

Believing in the record

A reflection on the life and work of V. S. Naipaul

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You could sense his hand right down to the jacket copy on his books. “V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. He went to England on a scholarship in 1950. After four years at Oxford he began to write, and since then he has followed no other profession.” Naipaul did not want anyone to mistake him for anything other than a complete devotee of his art, a Brahmin of the novel. Contained, too, in that phrasing was the sense that alternative fates haunted him: the washed-up writer, the BBC script man, the book reviewer, the put-upon lawyer, the English teacher, the waiter in a curry restaurant, the vagrant. The characters in his novels often read like chutes he could have fallen down, from Willie Chandran’s confused reckoning with his lack of talent in *Half a Life* (2001) to the fumbling Bombay house servant Santosh in “One Out of Many” (part of *In a Free State*), whose life amounts to “the knowledge that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed and clothe this body for a number of years”. In his grandest world-historical mode, Naipaul measured the tremors of individual self-consciousness in



V. S. Naipaul, Jaipur, 2015

some of the more neglected humans of his century. But there was never any mistaking that the main consciousness under examina-

tion was his own. No other writer took the achievement of having a “point of view” less for granted, and none was so wracked with the fear of becoming a part of the flow, an unthinking presence, one out of many, unaware of himself.

Much of the commentary on his death has puzzled over whether to pardon Naipaul his private cruelties for writing well. But what was the writing like? What gave it its crisp artless quality, as if he rinsed and distilled his sentences a few times more than his peers? It has something to do with the extreme level of attention that he could keep running simultaneously on a wide array of objects, all the while sensing the rhythm the reader would need to absorb it. In his youth, Naipaul attacked English novelists who had been to his part of the world and not seen it clearly: Trollope, Waugh, even Conrad. He savaged Gandhi’s autobiography because Gandhi never described what London looked like. For Naipaul, the corrugated iron shack on the side of the dirt road in between tropical shanty towns demanded attention. His novels are also full of animals and fauna and minerals – the Honduras trees, Bermuda grass, bougainvillea, jasmine, eucalyptus, heliconia, eboga, tulip trees, yews, aspens, peonies, Bauxite – brought to an almost suffocating density in *Enigma of Arrival*. Here is a passage from *The Mimic Men* (1967), Naipaul’s seventh novel and perhaps his finest, where Ralph Singh, the disappointed postcolonial politician turned aspiring memoirist, recalls his first experience of snow in England (he feels propriety towards snow because of his fantasies of Aryan Central Asia, which he treats as his own private mythical past):

Standing before window – crooked sashes, peeling paintwork: so fragile the structure up here which lower down appeared so solid – I felt the dead light on my face. The flakes didn’t only float: they also spun. They touched the glass and turned a film of melting ice. Below the livid grey sky roofs were white and shining black in patches. The bombsite was so wholly

white: every shrub, every discarded bottle, box, and tin was defined. I had seen. Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty? And looking out from that room to the thin lines of brown smoke arising from ugly chimney pots, the plastered wall of the house next to the bombsite tremendously braced and buttressed looking out from that empty room with the mattress on the floor, I felt all the magic of the city go away, and had an intimation of the forlornness of the city and of the people who lived in it.

This kind of noticing, weaving difficult emotions with the world outside, makes up some of Naipaul’s finest passages. It is not only the shabbiness of things that confounds Singh, but the way he feels that beauty, too, is inaccessible to him. Part of the effect owes to Naipaul’s confidence – so unfashionable and untenable – that it is possible to describe things as they actually are, to reach a level of perception where the subjective meets the objective, and reality has been reproduced on the page. Few writers think like this, but Naipaul’s fallacy produced prose whose suppleness was in inverse proportion to the brittle conviction that sustained it. He was probably being truthful when he said American movies influenced his writing more than English literature: the camera-like handling, the clipped dialogue. Naipaul’s distinctiveness showed up in smaller moments, too, as in *Guerillas* (1975) when Naipaul describes the South African Roche’s trousers as “fawn-coloured”, and then, a page later, describes a “dog” as “fawn-coloured”. It’s not merely that he despised elegant variation; he needed repetition, which registered right down to the “bis” in his own speech (“It was very difficult, it was very difficult”). When Naipaul had found the right word, he used it over and over. There were certain words he disliked (“plethora”) and certain words he favoured: “bush”, “tribal”, “latrine”.

In an extraordinary act, Naipaul gave himself over to his biographer like a patient giving his body over to science: no restrictions were put on Patrick French’s scalpel. “I am a great believer in the record”, Naipaul told French, whose biography *The World Is What It Is* appeared in 2008, “that the truth is wonderful and that any doctored truth is awful”.

The story that came through there was not quite what Naipaul had always led us to believe. The experience of arriving from the periphery to what he took to be the heart of civilization was one of his obsessive, recurring themes. But in French’s account, the young Naipaul was likely more heavily armed than he would later make himself out: a human husk without a point of view. Growing up in a crowded household and schooled in the Trinidadian art of pecong, a vicious style of duelling wit, Naipaul came to Oxford as ready to lunge as he was to parry. When he saw writers he admired pass through the college gates, “magical men” such as Joyce Cary, he wanted to become them. His later writing about some of his friends who eased his way into London society – Anthony Powell, above all – took on a vindictive quality (Naipaul proudly claimed never to have read any of Powell’s books when they were friends) that suggested some of his abundant disdain was his way of making it as an emigrant pioneer. He converted his precocity into hauteur. “That clever little nigger Naipaul has won another literary prize” (Evelyn Waugh, 1963) was the kind of thing he had to put up with behind his back.



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Adonis: Translation, a Second Act of Creation?



Photo: Bahijet Iskander

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Adonis is an internationally renowned poet, essayist, philosopher and theoretician of Arab poetics. Referred to in interviews as “the greatest living poet of the Arab world”, this “grand old man of poetry, secularism and free speech in the Arab world” has been writing poetry for 75 years and has more than fifty published works in Arabic of poetry, criticism, essays, with translations into many languages. His modernist influence on Arabic poetry is often compared to that of T S Eliot on Anglophone poetry.

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At first Naipaul did not realize that what he had left behind would become his great subject. He was afraid of having used up all his material in *A House for Mr Biswas*, but discovered it could not be exhausted. His non-fiction especially would expand on the presences and incipient dramas in the old Port of Spain schoolroom: Africa, South America, America, India, colonialism, Black Power and Islam. In his early writing, Naipaul was almost an anti-colonial avenger. Though he kept his distance from the great generation of Caribbean radicals – Stuart Hall, Derek Walcott, Samuel Selvon – he, perhaps more than them, succeeded in conferring dignity on characters that had only ever been caricatures in most British fiction.

But his non-fiction was different altogether. Though his writing on the period of decolonization is sometimes described as “searing” and “unsparing”, his overall depiction of the 1960s and 70s was distorted. In his eyes, the rise of the new states, full of incompetent bureaucrats aping their past masters in their offices and clubs, was an unending farce. Naipaul made things too easy for himself: he wrote only of the buffoons and murderous jesters – Cheddi Chagan, Michael X, Mobutu – instead of reckoning with harder figures: Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor. It was as if someone were to write about international socialism through the careers of Enver Hoxha, Siad Barre and Slobodan Milošević. “There is an instructively photogenic touch to Naipaul’s itineraries”, Benedict Anderson once observed. “Buenos Aires (not Caracas), Kinshasa (not Maputo), Kuala Lumpur (not Algiers) show in sharp, dyspeptic relief the civilized clubman against a backdrop of ‘Oriental’ savagery, self-delusion, fanaticism and stupidity. . . . Who will buy Naipaul on Belgium or Bulgaria?”

Likewise, Naipaul on Islam was often a crude retailing of colonial historiography: blaming twelfth-century Muslim conquests for the state of India’s contemporary distress, or finding Malaysians and Indonesians incapable of appreciating their own past due to their long-distance fealty to Mecca. He was not a very good traveller: the endless fussiness with guides and fixers and meals could become tiresome to read about (though it’s difficult not to agree with his discovery that it is easier to write in sterile international hotels than in ones that aim for authenticity). By his middle period, as Anderson noted, Naipaul was proclaiming loudly what many polite English people would no longer say in public. As the end of the Cold War came, and Islam was substituted for communism as the main enemy of the West, his writings became a safe pond where neo-conservatives went fishing for justifications for their own imposed revolutions. Not that Naipaul had much truck with the beneficence of US power. “The Americans shoot everybody”, says Harry da Tunja in *Guerrillas*. “They’re worse than the South Americans.”

Naipaul’s readers fall in several categories. At the extremes, there are those who view him as a sell-out, “who allowed himself quite self-consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution” (Edward Said), and those who embrace him with abandon. The old Left of New York mostly took a middle path. In the Upper West Side of Manhattan, sometime in the mid-2000s, I remember a woman in a wheelchair spying a copy of *The Mimic Men* in my hands. She smiled and said with a lilt: “Isn’t he very fine?” It was Elizabeth Hardwick in her dotage. Her apartment on West 67th Street had

been Naipaul’s base of operations on his visits to New York; there he may have written some of his piece on Norman Mailer’s campaign for mayor (“New York in parts is like Delhi with money”). Hardwick, Irving Howe, Vivian Gornick, Michael Greenberg and other New York writers found striking resonances of their own political itineraries in Naipaul’s visions – as well as the same distaste for the aestheticization of poverty and despair by a younger generation of liberals. But as much as they used his books as their own travel guides, and judged his writing unsurpassed, their admiration had a limit. “A serious writer”, Howe wrote of Naipaul, “can simply allow the wretchedness of his depicted scene to become the limit of his vision.”

A few years later, I saw Naipaul as he exited the 92nd Street Y. There had been an event for *The Masque of Africa*. He was bent over, teetering on dropsical legs, telling a fan who helped him walk that America was more receptive to him this time around. (The nadir may have been 1979, when Naipaul spent a year teaching creative writing at Wesleyan University, where he would read Balzac, silently to himself in front of his “bogus students”, and savoured their hatred of him.) He moved past the crowd; past the taxi drivers; past the doormen and hot dog vendors. I wanted

to believe he was taking them all in with quick saccades, candidates for a place in his fiction if they stayed in his memory: another escaped fate there, another one there. The colour and shape of some of the men was not that different from his. The opening of *A Bend in the River* is now taken as Naipaul’s credo, plucked by Obama for a drone-friendly foreign policy slogan, and likely to survive longer than his other sentences. “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.” But the line is spoken by Salim, an insecure shop owner, who is taking measure of his fate against the backdrop of dictatorial Africa. It is the voice of a small man reaching for exaggerated clarity, as he acts as his own dubious life coach. It is not a line from Naipaul’s personal diary or a letter from son to father.

Naipaul worked in more forms than most of his peers: only poetry he never seems to have tried (“Most people called poets are tiny people, with tiny thoughts”). Picaresque novels, political novels, short stories, travel reports, memoirs, auto-fiction (*The Enigma of Arrival*), literary appraisals of past masters, and magazine profiles (his piece on Jacques Soustelle is the pinnacle of the form): he mastered them all. Naipaul’s forays into the social psychology of elections – from Indira Gandhi’s, to the slim marvel *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), to his report from the 1984 Republican

Convention in Dallas – shames much of what passes for political science. There was something caustic yet also gentle about these pieces, as if he could not help seeing the ritual of representation for what it was – elites performing their responsibility to the people – but that it was in the end a necessary fiction, and that the lucky yet vulnerable conceit of democracy may be that it allows its pageantry to be enacted again and again.

As central as anything to Naipaul’s novels was sex, which tended to be clumsy, brutal and short. The scenes are hard to forget. Jane, the privileged, wide-eyed publicist in *Guerrillas*, on the bed after a rape, “her untanned buttocks together spreading slightly, wet with sweat where he had been sitting on her, the fine hairs there flatted in the sweat and showing more clearly”. The fear of Santosh in *In a Free State* before he sleeps with a black woman in his master’s apartment in Washington, DC. “The *hubshi* woman came in, moving among my employer’s ornaments like a bull. I was greatly provoked. The smell was too much; so was the sight of her armpits. I fell. She dragged me down on the couch, on the saffron spread which was one of my employer’s nicest pieces of Punjabi folk-weaving.” And Willie Chandran’s blind man’s bluff: “June undressed methodically. It was too much for Willie. He hardly enjoyed the moment. In no time at all it was over for him, after a whole weekend of planning. After all the expense, and he didn’t know what to say”. Naipaul always presumed that the damaged society a person belonged to would be exposed in the physical act. Among the ravages of colonialism, he was preoccupied with one element less talked about: the corruption and mimicry of passions whose generic shape was dictated by the self-proclaimed higher civilization.

Naipaul’s last novel *Magic Seeds* (2004) showed clear signs of slipping off. It was as if it had been conceived and written by someone attempting to lampoon his style and his obsessions. The funniest and saddest thing written on Naipaul may be a short story by Roberto Bolaño, “Scholars of Sodom”. The narrator tries to write a story about Naipaul in the 1980s, as he hovers around the streets of Buenos Aires on assignment for the *New York Review of Books*:

That’s how Naipaul was in my story, in spite of himself. He kept his eyes open and maintained his customary lucidity. He had what the Spanish call bad milk, a kind of spleen that immunized him against appeals to vulgar sentimentality. But in his nights of wandering around Buenos Aires, he, or his antennae, also picked up the static of hell. The problem was that he didn’t know how to extract the messages from that noise, a predicament that certain writers, certain literary artists, find particularly unsettling.

As writer’s criticism, this was the sort of thing that Naipaul could just about take. For all his investigations and meditations on why he had become a writer, the fact remained preciously mysterious to him. That insoluble blot of the unknown within himself granted him strong negative capability. Naipaul had thin enough skin to let the pain of the world in, but a tough enough hide to write some of it back out. Despite his distortions, his failings, and everything else, the sympathies he managed at his height were vast. You could say he died from self-parody. You could say that. But he will still be read by those who remember – or discover – the rest.

‘Grounded’ by Ella Baron



“In time they could not even fly after their hats. Want of practice, they called it; but what it really meant was that they no longer believed.” (J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*)