

The World is What it is

The authorized biography of V.S.Naipaul

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November 8 - November 22, 2009

Naipaul was, at least on the face of it, a most unlikely candidate to become a major literary figure, stemming as he did from a most peripheral part of the world - Trinidad and Tobago. Those were marginal colonial entities, with no culture, no history, no nothing. And they still are marginal, with no culture, no history, no nothing, even if colonial has been turned into post-colonial. Colonies of Britain, later abandoned to Negro succession, the Indian community out of which he came, was a minority on the fringe of the fringe. How come he was able to do this transition?

Ambition of course, a sense of pride of being of Brahmin stock, although strictly speaking this latter distinction is more conjectural than factual. His roots in the Caribbean island were rather shallow, but that often goes with colonial territory. His ancestors a mere two generations ago being drafted across the oceans to serve as indentured labor meant that his roots were cut very close to his emergence in this world. Nevertheless, in spite of such inauspicious beginnings, his relatives, that is on his mothers side, managed to improve themselves and become something of a local gentry, under whose wings his father, an intellectually ambitious man pursuing a career as a journalist, was taken when married. But of course the members of his mothers family were of course calling all the shots. This must have been humiliating to the father, and the son must have felt it and resented his fathers plight. The way out of this Caribbean hole was to win a scholarship. This being a feat already having been accomplished by relatives it was not beyond the thinkable even if it was still very hard to achieve. Naipaul applied himself to it and eventually won. Although it was for some time come or go until the billiard balls of fate dipped into the right slots. He was eighteen and about to enter the big world. Flying out in style out of his little island, leaving all behind. And it is at this moment really that his story begins.

He was ambitious, and his ambition was focused from the start. He wanted to become a writer, his father having proved the most vivid inspiration (and one he would always later make a point of acknowledging as his only real influence). The ambition was primarily confined to the writing itself as a highly technical craft. He thus brought to his pursuit a single-minded intensity, the likes of which one would rather expect from a prodigy in music or mathematics. With Naipaul one often feels that material is secondary. He does not so much write to express himself, but rather he seeks his expression in order to get an excuse to write. Thus, like Flaubert, he is very much a writer's writer. Typical and characteristic of his approach was his propensity to explicitly articulate rules of good writing, such as limiting the number of words in a sentence, never choosing a fancy word when a simple and ordinary one would do, and above all never to use words the meaning of which one is not completely clear. (If one does so one should seek another profession). Those are strict rules and they invariably act as a straight-jacket, so of course like all rules they are there

to be eventually broken. Eventually that is, not right away. Most would-be writers would clearly benefit from such discipline. The secret of art is not freedom but constraint. The act of freedom is a last resort, and only truly expresses itself as a rejection of strictures. Only the artist who has been through this process has achieved what transcends mere artistry and becomes true art. Thus to Naipaul the great difficulty was to find the right material, before that he simply could not take off but was grounded marking time.

And he did mark time at Oxford, diligently if with lackluster, he pursued his academic studies. He felt cut-off, was lonely and lost, and was sexually inexperienced and immature, shy withdrawn but above all haughty and fastidious. Not surprisingly he even made a half-hearted attempt at suicide, of which he subsequently would be very much ashamed. He sought out an English girl, got involved, sexually entangled although he was not sexually attracted to her. But one thing led to another and she would soon become indispensable to him and they got married. And so started a long, tortuous and sterile marital relationship based on compassion and habit and resulting in no issue, a forced childlessness that was a source of regret to both of them. In the meantime he graduated, his father died pre-maturely from a heart attack, he wrote his books based on his childhood and youth experiences from Trinidad, attracted attention, made contacts, appeared on the radio, got assignments to write and slowly made a name for himself. With his novel 'A House for Mr Biswas' he got critical acclaim and enjoyed public appreciation. He traveled, returned to Trinidad, visited India, and soon became well-known as a travel-writer and independent acerbic commentator on the modern world. Typical of his travel writing is that he air-brushes out his wife and the uninitiated reader gets the impression that he travels on his own. Was his wife not a real part of his life but only a convenience, taking care of his needs, the demands of logistics, while his mind and dreams were elsewhere?

He did not carnally desire his wife and early on he resorted to the services of prostitutes. This was clearly unsatisfactory at length, and the taking up with a more permanent mistress was inevitably in the books sooner or later, although it would not happen until he was forty. Margaret, a woman of English extraction living with her husband in Buenos Aires. Bored, flirtatious, sexually adventurous and ten years younger. An inauspicious beginning. He was ravenously attracted but equally inept, and she found his advances and performance below par and rejected him as a creep. He did manage to rig up a second chance and miraculously succeeded to have things hit off. What would follow would be an on and off saga, of intermittent passionate meetings of rather abusive sex pursued to mutual satisfaction. They were clearly cut out for each other, but he realized, consciously or subconsciously, that it would not work on a daily quotidian basis. They shared the excitement of illicit sex, but not of any intellectual interest. To abandon his English wife seemed more and more of an impractical proposition. After all she was indispensable for his work. The faithful secretary, the reliable advisor, the trusted critic. So it dragged on, he giving the standard excuses and evasions, she hanging around, divorcing her husband, abandoning her children, aborting his, always hoping for more. The classical situation, everything done on his terms. She wrote often, he wrote almost nothing, clearly being first and foremost a writer, keeping work and play clearly apart. Gradually his wife fades away, is diagnosed with cancer gets operated on, temporarily rebounds only to relapse again. The situation is getting desperate, he takes off onto a trip to Indonesia. When he returns

she has not many days left to live. In the meantime he has found a much younger woman in Pakistan, a Muslim too boot while he has projected himself as a chauvinistic Hindu, a real Brahmin. He has already proposed to her and she moves in shortly after the necessary services have been executed. And here the biography stops. And this is of course rather unsatisfactory. One would like to know more, after all the subject is not dead, in fact still very much alive, and the greatest triumph such as the long predicted Nobel Prize finally is still to be savoured.

It is a successful life, but not by any means a happy one. It is obviously very hard to sympathize with him, although perhaps not so difficult to identify. At least for me, seeing in his early break-out and tender relation with his father, a striking parallel to my own formative experiences. Nevertheless (or maybe rather because) he does come across as encrusted in his own selfishness. On the other hand there is undeniable brilliance and achievement, the kind that demands respect. He provokes awe and invites adulation but seldom if ever genuine friendship. The character of Paul Theroux is a tragic-comic case in point. Ten years younger, a peace-corps worker in the middle of blackest Africa, providing his assistance and proving his usefulness in an unaccustomed situation. He tags himself on, continues to be useful and solicitous, and is being tolerated only to eventually being unceremoniously dumped. He is probably far from being unique, the difference being that he is another writer, a compulsive one, just as he is a compulsive traveler and recorder, not being above writing vent to his anger and disappointment in best-selling books.

He is brilliant, but in what does his brilliance really reside? His technical mastery as a writer? Certainly this is a great component of his intellectual poise, the basis for his arrogance and confidence. Otherwise he is an unsentimental observer of the post-modern human condition. Allergic to prevalent cant, especially tart about fashionable politically correct opinions about multiculturalism and post-colonial aspirations. A ruthless critic of Muslim revival and an unabashed apologetic of Western advance, economic and scientific, he certainly made enemies and provoked resentment. He wrote novels, but I would place him highest as a travel writer. While his intermittent side-kick Paul Theroux writes self-centered accounts of adventures in exotic places, with whom most airport travelers can easily identify, he provides the real thing. In-depth incursions, taking the temperature of a society, sizing in up, providing a diagnosis. And this in a very successful and insightful way according to critics. How come? Does he possess particular expertise? Does he have secret resources, is he privy to special-behind-the curtains channels? Or is it the special touch of a writer? A good writer does not need to be an expert on what he writes, his very writing makes him an expert. He makes things come alive which earlier was hidden and unarticulated. He might not be as knowledgeable as he is sensitive. But is that not what art is all about?