wristwatch was standing with one foot on a statue of the Buddha. He had just chopped it down with an axe, and he was smiling and leaning on the axe like a lumberjack. [...] Willie felt ashamed for himself. He felt the fathers had been fooling him all these years. He was ashamed that he ever wanted to be a missionary. (*HL*, 48)

In the turmoil of life in India, and because he seems to himself to be the embodiment of all the tensions mentioned, Willie cannot easily figure out his own future. His very name had to be explained to him but the identity it refers to seems satisfactory neither to himself nor to his father:

Willie Chandran asked his father one day, "Why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me."

His father said without joy, "You were named after a great English writer. I am sure you have seen his books about the house."

"But I haven't read them. Did you admire him so much?"

"I am not sure. Listen and make up your mind." (*HL*, 1)

In order to escape from the tensions at home, Willie finally heads for London and his journey leads him to a world which is unknown to him and so seems mythical, outside reality.¹ In this first stage of his half-life peregrinations, Willie is very much like the unknown character in the short story entitled "The Enigma of Arrival" in Naipaul's eponymous novel. He is confronted with a new kind of tension: the fear of the unknown. In his second narrative project,² the narrator of "The Enigma of Arrival" stresses the character's fear before leaving the ship and before entering a new world, and the emotional consequences of his arrival in an unknown place. In the same way, Willie, on board the ship, is so worried that he can't speak, and he refuses to view reality in a clear-sighted way:

He went by ship. And everything about the journey so frightened him [...] that he found himself unwilling to speak, at first out of pure worry, and then, when he discovered that silence brought

1. "And that was how, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran, the mission-school student who had not completed his education, with no idea of what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew, only with the fantasies of the Hollywood films of the thirties and forties that he had seen at the mission school, went to London." (51)

2. See *The Enigma of Arrival* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987): 156-57.

him strength, out of policy. So he looked without trying to see and heard without listening. (*HL*, 51)

Like the narrator-writer in *The Enigma of Arrival*,¹ Willie realizes that his trip and his arrival are synonymous with loss. All previous knowledge proves irrelevant and inadequate at the time of arrival.² His exploration of London reveals his ignorance: he is not familiar with the place and is furthermore profoundly disappointed by what he sees:

He knew that London was a great city. His idea of a great city was of a fairyland of splendour and dazzle, and when he got to London and began walking about its streets he felt let down. He didn't know what he was looking at. [...] Willie knew little more of London than the name.

The only two places he knew about in the city were Buckingham Palace and Speakers' Corner. He was disappointed by Buckingham Palace. He thought the maharaja's palace in his own state was far grander [...]. His disappointment turned to something like shame [...] when he went to Speakers' Corner. [...] He expected big, radical, shouting crowds, like those his mother's uncle, the firebrand of the backwards, used to address. He didn't expect to see an idle scatter of people around half a dozen talkers; with the big buses and the cars rolling indifferently by all the time. (*HL*, 52)

1. One should be aware here of the most important difference between the narrator's projects to write a short-story entitled "*The Enigma of Arrival*", and the novel itself, written by Naipaul, referred to through the use of italics.

2. On that point, see Chapter 1 (528 and following) in "Analyse des marques stylistiques du point de vue narratif dans deux romans de V. S. Naipaul: *A House for Mr Biswas* et *The Enigma of Arrival*", F. Labaune-Demeule, Thèse de Doctorat Nouveau Régime, Lyon: 1999.

His only “dazzling moment”, when reality meets expectations, is his unexpected and very short meeting of Krishna Menon in the street. This physical meeting highlights the discrepancy between the way in which he apprehended things previously, as if in a halo of unreality, and the way in which the reality of the world can be felt now, becoming more tangible. The Suez example is also very telling: Willie’s very hazy knowledge of the Suez crisis becomes more concrete with the meeting of K. Menon,¹ and even more so with Willie’s discovery of the real place when he is on his way to Africa.² Thus he is able to become aware of the concreteness of the greater world and of his own reality in it. However this heightens his feeling of being lost, his difficulty in defining reality and fantasy.³ Therefore he has to learn a completely new

1. “Willie knew nothing about the invasion. The invasion had apparently been caused by the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and Willie knew nothing about that either. He knew, from his school geography lessons, about the Suez Canal; and one of the Hollywood movies they had shown at the mission school was *Suez*. But in Willie’s mind neither his school geography nor Suez were strictly real. Neither had to do with the here and now; neither affected him or his family or his town; and he had no idea of the history of the canal or Egypt. [...] Now, after his sight of Krishna Menon in the park, he was amazed at how little he knew of the world around him.” (54)

2. Although his knowledge was, at that time far greater, he refused to see the physical reality of the place because of the anguish generated by the second unknown world in which he would have to settle: “[...] he preferred to stay in the cabin dealing with this foolish thing that had befallen him. Alexandria was spoilt for him, and the Suez Canal. [...] Three years before, when he was going to England, he had done this part of the journey in the opposite direction. He hardly knew then what he was seeing. He had a better idea now of geography and history; he had some idea of the antiquity of Egypt. He would have liked to commit the landscape to memory, but his worry about the loss of language kept him from concentrating.” (133)

3. “Willie was living in the college as in a daze. [...] He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. He still had no idea of the scale of things, no idea of historical time or even of distance. When he had seen Buckingham Palace he

system of values:

At the college he had to re-learn everything that he knew. He had to learn how to eat in public. He had to learn how to greet people and how, having greeted them, not to greet them all over again in a public place ten or fifteen minutes later. He had to learn to close doors behind him. He had to learn how to ask for things without being peremptory. (*HL*, 58- 9)

This only makes him feel the artificiality of both Indian and English societies, of both his past and his present experiences, leaving him free, but adrift.¹ While his knowledge of real things grows with his experience of life, it also emphasizes his own littleness or insignificance on the universal plane. Hence his perception of tension of a new kind.

In Africa, he relives a similar experience as he realizes that he knows nothing of his new background. He has to adapt to the land, to its geography, crops, ways of living, to the terrible dangers of the place,² but he eventually finds this experience more positive:

The estate grew cotton and cashews and sisal. I knew nothing about these crops. But there was a manager and there were overseers. [...] my only function was to reinforce Ana's authority with these men. [...] So we all got on. I began to learn . . . [...] So bit by bit I learned. Not only about cotton and sisal and cashew, but

had thought that the kings and queens were impostors, and the country a sham, and he continued to live within that idea of make-believe." (58)

1. See 59-60, where he speaks of the rules at college as pieces of make-believe, and where he introduces the rules at home as "themselves a kind of make-believe, self-imposed".

2. The description of the sisal-cutting time is very relevant as to the potential local dangers. See *Half a Life*, 168-69.

also about the people. I got used to the road to the town. I knew the giant rock cones along the way. (*HL*, 146-48)

One might think that such tensions might lessen when experiences repeat themselves. In fact, repetition does not always assuage such anxieties; it sometimes intensifies them. On his way to Africa, the traveller's fear of arrival translates itself into a panic concerning language: his uncertain future makes him fear that he might lose part of his own past, part of his identity, represented for him in the form of his different linguistic acquisitions. The disappearance of such skills evokes his own mental death:

They—he and Ana—left from Southampton. He thought about the new language he would have to learn. He wondered whether he would be able to hold on to his own language. He wondered whether he would forget his English, the language of his stories. [...] Willie was trying to deal with the knowledge that had come to him on the ship that his home language had almost gone, that his English was going, that he had no proper language left, no gift of expression. (*HL*, 132)

This experience is no less traumatic than the first one, the fear of the unknown generating a schizophrenic feeling in Willie's mind.¹ And even though his first impression of Africa is the exact opposite of his first discovery of London, disappointment being now replaced by unexpected dazzle, he is no less disturbed than before.² He even feels trapped, like the character in the first sketch

1. "All this while he had been acting reasonably and lucidly. Neither Ana nor anyone else would have known that there was anything wrong. But all this while Willie felt that there was another self inside him, in a silent space where all his external life was muffled." (133)

2. "The town was big and splendid, far finer than anything he had imagined, not something he would have associated with Africa. Its grandeur worried him.

for *The Enigma of Arrival*. His thought, "I'm not staying here. I am leaving. I will spend a few nights here and then I will find some way of going away." (*HL*, 133), echoes the feeling of the unnamed character in *The Enigma*:

He would arrive [...] at that classical port with the walls and gateways like cut-outs. He would walk past that muffled figure on the quayside. He would move from that silence and desolation, that blankness, to a gateway or door. He would enter there and be swallowed by the life and noise of a crowded city. [...] gradually there would come to him the feeling that he was getting nowhere; he would lose his sense of mission; he would begin to know only that he was lost. His feeling of adventure would give way to panic. He would want to escape, to get back to the quayside and his ship. [...] at the moment of crisis he would come upon a door, open it, and find himself back on the quayside of arrival. [...] Only one thing is missing now. Above the cut-out walls and buildings there is no mast, no sail. The antique ship has gone. (*The Enigma of Arrival*, 92)

Such feeling of falling into a trap is emphasized by the description of the voyage inland, towards their own African "Heart of Darkness", a vegetal trap characterized mostly by the colours green and brown and by its labyrinthian roads.¹

However, in *Half a Life*, tension is not characteristic only of the time of arrival: here it permeates all Willie's experiences. The

He didn't think he would be able to cope with it. The strange people he saw on the streets knew the language and the ways of the place." (133)

1. After leaving the main town the land looks frightening (133), the rivers "barring any road or land route to the north", and after the smaller town, an asphalt road leads "further inland through open country". Then they have to "turn off into a dirt road" in the middle of the bush before they "left this road and began to climb a noticeable slope towards the house". (134)

main source of tension is obviously social tension, since the fact that Willie feels adrift means that he wants to feel gradually more integrated in society, whether in England or in Africa. The deeply different nature of these societies should lead to different analyses or discoveries, but both are mostly characterized by the predominance of make-believe, of bluff. In London, Willie's discovery of the ambivalence of the town¹ is in fact echoed by the aspect of pretence or sham in the two microcosms he is introduced to: Percy's "Bohemian-immigrant life of London of the late fifties", characterized by meetings in Notting Hill (*HL*, 72), and Roger's literary circles (*HL*, 89). People from both social groups seem to be acting in order to draw attention to themselves and to give themselves an importance they do not actually have in life. For instance, the so-called estate-developer plays the part of the rich and easy-going man, but his boasting does not escape Willie's notice.² All other Bohemians pretend to live a pleasant, enjoyable life, probably only to forget about their insecurity and bleak prospects.³

1. "So close to Marble Arch, but it was like another city, as though another sun shone on the college, as though another earth lay below the perfume counter at Debenhams." (69) "Willie thought, 'How strange the city is! When I came to look for Speakers' Corner [...] I never knew that the club and Debenhams perfume counter were so close on one side, and Percy's old manor, and the old man's, so close on the other side.'" (76)

2. "The stranger said, in an extraordinarily soft voice, and an accent that was not the accent of a professional man, 'It's chilled. It's from the Ritz. They always keep a bottle ready for me.'/ Willie wasn't sure that the man was serious. But the man's eyes were cold and still, and Willie thought that it wasn't necessary for him to decide on the matter. But the Ritz again! How it seemed to matter to them. And to Willie [...] it was a strange London idea of luxury." (74-5)

3. "This hardly touched the traditional bohemian world of Soho. It was a little world on its own. The immigrants, from the Caribbean, and then the white colonies of Africa, and then Asia, had just arrived. They were still new and

In the same way, people from Roger's literary circles also play parts, and their world is mere make-believe. Roger himself, who organizes a party for his editor, hopes that he will be able, like Proust's Swann, "to bring together dissimilar people, to create a social nosegay, as he says" (*HL*, 89). Marcus, a Black man who went back to Africa at the time of the "Back to Africa movement" has two ambitions: to open an account at the Queen's bank, and "to have a grand-child who will be pure white in appearance" (*HL*, 89); the young poet and his wife always look "disapproving and say absolutely nothing" (*HL*, 90); two of Roger's friends want to conquer women in order to get richer, but "each thinks the other is a fraud" (*HL*, 91). While "Richard is only a bedroom Marxist" (91), Peter has "developed his English-gentleman style" (*HL*, 92). Even the editor has his own moment of stage-setting when he reads the obituary he has prepared for himself (*HL*, 98-101). Even if he is gradually moved by his own words, he had only first intended to act out a role in front of an "audience" (*HL*, 101).¹

In Africa, the social circles Willie becomes a member of are as fake as the people from London, even if the society described

exotic; and there were English people [...] who were ready to seek out the more stylish and approachable of the new arrivals. [...] and they were gay and bright together. But few of the immigrants had proper jobs, or secure houses to go back to. Some of them were truly on the brink, and that gave an edge to the gaiety." (p. 72) This also echoes a passage from *The Enigma of Arrival*, about "the flotsam of Europe after the war". (*The Enigma of Arrival*, 132)

1. "The editor cleared his throat once, twice. It was his call for silence. [...] Deliberately, in the silence he had created, looking at no one, he shook out the sheets. [...] He began to read. [...] As he read his emotion grew. [...] He, the editor, was aware of Willie's interest, and he weakened. He began to choke on his words. [...] Roger, saying goodbye to them at the door of the little house, lost his worried look. He said mischievously, not raising his voice, 'He told me he wanted to meet my London friends. I had no idea he wanted an audience.'" (98-101)

is no longer modern and western, but more colonial-like, as if frozen and somewhat archaic. Willie refers to them as “Ana’s friends” (*HL*, 160), distancing himself from them since the very first days. He soon realizes that they are “half and half friends”, who are almost stereotypes, and who are merely acting out roles in life:

These estate friends and neighbours [...] we understood only in the broadest of ways. We saw them in the way they chose to present themselves to us; and we saw the same segment of the person each time. They became like people in a play we might have been studying at school, with everyone a “character”, and every character reduced to a few points. (*HL*, 161)

Willie also observes that estate-life in African society is a kind of “half and half world”, and that “the rich and exciting” (*HL*, 160) life he had first perceived was no more than a life of pretence, people concealing their wounds under the mask of privileges.¹ Even a man like Gouveia, the Portuguese architect who makes the colonials feel old-fashioned, plays a part in their society. He is “a white man pretending to be a black man” (*HL*, 218), the symbol of the new settlers.² Although Willie had felt, at first, that these peo-

1. “In the beginning, I saw this life as rich and exciting. [...] In the beginning I wished only to be taken into this rich and safe life, so beyond anything I had imagined for myself [...]. But then after a year or so I began to understand—and I was helped in this understanding by my own background—that the world I had entered was only a half-and-half world, that many of the people who were our friends considered themselves, deep down, people of the second rank. They were not fully Portuguese, and that was where their own ambition lay.” (160-161)

2. “We decided he was a white man pretending to be a black man. It was a new type we were just beginning to get in the colony, playboy figures, well-to-do, full Portuguese, people like Gouveia, in fact, who could cut and run or look

ple might discover that, in a way, he was a fraud, he eventually becomes aware of the fact that they are all in similar situations.

Such new colonial life, characteristic of the past, of a world outside the main current movements, is also governed by a different system of values, by new habits, and by a different kind of social organization. For instance, the traditional Sunday lunches have their own strange protocol and ritual, and their colonial stereotypes are emphasized. The servants' uniforms and the groups meeting in the dining-room or on the verandah seem to echo images from a past immobile life.¹ More surprising to Willie is the women's habit of taking away food in paper bags (*HL*, 144), which he understands is linked with some kind of anxiety or insecurity, another kind of tension.² At the same time, such colonial life is described as empty, because the people hardly have anything new to speak about. Their social life throws into relief their loneliness.³ This partly explains these people's reactions of indif-

after themselves if there was any real trouble." (218)

1. "We went one Sunday, not long after we had arrived, to a lunch at one of those neighbours of Ana's. It was a big affair. There were mud-splashed Jeeps and Land-Rovers and other four-wheel drives on the sandy open space in front of the house. The African servants wore white uniforms, buttoned at the neck. After drinks people separated according to their inclination, some sitting at the big table in the dining room, others sitting at the smaller tables on the verandah, where the tangled old bougainvillaea vines softened the light." (143-44)

2. "Towards the end of the lunch two or three of these eating women beckoned the servants and talked to them, and after a while the servants came with take-away portions of the lunch in paper bags. It appeared to be a tradition of the place. It might have been that they had come from far, and wanted to have food to eat when they got back home." (144)

3. "Some of these estate-owners appeared, in fact, to have no conversation; it was as though the solitude of their lives had taken away that faculty. When eating time came they just sat and ate, husband and wife side by side, not young, not old, people in between in age, eating and not talking, not looking round, very private [...]." (144)

ference when they meet Willie. He stands outside their general area of knowledge, outside the established social classes or racial divisions. Such colonial society is multi-layered, based on a precise hierarchy which reflects the history of the colony. On top of the social pyramid stand "pure" Portuguese people, who are few; then one can find the « second-rank Portuguese » (*HL*, 145) with an African grand-father (Ana is one of them);¹ a little further down the ladder are mixed-race people like the overseer, and finally the Africans. But the barriers between the latter communities are only officious. They have to live alongside one another.²

But as certain episodes suggest, some situations can prove to be full of racial tension for mixed race people. For example, the tiler who is abused and shouted at by the restaurant owner (*HL*, 165) is an illegitimate person. As such he is given no respect and his attitude is one of silent acceptance and submission. On the contrary, Ana's half-brother reacts to his own unfair situation in a very different way. He is described as "a very angry man" who "wouldn't express this by shouting at you. He will show off. He will try to let you know that he doesn't care for you at all, that he's done well on his own." (*HL*, 212-13) The spitting cobra imprisoned in

1. "About the people at the lunch Ana told me afterwards, 'They are the second-rank Portuguese. That is how they consider themselves. They are second rank because most of them have an African grandparent, like me.' In those days to be even a second-rank Portuguese was to have a kind of high status, and [...] in the colonial sate they kept their heads down and made what money they could." (145)

2. "I used to worry in the beginning about the overseers. They didn't seem to have much of a life. They were mixed-race people, born in the country most of them, and they lived in that row of small concrete houses. [...] African thatch and wattle was ordinary; concrete stood for dignity. But concrete wasn't a true barrier. These overseers lived, really, with the Africans. No other way was open to them." (146)

a bottle is the symbol of his own aggressivity, anger and violence. And quite unexpectedly, Ana's privileged situation is also full of tension, as she has to adopt the role of the estate-owner while at the same time accepting that her half-brother should live such life.¹ Social relationships are tense in the African society.

But Willie, in fact, stands outside all these social groups. He cannot even be linked with the Indians living in the country. He cannot be classified,² which leads to a denial of his own identity: he is finally always referred to as "Ana's London man" (*HL*, 145). Even other Indian people do not acknowledge his origins:

Most of the shops we used were Portuguese. One or two were Indian. I was nervous of going into them at first. I didn't want to get that look from the shop people that would remind me of home and bad things. But there was never anything like that, no flicker of racial recognition from the family inside. There, too, they accepted the new person I had become. [...] So that for me, as for the overseers, though in different ways, the place offered an extra little liberation. (*HL*, 148-49)

At the same time, this grants him new freedom, as "they let me be", he says (*HL*, 145). This is once more very close to the new freedom he enjoyed little after arriving in London, when he

1. "She said, 'My own flesh and blood. To think of him there all the time. That's what I've had to live with.'" (216)

2. "I found now that there was no special reaction to me. It was curiously deflating. I was expecting some recognition of my extraordinariness and there was nothing. [...] A number of them were of my father's complexion, and this might have been one reason why they seemed to accept me. Ana said later, 'They don't know what to make of you.' [...] I couldn't be mistaken for a Goan. My Portuguese was poor and for some reason I spoke it with an English accent. So people couldn't place me and they let me be." (144-45)

discovered that he could freely make up his past life in order to make it sound more interesting:

Noone he met, in the college or outside it, knew the rules of Willie's own place, and Willie began to understand that he was free to present himself as he wished. He could, as it were, write his own revolution. The possibilities were dizzying. He could, within reason, re-make himself and his past and his ancestry. (*HL*, 60)

However, other aspects of tension permeate Willie's life, both in London and in Africa. Racial and political tensions seem to be omnipresent, exactly as they were in India. Just as Willie and his father before him had found themselves in between the traditional way of life and the new prospects publicized by the firebrand, now Willie finds himself either at the heart of the racial riots in Notting Hill or entrapped in the African bush, encircled by guerrillas. Such events are always characterized in the novel by insecurity, instability and violence of different kinds. In London, the racial riots express much of the past contained hatred between different racial communities. Willie has to hide, as he feels personally threatened. He even develops feelings of paranoia.¹

In Africa, violence is linked with the general political situation of the country. Being a colonial land, it is quasi-inevitable that it will be prey to independentist movements. Willie had noticed the existence of the separation between the Africans and the estate-

1. "Willie felt at once threatened and ashamed. He felt people were looking at him. He felt the newspapers were about him. After this he stayed in the college and didn't go out. This kind of hiding wasn't new to him. It was what they used to do at home, when there was serious religious or caste trouble." (109)

owners.¹ But danger, when it comes, grows more and more perceptible and frightening. It is at first censured by the authorities; then they “began to play up the horror” (*HL*, 166), reporting mass-killings. As a consequence, Willie even learns to use a gun in order to protect himself. (Confronted with extreme outer tension, he realizes that the gun—itsself the emblem of tension—is also a means of slackening his own inner tensions.)²

But such outer, political violence and rebellion are also expressed in a more domestic setting, when Ana finds human excrement on her bed (*HL*, 220). Macrocosm and microcosm are both affected by aggressivity and vindication. And yet, suprisingly, no major act of violence is perpetrated by the guerrillas against the characters in the novel. Violent rebellion seems to take place outside Willie and Ana’s world. Only the consequences of such political instability can be felt in their everyday life, most of the infrastructure in town being slowly damaged. “The new régime” (*HL*, 225) is finally synonymous with decay and chaos and the dangers linked to such disturbances intensify only at the end of Willie’s

1. “It was strange when you got to see it, those two different worlds side by side: the big estates and the concrete buildings, and the African world that seemed less consequential but was everywhere, like a kind of sea. It was a version of what [...] I had known at home.” (152)

2. Although he was insecure at that time, this apparently negative experience proved enriching for him, because he perceived it as an act of self-fulfillment, as a way of slackening inner tensions: “I was entranced the first time I looked down a gun-sight with a finger on the trigger. It seemed to me the most private, the most intense moment of conversation with oneself, so to speak, with that split-second of right decision coming and going all the time, almost answering the movements of one’s mind. [...] I feel that the religious excitement that is supposed to come to people who meditate on the flame of a single candle in an otherwise dark room was no greater than the pleasure I felt when I looked down a gun-sight and became very close to my own mind and consciousness.” (167-68)

narrative account. There are "rumours of a new tribal war. Just as the anti-Portuguese guerrillas had begun in the bush, so now the people hostile to the victors were beginning in the bush." (*HL*, 226-27) The very first independentist movements were much less dangerous than the new guerrillas, who are described as blood-thirsty soldiers. But staying at the heart of violence has no sense for Willie, and he can't see why he should stay in the country. The decision to leave (in itself not surprising), is however, as often in the novel, partly ridiculed: the only injury he gets in such a disturbed context is due to his fall on slippery steps (*HL*, 227). On the other hand, such "private" violence helps him view his life in Africa in a new light: he becomes aware of the fact that his situation is not really different from his past life in London. What he has been experiencing in Africa is as artificial as his English life. As he says on the last page, "But now the best part of my life has gone, and I've done nothing. [...] And even if we go to Portugal, even if they let me in there, it would still be your life. I have been hiding for too long." (*HL*, 228)

Yet, two other kinds of tension are also mentioned in *Half a Life*. They are sexual tensions and the great difficulty Willie has of building a coherent image of himself. But these are part of a more personal quest for identity and are linked with experiences that finally help him reduce tension.

Reducing tensions: the quest for the self

From the beginning of the novel, sexuality is introduced as a real source of tension in Willie's life, and he explains that being brought up in India was the cause of his clumsiness. Arranged weddings do not require of young men that they should court

young women and try and appear attractive to them.¹ Therefore Willie does not know what to do when he is prey to sexual pulsions. The only women who seem to be able to help him are his friends' girlfriends, or prostitutes. Percy's girlfriend June and Roger's Perdita are the only women whom he can approach at first. But having sex with June is disappointing to Willie, because he feels incompetent and because the physical act takes place in a very shabby place.² It only means frustration.

Although he tries to improve his sexual knowledge, reading how to become "a sexual athlete" in a book and asking Percy about his own experience (*HL*, 71), he usually proves incompetent and unsatisfied. Though he is seduced by Perdita's elegance, first at the restaurant and then in the Marble Arch house (*HL*, 87, 97, 108), his failure is once more stressed: Perdita refuses to come to the rendez-vous because of his incompetence (*HL*, 119). Feeling desperate, he then tries to find June and, as she is married, he tries to have sex with a prostitute, only to observe once more his sexual inabilities.³ He ends up ashamed of himself, humiliated.

Only his meeting with Ana turns out to be different. For the first time in his life "he felt himself in the presence of someone who accepted him completely" (*HL*, 125), and this puts even more pressure on him. However he also experiences a feeling of completeness.⁴

1. "A friend of mine says it happens with Indians. It's because of the arranged marriages. They don't feel they have to try hard." (69) See also Willie's thoughts on p. 117.

2. See the description of the decay of the old house on pp. 68-9.

3. "He didn't consider her face. He just followed her. [...] He didn't look at the woman. They didn't talk. He concentrated on himself, on undressing, on his powers. [...] A few seconds later she threw him off. He didn't want to argue. He was full of shame." (120-21)

4. "After half an hour the spell didn't break, and Willie began to luxuriate in

When in Africa, Willie discovers a new freedom and the concretization of his fulfillment through his sexual relationship with Ana: "Those were the days of my intensest love-making with Ana. I loved her [...] for the luck and liberation she had brought me, the undoing of fear, the granting to me of full manhood." (*HL*, 145)

Sex becomes a way out of fear, out of panic.¹ But gradually, as time passes, their link becomes more tenuous and he finds himself in town with Alvaro, looking for places where to meet young African girls. This is sex without taboo (*HL*, 181) and in spite of his shame (*HL*, 185), he discovers that sexuality makes him even more alive, giving him yet another vision of himself.² It is, for him, a way of gauging his personal success, his progress out of the void. He now feels that his experiences are far more intense than his father's ever were (*HL*, 190).

But only his meeting with Graça brings him complete fulfillment:

That was new to me. Everything I had known before [...] over the next half-hour everything fell away, and I thought how terrible it would have been if [...] I had died without knowing this depth of satisfaction, this other person I had just discovered within myself. (*HL*, 204-05)

this new feeling of being accepted as a man and being in his own eyes complete." (125-26)

1. "And one day I realized that for all of the past week I had not thought about my fear of losing language or expression, the fear almost of losing the gift of speech." (146)

2. "I began to live with a new idea of sex, a new idea of my capacity. It was like being given a new idea of myself." (189)

Again this becomes a new landmark in his own way in the world. He finds once more that such revelation takes him worlds apart from his mother's and father's experiences (*HL*, 205). When the relationship with Graça finally breaks down, he realizes that he has lived "a life of sensation" (211) and that "it was hard to forget what she had taught, to unlearn the opening up of new senses; it was hard to go back to the sensual simplicities of earlier days." (*HL*, 211) Therefore, at that moment, he is once more confronted with another denial of his identity, as when his papers had been stolen and he had found himself utterly lost and unprotected (*HL*, 158). But his way in the world is, at that time, much better defined than before.

Another means of showing the evolution in his personality and of releasing tension in his life is story-telling and writing. When he first tried to write stories, at the time of arrival in London, he felt like a stranger, trying his hardest to get integrated into English society. But at that time, he realized that the new freedom granted to him by his Indian background—unknown to other people—allowed him to create stories far from reality. He soon rearranged truth to rebuild a new past for himself.¹ Such stories however were no more based on reality than his compositions at the mission-school. The artificiality of these very first pieces of writing lay in the fact that he used Western clichés, concealing his home experience behind the mask of Canadianness, for instance. Here, lies or very loose adaptations of reality predominate over truth.

1. "He spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself. He kept his father a brahmin. He made his father's father a 'courtier'. So, playing with words, he began to re-make himself." (61)

When the BBC editor asks him to write a short talk, Willie imagines a story built on the false identity of his mother as a Christian. Such artificiality, though omnipresent, goes unnoticed by the people around him and he tries to apply the same technique to any kind of subject. The more opportunities he has of writing stories, the easier the job.

Later, when Willie lies to Roger, pretending he wants to be a writer (*HL*, 82), Roger's advice is that Willie should "begin [his stories] in the middle and end them in the middle" to better make them resemble real life (*HL*, 83). Roger, then, can read through the masks, through the artificiality of Willie's stories:

What is interesting to me as a lawyer is that you don't want to write about real things. I've spent a fair amount of time listening to devious characters, and I feel about these stories that the writer has secrets. He is hiding. (*HL*, 83)

Finally, when Willie produces a new version of his former composition "A Life of Sacrifice", writing appears to him quite easy, evoking somewhat Naipaul's own experience at writing *Miguel Street*.¹

But Willie also notices that behind the invented reality of storytelling, he manages to express his more personal feelings unconsciously. The initial distancing of his compositions and BBC

1. Indeed the sentence « He only had to begin; the story rewrote itself » echoes Naipaul's words in *Finding the Centre* (19): "Luck was with me, because that first sentence was so direct, so uncluttered, so without complications, that it provoked the sentence that was to follow. [...] The first sentence was true. The second was invention. But together [...] they had done something extraordinary. Though they had left out everything – the setting, the historical time, the racial and social complexities of the people concerned – they had suggested it all; they had created the world of the street."

talks has melted away. Artifice is then used as the expression of partial truth:

To Willie's surprise, it was easier, with these borrowed stories far outside his own experience, and with these characters far outside himself, to be truer to his feelings than it had been with his cautious, half-hidden parables at school. (*HL*, 86)

Gradually, more and more personal experience permeates Willie's stories, as with the story about the holy man, modelled on his father's and S. Maugham's meeting (*HL*, 101). Writing then grants him a new point of view and becomes synonymous with discovering his own personality. But as soon as it is no longer possible for the protective distance to be maintained in the stories, writing ceases, because Willie's personal life then becomes too difficult to face and bear:

The story [...] took Willie by surprise. It gave him a new way of looking at his family and his life [...]. The stories seemed to be just waiting for him; he was surprised he hadn't seen them before; and he wrote fast for three or four weeks. The writing then began to lead him to difficult things, things he couldn't face, and he stopped. (*HL*, 102)¹

When Willie's book is finally published (*HL*, 103, 122), Willie knows that it is going to be stillborn, and in the few reactions to the book that he has long been waiting for, he can read only disdain and hypocrisy. This makes him distrust his literary skills,

1. Once more this evokes V. S. Naipaul's experience when he explained that writing without any emotional distance was impossible to him at the beginning. See *Finding the Centre* for example and in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1969. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) the passage when Biswas tries to read a poem in prose about his mother, 484-85.

and it puts an end to his literary career—temporarily, but at least for the eighteen years he spends in Africa.¹

Only Ana views the stories in a more positive light. For the first time in her life she can find something of her personal experience as a colonial in them. At some level, then, the book links fiction and reality and expresses the truth of certain situations.² This leads us once more to Naipaul's own experience, since he has complained several times about the absence of books in his childhood evoking his personal situation.³ V. S. Naipaul has also stressed the importance of truth in fiction, and this is precisely what Willie manages to achieve in his stories, though he does it unconsciously. Ana, for instance, has been able to see through them and to get to their heart of truth:

"I think you will see now why your stories spoke to me. All the bluff, the make-believe, with the real unhappiness. It was uncanny. It was why I wrote." She had never been so explicit about the stories, and it worried me to think that I might have given away more of myself than I knew, and that she had probably always known who and what I was. (*HLL*, 156-57)

1. In so doing he obeys his sister's wish. See *Half a Life*, 130.

2. "At school we were told that it was important to read, but it is not easy for people of my background and I suppose yours to find books where we can see ourselves. We read this book and that book and we tell ourselves we like it, but all the books they tell us to read are written for other people and really we are always in somebody else's house [...]. I feel I had to write to you because in your stories for the first time I find moments that are like moments in my own life, though the background and material are so different. It does my heart a lot of good to think that out there all these years there was someone thinking and feeling like me." (124)

3. See *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, "Jasmine", 24-31, and *Reading and Writing*, 18-19.

In that case, truth can be found indirectly, behind Willie's different masks. But when Naipaul writes, in "On Being a Writer", that "My aim was truth, truth to a particular experience, containing a definition of the writing self", we may wonder whether this could not partially be applied to Willie's stories.¹ And this raises a new question. If writing was, for Willie, a means of releasing tension, both concerning the society he lived in and concerning the definition of his own self, what should the reader's position be like as regards *Half a Life*? How should he consider the narration of Willie's life?

The reader's tension

Many critics have stressed the fact that the ending of the narration of *Half a Life* seems, as it were, suspended, as the reader knows only the first part of Willie's life and is not provided with the slightest clue about the second half of his existence to come. Thus, Jessica Lee Thomas notes that "*Half a Life* plunges the reader into the middle of a story and ends, half a life distant, at the beginning of another."² We know that Willie has left Ana and Africa behind, after eighteen years there, and that he is now living in Germany, in his sister's flat. Her life looks in fact almost as bleak as their parents', living in a somewhat dark and dirty background, with a man who also has two families, two dif-

1. Of course one should remain aware that Naipaul wrote those words about *The Enigma of Arrival*, in which the autobiographical aspect of experience is stressed. Truth therefore is given more importance in *The Enigma* than in *Half a Life*. See also V. S. Naipaul's essay "Conrad's Darkness" in *The Return of Eva Peron*, (1974. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988): 203.

2. Jessica Lee Thomas's review of *Half a Life*, "The Yale Review of Books", Vol. 5, number 1, Spring 2002. On the Internet: yalereviewofbooks.com/archive/spring02/review16.shtml.

ferent lives.¹ Yet, Willie is aware that this was the only way out for his sister, and that thanks to her relation with Wolf, she has escaped the void.² Once more, Willie's decision to leave Africa can be viewed as another positive act in his life. This may be his only way out of the slow colonial death he had been experiencing, the only way out of self denial.³ But when he observes Tamil boys in Germany, he can see that the perspectives in his life are perhaps not as well-defined as he had first thought. Ambiguity is still very much present, since he does not know what the second part of his life will be like.⁴ Willie can only observe and draw conclusions as to the present and the past, but he cannot view his future. Perhaps it will be a failure similar to Percy Cato's, who ends up "running a night-club for tourists on the north coast" in Jamaica. (*HL*, 139).

But the reader's tense position also springs from the fact that "Willie's alternating bouts of capriciousness and inaction lead the reader to evaluate and re-evaluate her feelings towards him throughout the novel".⁵ The reader's expectations are always in

1. Old snow lay on the pavements, with paths of yellow sand and salt in the middle, and scattering of dog dirt on the snow. Sarojini lived in a big, dark flat up two flights of stairs. Wolf wasn't there [...]. Sarojini said simply, "He's with his other family." (137)

2. "None of this would have come out if the German hadn't come and taken her away. If he hadn't come, would she and all her soul have just rotted to nothing?" (138)

3. When he leaves Ana, he says "I am forty-one. I am tired of living your life." (227)

4. "But I'm wrong. I am not like them. I am forty-one, in middle life. They are fifteen or twenty years younger, and the world has changed. They have proclaimed who they are and they are risking everything for it. I have been hiding from myself. I have risked nothing. And now the best part of my life is over." (138)

5. Jessica Lee Thomas, "The Yale Review of Books", *op. cit.*

suspension, on the razor's edge as it were. According to J. M. Coetzee, "Willie's story ends not only without resolution, but without any glimpse of what a resolution might look like. *Half a Life* reads like the cut-off first half of a book that might be called *A Full Life*."¹

The uncertainty and vague prospects of Willie's life are however slightly lessened by one small clue in the novel. Before he tells his sister of his African past (*HL*, 140-228), one third-person statement tells the reader that "and just as once his father had told Willie about his life, so now, over many days of the Berlin winter, in cafés and restaurants and the half-empty flat, Willie began slowly to tell Sarojini of his life in Africa." (*HL*, 139-40). An explicit comparison between Willie's predicament and his father's is drawn. Just as his father's trivial, petty and insignificant life was given a more obvious meaning because of Maugham's visit and the narration of it in *Half a Life*, so the reader may wonder whether Willie's existence is not, from the start, lent a certain importance by the very fact that it is narrated in a novel and that it is being slowly discovered by the reader's individual reading act. As such, it is hallowed, and can be viewed as a way out of the void, out of insignificance, for Willie.

This vision and interpretation can also be emphasized by a few more narrative clues, which are so tenuous and scattered that the reader has difficulty identifying them. The choice of different narrative voices to tell Willie's story appears to be relevant. The use of both first- and third-person narrations could be seen as a way of handling the reader's feelings of distance or empathy towards Willie, thus maintaining the reader's in between position in the

1. J.M. Coetzee, "The Razor's Edge", *The New York Review of Books*, November 1, 2001. (on the Internet: nybooks.com/articles/14680)

novel.¹ But in fact, one should go further in scrutinizing the narration. Indeed, the first narrative (the story of Willie's father's life), is framed by third-person references² while the father's story is supposed to be told by Willie's father himself in the first-person. Gradually, third person markers disappear from the text, which then introduces only the father's voice.³ At the end of the story, the third-person narrative voice reappears, with the same characteristics as before: it is an unintrusive, distant voice, which introduces a global perception of time. The point of view is general, summing things up or melting the different pieces of knowledge obtained at different moments of the father's story into one story: "This was the story that Willie Chandran's father told. It took about ten years. Different things had to be said at different times. Willie Chandran grew up during the telling of this story." (*HL*, 35)

Who but Willie Chandran could occupy such a privileged position in time? Who would have been able to hear all the emerging information concerning his father's life? An omniscient narrator might have been able to do that. But who could be in a better position to report Willie Chandran's father's story in the first-person? Who but the only witness, the only person it was aimed at?

Now, what about the narrative voices used in the different chapters of the novel? It is obvious to the reader that the gradual nar-

1. "Still, the meandering plot and the ambivalence of Willie's character tend to leave the reader in the middle of enjoyment and frustration. The act of reading *Half a Life* places the reader in a strange relationship to Willie Chandran. One feels the same perplexity that he does, and suffers from the same indecision that plagues his life." Jessica Lee Thomas, "The Yale Review of Books", *op. cit.*

2. "And this was the story Willie Chandran's father began to tell." (1)

3. "The writer (Willie Chandran's father said) came to India to get material for a novel about spirituality. [...] The principal of the maharaja's college brought him to me. I was doing penance [...]" (1)

rative move is one from impersonality and distance, through the use of the third-person narrative voice in “The First Chapter” and the first part of “A second Translation” (until p. 140) to a more personal, individual, subjective first-person narration in the second half of the chapter entitled “A Second Translation” (p. 140 to the end). This last narration is openly given (one should perhaps say apparently given) the stylistic marks of conversation, with several references to passages where Willie addresses his sister directly.¹ This narration is given both a vague pedagogical aim (to explain his life to his sister), and, gradually, the characteristics of a confession. Such references to Sarojini or to orality disappear from Willie’s narration little by little. The very last words in the novel lead the reader back to the present moment of Willie’s life in Africa. Willie’s narration abolishes the time boundaries that were set up at the beginning of the confession. The novel ends with Ana’s words, reactualizing them through the use of direct speech although Willie is now far away from Africa. The move, then, is one of increasing proximity and empathy, leading us closer to Willie’s own private, intimate experience.

Without analysing this in detail,² it seems obvious to the reader that such a move and the use of similar narrative markers at the beginning of the novel and at the beginning of Willie’s oral narration,³ point at a new interpretation. Couldn’t this novel be viewed

1. Several examples can be found in the narration. See for instance the most obvious ones in the first two pages: “as you may have noticed, Sarojini”, “And since I know, Sarojini, that you have your own ideas about love as well, I will explain.”, or the use of first-person-plural or second-person singular pronouns or possessive adjectives. (140-41)

2. This could be the subject of another more precise article on the narrative strategies set up in *Half a Life*.

3. The presence of a stylistic marker such as “(Willie said)” (p. 140) directly

as Willie's new story-telling act, an act which, this time, could be considered as successful, as another means of defining himself more precisely through writing?

Furthermore, the many metafictional or intertextual references to other works by Naipaul¹ might point at some positive evolution in Willie's (the narrator's) writing life.² If this were the case, this might explain why references to writing and literature are numerous in the novel and it might give a more significant meaning to the chapter headlines in *Half a Life*. The reference to Maugham inscribes Willie from the start in the world of writing. The first part of Willie's life as an adult is also reported in "The First Chapter" of *Half a Life* which is an ostentatious reference to books. And finally, the chapter "A Second Translation" is not only a reference to his second trip, or move, to Africa. It may also be viewed as a reference to the narrator's work which involves translating Willie's actual life into literary material and into fiction through writing. It seems therefore difficult to accept J.M. Coetzee's opinion that there are technical weaknesses in the

echoes the way in which the narration of Willie's father's story was introduced on p. 1, thus introducing a unifying, though somewhat artificial perspective. At the end of old Mr Chandran's narrative, one may notice a puzzling expression, on p. 33, when the supposed narrative voice of the father reports "when little Willie was born". The reader expects "when you were born", since the narration is addressed to Willie. Can't this be viewed as another clue indicating Willie's narrative presence and his need for distance at the beginning of the novel?

1. The reader of Naipaul's works can find many references to Naipaul's texts, whether fictional or non-fictional, and to his life. This even prompts J. M. Coetzee to write that "The vein of autobiography in Naipaul's fictional *œuvre* runs deep. But the Naipaul selves do not have a simple relationship to their author: they are stages in a process of continual self-creation and revision. W. S. Chandran is and is not V. S. Naipaul." J. M. Coetzee, *op. cit*

2. Once more, this can't be detailed here but any reader of Naipaul's work will be able to identify these.

novel especially concerning the use of point of view and narrative voices.¹

According to the interpretative line followed until now, the novel itself cannot be perceived as telling the story of a suspended life but as a step forward towards the discovery of the self, the attainment of personal truth at the end. Naipaul's mastery in this novel is to let the reader adopt whatever situation he feels closest to, viewing Willie's life as a mere dead-end or, on the contrary, as a positive issue thanks to writing. This unmentioned but implied repositioning of the reader is once more a means of insisting on tension in life, but also a means of showing that writing is the only way to escape from the fear of the void, the only way of creating oneself out of nothing. Even if Jessica Lee Thomas does not analyse the novel from the same perspective, she does however stress the fact that

the story feels a fragment of a whole. Naipaul tells a half-finished story, one that begins in the middle, ends in the middle, and contains within its fold the understanding of an uncompleted beauty, which, like a half-finished portrait, holds the promise and potential of greatness.²

I personally would add that Naipaul left it to the reader to perceive the greatness of Willie's whole story out of the magic of his

1. "*Half a Life* does not give the impression of having been carefully worked over, and the technical weaknesses that result are not negligible. Naipaul's plan is to present the whole story as if recounted by Willie. [...] But the plan is carried out only half-heartedly. Despite the coldness between father and son, Willie is given access to his father's most secret feelings [...]. At moments the pretense that Willie is guiding the story line is dropped in favor of interventions from an old-fashioned omniscient narrator." J.M. Coetzee, *op. cit.*, 5. He also mentions a few more weaknesses in Naipaul's novel.

2. Jessica Lee Thomas, *op. cit.*

own writing.

One might conclude by saying that the Nobel Prize Committee's praise concerning Naipaul's work can very well apply to *Half a Life*: "for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed stories."¹

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THE SAME, YET DIFFERENT: CARYL PHILLIPS'S SCREEN ADAPTATION OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR*

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In spite of an abundant fictional production—a dozen novels and several volumes of short stories—V. S. Naipaul had not had any of his works adapted for the cinema until Ismail Merchant, of the famous Merchant-Ivory film company, decided a few years ago to make Naipaul's first published novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), into a movie. Attracted to the story by its comedy elements but also by its main character, Ganesh, whose social ascent is helped by a boundless energy and an imagination germane to his own,¹ Merchant approached St Kitts-born Caryl Phillips to write the screenplay. That Phillips accepted the offer readily may have come as a surprise, if not a shock, to critics and scholars of Caribbean literature, for the younger writer is not exactly

1. Phillip Williams, "Crossing Boundaries: The Reinvention of Auteur Ismail Merchant", *MovieMaker Magazine*, 2.4., www.moviemaker.com/hop/12/auteur.html

known as a Naipaul fan. Admittedly, Naipaul and Phillips have a few things in common, such as their birth in the Caribbean, their education at Oxford, their ability to move with ease between fiction and non-fiction, and not least perhaps a worldwide recognition for their finely crafted prose. And yet, their visions of the world and of literature are as widely apart as can be, a divergence that cannot be explained by the fact that the two writers belong to different generations. Naipaul is known for an altogether pessimistic, often aloof, if not misanthropic view of human nature, and for his disillusioned statements on the future of the novel as a genre which, for him, ultimately fails to pin down reality.¹ Though Phillips is not reputed to be an incurable optimist, he is viewed as a compassionate chronicler of human survival to the sufferings inflicted on man by man, and as a writer for whom “novels are an incredibly democratic medium” since they give “everyone [...] a right to be understood”.² In short, as Phillips himself declared in a talk published in 1992, “[their] outlook on most things, literary and otherwise, differs quite radically”.³

Why, then, did Phillips finally agree to adapt *The Mystic Masseur* for the screen? Regardless of Ismail Merchant’s persuasive power, he seems to have been influenced by the qualities of the novel. As he points out in his foreword to the script, “Here was a book which could not only be filmed, but one that was rich in character, in comedy, and full of pathos”. Moreover, like other early novels of V. S. Naipaul, it seemed to portray, Phillips insists, “a Trinidad

1. V. S. Naipaul, “Delivering the Truth: An Interview with Aamer Hussein”, *TLS*, 2 (September 1994): 3-4 (p. 3).

2. “Caryl Phillips Interviewed by Graham Swift”, *Kunapipi*, 13,3 (1991), 96-103 (p. 98).

3. Caryl Phillips, “West Indian Writing Abroad: Naipaul and the New Generation”, *Caribbean Review of Books*, 3 (February 1992): 16, 19, 24, 25, 27 (p. 16).

that the author had some affection for",¹ a feature that, as Phillips deplors, was to disappear from Naipaul's later writing.² Finally, in Phillips's decision was also the hope of seeing Caribbean life at last represented for an international audience as something else than "an exotic backdrop for stories of people whose lives are not invested in the region".³ This film could therefore hopefully contribute to changing people's uninformed view of that part of the world as characterized exclusively by beaches, carnival and Calypso, a preoccupation that also underlies many of Phillips's artistic undertakings, whether his fiction, his non-fiction or his work as an editor.

Fidelity is one of the major issues that come to mind when one examines the cinematographic adaptation of a literary work. On the surface, Phillips's screenplay is quite close to Naipaul's book in its episodic structure and rhythm. According to Phillips, *The Mystic Masseur*, with its well-established "sense of drama", did not require a complete reworking of the plot; there was no need for him to "'break' the novel and make something afresh".⁴ Moreover, given the intellectual tension between the two writers, there must have been on his part a conscious effort not to betray his elder's text, but, on the contrary, to attempt to serve its humour and humanity with loyalty, a duty of faithfulness that he probably did not feel to such an extent when he adapted his own novel, *The Final Passage*, for television in 1996.

1. Caryl Phillips, "Foreword", in Gérard Besson and Caryl Phillips, *The Mystic Masseur: Essays and Excerpts from the Screenplay* (Cascade, Trinidad: Paria Publishing, 2001): 5-7 (p. 6).

2. Caryl Phillips, "V. S. Naipaul", *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001): 209.

3. Phillips, "Foreword", 6.

4. Phillips, "Foreword", 6.

This being said, however, a closer look at the script reveals several meaningful, if sometimes minor, changes. Some of them are obviously imposed by the film format. For example, while the dialogue in Trinidadian English is counter-pointed in the novel by a narrative in Standard English, the film is almost exclusively spoken in vernacular, with the exception, particularly in the second part, of some voice-overs by the narrator, a student at Oxford University, and of the lines spoken by Mr Stewart, a crazy Englishman who thinks he is an Indian but nevertheless “does talk normal”.¹ For one commentator this new linguistic distribution has preposterous results for it makes us patronize the characters, “as if”, he writes, “we [were] observing [them] through the windows of a tour bus”.² I cannot agree with this criticism, for it looks upon Trinidadian English as being *per se* an inferior language, while it views what it calls the “fluent prose” of the narration in the novel as “graceful”. If I agree that such a change is ineluctable given the film format, to me, if anything, it confers respectability on the local language. Thus, even if the accent of the actors does not always sound Trinidadian, the language they use stands in its own right, no longer an exotic version of a norm imposed from abroad, what Ganesh in Naipaul’s novel calls “good English” (*MM*, 78) and, at one point, attempts in vain to adopt in everyday conversation. Perhaps meaningfully, the dialogue in the film is free from the malapropisms and other errors, such as “edication” (*MM*, 102), “antheology” (*MM*, 93) or “correctest people”

1. Caryl Phillips, adapt. *The Mystic Masseur*, by V. S. Naipaul, unpublished screenplay, December 2000, 13. Further references to this screenplay will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation *S*.

2. Stanley Kauffmann, “Naipaul, Stoppard – and Winslet”, *The New Republic* (13 May 2002): 24.

(*MM*, 153), which Naipaul had put in the mouths of the Trinidadian villagers with the sarcastic effect one can imagine.

Nevertheless, most departures from the original novel cannot be attributed only to the new medium. They can, of course, be read as further proof of the gap that separates the two writers. But, I would argue, they could also be viewed as an attempt, albeit unconscious, on Phillips's part, not to settle old scores, or rectify anything, but to enter into some dialogue with Naipaul. In other words, the changes introduced by Phillips could be regarded as an unintended acknowledgment of some common ground for discussion resting on a shared Caribbean legacy and on a common exilic condition.

The remainder of this paper will focus on a few selected areas where Phillips's script clearly modifies Naipaul's text. I will attempt to analyse how these changes shed light on the writers' divergent philosophies and, in view of the argument outlined above, how they can help to interrogate Naipaul's 1957 novel or even dynamize some of the buried clues it contains. After examining the structure of the two versions, i.e. the novel and the script, I will concentrate on their treatment of gender, family, and race, three major areas of disagreement but also possible exchange between the two artists.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the novel and the script lies in their overall structures. Even though Phillips follows the novel almost step by step, he places its very last scene, in which Ganesh Ramsumair, now called G. Ramsay Muir, is welcomed by a fellow Trinidadian in an English station, right at the beginning of the film. As one can easily imagine, this alters the tone of the whole narrative. The revelation of Ganesh's new name, coming as it does, at the end of the novel, works as a final straw

to the satire built by Naipaul throughout the book, and it somehow brings home unequivocally that Ganesh is a charlatan, who is only interested in his own advancement and is ready to jettison his identity in exchange for some recognition from the colonial power. By putting the revelation at the start, Phillips in a way deflates Naipaul's satire, but, more importantly, stands Ganesh's tale on its head, as it were, allowing us to see it from a different perspective. So, if the new structure makes for a rather flat, unsurprising ending, in which, a critic writes, "cynicism has been defanged",¹ it also presents the story of Ganesh's ascent to power in a more tolerant way, allowing the rest of the film to explain the process of colonial alienation that affects Ganesh as both victim and agent.² This, of course, highlights a major difference between Naipaul's and Phillips's views of human nature. If both novelists often depict human foibles and weaknesses, Naipaul tends to be content with exposing them in all their crudeness, while Phillips generally uses his narrative as an attempt to understand why people behave the way they do, which does not mean that he condones or judges their behaviour in any way. So, in a way, Phillips's adaptation brings the tale beyond what George Lamming has described as "castrated satire", which, for him, cannot on its own inform an important work of art.³

1. Brandon Judell, "The 'Mystic' Producer; Ismail Merchant's 'Mystic Masseur' Reshuffles Naipaul", *IndieWire*, www.indiewire.com/film/biz/rev-020502-MysticMasseur.html

2. There is another difference, which has less impact on the dramatic effect of the film. While in the novel Ganesh's MBE is announced from early on (*MM*, 18), in the script the news comes when Ganesh's political career has run aground and the colonial authorities decide to award him the title as a means of securing his support.

3. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960. London: Alison & Busby, 1984): 225.

It should be added, however, that Phillips's move away from satire to a "gentle, mocking"¹ tone which is not devoid of irony is not expressed only through this structural change, but through other elements as well. Let us look at the same scene once again. In Naipaul's version it concludes with Ganesh rejecting the enthusiastic welcome of his fellow Trinidadian and giving his new name "coldly"², this adverb being significantly the very last word of the novel. Phillips transforms this scene by introducing a previous personal link between the two men, so that their reunion on the platform station is imbued with genuine warmth on both sides, even though Ganesh is still described in the scene directions as holding himself in "an unapologetically pompous manner" (S, 1).

Clearly, then, it is in his reworking of human relationships that Phillips operates the most significant transformations, which would tend to demonstrate that Naipaul's early novel is full of a humanity that is often left latent, obliterated by layers of sarcasm and of reserve. This is particularly the case with man-woman relationships. While the ups and downs of Ganesh and Leela's married life are about the same in the two versions, their rapports are less caricatural in the screenplay. Leela is still greedy, manipulative, and naive, but she is also clear-sighted and plays a more positive role in Ganesh's career, while in Naipaul's novel she is first presented as a giggling girl, then as apparently "chastened and impassive, a good Hindu wife" (MM, 55) or as a tearful creature (MM, 104). Moreover, Phillips does not hesitate to suggest some

1. Jean Oppenheimer, "Pilgrim's Progress: Merchant Ivory Bring V. S. Naipaul to the Big Screen in *The Mystic Masseur*", *New Times L.A.*, 16 May 2002.

2. V. S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977): 220. Further references to this edition are mentioned in the text.

form of tenderness between the two spouses, a dimension that is totally absent from the novel, for, as Phillips points out in an essay, “the region of the heart is a place that Naipaul, more than any writer of his generation, has seemed determined to avoid”.¹

The character of the aunt provides another interesting point of comparison. Called “The Great Belcher” in the novel, Ganesh’s aunt is a woman who devotes her life to Indian communal celebrations, such as weddings and funerals. As her name indicates, she remains something of a stereotype who always turns up when Ganesh is in need of financial or material advice. In the script, however, even though she is still prone to belching, she loses her nickname. There she is most often called “auntie”, an affectionate term that corresponds better to her part as a substitute mother to Ganesh, as a guide in his marriage and career. Her death in the film shortly after Ganesh’s departure for Port of Spain further symbolizes his temporary rejection of the old, rural order.

The positive role played by women in the script also seems to highlight the importance accorded by Phillips to substitute family relationships which, in his own fiction too, are a way of making good the disruptions and dislocations caused by colonial history. In the script, therefore, Ganesh is no longer viewed as an orphan, an isolated individual, in short as a castaway, but as a man who, thanks to the generosity of others, but also to his own resourcefulness, can make up for the void that fate has created around him. Significantly, Ganesh and Leela’s childlessness is treated very differently in the two texts. In keeping with Naipaul’s avoidance of emotional issues, the novel mentions Leela’s barrenness in passing in two dialogues, then refers to it, in a detached, third-person

1. Phillips, “Naipaul”, *A New World Order*, 187.

narrative as “another disappointment in [Ganesh’s] life” (*MM*, 74). In the script, on the contrary, it becomes a touching issue discussed by Ganesh and his wife on an intimate mode or evoked through Leela’s prayers. Ganesh does not resign himself to the idea of having no heir, but believes his creativity and imagination can provide a solution: “Leela, girl. Don’t cry so. The books I [go] write they [go] be my children. You hear me? We going make sons and daughters out of literature” (*S*, 30). This, in a sense, could be Phillips’s reply to Naipaul’s famous statement in *The Middle Passage* that “nothing was created in the British West Indies”.¹ Admittedly, Ganesh’s books are not presented as sophisticated literature in the script – even less so in the novel where they are ridiculed, for example when the narrator says that Ganesh found inspiration for one of his books in a musical toilet-roll rack (*MM*, 164). But, as Phillips shows, Ganesh’s resourcefulness commands some kind of respect in spite of his literary mediocrity. Moreover, for all its modesty, his achievement, like that of Mr Biswas, should be viewed in the context of a colonial society which did not encourage individuals to excel, but, in line with its educational system which was supposed to form, not inform, pupils (*MM*, 24) conditioned them to imitate the West, for example by drinking Coca-Cola, presented in both novel and screenplay as the ultimate token of modernity.

A final example of the substitute relationships, and thus of the added emotion, woven by Phillips into Naipaul’s narrative is provided by the connections between Ganesh and the narrator. In the novel, the two hardly meet, and this impersonality guarantees the detachment of the narrative, with all the irony this entails. In

1. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (1962. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978): 27.

the script, the narrator is no longer anonymous: he is Partap, the fatherless son of Ganesh's landlady when he was a teacher in Port of Spain, also the boy pursued by a black cloud on whom Ganesh performs his first successful act of mystic healing, and, later, a close collaborator in the Mystic Masseur's political career. Obviously, he is closer to Ganesh, but also more critical of his foibles (S, 78 & 93). Between the two Phillips establishes a clearly filial bond, making Leela and Ganesh take the boy in during Ganesh's political campaign, even though the film slightly attenuated this aspect of their acquaintance. What is important to note is that Partap, equally at ease in England and Trinidad, stands in the script as Ganesh's spiritual heir: at the end of the film he plans to go back to Trinidad to get involved in politics saying "I was the future and the Pundit was the past" (S, 110). The prospects of Trinidad seem less bleak in Phillips's version because there is a new generation ready to take up the challenges of a post-colonial society. Whereas the novel concludes with a recognition of complacent and unredeeming mimicry, announcing the even darker world of *The Mimic Men*, the film, closing as it does with a well-integrated Partap in Oxford, gives a glimpse of a future of accepted hybridity.

Phillips's insistence on seeing Ganesh and Partap as father and son could, of course, have several meanings which cannot be explored fully here. Let me just mention two possible interpretations. First of all, it could be an allusion to Naipaul's relationship with his own father and the recent publication of his correspondence with his family, entitled *Letters Between a Father and Son*,¹ which Phillips has reviewed and in which he sees a lot of

1. V. S. Naipaul, *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999. London: Abacus, 2000).

repressed emotion, the very same emotion that he, Phillips, is trying to unearth in his adaptation of *The Mystic Masseur*. Next, the filial bond that links Partap to Ganesh could also be an indirect, if ironic comment on Naipaul's literary paternity. Early in the script, Ganesh says to his landlady "one day I'm going to stand at the centre of world literature" (*S*, 9), a line that does not appear in the novel. By adding it, Phillips, of course, highlights the dichotomy between Ganesh's ambition and his final achievement, but it might also be a way of suggesting a parallel between Pundit Ganesh and V. S. Naipaul himself, a parallel all the more piquant as Naipaul has since the writing of the script and the making of the film been awarded the Nobel Prize, thus effectively been placed at the centre of world literature. (And from that perspective, Ganesh's MBE might be a counterpart to Naipaul's knighthood). So, Partap might stand for any West Indian writer of the younger generation, Phillips perhaps, whose writing comes in the wake of the famous literary father figure.

If gender and family relationships constitute the major area of shifts in Phillips's script, it is also worth examining how the two versions of *The Mystic Masseur* handle the notion of race. In addition to repeated remarks about the inferiority of Trinidad or to the immaturity of its inhabitants, Naipaul's novel contains numerous references, veiled or not, but mostly prejudiced, to racial belonging. On the one hand, the dialogue is replete with bitter allusions to the greed and jealousy of Indians towards each other, as if their community could be made responsible for its own limited success. On the other hand, the novel suggests on several occasions the lack of sophistication or intelligence of people of African descent. For example, gossip spreads on the island through "the Niggergram" (*MM*, 137, 154 & 214), a distorting means of com-

munication which Naipaul nonetheless describes as “an efficient, almost clairvoyant, news service” (*MM*, 156-157) since it predicts Ganesh’s success. Next, the young boy pursued by the cloud is called Hector in the novel, obviously not an Indian name, and his parents are represented as totally gullible. Finally, in the scene at Lorimer Park where Ganesh confronts a crowd of angry workers, one of the strikers is described as “[beating] his fists on his chest” (*MM*, 218). This clearly simian gesture is reminiscent of other statements by Naipaul that speak of Trinidadians as “monkeys”, one of which is quoted by Phillips in *A New World Order*.¹ In his adaptation, Phillips leaves these racist references out, which does not mean to say that his version irons out the racial tensions between people of Indian and African descent in Trinidad, as testified by the confrontation between Ganesh and the headmaster at the beginning of the film. Rather, Phillips seems to have tried to show this tension rather than describe it, which is admittedly easier to do in a film than in a novel. At the same time, and in spite of a clear local anchorage, his version focuses more on the universal fable of an ordinary man who makes good but is corrupted by power, in which racial differences are but one of the possible sources of tension, but not an obsessive zone of conflict as it is for Naipaul.

Nevertheless, there is a major scene in the novel that is heavily loaded in racial terms and which Phillips has not been able to soften as much as he would. It comes at the end, when Ganesh is invited to a dinner party at Government House. One of the guests, “the blackest M.L.C.”, is described, with Naipaul’s usual excess, as wearing “a three-piece blue suit, yellow woollen gloves,

1. Phillips, *A New World Order*, 190.

and a monocle" (*MM*, 207), which eventually falls into his soup. If Phillips tries to tone down the ridicule and the racial prejudice of the scene by attributing these grotesque features to two separate characters, he cannot eliminate all the racist innuendos because, as he said to a journalist, "You have to see race and class in the context of that period, and the film remains true to the difficulties of that time".¹ Yet, even if Phillips is reported as having "encouraged the film editor to take out some of the more buffoonish stuff", he seems not too be fully pleased with the final result in the film, because, for him, "one or two of the black Trinidadians are portrayed as caricatures, while the behaviour of the Indian characters was more understated".²

One could explore many more aspects of Phillips's adaptation of *The Mystic Masseur*, such as the fact that it pays less attention than the novel to the theme of deceptive appearances or to philistinism in Caribbean society. Still, I hope that my analysis has made clear that for the St Kitts writer adapting Naipaul's book was more a matter of tuning, of turning down the satirical and the racial of the novel, than of rewriting it radically. Like the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Phillips could perhaps conclude "Who knows, but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"³

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**V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A TURN IN THE SOUTH*: PLAYING
DEVIL'S ADVOCATE OR A STEP TOWARDS A MORE
SERENE INCLUSIVITY?**

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In his non-fictional text *A Turn in the South*, published in 1989,¹ V. S. Naipaul presents his travels through the seven states of the old Southern Confederacy of the USA. The seven chapters of the book correspond each to one of the seven states, with, in addition, a Prologue that sets the tone with its title "Down Home: A Landscape of Small Ruins". This enables the narrator to begin and end his travelogue at the same geographical point, namely North Carolina, creating the impression of a completed cycle. The improvised nature of the whole enterprise is emphasized in the opening lines: a chance exchange between two friends of the narrator in New York inspires him to choose "the home that Howard

1. V. S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (London: Penguin Books, 1989). All allusions to this text will be followed by the initials *TiS* and the page number from this edition.

had" as the starting point of "this book about the South" (*TiS*, 3). Naipaul uses the same travel-writing method here as in several of his other travel books such as *The Middle Passage* (1962), *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998). This method consists of a series of interviews with persons from differing backgrounds strung together to form a mosaic that illustrates the human conditions in the region concerned.

It is only well into the first chapter of *A Turn in the South* that the reader gets an inkling of what motivated the narrator to undertake such a trip: his discovery of Dallas, Texas, at the American Republican Party Convention of 1984 and his realization of the cultural and historical distinctness of the American South as compared to New York and New England (*TiS*, 23). So chance associations and a desire to know more set the journey in motion. There was also a link with his first travel book, *The Middle Passage*,¹ which was "about some of the former slave colonies of the Caribbean and South America" (*TiS*, 25), since it occurred to the narrator that the American Southeast, made up of "the old slave states", would have much in common with his own birthplace, Trinidad, "an agricultural slave colony" (*TiS*, 24). Thus, this attempt at textual construction of Otherness can also be read as a means of self-exploration, visible through a series of mirror-like parallels with the narrator's own experiences established along the text.

1. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: André Deutsch, 1962). This text was undertaken at the suggestion of Eric Williams, the first Black Prime Minister of Trinidad when Naipaul was aged 28. As with several of his texts, his narrator-protagonist bears a close resemblance to himself.

Interestingly also, we learn that the theme selected by the narrator evolved and underwent transformations as he pursued his travels:

My Thoughts – in Dallas, and then in New York, when I was planning the journey – were about the race issue. I didn't know then that that issue would quickly work itself out during the journey, and that my subject would become that Other South – of order and faith, and music and melancholy – which I didn't know about, but of which I had been given an intimation at Dallas. (*TiS*, 25)

Here, it is the narrator's pre-established ideas about the racism and the religious fundamentalism of the American South that take a knocking as he meets individual persons and tries to understand their specific contexts, mindsets and outlooks. Even the schedule of the places he is to visit and the subjects he is to investigate get modified along the way, as for example, his shelving of his plans to find out about Faulkner in the state of Mississippi, in favour of an inquiry into country music and the cult of Elvis Presley (*TiS*, 222). Again "luck" and "accidents" play a part in the shaping of the narrator's journey.

His final itinerary, resulting from the narrator's initial planning together with additions, deletions and last-minute changes worked out as follows: a preliminary visit to Bowen, North Carolina, which was home to the narrator's black friend Howard, a trip to Harlem in New York to meet the black writer Al Murray, a tour of Atlanta, Georgia, where the narrator met several white and black personalities, interviews with several white persons in Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina, examples of "a developing black movement forward" (*TiS*, 134) in Tallahas-

see, Florida, an exploration of the all-black town of Tuskegee, Alabama, encounters with mainly white witnesses and two black administrators in Jackson, Mississippi, a pilgrimage to Elvis Presley's birthplace in Tupelo, North Mississippi, an introduction to white country music and white Southern fundamentalist revivalism in Nashville, Tennessee, a stay at an estate in the hills of Northwest Georgia, and finally a discovery of changing methods of tobacco-growing and encounters with leaders of the white new Right around Chapel Hill, in North Carolina, thus completing the roundtrip through the seven states represented by the seven stars in the old Confederacy Flag.

I will try to assess the narrator's attempts to penetrate the complexities of the American South through a postcolonial approach of the tensions between the Self and the Other, as they appear in the text of *A Turn in the South*. First, I will look at a series of mediating mediums used by the narrator to translate the Foreign into Discourse.¹ Then, I will study the rhetorical techniques and framing strategies deployed by the narrator to illustrate the inner divisions and ambivalences of the different aspects of the South he is observing, as well as in his own observing procedures.²

1. See Chloe Chard, *Pleasure & Guilt on the Grand Tour – travel-writing and imaginative geography, 1600-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999): 2-21.

2. Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity" in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 40-65. With a reference to Frantz Fanon's "doomed search for a dialectic of deliverance", Bhabha shows that a subversion of the oppressing racist gaze and of the narcissistic indifference of colonialism is possible in the production of the relation of Self to Other, through the shifting boundary of Otherness within Identity. His postcolonial theory of the Subject thus always opens on to the emergence of "something else besides", through a constant negotiation of its goals.

Since the desire for knowledge is inevitably linked to relations of Power, and the specific political agenda of appropriating Otherness, a postcolonial mediation of the foreign, in order to subvert the oppressing gaze of power and enable dialogue and cross-cultural empathy, has necessarily to be associated with a personal relationship between Self and Other, where an awareness of the limits of language, the logic of the supplement that always exceeds the initial project for knowledge, and counterdivision or a metonymic approach (attempting only to understand a part, never the whole), enable the fundamental tension of meaning and being through a constantly renewed negotiation of goals and a repeated shifting of Manichean boundaries.¹

For example, an awareness of the limits of language appears in the explanation of certain specific terms used by the Southerners that the narrator meets. Thus "cracker houses" are usually inhabited by poor or "Backwoods Whites" (*TiS*, 109), whereas "single houses" are inhabited by affluent whites in South Carolina (*TiS*, 88). In the days of slavery, new slaves were "acclimated" or made accustomed to plantation life in special cells (*TiS*, 82). The slave cabins on the old plantations were known as "the quarters" or "the village" (*TiS*, 83). From the vantage point of the New York area, eastern North Carolina was referred to as "Down Home" (*TiS*, 3) or "Down East" (*TiS*, 293). These terms show the narrator's need for translation in order to understand the new realities he was faced with.

Various versions from different sources of specific anecdotes that populate the collective memory in the South are also examples of the limited understanding of events that is available on

1. Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity", 62.

investigation. Thus, according to their respective positions in society, different newspapers give different interpretations of events like Georgia's Forsyth County affair of 1912, where a white girl died from her injuries after being raped, had resulted in all the blacks being chased out of Forsyth County in 1912, and later inspired a massive protest march labelled "Walk for Brotherhood" in January 1986, shortly before the narrator's visit there (*TiS*, 27, 35). Similarly, in the Mississippi Delta, the Emmett Till Murder of 1955, when a black youth accused of whistling at a white woman store clerk, had been killed, had added to the state of Mississippi's bad reputation for racial conflict, and was remembered through different details by different individuals (*TiS*, 169, 181).

Different Civil War Memorials also highlight different aspects of the epic defeat of the South by the North in 1865, encapsulated in public commemoration monuments. Thus, the Confederate Memorial in Columbia, South Carolina, marked grief together with a patriotic conviction of a great cause (*TiS*, 99, 101), whereas Howcott's Obelisk to the loyalty through the Civil War of his black servant boy in Canton, Mississippi, celebrating the institution of slavery, can be seen as a sign of defiance to the cause of the Civil War, which was the abolition of slavery (*TiS*, 178), while in Chickamauga, North-West Georgia, in a battlefield park, dotted white patterns of tomb headstones on the low hills seem to underline the futile waste of human lives in the Civil War (*TiS*, 263).

The comprehension of history as a sedimentation of layers is also presented from differing angles though the different states the narrator visits. In Georgia, the different groups of population are perceived through their music and their need for religion down the ages (*TiS*, 35). In South Carolina, the successive layers of

history are noted through the main economic resources: the agricultural economy with the large slave population, followed by industrialization and the tourist town (*TiS*, 89). In Jackson, Mississippi, history is presented as a series of crises – the Civil War, the Great Depression and the 1980's industrial depression (*TiS*, 180). And in Nashville, Tennessee, the layers of history take the form of a succession of cycles – petty cultivation, plantation cultivation, war, industry, slum and most recently “the beginning of a new order leading no one knew where” (*TiS*, 263). This attempt to approach the history of the South in varied ways can be seen also as an attempt to respect its complexity and to avoid oversimplification.

Thus, different mediums of mediation are used to comprehend the lifestyles of the foreign South, while at the same time exposing the limitations and partial inefficacy of these mediating mediums. This strategy can be understood as a postcolonial means of sidestepping any totalizing tendency or stereotyped fixity in the terms of the translation of the foreign South into textual discourse.

Among the rhetorical techniques used by the narrator to disrupt any completeness that might be too complete in his own travel account, thus creating a tension in the very fabric of his text, we can observe a certain disorderliness and a tendency to digress. Thus, although race differences and religious fundamentalism do strike the reader as two important themes that structure the whole, they are constantly interwoven with other factors like the evolution of the agricultural economy or the relation with the past and history, avoiding any total monopoly by any single fixed factor in the overall effect created. Similarly, the sequence of the narrator's interviews and meetings with Southerners follows an

apparently haphazard pattern, adapting itself to the chance occurrences and the requirements imposed by the chosen theme, along the way. The narrator opposes this adaptation to the vicissitudes of his travel on a theme to the pure logbook kind of tourist travelogue where the traveller's sole aim is to define himself "against a foreign background", having as his only theme his own alienness or outlandishness in relation to the country he is visiting. Paradoxically, the chance occurrences along the way have less impact on the traveller's observations when the traveller is not pursuing any theme or line of inquiry:

If you travel on a theme, the theme has to develop with the travel. At the beginning your interests can be broad and scattered. But then they must be more focused; the different stages of a journey cannot simply be versions of one another. And, more than the other kind of travel, (i.e. the purely tourist kind of travel), this traveling on a theme depended on luck. It depended on the people you met, the little illuminations you had. As with the next day's issue of a fast-moving daily newspaper, the shape of the chapter in hand was continually being changed by accidents along the way. (*TiS*, 222)

Another rhetorical technique that circumvents bipolarizing oppositions which Frantz Fanon has referred to as "primary Manicheism" or a kind of delirium,¹ consists in introducing extraneous points of comparison in order to widen the scope of the presentation. For example, two important black activists mentioned in the text: Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) and Hosea Williams whom the narrator met in Atlanta, Georgia, are com-

1. Frantz Fanon, "Concerning Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Trans. by Constance Farrington; 1967. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990): 39. See also Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity", 43.

pared to Mahatma Gandhi for their pragmatic, economic sense and their adroit use of means of publicity in their combat for civil rights for blacks (*TiS*, 59, 61, 64, 146). This comparison widens the black-white question to include other kinds of political conflict and action. So also, the power of fundamentalist religious preachers in the American South is compared to that of fundamentalist preachers in a Muslim country (*TiS*, 15, 285), indicating that no single religion has the monopoly of fundamentalist practices.

The framing strategies that permit the first person subject-observer to give an account of the objects he is observing also deliberately include certain self-conscious relativizing elements that can be understood precisely to have the aim of disrupting any totalizing fixity. Thus, class differences among the white Southerners as visible with affluent, retired, white judges and governors on the one hand and other white interviewees of much poorer economic backgrounds with postmistresses and store managers among their kin on the other, or again with the almost destitute "Backwoods Whites" (*TiS*, 169), underline inner polarities within the white communities. So also, the lucid critique of the limitations of Martin Luther King's actions by a black preacher named Robert Waymer, in Atlanta, Georgia (*TiS*, 67, 68),¹ shows that since even action by blacks in favour of blacks

1. V. S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, 67-68: "... What Dr. King did was to act as a catharsis for white people. He was a great mental-health cure for white Americans. What he did for blacks was to make their rights legal and to inspire tremendous numbers of blacks to take action for their people and themselves. But once blacks got into white institutions they found that being in their own institutions was a lot better, and that being a white American wasn't all that great. We thought that once we had the same rights all our problems were over. What happened was that we retained eighty percent of the historical problem that we had, and that now we also had to deal with all of those things associated with being white..."

is riven with ambivalences, constant negotiation is necessary in a hostile environment.

The eye-witness status of the narrator includes drawbacks and undergoes evolution. For example, the narrator's meeting with the black politician Marvin Arrington in Atlanta, Georgia turns out to be unsatisfactory since all the narrator's questions founder on stock answers that ring like publicity slogans (*TiS*, 57). This exposes the danger that interviews could reduce the interviewee to "the set interview", and "a certain number of postures and attitudes". The narrator also admits that his own manner of viewing underwent transformations thanks to enlightenment from his local guides. For example:

Campbell's description of the mode of living of rednecks made me see pride and style and a fashion code where I had seen nothing, made me notice what so far I hadn't sufficiently noticed: the pickup trucks dashingly driven, the baseball caps marked with the name of some company. (*TiS*, 212)

Frequent interpositions among the narrator's observations of parallels with his own experience defuse the questions treated onto a wider stage. The family histories of two interviewees in Charleston, South Carolina, had links with the Caribbean islands. Thus, the claim of a lady from the Burke family in Charleston that her family from Philadelphia had inherited the entire island of Trinidad in 1795, fits in with the narrator's knowledge of the history of his own island more as a fantasy dream of wealth in the past than as actual fact (*TiS*, 86). And Jack Leland of Charleston possessed wooden sea chests from Barbados brought by a family ancestor in 1685 (*TiS*, 88, 89). The narrator sees this as a Romantic

"harking back to the colonial British West Indies as to a mark of blood and ancestry" on the part of Jack Leland.

In a moving bonding with his last interviewee, the white University teacher from an old tobacco-growing family, James Applewhite, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the narrator synthesizes his approach throughout his journey, that of an insider-outsider, trying to step outside the frame and put names on things, while maintaining a tension between separation and kinship between himself and the objects of his observations (*TiS*, 303):

It was extraordinary. Not only (as had happened more than once) did I find Jim Applewhite talking for me, expressing things I had felt as a child and adolescent in Trinidad. He was also – though he was from the other side of the tracks – talking like Howard, Hetty's son.

On this epiphanic note of communion between the different opposed groups that the narrator had been observing through his material journey through the South, as well as in the kind of crystallization he seems to reach in his evolution as a writer, he shows that it is in the tension of circulating "between and beyond"¹ that the difficult and dangerous freedom of Self-Understanding can be achieved. As Frantz Fanon claimed: "The Negro is not. Any more than the White Man."² What remains perhaps is the possibility of establishing a Relationship between the Self and the Other, which is but a starting point that has to be constantly renewed

1. Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity", 63.

2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Trans. by Charles Lam Markmann), (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 231.

and re-translated. Along the road, what results at best is “something else besides”.¹

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1. Homi Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity”, 64: “The subaltern or metonymic are *neither* empty nor full, *neither* part nor whole. Their compensatory and vicarious processes of signification are a spur to social translation, the production of something else *besides*, which is not only the cut or gap of the subject but also the intercut across social sites and disciplines.”

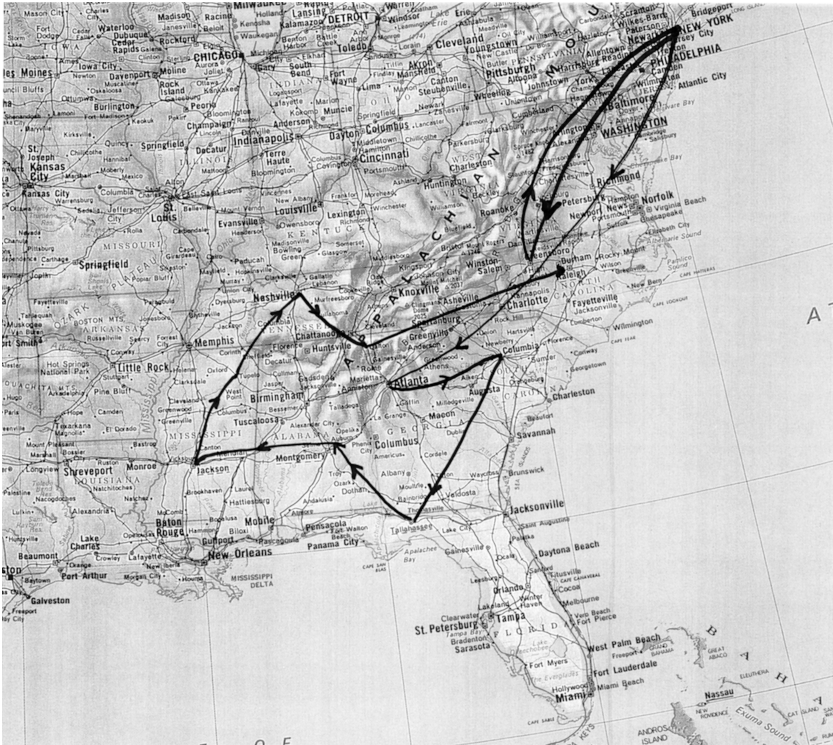


FIG. 1. — The itinerary of V. S. Naipaul in 1985.

L'ÉCRITURE HORS L'HISTOIRE : *A WAY IN THE WORLD*

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Parmi les tensions qui parcourent l'œuvre de V. S. Naipaul, il en est une qui paraît particulièrement vive dans *A Way in the World* : elle s'exerce entre l'affirmation de l'auteur selon laquelle il cherche à écrire l'histoire et la négation de l'histoire à laquelle, en vérité, il travaille. Une telle tension est difficile à saisir puisqu'elle repose sur une contradiction telle qu'elle échappe nécessairement à la conscience de l'auteur et doit donc se masquer, y compris à ses propres yeux, derrière des dispositifs d'écriture assez sophistiqués et une idée de l'histoire assez élaborée pour ne pas la laisser paraître. Je la chercherai pour commencer dans ce que Naipaul présente comme un constat : dans les colonies, le présent efface le passé en détruisant l'héritage des sociétés antérieures sans construire de nouvelle réalité stable, de sorte que les coloniaux ne sont pas enracinés dans un monde solide, mais

« flottent »¹ quelque part entre la mer et la brousse. Je choisis ce verbe parmi toutes les expressions équivalentes qui figurent dans *A Way in the World* parce qu'il s'y trouve deux fois. Or, la première, particulièrement révélatrice, compare le sentiment de soi des Trinidadiens du milieu du xx^e siècle à celui des Indiens aborigènes avant la découverte de l'île par Colomb : « ... without the witness of our visitors, we would have been floating people, like the aborigines first come upon below Point Galera, living instinctive, unobserved lives » (73). L'effacement colonial de l'histoire provoque donc – contradiction flagrante – le retour à une forme primitive de conscience de soi, celle des anciens Indiens, qui, ignorants de l'extérieur, sans connaissance d'une quelconque histoire, flottaient dans le temps et l'espace. En quelque sorte, l'effacement de l'histoire par la colonisation refermerait une parenthèse ouverte par la colonisation elle-même. C'est proprement impensable, et pourtant ce n'est pas une erreur ou une inconséquence, mais une idée qui me semble centrale dans la pensée de l'auteur et qui repose en fait sur une autre contradiction : Naipaul prétend vouloir fixer l'histoire, mais comment faire si elle n'existe pas ? Les historiens n'écrivent l'histoire qu'en supposant qu'elle existe, c'est-à-dire que le passé a laissé des traces, des documents, des archives. Un passé effacé sans laisser de trace et qui laisse après lui un « monde flottant » peut-il s'écrire ? Naipaul ne peut trouver de solution que littéraire, dans un mélange des genres plus original qu'il n'y paraît, entre fiction et reportage, entre l'histoire qu'on invente et celle qu'on reconstitue. Cela n'efface pas la contradiction de départ, mais la déplace et la rend surmontable ; elle prend la forme des « histoires non écrites » de *A Way in*

1. *A Way in the World* (London : Heinemann, 1994) : 73 et 79. Toutes les références renverront désormais à cette édition.

the World : trois chapitres sous-titrés An Unwritten Story. Chapitres qui contiennent la contradiction : non seulement les histoires « non écrites » ont bien été écrites, mais par Naipaul lui-même, en 1962 dans *The Middle Passage* et surtout en 1969, dans *The Loss of El Dorado*¹.

J'insiste sur ces contradictions pour éviter deux écueils. Le premier serait d'écarter le sens politique des écrits de Naipaul d'un revers de main, en se contentant d'y voir une critique du sentimentalisme, comme le fait Philip Gourevitch². On peut au contraire, et à mon sens on doit, critiquer les idées politiques ultra-conservatrices de l'essayiste Naipaul, au moins parce qu'elles sont loin d'être claires³, mais si on s'en tient là, il demeure impossible de comprendre la force de son écriture. Si Naipaul est un écrivain intéressant, ce n'est pas par ses idées, mais par leur forme. D'où le deuxième écueil que j'évoquais, à l'opposé, qui serait de réduire l'œuvre aux thèses qui s'y trouvent explicitement – et qu'on trouvera d'ailleurs plus souvent dans les entretiens et articles de l'auteur que dans ses livres –, comme le fait Rob Nixon⁴. Je veux

1. La première « *histoire non écrite* » développe un souvenir brièvement narré dans *The Middle Passage* : le voyage à pied dans la jungle avec deux guides, vers Utshi, à la fin du chapitre sur la Guyane britannique. Les deux autres reprennent la matière de *The Loss of El Dorado*.

2. Ph. Gourevitch, "Naipaul's World", *Commentary* (New York : August 1994) : 27-31. L'auteur résume ainsi les positions politiques de Naipaul : « ... because the obstacles his characters face are also his own, he refuses to excuse them, for their sloppiness and failures. ... This unsentimental attitude, of course, only stokes the indignation of Naipaul's critics. » (28-29).

3. Voir l'analyse qu'accorde Pierre Pachet au rapport entre écriture et politique chez Naipaul dans *Un à un. De l'individualisme en littérature* (Michaux, Naipaul, Rushdie) (Paris : Seuil, 1993) : 45-117, et particulièrement p. 105-108. La lecture de L. Feder, *Naipaul's Truth. The Making of a Writer* (Boston : Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) me semble la rejoindre.

4. R. Nixon, *London Calling. V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*. (Oxford :

donc insister sur les contradictions qui appartiennent à ses textes, car il est un peu facile de les laisser de côté pour ne retenir de Naipaul que ses thèses. C'est un truisme, mais il est sans doute important de le répéter : les convictions privées d'un individu ne font jamais un écrivain, c'est l'écriture qui le façonne, et elle n'a que faire des idées. Ainsi, les contradictions que je relève m'intéressent moins pour leur contenu idéologique que pour la forme qu'elles trouvent dans l'œuvre, car – c'est mon hypothèse – c'est d'elles que *A Way in the World* tire sa puissance et sa capacité de séduction. Parce qu'il joue d'une prétendue impossibilité à écrire ou à faire l'histoire pour mettre en scène la distance qui sépare son héros de l'histoire et le pathos lié à cette situation. La jouissance particulière du texte vient de la tension entre les deux pôles, d'autant plus forte qu'ils sont éloignés l'un de l'autre. Naipaul doit affirmer l'absolue impossibilité de faire l'histoire pour que ses personnages, placés devant une histoire qui, pourtant, se fait, ressentent plus durement leur incapacité à y intervenir. L'histoire ne se manifesterà à eux que par ironie. C'est son point commun avec le narrateur. Je montrerai que Naipaul écrit une anti-histoire, puisqu'il multiplie les variations autour d'une même figure : le personnage qui cherche à faire l'histoire mais s'y trouve encalminé. Je tenterai enfin de comparer les différentes mises en scène de leur échec en me demandant si l'ironie de l'histoire n'est pas surtout l'ironie de l'auteur.

Oxford U.P., 1992). Voir, sur les positions politiques de Naipaul, le chapitre I, pp. 36-37, et sur son idée de la supériorité de la civilisation occidentale, les chapitres 5 et 6. Sur ce dernier point, voir aussi P. Casanova : « Le Nobel à V. S. Naipaul : le prix du reniement », *Le Monde diplomatique* (décembre 2001) : 32. Le grand mérite de R. Nixon est d'avoir démythifié le personnage public qu'est devenu Naipaul et montré l'attachement nostalgique de l'écrivain à l'ancien empire britannique, souvent passé sous silence par la critique.

I

La composition de ce livre est étrange. Neuf chapitres de longueur très inégale se suivent, mais entretiennent des rapports plus thématiques que narratifs. Tous sont des récits, mais des récits qui ressortissent à plusieurs « genres » sans qu'on puisse toujours déterminer précisément lequel. On glisse ainsi constamment de l'autobiographie à la fiction et de la fiction à l'histoire. Comme la fiction a souvent un prétexte historique – comme dans les récits de l'expédition de Walter Raleigh et de la tentative de soulèvement révolutionnaire de Francisco Miranda – et comme l'histoire se fond dans l'autobiographie, elle-même en partie fictionnelle – comme dans le récit des rapports de l'auteur avec Blair et Lebrun – il est difficile de départager le récit de faits authentiques du récit de fiction. À l'intérieur de la fiction elle-même, on peut encore distinguer plusieurs espèces. Le chapitre III, *New Clothes : An Unwritten Story*, est une nouvelle, dont les premières pages contiennent l'indication de la source et avertissent le lecteur que sa « forme » n'est pas accomplie. Ce qu'on s'apprête à lire n'est développé qu'« en partie » (45). Une nouvelle, donc, présentée comme une esquisse, ce qui explique son sous-titre. Le chapitre VII, *A New Man*, commence comme un souvenir autobiographique, continue en évoquant l'expédition de Raleigh et se termine par un récit enchâssé, censément authentique – une confiance recueillie auprès d'un voisin d'avion – mais certainement en grande partie voire totalement fictive. Les chapitres VI et VIII, parmi les plus longs du livre, sont des « histoires non écrites » qui présentent deux différences avec la première. Elles reposent sur des documents et des personnages historiques, Raleigh et Miranda, et le récit se concentre sur des événements attestés.

Elles sont aussi beaucoup plus développées que l'histoire du chapitre III. Leur caractère d'esquisse est moins évident, en particulier pour la dernière, *In the Gulf of Desolation : An Unwritten Story*, qui est entièrement développée et articulée comme un petit roman.

Ces histoires sont liées entre elles par des personnages, des figures, des thèmes communs. Le modèle de ces liens est donné par le premier chapitre, titré *Prelude* et sous-titré *An Inheritance*. Ce texte ne fait que quelques pages, mais son rôle est important, puisqu'il met en perspective le livre entier en établissant, entre l'auteur et son objet, une distance que le livre entier respectera. Il y est d'abord question du dépaysement qu'éprouve l'émigré – Naipaul lui-même – en rentrant au pays : les bruits de la rue ont changé, la couleur de la peau des gens a foncé. L'expérience se compare à un jeu : c'est comme jouer avec ses lunettes. La comparaison est développée :

To go back home was to play with impressions in this way, the way I played with the first pair of glasses I had, looking at a world now sharp and small and not quite real, now standard size and real but blurred ... (1)

Jouer avec la « sensation plaisante » de provoquer des « glissements de la réalité » ou de se plonger « dans un demi-rêve » (2) : il s'agit d'altérer son point de vue pour déréaliser ce qu'on a sous les yeux. Le résultat est comparable à celui que provoquait chez le narrateur enfant une « fièvre » qu'il n'écrit qu'entre guillemets (2), comme pour faire entendre qu'il s'agit là d'une métaphore. Or, c'est pendant un accès de cette maladie métaphorique qu'il entend un récit, qu'il rapporte dans les pages qui suivent. Le récit est attribué à une institutrice anonyme et dont il ne sera

plus question ensuite. Il raconte les trois entrevues de la jeune femme et d'un certain Leonard Side, présenté comme « spécialiste en décors de gâteaux et arrangements floraux » (a decorator of cakes and arranger of flowers, 2). Trois entrevues brèves, échelonnées sur trois ans, dans trois lieux différents. D'abord, la narratrice rencontre cet « Indien à la peau sombre [...] plutôt bel homme, malgré [ses] doigts poilus » (a dark Indian man ... a good-looking man, in spite of the hairy fingers, 4) en plein travail : il fait la toilette d'un cadavre. Elle est surprise et choquée, parce qu'elle ignorait son métier, elle qui devait seulement lui demander d'arbitrer un concours de bouquets de fleurs. L'année suivante, elle va voir Leonard à l'association féminine où il enseigne aux femmes le glaçage des gâteaux. Elle est heurtée de voir les doigts qui s'affairaient l'autre fois sur un cadavre offrir maintenant des pâtisseries. La troisième rencontre a lieu chez lui : il est malade et alité. C'est l'occasion de décrire sa chambre, méticuleusement décorée :

There were crepe-paper flowers in a brass vase on a thin-legged side table or vase-stand, and there were satiny cushions and big bows on two simple cane-bottomed bentwood chairs. (6)

Et par-dessus tout, un cadre représentant le Christ en majesté est suspendu au mur face au lit, penché en avant, de sorte que sa bénédiction semble s'adresser à Leonard Side. Or, l'homme est musulman. Il n'a pu mettre là cette image que pour la beauté qu'il lui accorde. Elle correspond bien au décor de la chambre, à la fois kitsch et mièvre. Mais ce n'est ni le kitsch, ni la mièvrerie que lui reproche l'institutrice, c'est le « mélange » des petits gâteaux, des fleurs et des cadavres. D'où l'horreur de la vision du malade : couché parmi les décorations en satin et en soie dérobées à l'entreprise de pompes funèbres où il travaille, il a l'air d'un mort. Ce qui

dérange la jeune femme et la fait fuir, c'est l'idée de la beauté de Side, qu'elle compare à une maladie, puis à un virus transmis par sa mère, « some unfamiliar, deforming virus had passed through his simple mother to him, and was even then ... something neither of them had begun to understand. » (7-8) Virus qui semble être devenu réalité puisqu'à la fin du récit, Side est réellement malade.

Ce bref récit enchâssé reprend donc la métaphore de la fièvre qui l'avait introduit. Mais la « fièvre » de l'auteur ne l'empêche pas de voir la réalité alors que celle de Side semble l'expression de son déracinement. Le « spécialiste en décors de gâteaux » évoque les artistes dérisoires de Miguel Street, dont le bricolage et les feux d'artifice étaient les seuls moyens d'expression¹. Il n'a pas les moyens de prendre conscience de sa déculturation. C'est la narratrice qui peut diagnostiquer la maladie en examinant le malade et sa chambre – elle a d'ailleurs été prise pour le docteur quand elle est entrée. Et c'est l'auteur, en reprenant la parole, qui l'explique. Selon lui, Side peut être une déformation de Sayed, qui devait être le nom des ancêtres de Leonard en Inde. Selon lui encore, seule une éventuelle émigration en Angleterre ou aux États-Unis a pu donner depuis à Leonard « la compréhension de sa propre nature » (8). Compréhension à laquelle l'auteur s'est hissé, comme il le précise au paragraphe suivant : « With learning now I can tell you more or less how we all came to be where we were. » (8) Il y a donc deux fièvres opposées : celle de l'Indien qui n'a jamais quitté Trinidad et n'a pas conscience de ce qu'il est et celle de l'auteur qui est le résultat de ses aller- retours. La première fièvre peut se com-

1. Cf. J.-P. Engélibert, « La vie déplacée. La condition urbaine post-coloniale chez V. S. Naipaul », in É. Tabuteau et C. Duboin (dir.), *La Fiction antillaise anglophone. Images de l'interculturel* (Toulouse : P.U. du Mirail, 2000) : 187-206.

prendre comme le symptôme de sa déculturation et la seconde comme le résultat d'une cure : « the recorded history », « that historical bird's eye view » (8-9) ont permis à l'auteur d'objectiver sa propre condition. Grâce à l'enchâssement du récit, l'horreur ressentie devant Leonard Side est attribuée à un personnage secondaire et Naipaul ne prononce pas de jugement de goût, ne révèle aucun sentiment. Il adopte la posture distante de l'historien. Les archives existent, dit-il. Le deuxième chapitre de *A Way in the World*, intitulé justement History, raconte les quelques mois de travail de Naipaul, à dix-sept ans, aux archives de l'état civil.

All the records of the colony were there, all the births, deaths, deeds, transfers of property and slaves, all the life of the island for the century and a half of the colonial time. I would have liked to look at old things, old newspapers, old books. (21)

Mais il n'a jamais pu le faire parce que ces archives sont conservées dans un caveau (a vault, cinq fois en deux pages) où sont entreposés de grands registres reliés à la colle de poisson. Il s'en dégage une odeur de putréfaction insupportable au jeune Naipaul qui ne les a donc jamais consultées. Les archives sont lettre morte. Ce qui suit est, logiquement, une anti-histoire. L'histoire sans les archives ou une écriture qui se prétend historique, mais qui relève en fait de la fiction et dont l'intrigue, ou plutôt les intrigues, nient l'existence de l'histoire. L'auteur n'explique pas « le mystère de l'héritage de Leonard Side » (9) parce qu'il met en scène des personnages qui regardent l'histoire comme Naipaul Trinidad avec et sans ses lunettes, en jouant avec les verres pour déréaliser ce qu'ils voient, en faire des images tantôt nettes mais irréelles, tantôt réelles mais floues.

II

C'est le cas dans les trois histoires « non écrites », mais c'est déjà le cas du héros de ce chapitre intitulé « Histoire », Naipaul lui-même. Il fournit le modèle de ces personnages qui regardent l'histoire et la transforment, par leur regard, en autre chose. Devant le meeting de Woodford Square en 1956, il reste à l'écart de la foule qu'il décrit par trois adjectifs : « dark, scattered, unreadable » (28). Cette assemblée compose un spectacle vaguement inquiétant, auquel le clair-obscur et la verticalité confèrent une dimension presque gothique :

The big trees threw distorting shadows and looked bigger than in daylight. Some people stood at the very edge of the square ... The men on the bandstand spoke of old suffering and current local politics. They spoke like people uncovering a conspiracy. They were at one with their audience ... It was like entering a cinema long after the picture had started. (28-29)

Dans l'obscurité, sous les ombres « déformantes », la scène a le caractère hypnotique d'un film. L'auteur la regarde passivement, sans pouvoir y participer. Il est relégué à l'extérieur alors que les orateurs et leur auditoire appartiennent au même ensemble. La comparaison avec le cinéma donne à Naipaul une bonne raison de rester à l'extérieur de la conspiration : il a manqué le début. Or, de quoi s'agit-il ? Le peuple assemblé sur la place se raconte l'histoire de Trinidad, faite comme toute histoire de « vieilles souffrances » et de « la politique actuelle ». Car l'histoire se fait, ici comme ailleurs, en se réinterprétant collectivement dans le débat du peuple avec lui-même – ce qui est le contraire d'une conspira-

tion¹. Mais l'auteur, en spectateur passif d'une scène effrayante, doit y voir autre chose. En citant la comparaison avec le cinéma, j'ai omis la fin de la phrase : « but I felt that what was said didn't matter » (29). Rater le début n'empêche pas de comprendre, parce que ce n'est pas l'histoire qui compte, mais l'impression : « the discovery (and celebration) by many of the black people in the square ... of a shared emotion » (29). L'auteur ne la partage pas mais il la comprend : « In the square, romantic with its lights and shadows, they talked of history and the new constitution and rights ; but what had been generated was more like religion. » (29)

On peut donc ne pas connaître toute l'histoire, car ce n'est pas l'histoire qui se commente ou se fait, c'est une religion. Tout ce récit décrit les leaders politiques comme des prédicateurs : le rassemblement du peuple est irrationnel, exalté, dangereux. Mais ce danger doit lui aussi devenir un élément du spectacle et Naipaul le représente par la frayeur d'une famille de Blancs. « They had been standing at the edge of the square ... respectful of the occasion. Perhaps they had gone for the show. But then, like me, they might have felt excluded ; they might have felt the ground move below them » (32). Dans le « Prélude », Naipaul n'avait connaissance de l'histoire de Side que par l'intermédiaire de la narratrice et n'avait pas à livrer son propre sentiment sur ses goûts, laissant

1. Naipaul ne dit pas ce qu'est ce meeting, mais il s'agit très probablement d'une des réunions de « l'université de Woodford Square » organisées par le *People's National Movement* d'Éric Williams, futur premier ministre de l'île, avant les élections de septembre 1956 qui virent la victoire du PNM. Ces soirées, consacrées comme leur nom l'indique à l'éducation politique du peuple, ont joué un grand rôle dans l'accès du PNM au pouvoir et dans celui de Trinidad à l'indépendance. Elles sont bien plus qu'anecdotiques : elles sont un élément important de l'histoire de ce pays au xx^e siècle. Voir E. Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (1942. New York : A § B, 1993) : 242.

l'institutrice en juger, comme si lui-même n'exprimait, de ce fait, aucun jugement. De la même manière, ce sont ici d'autres témoins qui vivent la scène et reflètent ses impressions en lui permettant de ne pas les reconnaître explicitement pour siennes. Deux fois mis à distance, par l'attribution à autrui et par la modalité du doute, le jugement hautement subjectif de sentir le sol se dérober sous les pieds est objectivé : il semble ne plus être celui de l'auteur. L'histoire se déroule sur un écran de cinéma et n'affecte l'auteur que comme un film. C'est la mise en scène du sentiment qui compte et pas l'intrigue, car il n'y a pas d'histoire mais le « sentiment », tantôt intime, tantôt partagé, et l'« extase religieuse » (*religious ecstasy*, 32) des Noirs.

La comparaison qui clôt ce passage est encore cinématographique : Naipaul rapporte sa vision de l'île aux « petits carnets de photographies d'avant-guerre » (« those pre-war pads of photographs showing a cricketer in action », 33) composés de vingt ou trente photos qu'on feuilletait avec le pouce pour reconstituer le mouvement. Image de l'extériorité du spectateur autant que de la vitesse du défilement. Il est significatif qu'elle imprègne les histoires non écrites. Naipaul le signale au début du chapitre consacré à Raleigh : « Perhaps a play, or a screen play, or a mixture of both » (157). Et encore pour introduire l'histoire de Miranda : « At one time I thought I should try to do a play or a film – a film would have been better – about the Gulf » (237). Le caractère cinématographique de *New Clothes* est plus discret. Il n'est pas annoncé, ni affirmé par des comparaisons. Il doit tout à la position du protagoniste, qui se situe en apparence à l'opposé de celle de Naipaul à Woodford Square, mais pour mieux la retrouver.

Celui que Naipaul appelle « le narrateur » est un militant révolutionnaire venu infiltrer, dans les années 1970, les Indiens de la

forêt pour les soulever contre le « gouvernement africain de la côte » (46). Il se fait guider jusqu'à un village situé à des jours de marche de la ville et découvre le peuple qu'il doit inciter à la révolte. C'est un homme actif avec une tâche à accomplir. Mais, du premier au dernier épisode de la nouvelle, il devient de plus en plus passif, doute de sa mission et se fait davantage spectateur de son propre séjour qu'activiste politique. Il reste étranger aux Indiens et inversement. Et tout se passe comme s'il comprenait peu à peu qu'il est devant un spectacle. La vie du village est comme un film dans lequel il ne peut pas intervenir ou comme un scénario qu'il n'aurait pas le droit de réécrire. Il pénètre dans un monde immobile dans lequel l'histoire est impossible et lui, qui est venu en conspirateur, ne peut que trahir le peuple qui lui fait confiance. Forcer ces gens à entrer dans l'histoire, c'est les violer, et leur passivité les empêchera même de regimber. D'où les assauts sexuels du « narrateur » sur ses deux guides, qui se laissent faire sans rien dire et dont Naipaul souligne la passivité (57 et 60).

Il n'y a pas d'histoire, mais un monde « flottant ». La scène réelle déréalisée de Woodford Square et l'histoire « non écrite » de la conspiration fictive contre le régime nationaliste noir entrent dans la même mise en scène qui les retranche de l'histoire pour les faire entrer dans un monde de croyances et d'illusions. Les Indiens sont hors de portée, pense le militant :

They are beyond reach. They are further away than any group the narrator has known; perhaps even the revolution will not reach them. . . . These people, after the migration of their ancestors from Asia, have become people entirely of themselves, without resilience or the talent to adapt. Once their world was broken into, they lost their wholeness. (56)

Comment interpréter cette idée ? En introduction, je me suis arrêté sur une comparaison que j'ai qualifiée d'impensable entre les Indiens précolombiens et les habitants de Trinidad dans les années trente et quarante. Les premiers et les seconds auraient eu besoin du regard de l'autre pour se construire et, en son absence, se seraient enfermés dans une conscience limitée d'eux-mêmes, instinctive et stérile. Ce qui est impensable dans ce rapprochement, c'est sa dimension historique : on ne peut pas concevoir que le résultat de la colonisation soit de produire des groupes humains isolés dont l'idée d'eux-mêmes soit identique à celle des Indiens avant la colonisation. Naipaul le sait bien : il est très conscient du mépris colonial de soi, de la dépendance coloniale, essentiellement différente de la « complétude » aborigène¹.

Mais cette « complétude » pré-coloniale à laquelle songe le personnage est introuvable – pour lui et d'ailleurs pour quiconque. C'est une construction de l'esprit qui ne sert qu'à montrer l'incomplétude des Indiens mis au contact des Anglais. Ils n'ont pas la connaissance de l'histoire de leurs colonisateurs et doivent inventer des mythes pour pallier cette ignorance. Mais ce mythe n'est pour le « narrateur » qu'une croyance pathétique, comme les mythes antérieurs à la colonisation. Autour du feu de camp, un soir, les Indiens évoquent leur peur du *kanaima*, l'esprit de la mort.

In a world without time, when men live only in the present, by their own light, as it were, all a man's life is spent in this fear. Without the *kanaima*, a man could truly be happy ; might live forever. (55)

1. Voir l'expression très ferme de cette dépendance p. 73-74.

Cette vision du monde que le protagoniste essaie de pénétrer remonte à une époque bien antérieure à la colonisation. Elle appartient à la « complétude » du peuple indigène, dans laquelle le temps n'existe pas parce qu'il n'y a pas, justement, de contact avec l'extérieur. C'est la même vision du monde qui fait entrer la visite d'un étranger, trois cent cinquante ans plus tôt, dans le temps statique de la tribu. Le chef raconte qu'au temps de son grand-père, la tribu est entrée en relations avec les Anglais, qui devaient construire des maisons au village. Mais les Anglais ne l'ont jamais fait et ont disparu pour toujours. Il ne reste qu'une trace de leur passage : un vêtement. C'est la chute de la nouvelle : le « narrateur » reconnaît un pourpoint Tudor. La visite des Anglais remonte au début du xvii^e siècle. Au-delà de deux générations, les Indiens n'ont plus aucun sens du temps, mais le mythe, qui condense toutes les époques et rapporte au grand-père du chef tous les événements marquants, permet de garder le souvenir de la vieille trahison. On peut interpréter cet épisode comme la preuve de la force du mythe, qui permet de sauver une vision du monde ancienne malgré l'irruption d'événements nouveaux. Mais ce n'est pas le choix de Naipaul, qui y voit au contraire la perte de l'intégrité de ce peuple, le symptôme de sa violation, du tout qu'il formait avec la forêt. Le militant qui arrive au village avec le sentiment qu'il s'apprête à trahir ces gens s'émerveille de leurs techniques : la découverte et la préparation du manioc, les hottes qui permettent de porter de lourdes charges sans effort, les ustensiles de cuisine des femmes. Il songe à l'antiquité de cette vie toujours répétée à l'identique et pour laquelle il éprouve une certaine nostalgie. *It is pain rather than love which now suffuses the narrator's vision, and corrupts everything that he sees. It is all like something he has already lost (64).* Cette

« complétude » tribale est elle-même mythique : c'est le mythe d'un âge d'or, évidemment toujours déjà perdu, sinon celui d'un Eldorado, qui s'exprime ici¹. La pureté originelle des habitants de la forêt est affirmée car elle offre un contrepoint à leur corruption par la colonisation. Mais, par contrecoup, elle les exclut de l'histoire et en fait les victimes naturelles de toute intrusion venue de l'extérieur : les colons ne font que profiter de dispositions présentes depuis l'antiquité chez ces peuples. Quand le « narrateur » souffre pour eux, il est difficile de savoir si c'est à cause de l'aliénation coloniale ou à cause de leurs croyances millénaires. Il ressent de la honte et du chagrin (*shame and grief*, 56) après avoir entendu ses guides affirmer l'infériorité des Indiennes sur les autres femmes. Mais le paragraphe précédent rapporte la croyance au *kanaima*. Les deux sont mis en parallèle. Est-ce la haine coloniale de soi qui lui fait honte ou la foi primitive ? Le récit les oppose, mais pour en faire les deux faces de la même pièce : les deux preuves d'une même infériorité. Infériorité qui

1. C'est un mythe que Naipaul identifie bien *par ailleurs* : « There is no Australian or American black legend ; there is at the most a romantic, self-flattering guilt. But the black legend of Spain will persist, as the heroic legend of Columbus. The dream of the untouched, complete world, the thing for ourselves alone, the dream of Shangri-la, is an enduring human fantasy. It fell to the Spaniards to have the unique experience. Generosity and romance, then, to the discoverer ; but the Spaniards will never be forgiven. And even in the violated New World the Spaniards themselves remained subjects to the fantasy. The quest for El Dorado became a recapitulation of the whole New World adventure, a wish to have it all over again... / *Robinson Crusoe*, in its essential myth-making middle part, is an aspect of the same fantasy. It is a monologue ; it is all in the mind. It is the dream of being the first man in the world, of watching the first crop grow ..., of possessing "the first gun that had been fired there since the creation of the world." It is the dream of total power. » « Columbus and Crusoe » (*The Listener*, 28 dec. 1967, rep. in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (London : André Deutsch, 1972) : 203-207 ; citation p. 206.

place le « narrateur » devant un dilemme : soit il accomplit sa mission et trahit l'attente des Indiens, soit il fuit et les trahit encore. Peu avant la fin de la nouvelle, il choisit de fuir : il sera spectateur d'une histoire à laquelle les Indiens ne comprendront sans doute rien de plus qu'il y a trois cent cinquante ans. Il connaît les tenants et aboutissants de la situation ; eux vivent dans un monde d'illusions. Partage du savoir qui rappelle celui de Woodford Square : la description de la communion des Noirs dans l'extase religieuse et le récit de la participation indienne à un coup d'état ourdi par des Blancs reposent sur la même opposition entre un spectateur qui sait et des acteurs qui ne savent pas ce qu'ils font. Or, c'est là une structure essentielle à l'écriture de Naipaul car c'est d'elle qu'il tire les effets pathétiques qu'il recherche.

III

Les deux « histoires non écrites » les plus développées se présentent comme des variations sur cette structure. Leur titre est trompeur : ce ne sont pas des histoires, mais plus des portraits, et ils sont bien plus écrits que Naipaul ne l'admet. Ils mettent en scène un personnage condamné à l'immobilité devant un rêve qui se refuse à lui : le rêve de faire l'histoire, d'être un héros. Cette immobilité devient hypnotique, l'histoire défile alors comme un film dans lequel il est impossible d'intervenir. Cette impuissance confère au récit la puissance du pathos. C'est pourquoi Naipaul prend ses personnages à la fin de leur vie : il choisit le second voyage de Raleigh et pas le premier, les dernières années de Miranda de préférence à ses voyages en Europe pourtant à coup sûr plus riches en péripéties romanesques. Il lui faut représenter un vieil homme près de sa fin, quand le but de sa vie lui a

échappé après qu'il l'a touché du doigt, quand l'échec est assuré, quand enfin il peut cesser d'espérer.

Le chapitre consacré à Raleigh commence par un long dialogue entre l'aventurier et son médecin. Le dialogue permet de rappeler les faits antérieurs. Raleigh a tenté, vingt-deux ans plus tôt, une première expédition, au cours de laquelle les accrochages avec les Espagnols ont été nombreux. Il a perdu beaucoup d'hommes. Il s'est aperçu que l'Eldorado n'existait pas. Mais il a publié un récit dans lequel il affirme son existence. Le dialogue tourne au procès : le médecin résume le livre, qu'il a lu attentivement. À l'occasion, il repère la source livresque d'un détail qui lui semble invraisemblable¹. Il prouve, en analysant le livre et en y rapportant le comportement de son auteur, que celui-ci a vite cessé de croire à l'Eldorado, mais a complaisamment entretenu sa légende. Le vieux capitaine, qui a maintenant soixante-quatre ans, qui est malade, ne dément pas cette accusation de mensonge. Or, il a investi toute sa vie dans cette légende : s'il ne rapporte pas d'or en Angleterre, il sera exécuté. L'analyse du médecin sonne comme une condamnation.

Après ce dialogue, un bref passage narratif raconte l'arrivée d'une chaloupe. Un messenger rapporte la nouvelle de la mort du fils de Raleigh. L'accablement est parfait. Le porteur de la nouvelle est un jeune Indien, qui se dit fils de l'ancien gouverneur espagnol et d'une Indienne. On l'appelle Don José. Le vieil homme lui donne des vêtements neufs, qu'il prend parmi ses propres affaires. Vêtements qui rappellent le pourpoint du chapitre III : le lecteur peut penser que l'Indien est revenu dans son village, où il a rapporté le costume. Le mythe indien du xx^e siècle

1. Il s'agit de l'épisode du Noir happé par un crocodile, emprunté à l'explorateur John Hawkins (175).

a sa source dans la légende européenne qui s'éteint au début du xvii^e siècle. Mais la fin du chapitre montre une autre différence entre l'Amérique et l'Europe. La tribu indienne a gardé la relique dans des feuilles de bananier, mais perdu le nombre de générations passées depuis lors. Les Européens écrivent l'histoire et sa légende. Après avoir appris la mort de son fils, Raleigh demande du papier et se met à écrire. Quand Don José lui demande à propos de quoi, il répond : « About the gold mines of San Thomé. What else ? » (203). Et le récit de Don José lui-même est recueilli par un moine espagnol, dont Naipaul tient à nous faire entendre la voix, dans un montage encore cinématographique : « Over this comes the voice of Fray Simon, reading aloud as he writes his history. » (191) Se nouent ici le pathos du vieil homme qui a tout perdu, l'écriture de la légende et la lecture de l'histoire. À l'homme dont le rêve héroïque a sombré, il ne reste qu'à écrire la légende qui sera immédiatement contredite par l'histoire. Une série d'emboîtements atteste de la vérité de l'histoire et la met à distance à la fois. C'est la façon européenne d'écrire l'histoire, qui sépare celui qui sait, le frère Simon, des acteurs qui ne savent pas ce qu'ils font¹. C'est un dispositif complexe à côté de celui du mythe, qui apparaît, rétrospectivement, « simple »².

C'est ce dispositif qui apparaît nécessaire pour faire naître le pathos de l'histoire. Il se répète avec le chapitre consacré à Miranda. Le récit s'attache à un Miranda au bout du rouleau, âgé de cinquante-six ans, toujours mû par l'espoir de fonder une

1. Le frère Simon en sait plus que Don José : il le corrige quand celui-ci écorche des noms qui figurent dans les rapports d'enquête espagnols que le religieux a lus (182- 183).

2. Sur l'emploi de l'adjectif « *simple* » chez Naipaul, en particulier dans l'expression récurrente « *simple society* », voir R. Nixon, *op. cit.*, 121- 129.

république vénézuélienne. Le récit se laisse découper pour l'essentiel en trois parties : une présentation assez rapide, non focalisée, par un narrateur possédant l'omniscience et l'impersonnalité de l'historien (ce que Genette appelle un « sommaire »¹), puis un long dialogue entre Miranda et le gouverneur Hislop, enfin un échange de lettres nettement plus long entre Miranda et sa femme restée à Londres. Trois modes narratifs qui ont pour point commun de permettre à l'auteur de disparaître, que ce soit derrière l'objectivité supposée de l'historien, la parole rapportée de ses personnages ou bien un narrateur intradiégétique qui prend le récit à son compte. Mais ils diffèrent essentiellement sur un autre point : l'implication du personnage. Le premier l'exclut, puisqu'il considère celui-ci de l'extérieur. Le deuxième l'implique dans une situation d'interlocution : il a un rôle social à jouer, il doit se montrer à la hauteur. Etant donné son interlocuteur, le gouverneur de Trinidad, il est un personnage qui est à la fois lui et un autre : l'homme public, le révolutionnaire qu'il veut paraître. Dans l'échange épistolaire seulement, il est l'homme privé qui peut tout dire. La succession des trois modes permet à Naipaul de saisir d'abord Miranda objectivement comme personnage de l'histoire, puis de le faire parler en tant que tel, mais dans un dialogue où l'homme privé se trahit mal gré qu'il en ait, enfin de lui faire tomber le masque pour montrer son désarroi : l'histoire passe à côté de lui. Les Anglais hésitent à organiser un débarquement militaire au Venezuela, la vie à Trinidad est petite et mesquine, le monde se rétrécit. C'est dans la partie du récit où l'auteur s'est fait le plus discret (l'échange épistolaire, sans aucune intervention éditoriale : ni date, ni lieu, ni commentaire), que le pathos est le

1. Cf. *Figures III* (Paris : Seuil, 1972) : 129.

plus présent.

Il faut tout de même un témoin ; il y en aura deux. Le premier est Andrés Level, avocat vénézuélien qui vient visiter Miranda dans la prison de La Guaira, six ans après l'épisode que je viens de raconter. Naipaul s'autorise des mémoires de Level pour reconstituer le dialogue des deux hommes. Le second est l'érudit américain William Robertson, que Naipaul mentionne à la fin du chapitre : il a retrouvé les papiers de Miranda, de sorte qu'on a pu les publier et que Naipaul a pu les lire. À la fin de son récit, le romancier donne ses sources, mais ce faisant il fait plus : il montre comment l'histoire s'écrit. Il y a les acteurs de l'histoire qui agissent dans l'ignorance et un témoin qui sait, parce qu'il vient après. C'est l'ironie de l'histoire. Miranda parle avec lucidité dans sa geôle parce que tout est fini et qu'il va mourir. Mais cette ironie est aussi celle de l'auteur : c'est bien sûr lui qui est au bout de la chaîne et qui maîtrise l'ensemble. C'est Level et surtout Naipaul. Le pathos de l'histoire suppose un auteur extérieur ou postérieur qui serve de point de repère.

J'en vois un autre indice dans le chapitre précédent : toujours dans le golfe, entre Trinidad et le Venezuela, maintenant survolé en avion, il rencontre un voyageur qu'il décrit comme un Indien d'Asie originaire de Trinidad, Manuel Sorzano (218). Cet homme lui raconte son histoire : il a trouvé de l'or à Caracas, beaucoup d'or pour lui qui était manœuvre dans le bâtiment. Ironie de l'histoire : l'Eldorado existait, mais sous cette forme dérisoire : un tas de pièces d'or trouvé en démolissant une maison et escamoté par l'ouvrier avant que la police ne le confisque. De quoi acheter une maison et arrêter de travailler. Depuis, l'homme porte ce qui reste de son trésor en bracelet et en collier. Sur lui, il est en sécurité, dit-il. Il confie son histoire à Naipaul et se montre expansif, ignorant,

vulgaire. Il ne sait pas, bien sûr, que tout dans son histoire fait écho à une histoire autre et autrement plus noble. Il raconte la mésaventure de son fils, qu'il a failli perdre et pour lequel il est allé prier à Trinidad. Le fils sur lequel le père veille, le fils qui porte un prénom espagnol, qui ne parle que l'espagnol, qui est installé au Venezuela où il est devenu policier, inverse la perte du fils, envoyé par son général anglais de père à la conquête de l'Éldorado et tué dans la première escarmouche contre les Espagnols. Il y a de l'ironie dans cette répétition comique de la tragédie. Son seul témoin est Naipaul lui-même – qui recueille le récit en parvenant, comme dans le « Prélude », à ne pas prononcer de jugement explicite sur son personnage. Le ridicule du Vénézuélien n'est jamais affirmé, ou alors avec un art consommé de l'understatement. Sa volubilité remplit le rôle que jouait l'institutrice dans le premier texte : il se révèle en parlant comme Leonard Side était révélé par les paroles de la jeune femme. À la fin du récit, on a le sentiment de bien le connaître alors qu'on ne sait rien de Naipaul.

IV

Je termine cette étude de *A Way in the World* sur cet épisode car il me semble déplacer encore la tension entre histoire et anti-histoire, entre action et pathos, entre absence et présence de l'auteur dans son texte, que je me suis donnée pour objet. Il est particulièrement ambivalent. On peut le lire comme la seule page du livre où l'ironie de l'auteur se retourne contre lui. Les deux voisins d'avion arrivent à l'aéroport. L'écrivain a pu lire sur le passeport de l'autre son métier : menuisier. Lui n'a rien inscrit. Le douanier, sur le point de le lui reprocher, se ravise et remplit la rubrique lui-même. Sorzano, pittoresque (noticeable with his pig-

tail and his souvenir raffia bag, 235) mais serviable, a attendu Naipaul : il lui fait remarquer que l'employé a inscrit *ejecutivo*, cadre supérieur. Leur différence de statut social se voit et donc s'écrit : c'est une preuve du développement du pays, selon le Vénézuélien : « They treat you according to what you show yourself to be. » (236) Mais c'est pour ajouter aussitôt qu'il y a un danger à porter cette qualité sur son passeport : cela finit par se savoir et on risque de se faire enlever pour une rançon. Leçon de l'ouvrier à l'écrivain : vous feriez mieux de ne pas essayer de passer pour ce que vous n'êtes pas. Mais on peut aussi le lire à l'inverse comme une preuve supplémentaire de l'ignorance du Vénézuélien : il n'a pas compris que Naipaul n'ira pas se vanter de sa qualité d'*ejecutivo*. Il ne sait pas que l'écrivain n'a pas de qualité sociale mais se situe au-dessus de toutes les qualités. Sa remarque ne prouve que le sous-développement d'un pays sans culture. Sagesse de l'homme du peuple ou naïveté d'un pays « simple » ? Les deux interprétations sont peut-être compatibles, mais de quel poids idéologique la fable se charge ! De quelle condescendance ! Un poids si lourd qu'il faut (se) le dissimuler. Alors Naipaul doit écrire une anti-histoire dans laquelle il est toujours impossible d'intervenir parce que l'auteur est à la fois toujours présent et toujours absent, jamais plus présent que lorsqu'il feint de n'être pas là. Indépendamment du sens politique du roman, c'est justement là que réside son intérêt littéraire. Le camouflage idéologique auquel il se livre le conduit à naviguer entre fiction, autobiographie et histoire en effaçant les frontières génériques, de sorte qu'entre les deux catégories opposées de l'ego-littérature et du roman-du-Je, on doit classer *A Way in the World* dans la seconde. Celle qui postule que « qui raconte sa vie la transforme fatalement en roman et ne peut déléguer de lui-même à l'intérieur du récit

que le faux-semblant d'un personnage, [que] "ma vie" n'existe qu'à condition d'être déjà "du roman" et [que], "moi-même", je n'y existe qu'à condition d'y figurer depuis toujours à la façon d'un "personnage". »¹ Ce qui nous donne une raison d'apprécier Naipaul comme écrivain et non comme idéologue, comme créateur de formes, c'est-à-dire d'objets dont chacun peut se saisir, d'objets voués à lui échapper, à défaire la maîtrise de l'idéologue – et cela quoi qu'il en pense.

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V. S. NAIPAUL: THE WRITER AS ANTHROPOLOGIST

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Recent pronouncements by V. S. Naipaul, both before the results of the 2001 Nobel Prize (in the aftermath of the terrorists attacks against the twin towers) and after, have renewed a certain amount of concern over the politics of the creator of Mr Biswas. His rather dismissive comments on Islam recall certain features of some of his travel-books, and while some might choose to dismiss the comments and concentrate on the excellence of the novelist, one may equally be reminded of the ways in which they are consonant with other writings. Naipaul's engagement with India over the years affords an interesting starting point for the critic who might be interested in the intimate workings of Naipaul's

politics and poetics: his “trilogy”,¹ supplemented by essays,² has often been the target of attacks, in particular from the subcontinent. Without wanting to build again the case against Naipaul, I want briefly to recall some elements in the debate.

Salman Rushdie for instance has been a long-standing opponent of Naipaul’s, accusing him of sympathy towards the BJP — Naipaul has indeed judged approvingly the “creative energy” of the Hindu nationalists. More generally, critics have tended to underline Naipaul’s string of disparaging comments about Islam, Africa, or India. In India, in particular, Naipaul’s eye seems to dwell at length on the disorders of the country, on the bleak aspects of the life as he sees it, on the darkness of the wounds that he has diagnosed. The failure of India seems, at times, a failure to conform to Naipaul’s own idea of India; in the words of an Indian novelist: “Whether it is India’s perverse tendency not to ‘need’ pavements or the ‘background of swarming Bombay slum’, it is clear there is nothing left in India of the dream-world Naipaul had constructed as ‘the home of his ancestors’. In modern India, ‘Shiva has ceased to dance’”.³ And she quotes such writers as Nissim Ezekiel, who insists that if criticism must exist, it must not deny humanity.

In what follows, I shall not take sides, nor shall I wonder for too long about Naipaul’s prejudices (which are, I think, undeniable). I wish to analyse the nature of Naipaul’s writings when

1. *An Area of Darkness* (hereafter *AD*), (1964. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); *India: A Wounded Civilization* (*WC*), (1977. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (*MM*), (1990. London: Minerva, 1991).

2. Some of which were recently collected in *The Writer and the World* (London: Picador, 2002): 3-70.

3. Gita Hariharan, “The Ignoble Politics of Naipaul’s Nobel”, *Frontline*, Volume 18: 23 (Nov. 10-23, 2001).

he comes to India, to examine the principles of his narratives, in order to assess their ambiguities. Unlike Clifford Geertz's anthropologists who turn out above all to have been writers,¹ this writer has occasionally performed the part of an anthropologist, and indeed some of his books, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* in particular, read like field notes.

The sense of narrative

Reflecting over his first excursion to the subcontinent, Naipaul explains that he had set out with a fuzzy sense of what he would be discovering there, and an even fuzzier sense of the nature of the book that he would bring back from this year-long stay in the country of his ancestors: "The next year, in an oppressive furnished flat in south London, I began to write my book about India. I had intended to write one, but after my early weeks I had begun to give up the idea. Travel writing was new to me, and I didn't see how I could find a narrative for a book about India: I was too overwhelmed by the distress I saw" (MM 493). This approach to the narrative characterises Naipaul's travel books. He does not attempt to offer a complete travelogue-like account of the traveller in foreign surroundings, but he builds a stylistic itinerary which would account for the experience of the traveller. His books do not purport to be a definitive historian's account of India, but they investigate the ways in which the narrative may be affected by the country. In turn, they sometimes dwell on the traveller's inner reactions and anxieties.

1. Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

An Area of Darkness conveys a sense of careful architecture, organised around the Kashmir episode, the moment of rest experienced by Naipaul in his travels, which provides in turn the moment of rest for the narrative. After the frustration of the plains, Kashmir has a soothing effect on the irritated writer, who indulges immediately in descriptions of the landscape: "Kashmir was coolness and colour: the yellow mustard fields, the mountains, snow-capped, the milky blue sky in which we rediscovered the drama of clouds. It was men wrapped in brown blankets against the morning mist, and barefooted shepherd boys with caps and covered ears on steep wet rocky slopes" (AD 95). The writer may indulge in the pleasures of description, in the spectacle of the clouds as much as in the juxtaposition of elements, human and mineral.

After a prelude which had confronted Naipaul with the red tape of customs, the first part focuses on India as a place constructed out of the imagination of the Trinidad-born writer, whose family, having come from India, cherished the memories and traditions of the subcontinent—an experience of exile, in other words, which is reclaimed, and denied, by the writer: "The India, then, which was the background to my childhood was an area of the imagination. It was not the real country I presently began to read about and whose map I committed to memory" (AD 41). The whole of the first part, perhaps the whole of Naipaul's writings about India, is a realization of the inadequacy of this image, which in turn fosters a sense of separateness, a distance from the country. Even the stay by the lake, in Kashmir, does not generate the fusion that the writer might have expected. The third part goes back to India, to its past and present, to its colonial inheritance, but above all to the dissatisfaction of the traveller

who comes to realize: "India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness . . ." (AD 252). The first volume of the trilogy, based as it is on an investigation of the myth of his childhood, on a construction of the narrative that culminates in the peaceful moments of Kashmir, is the story of a failure, the failure of an idea, the failure of a quest.

The second volume picks up where the previous had left. The failure that had been diagnosed by the writer, is now transferred to India in more severe terms. Whereas *An Area of Darkness* outlined a difficult itinerary, *A Wounded Civilization* adopts much of the tone of the pamphlet. Naipaul's journey has now become India's journey, scrutinized by Naipaul: "The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead" (WC 18). The "old equilibrium", which Naipaul examines through a reading of Narayan's *Mr Sampath*, of a world finely balanced, is destroyed. Contemporary politics justify this reading, partly, because Naipaul's stay occurred during the Emergency imposed by Mrs Gandhi. The wounds suffered by India's civilisation are further approached by Naipaul in his investigation of the modifications in the urban landscape, in a description of the Naxalite movement, in a severe indictment of India's borrowings from foreign influences—the concept of mimicry which he had used in the first volume is here invoked again: ". . . all the disciplines and skills that India now seeks to exercise are borrowed. Even the ideas Indians have of the achievements of their civilization are essentially the ideas given them by European scholars in the nineteenth century" (WC 129). The conclusion focuses on the end of Indian civilization. This is why I would want to view it more

as a satirical account than as a travel-book, more as a pamphlet than, say, as an essay. The sense of detachment and separateness from India that had been the concluding impression of the first volume has now been totally established, and used as a narrative standpoint.

Although *India: A Million Mutinies Now* starts like *A Wounded Civilization* with a description of the road from Bombay airport, it is different from the other two volumes. Here, it is the sense of an ethnographer at work that dominates, offering a number of interviews to the reader. The concern for structure that characterised *An Area of Darkness* is present again, if only because the narrative ends with a return to Kashmir. Having opened with the theatre of Bombay, with the numerous aspects of its political and social life, the narrative follows the musings of the traveller, through Goa and its faded grandeur, Tamil Nadu and its elections, Calcutta, its English past and its political activists, Lucknow which affords a journey into Islam, and finally two excursions into the world of the women's press as well as an inquiry into the Sikhs. The book is based on a great number of interviews which are juxtaposed within the space of the narrative; it relies on the multiplicity of voices, on the use of varying points of view. It tries to convey the sense of the country through a number of informants, to recreate a polyphony of India through this narrative device; it is more attentive to people perhaps, and it closes the circle of Naipaul's writings about India, with the final chapter, "A Return to India", which leaves the traveller confident of the prospect of a new era: "In India, with its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbance. It had to come as rage and revolt. India was now a country of a million little mutinies" (*MM* 517).

The diversity of the construction of the different books about

India testify to Naipaul's stylistic evolution. The different narratives offer varied perspectives on India, from the more intimate quest of the first volume, to the scathing report of the second, to the seemingly more detached account of the third. They suggest an evolution in Naipaul's prose, although perhaps not an evolution in his thinking about India.

The Anthropologist at work

Most of Naipaul's observations on India seem to be caught in a tension, between the reality of appearances and the idea of India which is embodied in memories of Trinidad, in readings, in religion and sometimes in politics. The initial contrast which is apparent to the writer of *An Area of Darkness*, is between the lack of cleanliness of India and the idea that he has formed of it, between the poverty and the image that India projects, between the general disorder of the country and the tiny place that one may find to rest: "I had learned too that escape was always possible, that in every Indian town there was a corner of comparative order and cleanliness in which one could recover and cherish one's self-respect" (AD 45). This tension leads the traveller to separate the pleasant from the unpleasant, things from men.¹ But always appearances stand in the way of the stroller, and comments about defecation or degradation reinforce the tension between what is immediately accessible and the traveller's quest.

Through separation of the contradictory elements and rejection of appearances, Naipaul tries to construct an idea of India. Under the chaos lies a hidden logic, one which makes sense of the landscape, as much as it accounts for the alleged degradation of the

1. Cf. "More than in people, India lay about us in things" (AD 29).

country. According to Naipaul, the order of caste, the nature of the function that each man supposedly embodies, the knowledge of degree are ways of making sense of the country: “. . . a knowledge of degree is in the bones and no Indian is far from his origins” (*AD* 55). Even the romance of the railway has a deep meaning, an inner logic which makes it favour freight over passengers, third-class passengers over first, because they bring more revenue. And this, in turn, explains why the “railway administrator, who knows this, can be forgiven if he fails to see the romance of his service or its brilliance” (*AD* 221).

We find Naipaul at every turn engaged in this process of dissection of appearances, in a quest for the logic of something that seems, at first, to exceed logic. This is a recurrent feature of all of Naipaul’s texts. We see him, for instance, concluding an interview with a Mr Raote, engineer and member of the Shiv Sena: “The worldly man who wanted to be an officer and an engineer, the Sena worker, the devout Hindu: there were three layers to him, making for a chain of belief and action” (*MM* 53). We witness him trying to investigate the more densely populated areas of Bombay. We follow him as he tries to unravel the logic of a large gathering of people, on arrival from the airport. He cannot understand at first the reason for this assembly. His enquiries yield no result. Until someone suggests that it might be people queueing up for telephone directories. Or again that it might be a celebration for the birthday of Dr Ambedkar (the leader of the untouchables). And the investigation leads him to realise that “a greater understanding became possible of the long, patient line of dark men and women on one side of the road on the morning I had arrived: not just the poor of India, but an expression of the old internal cruelty of that poverty: people at the bottom, full of

emotion, with no politics at that moment, just rejecting rejection" (MM 119).

This corresponds to something which Naipaul sees as one of the dominant features of India—the relationship between outer and inner world. In *An Area of Darkness*, it enables him to reflect on colonialism, suggesting that the coexistence of these two worlds provokes the mimicry of colonial classes that exists at the higher level of Indian society:

Its mimicry is both less and more than a colonial mimicry. It is the special mimicry of an old country which has been without a native aristocracy for a thousand years and has learned to make room for outsiders, but only at the top. The mimicry changes, the inner world remains constant: this is the secret of survival (AD 56).

This principle, in turn, explains the permanence of behaviours, and the enduring value of old accounts of India.¹ In *A Wounded Civilization*, he offers this distinction in order to make sense of Gandhi. He identifies in Gandhi's autobiography a general trend which ascribes importance to the outer world only insofar as it affects the inner world: "It is the Indian way of experiencing" (WC 101). Gandhianism itself remains, in Naipaul's analysis, an empty form, words without effect, a self-display, "a liberation from constructive thought and political burdens" (WC 158). But

1. The problem with Naipaul's interpretation lies not so much in the identification of the disjunction between outer and inner world, but in the identification of this inner world with a world of permanence. On the contrary, the inner world is itself open to negotiation, and historical evolution. For an analysis of the relationship of outer and inner worlds in the context of the emergence of nationalism, see for example Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

this is because, according to Naipaul, Ghandianism is a thing of the past, an idea that has receded, for Gandhi failed to communicate to the people his direct way of seeing, his penetrating look on the world (*AD* 82).

In seeking to get to the heart of his subject, Naipaul questions appearances, he reflects on the nature of what he sees, which leads him to investigate the hidden logic of it all. The separation between appearances and reality, between what is palatable and what is not, perhaps, in other words, between the outer world and the inner world, becomes the fundamental mode of analysis of the reality of the country. Although it is partly induced by the image formed overseas, the story is obviously more complex, and the sense that there must be more than meets the eye is always present in Naipaul's narratives. This works both at the level of contiguity, where the squalor, for instance, may conceal the sight of a cleaner place to rest, and at the level of substitution, where behind the nature of the world, as it is observed and described by the narrator, lies its true reality.

In his analysis of India, Naipaul insists on the Indians' ability not to see what is obvious, a feature which first strikes him when he observes people squatting and defecating everywhere. The faculty to retreat characterises both Naipaul's own perception of India as a child, which turned India into an unreal idea, devoid of English presence for instance, and the general outlook on the world displayed by the population:

It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see would drive them mad. And it is well that they have no sense of history, for how then would they be able to continue to squat amid their ruins, and which Indian would be able to read the history of his country for the last

thousand years without anger and pain? It is better to retreat into fantasy and fatalism, to trust to the stars in which the fortunes are all written . . . and to regard the progress of the rest of the world with the tired tolerance of one who has been through it all before (AD 201).

The idea of separation, the complicated connections between outer and inner world, the relationship to appearances are identified as the fundamental principle of the Indian psyche. This explains the fatalism of the Indians, and perhaps the decay of their civilization.¹

What is at stake, obviously, is the nature of India, as a concept, or the nature of Indian civilization. Throughout the three books, we find Naipaul concerned with what India might be, with the idea of India, with the true nature of India. The idea that he has formed in his native Trinidad, through the relationship of his community to their past is abstract: it has lost all reference, all content, for even the rituals have ceased to be understood. And there is a way in which Naipaul, half-equipped with this abstract idea, comes to the subcontinent in search of nurture for his idea, in search of something that would foster his relationship to this abstract idea. But the continuity between his idea of India and his approach to the country must be stressed.

This is partly based on the identification of a general law of the behaviour of both people and country, for which evidence may at times have to be proffered ("Withdrawal, denial, confusion of values: these are vague words. We need more direct evidence" AD 62). Pronouncements occasionally serve the purpose of account-

1. We find echoes of this principle in *A Wounded Civilization*, where the writer carries out a correspondence with the Indian psychologist Sudhir Kakar, for whom the outer world defines the inner self.

ing for political action, or discourse (in Kipling-like words: “In India, where the problems are beyond comprehension, the goals have to be vague” *WC* 115). Often, they link up with the questioning of appearances in a discreet modalisation that serves only to reinforce the general law:

It wasn't easy, being a good brahmin! The more Kakusthan went into it, the more he came up with needs and observances; and the more awkward the whole business appeared. Perhaps an absolute brahmin way wasn't possible. Perhaps it had always been like that; perhaps at all times brahmins would have had to compromise in one thing or another (*MM* 249).

All three books teem with the idea of India, embodied in the discourse of others, in the discourse of the journalist he meets in *A Wounded Civilization* for instance, and who evidently relates to a fixed idea of what his Indian identity might be, and therefore to a no less fixed idea of India and of India's past: “It was part of the purposelessness of which many Indians spoke, part of the longing for Gandhian days, when the idea of India was real and seemed full of promise, and the ‘moral issues’ clear” (*WC* 71). Naipaul sees an embodiment of the idea of India in a number of places, in the nature of the railway, in the memory of an ideal past, in Gandhi's philosophy, in the promised restoration through a million mutinies, in the crisis that it undergoes, in the decadence that he observes throughout (“the intellectual depletion” *WC* 17). This is also how the essence of India is constructed by the narrative, through the juxtaposition of the various elements, through the investigation of the reality behind the appearances, through the logic that the writer wants to unfold. But such laws have their limits, and the possible irony of certain comments seems

to acknowledge precisely this; a letter to a financial newspaper that seemingly develops a concern for nonattachment affords the exclamation: "But India is India" (WC 52); his puzzlement at the journalist's concern for loss of identity brings about the sobering comment: "Bombay, after all, was Bombay" (WC 70).

This concern for the essence of India, its mythical past, its forceful idea, its impressive but wounded civilization creates in turn a partial view of the country. This is not to say that we should read Naipaul's books as accurate descriptions or genuine accounts, but that the authority with which they are invested results in part from the assertions that the books convey—and Naipaul's style is very much the assertive style. The first book suggests that India does not correspond to the idea of India that he had formed in Trinidad. The second book implies that India's civilization has come to an end, the Emergency being the last sign of this failure. The third book outlines a rebirth that may be about to occur in these million mutinies—a renaissance or a restoration. What is partial about the idea of India, is not so much that the author would not take into account some aspects of the country, or that he ignores certain realities. The partial aspect of Naipaul's India is precisely that it is *Naipaul's* India: the country is not examined with affection or empathy, but with irritation, even anger. For instance, the anger at small events (the "idlers" who remind visitors of mosques that they are supposed to take their shoes off, the disappointment at being charged rather more than expected for an expedition, the irritation at the Prince who pretends that the Indians, unlike the English, are happy, etc.) relates to the general sense of separation which is experienced by the writer throughout his travels, with the fear and contempt that he feels towards poverty, with the general corruption that he faces:

. . . I was overpowered this time by my own wretchedness, the taste of the water, corrupting both coffee and tea as it corrupted food, by the brown smoke of cars and buses, by the dug-up roads and broken footpaths, by the dirt, by the crowds; and could not accept the consolation offered by some people that in a country as poor as India the aesthetic side of things didn't matter (*MM* 347).

So that the sense of "being there" which characterises both the traveller's account, and, if we believe Geertz, the ethnographer's, must be seen, in Naipaul's writings, in conjunction with the distance which is enforced and reinforced. The documentary evidence offered by the writer derives its authority from this sense of having been there. The ambiguity of his initial position (the Trinidad-born writer of Indian origin) which seems partly to induce the authority of the insider, is somewhat undermined by the realization of the distance that operates between the writer and the country, between the country and the idea of the country, between, perhaps, the reader and the writer.

The Ambiguities of the self

India provokes a confrontation of the writer with his identity, with his past, with the "phantasmal memories of old India which for [him] outline a whole vanished world" (*WC* 9). The peculiar position which he stresses, of belonging and not-belonging, of being at home in India and being a stranger, is the starting point of his analysis. It is based on the duality of his education, on the juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive worlds, the world of the timeless Indian heritage, of the family rituals, and the refusal (rather than the denial) of this very culture. Life in the West Indies

implied the separation between two worlds, the inner world of the family and the outside world. India reactivates this duality, for it addresses the buried parts of his self, the faint memories of traditions which he has rejected. The Indian cultural heritage, as the writer discovers time and again through the three travel books, is an essential component of his being, an indeterminate yet powerful means of dealing with the outside world. This generates a feeling of exclusion.¹ It even creates a problematic relationship to the world, for he has lost his distinctiveness. It suggests, almost, an identity crisis. In Trinidad, in England, in Alexandria, to be an Indian is to stand apart; in India, it is to be one of the crowd, to be deprived of precisely the feature that has created the distinctiveness:

Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how (*AD* 43).

It may seem that this duality, the sense of a half-buried world, the juxtaposition of the different spheres impose their narrative logic on the world that he describes. The incentive to look for the Idea of India, to try and unearth a deep law which would make

1. See the irrelevance of the English past of India, which belongs to him on no account, since he is neither English nor Indian. This may also be due to the fact that his inner world, defined by Indian traditions, belongs clearly to the past. It is devoid of the energy and creativity that Partha Chatterjee sees as one of the features of the birth of the national sentiment in Bengal in the nineteenth century.

sense of the world, fits the position of the writer. Although he confers on his descriptions and accounts of the country the authority of the observer, of the anthropologist who *was there*, the traveller's position determines the nature of his enterprise. The fantasy he brings to India, which was born in Trinidad, the recognition that he acknowledges at times, and the undiscovered self, do not generate so much a subjective account, as a distinctive narrative point of view.

This suggests in turn a philosophy of style common to all three texts. In spite of their narrative differences, their style (understood as a complex system of writing the world) is similar. It relies first, I think, on Naipaul's position as the perfect observer (the anthropologist, in other words). This position may be undermined at times, and this is why the experience of being one of the crowd is such a traumatic experience: it challenges the stylistic principle of his enterprise. Throughout the texts, Naipaul insists on the privileged position which enables him to penetrate most circles of Indian life, and which warrants the necessary diversity of his representation of the country. *India: A Million Mutinies Now* follows the principle that the observer can move among all circles, can address prostitutes as well as communist militants or state ministers. It takes for granted the idea that India can be approached through a fairly representative mosaic of people and positions, through the taking into account of the Sikh's narrative as much as of the pujari's. The separateness from the country which is, at a first level, experienced as a drawback, as an inability to relate to the country, is in fact the very condition for the narrative:

In India I had so far felt myself a visitor. Its size, its tempera-

tures, its crowds: I had prepared myself for these, but in its very extremes the country was alien (. . .) In all the striking detail of India there was nothing which I could link with my own experience of India in a small town in Trinidad (*AD* 140).

This enables in turn the irony and the satire which critics have been prompt to detect in Naipaul's texts, and which they have dismissed as arrogance. This may be the case. But I think that the ironical perception of the world reinforces the coherence of the stylistic purpose. If proximity and distance are important features of Naipaul's outlook on the country of his ancestors, this is as much consequence as cause of the use of irony. This is where, at any rate, the anthropologist gives way to the writer. The irony that he offers to the man who wants to improve transportation by improving the yoking of bullocks, or the impossibility that he sees, precisely, to use irony with officials, thereby giving vent to anger, characterise the tone of the narratives. In the last of the three books, it is the principle of construction of the narrative, with a reliance on transcription of interviews. This principle is indeed ambiguous, because it provides the reader with the multiplicity of voices of India, and it places the narrator in a distant position from which he can pass comment, analyse, and infer. The ironical position, in turn, implies a retreat of the observer. And Naipaul's movement, throughout the narratives, is a movement of retreat, of standing back, which culminates, of course, in the conclusions of the books. In the last paragraph of *An Area of Darkness*, he analyses the Indian movement of negation: "it was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had

become the basis of thought and feeling" (*AD* 266). This perception relies on the narrator's absence of belonging, on his separateness, on his distance: "In India, writes Naipaul at the end of *A Wounded Civilization*, there is no room for outsiders" (*WC* 171). It is perhaps here that we may best sense this feeling of distance, the necessity of Naipaul's standpoint, the fundamental tension between the ties with India and the outsider's position.

The ambiguities of his posture, the tensions of his inner being, explain in turn what seems to me the most striking aspect of his writings about in India—the fascination for the evanescent. There is, throughout the three books, an insistence on moments when meaning seems to recede, when the world fades away. Naipaul is attentive to traces of colonial grandeur, to the signs of the Moghuls whose splendour has vanished, whose artists have lost their historical dimension only to fall into legend. He examines England, the part that England played in the construction of India, but he observes as well the ruins of the Empire. The maharajas of Mysore are becoming inaccessible, like the Portuguese past of Goa: "Now they were receding fast into the difficult Indian past, beyond the reach of the imagination—like so many of the historical names on the road down from Goa" (*MM* 206). Stories of Calcutta offer hints of these worlds that are on the verge of oblivion, the world of the boxwallah which is recounted to Naipaul "just when that world was about to disappear, giving way to the cruder, richer business world of post- independence India" (*MM* 341). So that the final recognition can only be spelt out in the last return to Kashmir, in the last chapter of the last volume of the trilogy: "The India of my fantasy and heart was something lost and irrecoverable" (*MM* 491).

The fascination for the idea of India, the insistence on Indi-

a's faded glory, the need to capture these disappearing worlds, the philosophy of style which commands the perception that the reader forms of India all seem to spring from Naipaul's original ambiguities. The necessary rejection of his inner Indian identity imposes a consciousness of its irretrievable nature. And it seems therefore that the whole of Naipaul's writings about India, in spite of the occasional attention to people and details, in spite of their form of authorized account, spring from an awareness of the evanescence of his Indian part. It is this consciousness which, in turn, commands the position of the writer, the philosophy of style, the nature of the country constructed and not seen by the writer.

The engagement with literature

Going through India, Naipaul also engages with literature. Kipling articulated the most immediate way of dealing with the realities of the English in India, and possibly with the nature of colonialism. Naipaul does not say, of course, that Kipling is a colonialist. He shows rather how the author of the *Plain Tales from the Hills* captured the essence of the Raj, the nature of the English in India, who were constantly performing, playing at being British perhaps, out of place. The architecture of British India, although praised as fine architecture, gives the first indication that something was not quite right:

Their grounds were a little too spacious; their ceilings a little too high, their columns and arches and pediments a little too rhetorical; they were neither of England nor India; they were a little too grand for their purpose, too grand for the puniness, poverty and defeat in which they were set (*AD* 190-1).

Kipling embodies this atmosphere of people at play, of people in exile. The characters of the Raj were concerned with their duty, their burden, their responsibilities, and Kipling's narratives, unwittingly, convey their memory: "He genuinely saw people bigger than they were; they, perhaps less securely, saw themselves bigger than they were" (*AD* 192-3). The setting itself, Simla, the summer capital of the Raj, is Kipling's fantasy and creation, where the officials of the Raj parade on the mall, where petty and less petty intrigues are unfolded; Simla is the mythical capital of the myth of the Raj.

But Naipaul also engages with Indian literature, with the Indian novel, which is itself an imported genre, one that does not fit with the country, one that perpetuates the confusion between the West and the East, one that entertains doubts about the purpose and the value of fiction. Narayan is the odd man out, the exception that cannot be imitated. In *A Wounded Civilization*, his novels guide Naipaul's wanderings—*The Vendor of Sweets* and *Mr Sampath* offer their unique perspective on the nature of India. For instance, Naipaul reflects on the confusion of India through the imperfections of *The Vendor of Sweets*. He identifies the sense of the evanescent, of the passing away of a world: "the end of reverences, the end of the family, individuals striking out on their own, social chaos" (*WC* 49). Naipaul is attentive to the disappearing worlds that are captured by Narayan, to the shimmering away of the nature of things—and when he reads the travels of W.H. Russell, he is concerned with the absence of such an ear for the world.

Above all, the decay that Naipaul observes, and the necessity of change, inform his perception of England in *The Enigma of Arrival*. The faded glory of the Edwardian house, still percepti-

ble through traces and signs, the complex disorder of the garden, embody the peak of beauty—the beauty that there is in having come to England at the wrong time, when its imperial grandeur is in ruins. The narrator’s experience of the world finds a surprising but coherent home in this manor cottage:

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.¹ (*EA* 52).

Is it a contrast between appropriate evenescence in England, and inappropriate fading away of the idea of India, that marks the difference between the subtle, attentive narration of *The Enigma of Arrival*, and the altogether more constrained view of India? In the novel, there is a true sense, perhaps, of listening to others, of seeing the world through their eyes. Not the analyst’s, nor the anthropologist’s *montage* of interviews and comments, but the doubts that inhabit the narration even as it is about to conclude:

I had arrived at my feeling for the seasons by looking at Jack’s garden, adding events on the river and the manor river bank to what I saw in his garden. But there were other ways of looking. Jack himself, giving the attention he gave to a meaningless hedge—a hedge that ran down the length of his garden and then abruptly stopped—saw something else, certainly (*EA* 58).

The great discovery that man and writer are the same person suggests the meaning of the philosophy of style that was earlier

1. *The Enigma of Arrival* (hereafter *EA*), (1997. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987): 52.

described. The very clear definition of himself to himself—the essential condition for writing—does not take place in the first Indian book but in *The Enigma of Arrival*. Here indeed, we may follow the writer's quest for the right view, for the appropriate position, for the angle that will make sense of the whole world. Here the confrontation with the world, with colonial history, with the delicate fragility and romance of the past, reaches the complex perfection of simplicity. Here he may acknowledge the ivy that covered the trees, so that it was hard to tell what kind of trees they were, here he may wonder at the ivy that smothered them, leaving the writer to contemplate "the debris of his [landlord's] garden, the debris of his own life. Debris which nonetheless never ceased to have an element of grandeur" (EA 198).

The Enigma of Arrival outlines the failures of the Indian texts—this is where writing and living, man and the world, come together. It is the missing book about India, the narrative unconscious of the Indian trilogy. The delicate balance of the world, as it is tilting away, is of England more than of India, of arrival, more than of travel. The Indian books are not documents about India, they do not offer documentary evidence; they are a momentary stop on the way to writing, a landmark in the progression towards the completeness of a philosophy of style, a moment in a literary itinerary when faint echoes can be heard, when the fragility of the world can be perceived, when the writer's position can be sighted. They do not tell us anything about India.

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ABSTRACTS

Dr Beena Anand (University of Nancy I): Entrapment and Release in *The House for Mr Biswas*.

A House for Mr Biswas is reputedly and avowedly a fictional look alike of Naipaul's earlier life and a mirror of his relations with his father. Subsequently the novel narrates the paradoxes of exilic selves in the protagonist's existential search for a 'portion of earth'. The latter develops along inextricably intertwined dichotomic planes of roots and rootlessness. This paper explores the diverse overlapping and distancing tensions that surface during Mr Biswas's struggle as he espouses and rejects the diverse worlds (homes) he is forced to inhabit. Entrapment and release for the migrant caught in tectonic interactions (between societal traditions and transitions) lies in his desperate aspirations to an identity that is at the crossroads.

Dr Rita Christian (London Metropolitan, UK): 'Coolie' Come Lately: the making of *The Suffrage of Elvira*.

The Suffrage of Elvira is Naipaul's second novel and is one of his most overtly political. The novel can be read as an apprenticeship in creolization of the most recently arrived migrants in Trinidad. Set within the context of the late 1940s, it is only two decades after the end of Indentureship and Indians in Trinidad are attempting to gain entry into Trinidadian political life. In a sense Naipaul is attempting in his unique, anarchical, irreverent way, to capture the Indian emerging from plantation life into a life of politics with all its intrigues but who have no real sense of political organization. Behind the caricature and absurdity of the Brahmin leadership playing on the religious and other emotions of hierarchy and caste of the Indians in the village of Elvira, we are presented with serious notions of the outsider and the need to belong. This is a "just come" community, the youngest section of Trinidad society, not yet creolized, and they are being dragged along by the changes in society, brought about by universal adult suffrage. Attempting to make their political mark is presented in a most farcical way. Naipaul depicts a community being catapulted, unprepared, into an alien world, a world of British politics far removed from plantation life and obsessions with family. Bribery and corruption are prevalent and Naipaul manages in his own inimitable way to deal with the serious subject of the political development of the Indian in Trinidad with great comedy. His characters are strongly emphasised as he gives a portrayal of the uninitiated Indian as well as the rugged individualist in the characters of Chittaranjan and Baksh.

Dr Florence D'Souza (University of Lille III): *A Turn in the South:* Playing Devil's Advocate or a step towards a more inclusive

serenity?

Home, History, Religion, Racial Difference form constant threads throughout Naipaul's travel narrative of his "turn" through the Southern states of the USA. This paper will try to trace the position and point of view of the 1st- person narrator as he interviews black and white personalities along his journey. Is his approach judgmental and inquisitorial? Is he partial to or prejudiced against any particular individual or group? Are perfect neutrality and objectivity possible? Through an analysis of the narrator's framing strategies, his overall aim and how far it is achieved will be explored.

Pr JP Engélibert (University of Poitiers): L'écriture hors l'histoire ou les histoires non écrites.

La tension entre la civilisation et non pas la nature ou la barbarie mais l'effacement de l'histoire. D'un côté la civilisation, c'est-à-dire le processus continu d'écrire l'histoire, de l'autre l'effacement continu de l'histoire. Cette thématique trouve son expression achevée dans *A Way in the World*, mais elle est déjà sous-jacente dans *The Mimic Men* : Naipaul commence par en faire le sujet de ses fictions, avant de tenter de la prendre de front, mais justement par des « histoires non écrites ». La tension post-coloniale pourrait alors se comprendre comme la tentative d'écrire l'histoire de ce qui n'en a pas (car elle s'efface à mesure qu'elle se fait). L'étude portera en priorité sur *A Way in the World*.

Dr Hedi Ben Abbes (University of Franche-Comté): The Creative Tension of Emptiness in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*.
The Mimic Men is the very place from which springs a creative

sense of the self. Tension fuels Ralph's tormented being and propels him to experiment all the means available to achieve something poignant. Politics, love, social and cultural commitment are part of that experience that culminates in writing. Past, present, here and there, security and chaos, "I" and "others" are interacting and struggling to forge the new out of the old. In the tension between the "unauthentic" and the "real" lies the very secret of writing itself. Ralph is the echo of fiction itself, a "fake" and a "lie". Shipwreck and adrift on the destabilizing historical upheavals, Ralph Singh anchors his life on the creative uncertainties of writing. In his craving for the "hard, the concrete where everything becomes simple and ordinary and easy to seize" while he is on the shaky ground of impermanence Ralph Singh finds the secret of his art. Restless people of the world embrace your loss and be "fluid".

Dr Florence Labaune-Demeule (University of Lyon III): V. S.

Naipaul's *Half a Life*: Moving Away from Tension?

After a whole life devoted to writing about "little men" overcome by different manifestations of tension, Naipaul might have chosen to write a novel about serenity and reconciliation. And yet, *Half a Life*, Naipaul's latest novel, explores such tensions once more—whether racial, political, linguistic, spiritual, or sexual. Willie Chandran—the protagonist—is not really different from Naipaul's other "little men", those weak characters who feel partially adrift, who are the preys to overwhelming tensions. Writing may be Willie's only way out: writing about half his life can perhaps be viewed as his successful attempt at writing, giving substance to experiences which would otherwise be perceived as inconsistent and triv-

ial. Moreover, Naipaul's stylistic mastery also hints at further reduction in tension, and even at some new reconciliation.

Dr Bénédicte Ledent (University of Liège, Belgium): The same, yet different: Caryl Phillips's screen adaptation of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*.

V. S. Naipaul's 1957 novel *The Mystic Masseur* has just been made into a film directed by Ismail Merchant. It may come as a surprise that the script for the film was written by Caryl Phillips, a younger novelist born in St Kitts, for the two writers have dramatically diverging views of the world and of the novel as a genre. What seems to have persuaded Phillips to adapt his elder's early novel is that it "betrays some affection for the Caribbean" — a feature that was to disappear from Naipaul's later writing. *The Mystic Masseur* is therefore likely to contribute to changing people's sometimes uninformed view of that part of the world, a preoccupation that underlines Phillips's own fiction and non-fiction. My paper will concentrate on a comparison between the novel and the screenplay, in particular in terms of tone, language and narrative process. Whereas Phillips's script clearly means to serve the novel, its humour and its humanity, it contains changes which I will attempt to analyze in the light of the film format, and more importantly in the light of the two writers' different sense of Caribbeanness.

Dr Éric Tabuteau (Université Stendhal, Grenoble III): La moitié d'une vie entre deux mondes: V. S. Naipaul, prix Nobel controversé.

Lorsque V. S. Naipaul reçut le prix Nobel de littérature en

2001, de nombreux critiques établirent rapidement un lien entre la vision pessimiste de l'auteur en matière de contacts de cultures et les événements tragiques du mois de septembre de la même année. Ils virent dans le choix de l'Académie Suédoise la volonté de récompenser un romancier à leur avis tout acquis à la cause occidentale et particulièrement critique vis-à-vis du Tiers Monde. Cette décision constituait en outre un revirement idéologique pour cette institution qui, dix ans auparavant, avait encensé le poète antillais Derek Walcott pour ses prises de position en faveur du multiculturalisme. Cette étude s'attachera à démontrer que ce jugement porté sur Naipaul et son œuvre n'est pas fondé, que les critiques font fausse route en pensant voir dans l'égoïsme de Naipaul la marque d'un eurocentrisme évident. Naipaul n'a jamais été le valet des puissances occidentales, c'est son indépendance forcée, et parfois une arrogance évidente, qui a fait de lui un bouc émissaire.

Pr Alexis Tadié (University of Paris VII): V. S. Naipaul: the writer as anthropologist.

This paper deals with the non-fictional writings of V. S. Naipaul, in particular his travel writings. I shall try to define the position, the attitude of the writer in the world. I shall first analyse the way Naipaul constructs the object of his study. Using history, writers, observation, Naipaul defines an India which then becomes the Idea of India. I shall then study how Naipaul's style commands this vision of the world; through irony of descriptions, general laws, retreat of the observer, Naipaul defines a philosophy of style. I shall finally deal with the recurrent concept of "civilization" (India is left alone with the

blankness of its decayed civilization) in order to show how it enables him to assemble the diversity of the world, the million mutinies, into a meaningful unity.

Pr Jesús Varela-Zapata (University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain): Not part of the gang: Naipaul's hostile portrayal of non-Indian characters.

The concern for the human being is the avowed main leit motif in Naipaul's work, as he has said "you need to acquire an anxiety about man as an individual". In his fiction he has created complex and highly profiled characters, the most representative and favourably featured being displaced Indians like himself, sensitive individuals who tell their own first-person stories of oppression and survival through isolation and exile. On the contrary, there is a negative bias towards a group of fictional characters, readily identified as non-Indians who are led to misery for their inability to understand the Third World territories they have chosen as places of adventure and excitement. This is the case with Jane (*Guerrillas*), Sandra (*The Mimic Men*), Linda ("In a Free State") or Yvette (*A Bend in the River*). A substantial accusation of Naipaul as a misogynist arises from the fact that he characterizes all these women in a very negative way, especially as far as their sexual role is concerned. This hostility only adds to the mounting tension created between writer and a large section of critics and general readers.

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