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Naipaul Unveiled

Patrick French's biography of V. S. Naipaul was published in England last spring where it received glowing praise from A. N. Wilson, a reviewer not inclined to glow indiscriminately.[1] Wilson called it "a prodigious achievement," "a justification for the art of biography itself," and compared it, astutely, to the authorized biography J. M. Froude wrote of Thomas Carlyle, a portrait that brought out the master's selfishness and cruelty toward his wife Jane. Froude also edited *Reminiscences*, in which Carlyle wrote passionately of the guilt he suffered after his wife's death. Naipaul has spoken openly and fully to Mr. French about his wife Pat, who died of cancer: "It could be said that I had killed her. It could be said. I feel a little bit that way." The combination of confessional directness and a more indirect "objectivity" is startling, even chilling. But then, Sir Vidia (he was knighted in 1990) has taken good care over the years, both in his books and recorded interviews, to express opinions and divulge confessions that, though often irreverent and humorous, are sometimes more than a touch disturbing.[2] Again the comparison to Carlyle is apt: one of Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, about a black insurrection in the West Indies, was titled *The Nigger Question*; Naipaul was not averse to shocking listeners by using the N-word, even as his wife would attempt to restrain him.

In his introduction to the book, French notes that it is perhaps "the last literary biography to be written with a complete paper archive." The central documents in that archive are the hundreds of pages of journals Pat Naipaul kept over decades, containing the most intimate reflections about her relationship to her

[1] THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul, by *Patrick French*. Alfred A. Knopf. $30.00. Paul Theroux's "unauthorized" portrait, *Sir Vidia's Shadow* (Boston, 1998), is still very much worth reading.

[2] A single instance, fairly mild: Bernard Levin interviews him in 1958 and asks, "You were born in Trinidad?"; Naipaul's answer: "I was born there, yes . . . I thought it was a great mistake."

husband. Although Naipaul had, evidently, never read any of the journal, he requested no changes in French's completed manuscript, which ends in 1996 when Naipaul and his second wife, Nadira Khannum Alvi, a well-connected Muslim woman, scatter Pat's ashes in Gloucestershire. The book begins with Naipaul's subsequent award, in 2001, of the Nobel Prize ("a cynical gesture to humiliate Muslims," said a member of the Muslim League), by which time, French writes, his reputation for giving offense counted more than the "half-century of work" to be seen in some thirty books. Yet it is possible that the effort not to let what French calls his "tendency to caricature himself in public" take precedence over his written work may exempt that work from adequate and inquiring criticism. "Using simple sentences he would look at complex modern subjects," French announces in his opening page. Can truly complex looks at such subjects, whether in Naipaul's fiction or nonfiction (the line is not always clearly drawn), be created by "simple sentences"?

At any rate his story, told and retold on a number of occasions in his books, is a great one: the East Indian-West Indian boy whose Oxford education left him what French calls "a double exile, a deracinated Colonial." Perhaps the best and most affecting introduction to his work are the letters he exchanged with his father, Seepersad Naipaul, himself an aspiring writer whose struggles are the inspiration for Naipaul's greatest character, the protagonist of his best novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas.*[3] The other major person in his life was Patricia Hale, an Oxford undergraduate when they met, from a provincial family in Birmingham. After many difficulties, mainly parental, they married in 1955, both age twenty-two. "Explaining," Pat to his parents (they had found out he had a girl friend), Naipaul did so in the most unpromising terms, describing her as "not unintelligent, nor altogether unattractive," while finding her willingness to "put up with all my moods" worth gratitude, and her friendship "most stimulating." Neither family was informed of the marriage, and Naipaul failed to produce a wedding ring, pleading poverty and noting that "I simply had no interest in jewelry." Pat eventually bought herself a gold band but rarely wore it. From the begin-

[3] The letters may be found in *Between Father and Son*, ed. by Gillon Aitken (New York, 2000). A collection of Seepersad Naipaul's stories, *The Adventures of Gurudeva*, with a preface by V. S. Naipaul, was published in 1976 by André Deutsch.

ning, sexual relations between the two were unsatisfactory, and a few years afterwards Naipaul began to visit prostitutes—"a great prostitute man" he later called himself, with whatever exaggeration such a claim might entail.

If we had not thought Naipaul's erotic experience, or lack of it, was important to his life as a writer, the new biography offers a fully substantiated corrective and does so with remarkable dispassion. An unsuccessful marital sex life punctuated by brothel visitings that doubtless produced guilt and provided less than fulfilling relationships, ended with his taking a mistress in 1972 as he reached age forty. Margaret Gooding was married with three children, living in Argentina, a country whose political unrest Naipaul was planning to write about for the *New York Review of Books.* An Italian-American acquaintance, Thomas di Giovanni, amanuensis for Jorge Luis Borges, met Naipaul in Argentina and before long learned of his marital unhappiness. Di Giovanni invited Naipaul to a tea at which Margaret was the only guest. Naipaul described the moment in an interview with French in 2003:

> I wished to possess her as soon as I saw her. She was wearing a kind of furry pullover because it was the beginning of the Argentine winter and it was slightly dirty, the way these things can get dirty, and that was very affecting to me . . . So she came in and I was completely dazzled. I loved her eyes. I loved her mouth. I loved everything about her and I have never stopped loving her, actually. What a panic it was for me to win her because I had no seducing talent at all. And somehow the need was so great that I did it.

This has the ring of truth—of the way it was. At the time Margaret was thirty and she would be his on-and-off companion for the next three decades, three times pregnant by him and aborting the pregnancies. Meanwhile Pat, to whom Naipaul confessed the affair, was devastated: "I was liberated. She was destroyed. It was inevitable" said Naipaul many years later. In French's words, Pat became as she poured her feelings into the pages of her journal, another of the "great, tragic, literary spouses such as Sonia Tolstoy, Jane Carlyle and Leonard Woolf." (Perhaps so, although Woolf doesn't appear to me as a tragic spouse.)

The most absorbing part of the biography, aside from marital and extramarital goings-on, is Naipaul's entry into the British literary establishment, a process French describes and docu-

ments thoroughly. After failing to receive a B.Litt degree in his fourth year at Oxford, he attempted unsuccessfully to procure jobs in India and Darjeeling, then worked in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and eventually was offered a three-year contract as producer of a program, "Caribbean Voices," for the BBC, with contributors such as George Lamming, Edgar Mittelholzer, and Samuel Selvon. In his "Prologue to an Autobiography" (in *Literary Occasions*, 2003), he recounts how, at the BBC's freelances' room, he inserted a piece of paper into a typewriter, assumed what he called a "monkey crouch," and wrote the following sentences: "Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, 'What happening there, Bogart?' Bogart would turn in his bed and mumble softly so that no one heard, 'What happening there, Hat?'" The exchange between these two Trinidad natives would open the first story in *Miguel Street*, a volume of vignettes of Caribbean life that appeared in 1959. By that time, Naipaul, with the aid of the literary man Francis Wyndham, had secured a publisher, André Deutsch, and a sympathetic editor, Diana Athill. He had also brought out rather quickly two novels, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), deft, immensely readable comedies of West Indian life. They were saluted by England's foremost comic novelists, Anthony Powell and Kingsley Amis, the latter of whom, reviewing *The Suffrage of Elvira*, wrote that Naipaul's narrative was "concerned with small-scale stratagems, between neighbors, in-laws or rivals. It gradually dawns upon one that this humour, conducted throughout with the utmost stylistic quietude, is completely original." Powell not only got him reviewed in *Punch* but invited Naipaul to mingle socially with the likes of Lady Antonia Fraser, Hugh Thomas, and other writerly figures. Naipaul also put in what seemed to be the requisite stint for any aspiring novelist by reviewing countless books for the *New Statesman*. (Powell recommended him for the job.) By 1962, when he brought out his first "non-fiction" book, *The Middle Passage*, Evelyn Waugh would praise him for a mastery of English that put to shame his British contemporaries and whose stories revealed him to be "free of delusion about independence and representative government of his native land." French notes that Waugh's response was an early example of a reactionary finding confirmation of anti-liberal prejudices in

the writer's work. Privately, to his friend Nancy Mitford, Waugh wrote, "That clever little nigger Naipaul has won *another* literary prize. Oh for a black face."

In 1961 Naipaul published his masterwork, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, by common consent one of the most significant and satisfying novels of the last century. He then began his career of traveling to and writing books about places of racial and political mix and confusion: Trinidad, India, Africa, Iran, Pakistan. These books—lengthy, crammed with interviews, observations and formulations—made him an international reporter of impressive resourcefulness. After he won the Nobel prize, Geoffrey Wheatcroft directed attention to "his magisterial sequence of nonfiction narrative," for which, Wheatcroft said, the phrase "travel writing" was wholly inadequate. He could have been, Wheatcroft observes, "a great tabloid journalist with his love of anecdote, colour, and 'human interest.'" Few would dissent from this claim.[4] Concurrent with these narratives, Naipaul, it seems, began to lose faith in the novel's claim to be the prime recorder of human experience. His developing conviction was that a once great literary form had become inadequate to express (in French's words) "the complexities of modern, patchwork societies." By the end of the century he would pronounce, as from a great height, "it is a vanity of the age . . . that the novel continues to be literature's final and highest expression." French also notes, presciently, that increasingly Naipaul was having trouble with the form of his own novels, having convinced himself that, with *Mr. Biswas*, he had used up his Caribbean material. After his first trip to India in 1962, he said in an interview "I was no longer going to manufacture an artificial, contrived story"—in other words, not going to write one of those artificial contrived novels. Such a declaration might be seen as refreshingly bold on his part; it also, in this reader's judgment on the evidence of the novels (or "novels") to come, represents a serious loss in the imaginative possibilities of fiction.

Turning to those novels, my troubles with Naipaul begin with *The Mimic Men* (1966), a first-person "confession" by one Ralph Singh, a writer born on a Caribbean isle, now living in exile in

[4] Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "A Terrifying Honesty," in *The Humour and the Pity: Essays on V. S. Naipaul* (New Delhi, 2002).

London and musing over his life as a once Colonial minister. The novel is written in a severe style, quite unlike the subtle comedy of voices heard in the earlier books. Its "I" narrator eschews any variations in tone—the voice throughout is pitched in a single key, as in these sentences about schooldays:

> I took up sport. I put my name down for cricket. I thought I would be a bowler and needless to say I wished to bowl very fast. I took a long run and not infrequently at the end lost control of both the run and the ball. I did not last on any side. But my effort was not wasted. I lost some of my self-consciousness.

And so on, for 250 pages. Reading *The Mimic Men* is like trying to chew your way through an endless, flavorless loaf of bread. The novel is humorless as well, in marked contrast to the ones preceding it, and there is really no exploration of the narrator's consciousness, since all he does is utter one declaration after another. Recently Naipaul admitted to French that *The Mimic Men* was "an important book for the cultural emptiness in colonial people. But it is very dry." This statement is of significance for suggesting that "importance"—the serious treatment of colonial, cultural emptiness—can better be brought out without the distractions of humor, of comedy. "Dryness" is presumably in the service of a larger import; or so, it seems, Naipaul convinced himself, turning his back on the comic sensibility central to his novels thus far—as well as to The Novel—in favor of something larger.

In calling *The Mimic Men* "very dry," Naipaul went on to inform his biographer that after that novel his books stopped being dry, and that this change happened "after Margaret." The books he has in mind are his next two novels, *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), both written after he met Margaret in 1972. We gather that their non-dryness has a great deal to do with the presence in each of them of graphic sexual encounters: in *Guerrillas*, the anal rape of Jane by the half-breed guerrilla leader, Jimmy Ahmed; in *A Bend in the River*, the beating administered by the narrator Salim to his mistress Yvette. Even more so than *The Mimic Men*, both novels were well reviewed and sold well; but they continued the humorless, mesmerized mode of the earlier book. *Guerrillas* has an "objective" third-person narrator whose sentences are almost wholly without tone. A couple from England,

Roche and his mistress Jane, come to a troubled Caribbean island to do—it is not clear precisely what, but their connection with the revolutionist Jimmy Ahmed leads only to disaster. *A Bend in the River* is mainly a first-person recitation by the narrator Salim, who comes to central Africa from the eastern coast to run a small business; he becomes involved with the French wife of a writer, Raymond, who is looking for favor from the "Big Man" who runs the country. The emerging chaos and disaster in the larger political scene parallel the disintegration of Salim and Yvette's relationship.

A Bend in the River is a better book than *Guerrillas*, and there's no doubt that, in tackling the subject of countries recently liberated from colonial rule, then subject to the false hopes and corruption of a "native" regime, Naipaul has given us up-to-the-minute reports on the politics and culture of troubled spots. But insofar as character and plot are central to novels, he lets us down badly. The English couple in *Guerrillas,* Roche and Jane, are empty vessels, rendered with an absolute lack of sympathy, even "affect." There is a refusal to imagine anything that might be called redeemingly human about either of them. One unfriendly reviewer of the novel called it "not a story, but a vehicle around which a series of magazine articles, on sex, on women, on delinquency, are hung like placards." *A Bend in the River* has a more believable protagonist, although it is a strain to imagine complex meditations on history emanating from an East African Muslim shopkeeper who is otherwise presented to us as an ordinary man. Both novels move stiffly, or rather lurch from one event or topic to another. Naipaul said to French, "I have always been bad at plotting," a limitation that may have encouraged his determination not to manufacture "an artificial, contrived story." But good novels manage to contrive a story that feels, remarkably, natural and compelling, uncontrived.

When *A Bend in the River* appeared, Irving Howe in the *New York Times Book Review* praised it in the highest terms, admiring Naipaul's "hard-edged wit," "steely perspective," the "cool precision" of this "tough-spirited writer." Howe admitted that Naipaul is "hardly even a 'likeable' writer" (as if to be likeable were a flaw) who "no longer performs and barely troubles to please." Wordsworth thought that poetry was an homage to the "grand elementary principle of pleasure"; evidently the post-

"novel" as produced by Naipaul acknowledges no such imperative but strives for importance rather. Howe does wonder, near the end of his almost wholly positive review, whether if, finally, "a serious writer can simply allow the wretchedness of his depicted scene to become the limit of his vision." Such wretchedness is especially evident in the sexual violence of both *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*. An instance of it appears late in the latter novel, when Yvette visits Salim and enrages him with what he sees as whorish behavior. Salim asks her twice if she thinks he is "Raymond" (her husband):

> This time she was given no chance to reply. She was hit so hard and so often about the face, even through raised, protecting arms, that she staggered back and allowed herself to fall on the floor. I used my foot on her then, doing that for the sake of the beauty of her shoes, her ankles, the skirt I had watched her raise, the hump of her hip. She turned her face to the wall and remained still for a while.

After which she begins to wail. Unless I misread the book, we are wholly unprepared for this shocking event, given the relative passivity and caution observed in the protagonist. Even here Naipaul somewhat removes the violence from the narrator ("she was given no chance to reply. She was hit so hard . . .") as if it weren't really his doing. When French tells us that "Many of the gruesome sexual depictions in his subsequent novels were not the work of the imagination, but drawn from his life with Margaret," the biographer doesn't seem to realize how damning a criticism this is of Naipaul's lack of moral imagination about the central human figures of his fiction. If, as Naipaul claimed, the novels written after he met Margaret "stopped being dry," the change may not be to their advantage.

After *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul's fiction consists mainly of two long works, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World* (1994). Although in prefatory lists of his book titles he categorizes them as fiction, they are scarcely novels. *Enigma* is an extended first-person meditation of a writer ensconced in a cottage in Wiltshire, near Stonehenge, taking walks and musing about the place's past and present. It was occasioned (he tells us in an epilogue) by the death of his sister, Sati, and attendant thoughts of his own mortality. More than one writer has declared *Enigma* a great book—A. N. Wilson's word for it is "masterpiece"

—but no one has demonstrated to my satisfaction why this uninflected rumination, claustrophobic in its overall impact, is a candidate for greatness. *A Way in the World* is experimental in a different way: portraits of Caribbean figures spliced together with an historical expedition in nineteenth-century South America, it is not a book one reads more than once, and has little dramatic life. To turn back on him his own words about the novel Naipaul was no longer going to write, *A Way in the World* is both "artificial" and "contrived," but not to the effect of any artistic revelation. Patrick French writes, about *Enigma,* that "it is a book more for writers than readers." Whatever this means, it puts the hopeful reader—as does *A Way in the World*—in a not very hopeful situation.

About a particularly stressful year in Naipaul's life, his biographer remarks that throughout it he had "remained focussed on two things: himself and his writing." Looking at his career in its entirety, it must be said that remaining focussed on self and writing was not at all a condition of one particular year, rather a lifetime habit. Perhaps this might be said of any productive writer, but about no one more so than Naipaul. Along with this self-preoccupation has gone a willingness to make claims for that self, especially as it gets expressed in writing, which are, to say the least, extravagant. A few years ago he was interviewed in *The New Yorker*, and after dismissing "style" as something to be avoided in prose ("I want the writer not to be there"), he went on to insist on the peculiar difficulty of his own, presumably styleless, prose: "My paragraphs are very rich—they have to be read. Many things are happening in the paragraph. If you miss a paragraph—if you miss a page—it's hard to get back into it." Is tongue slightly in cheek here? Probably not, since such promoting of the writer's prose fits with other pronouncements. Decades ago he listed some novelists he didn't like—"Jane Austen, Hardy, Henry James, Conrad" for starters. He later modified his position on Conrad by praising a single story, "The Lagoon," while dismissing as impenetrable or unfinishable *Typhoon*, *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent*, *Nostromo*, and *Under Western Eyes*. On the basis of such judgments, it's hard to see how, as a critic of fiction, Naipaul can be taken seriously.

In his most recent collection of essays, he writes a "tribute" to his friend of many years, Anthony Powell, titled "An English Way

of Looking."[5] Naipaul was invited, after Powell died in 2000, to be interviewed about him on the BBC, then found he had little to say about Powell's fiction, since he had scarcely read any of it. When later asked by an editor of a literary weekly to write about Powell, Naipaul read six connected books from the middle of Powell's twelve-volume *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Lo and behold, he found that the books had no shape, that there was less care taken in the writing, that everything was over-explained, and that he detected "a strange new vanity in the writer, as of a man who felt he had made it." Summing it up: "There was no narrative skill at all, perhaps even no thought of narrative." A look at Powell's prewar gem, *From a View to a Death*, found it also unsuccessful since, like the *Music of Time*, it "leaves English social life just where it found it." Having dispensed with Powell's art, Naipaul in the remainder of the essay elaborately patronizes his old friend, right down to Powell's journals published near the end of Powell's life, in which, Naipaul says, he "lived up to what his enemies [Auberon Waugh in particular] said of him."

As someone convinced that Powell's narrative mastery is miles ahead of anything Naipaul is capable of, my judgment may be discounted as partial, prejudiced. Yet the essay on Powell, taken along with the overall tale told by this biography, produced a bad taste in my mouth. After his wife died Naipaul decided, says French, that he didn't want Margaret Gooding in his life any longer. Once more he presented himself, in the biographer's words, as "a figure controlled by irreducible needs," saying to French in 2003, "I feel that in all of this Margaret was badly treated . . . I feel this very much. But you know there is nothing I can do . . . I stayed with Margaret until she became middle-aged, almost an old lady." Nothing he could do, you know, just as with his discovery that Anthony Powell was a negligible novelist. It boggles the imagination.