

V.S. NAIPAUL AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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.¹

Settled, like the devolution of an inheritance. Seepersad Naipaul had just got his book of stories into print and Vidia had been drawn into the excitement, as earlier his father had drawn him into the creative process, reading the stories to him. He was still only eleven and had "given no sign of talent"; but he "was to be a writer".

In his most recent book, *Finding the Centre*, Naipaul seeks to admit the reader to the "process of writing" as he has experienced it. It is about his "literary beginnings" and current procedure; it gives us the "imaginative promptings" of his "many-sided background" and the mature writer "adding to his knowledge of the world".²

Even when Naipaul came down from Oxford to freelance for the B.B.C. the talent had not yet appeared - there was only the determination. And then late one afternoon a voice from the past launched him on his creative career:

... late one afternoon, without having any idea where I was going, and not perhaps intending to type to the end of the page, I wrote:

*Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, what happening there, Bogart?*³

That sentence, says Naipaul, was true; the next was invention, and together they had "done something extraordinary"⁴ to him as a writer. They created a world, not a mere representation

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1. V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre, Two Narratives*, London, 1984, p. 43-44.
 2. *ibid.* p.9.
 3. *ibid.* p.18.
 4. *ibid.* p.22.

of remembered life on a remembered Miguel Street but memories "simplified and transformed".⁵

It was a kind of luck - or talent, a given. Looking back, Naipaul says "the ways of my fantasy, the process of creation, remained mysterious to me ... True, and saving, knowledge of my subject ... always seemed to come during the writing". The attempt at narrative gave "value to an experience which might otherwise evaporate away".⁶

Naipaul underscores the magic and the creative transformation, illustrating this with the growth of the Bogart story and with the composition of *Finding the Centre*, beginning and (provisional) end expertly interlocked, and orchestrated with vignettes from the manysided background, its "imaginative promptings" juxtaposed with reflections on himself and his past.

The "impulse" to write what became Prologue to an Autobiography, the first of the two narratives that make up *Finding the Centre*, had actually come to him in 1967, "early one morning ... in a second-class Bombay hotel".⁷ But he "needed a story", and none proffered itself for years. A false beginning in 1972 ran into the sands, and it was only in 1981 that his encounter as a mature writer with the Bogart who became the protagonist of his first story came back to him and he "saw it as the centre" of the narrative he had set aside eight years earlier. "The present piece", he says, "represents my full intention. As a story of discovery and growing knowledge, it goes beyond the impulse felt all those years ago in Bombay".⁸

With these intimations, and with the careful preparation for the Bogart-in-1975 sequence - Naipaul sounds the theme twice before actually giving us the episode in the middle of 'Prologue', making it a centre in that sense, too - one reads the Bogart sequence with special intentness. And one wonders. It turns out to be an

5. *ibid.*

6. *ibid.* p. 31.

7. *ibid.* p. 9.

8. *ibid.* p. 10.

undistinguished tale of a drab meeting with an unremarkable man. Life imitates art - or improves on it. The episode ends with a touch that is more O. Henry than the self-conscious O. Henry ending of the story in *Miguel Street*. "Finding the centre", waiting fourteen years; what could Naipaul have meant when he wrote, "I saw it as the centre?"

It became the centre because it threw Naipaul back to his first day as a writer; it remains in the centre because it defines the creative transformation that produced the fictional character, cross lights from personal and family history adding perspective - we are admitted to the process. We see the young writer eagerly, anxiously, achieving the Bogart story after the serendipity of the first two sentences, passing the three sheets of B.B.C. non-rustle paper, typed close to resemble print, around among the other freelances, pressing on to the end of the book. This literary beginning is evoked in fine novelistic detail, down to the unusual typing posture:

My shoulders were thrown back as far as they could go; my spine was arched. My knees were drawn right up; my shoes rested on the top-most struts of the chair, left side and right side. So, with my legs wide apart, I sat at the typewriter with something like a monkey crouch.⁹

We see the anxiety of the author dictating the form and the speed of the first story: "I wanted above all to take the story to the end".¹⁰ Then, "over the next few days the street grew. Memory provided the material".¹¹ A narrator defined himself and grew with the stories, the street; 'found' items from the London present were thrown in. Till one day "I had come to the end of what I could do with the street, in that particular way".¹²

"What I could do". Looking for a new subject for another book, Naipaul reports, he was as "uncertain" as "pretending to be a writer"¹³ as when he had started. But the reader who

9. *ibid.* p. 25.

10. *ibid.* p. 24.

11. *ibid.* p. 28.

12. *ibid.* p. 29.

13. *ibid.* p. 30.

remembers the Bogart of Miguel Street can relate what was done there to what he now discovers of the real Bogart, both as remembered by the author and as encountered in Venezuela in 1977. He sees the transformation of the placid, detached, undemonstrative man, without conversation and without "pronounced character", who lived in the room in the Naipaul yard and came and went a few times, into the enigma seen by Miguel Street as "sensual, lazy, cool",¹⁴ more Humphrey Bogart like after each disappearance, becoming a boaster and one of the more colourful characters on the street - to be punctured by the ending.

The Bogart sequence of 'Prologue' is preceded and followed by vignettes from the past, both as remembered by Naipaul and as recovered from later encounters, conversations, research. (Here again we see the genuine artist's combination of work and gift; we see what he has sought, and what he was 'given' because he was receptive). Beautifully done; with Naipaul, beauty resides in structure, unpredictable nuances of characterization, incidents caught with economy and grace and a mature control over arrangement; not the order of sequent narrative but an imaginative order of juxtapositions, linked episodes, paradoxes and illuminations. One would not lightly want to lose the old grand-aunt dying, "very small, very light, like an object carefully placed, on her spring mattress" in a bright death chamber full of chatter and movement ("she had always been a humorist in a gathering") yet intensely serious about caste and blood.¹⁵ Or the uncle, crying for his youth on eight cents a day,¹⁶ or the episode of Naipaul's father and the sacrificial goat.¹⁷ And Naipaul himself - the child discovering his father's "bookcase-and-desk", the young freelance watching his story being read: "when he finished reading the story he folded the sheets carefully; with a gesture as of acceptance he put the sheets in his inner jacket pocket"; one sees the reader, and one 'sees' Naipaul watching him; one is touched to learn that the manuscript has been preserved - it "still has his foldmarks and wine stains"¹⁸ and by the young writer's anxiety: "I never with my own hand typed or wrote my name.

14. *ibid.* p. 24.

15. *ibid.* p. 64.

16. *ibid.* p. 67.

17. *ibid.* p. 73, 80-82.

18. *ibid.* p. 28.

I always asked someone else to do that for me".¹⁹ It's that kind of vignette and detail that arrests, as the creatively complex structure, making free with time, place and persons, absorbs; the Naipaul style is not marked by notable verbal felicities.

There are, of course, the hallmarks one has come to recognise. There is the deadpan repetition of key words and phrases: "going back" and "to become a writer" and their variants in 'Prologue'; the "two worlds" of *The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro* - the second of the book's two narratives. There is the sudden, vivid, placing of bald, assertive words in a general context of subtle half-tone; there is the presentation of something provisional as final, unqualified statement - to be qualified, or contradicted, later by other statements with a great effect of spontaneity, at times of drama. Permeating everything is the Naipaul tone (called "even-handed disenchantment" by a *TLS* reviewer) making sarcasm look like fastidiousness, but also able to convey personal shortcoming without prevarication or excuse: "I should have done something for them, gone back to them. But without having become a writer I couldn't go back."²⁰

Subtle and various, the whole masterly performance, encompassing as it does the simple transformations of reality of *Bogart* and its naively imitative end (perhaps an inheritance from his father who was a great admirer of O. Henry), yields us a triple view of "process": the beginnings, the present state of the art, and the writer's modes of arriving at his material.

But, it is interesting that what Naipaul calls the centre is the narrative spine - "it needed a story" - when one would expect, rather, some moral centre, some clarifying insight, some vision. None such was available to the young writer hurrying to the end of his first story, to the end of the book - this is what is clarified. The mature writer's account points to the lack, but not in terms of a later-achieved human centrality. The sense is rather of limitations being overcome, which might easily have

19. *ibid.* p. 31.

20. *ibid.* p. 85.

crippled, and which did destroy Naipaul's father. To be a colonial was "to live in an intellectually restricted world", denied "mature social experience",²¹ where "the English or French writer of his age had grown up in a world that was more or less explained. He wrote against a background of knowledge".²² For his father the pressures of such a life and the "fear of extinction" brought breakdown: "He looked in the mirror one day and couldn't see himself. And he began to scream".²³

The mature writer understands that he had inherited the hysteria:

That fear became mine as well. It was linked with the idea of vocation: the fear could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation.²⁴

It had surged up at the time of leaving Trinidad, so that he couldn't look back at his father, and so did not carry away with him "some picture of him on that day" that he "might still possess".²⁵ Seepersad Naipaul died "miserably" three years later. When Naipaul had come down from Oxford and was trying to write in London, there was a recurrence of the hysteria:

Our family was in distress. I should have done something for them, gone back to them. But without having become a writer I couldn't go back.²⁶

The hysteria could have been one more limitation, but he was saved by encountering a subject-matter. Beginning only with the determination and "that fear, a panic about failing" to be what he should be "rather than simple ambition"²⁷ He went back through Bogart to Miguel Street.

21. *ibid.* p. 12.

22. *ibid.* p. 32.

23. *ibid.* p. 82.

24. *ibid.* p. 84.

25. *ibid.* p. 46.

26. *ibid.* q.v.

27. *ibid.* p. 84.

This, too, he might have inherited. He had read his father's stories of Trinidad Indian life as "memorials of a heroic time"; the longest became his "private epic",²⁸ he tells us. And also "This way of looking from being my father's, became mine: my father's early stories created my background for me".²⁹

To become a writer, "that noble thing", he had "thought it necessary to leave". But "actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of self-knowledge".³⁰ The process had continued: "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". With each book he is surprised by what he learns about himself; he sees himself as a man gaining, through writing, knowledge "both about himself and the writing career that had been his ambition since childhood".^{30a}

But if going back, and his very colonial "particularity" gave him a subject and increasing knowledge of himself and of writing, it failed to give him a positively "deepening knowledge of a society" and of values and ideals internalised in that society. In five novels after *Miguel Street*, two books of non-fiction and various essays like 'The Killings in Trinidad', in which he explored the West Indian material, he moved from laughter through tragi-comedy to repudiation, so that in *Guerrillas* he is so totally alienated that it is as much an absurdist novel as a realisation of the foreboding expressed in *The Mimic Men* that people in such territories were "born to disorder".³¹

There is the interesting paradox that, as his readers became increasingly familiar with a Trinidad-like territory, Naipaul's "point of view" became increasingly emigré. In the last novel to date, *A Bend in the River*, he moved right out of that territory, but again to project alienation and hopelessness, with a protagonist who is essentially an exploiter and an action that ends in midflight and in images of futility.

'Prologue to an Autobiography' is what its title says, about beginnings, and we do not of course know how Naipaul will

28. *ibid.* p. 43.

29. Naipaul's Foreword to Seepersad Naipaul's *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* p. 15.

30. *ibid.* p. 47. 30a. *Ibid.* p. 33.

31. *The Mimic Men*, London 1967, p. 141.

treat the years that lay ahead. If Naipaul now sees that panic drove him in the beginning, the reader conversant with his work knows that alienation and "hysteria" continued to appear - and wonders how Naipaul himself perceives his experience: he says he "eased himself into knowledge". Exploration of the Caribbean issued in the stridency of his dismissal of "West Indian futility".³² But the nightmare that falling asleep in a London bedsitter he might wake up in Trinidad was revealed almost at the same time as when he wrote "the barrenness of my life in London ... after eight years here I have, without effort, arrived at the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment".³³ The attempt to come to terms with his Hindu ancestry, which yielded two books on India, confirmed for him that he was "without a past, without ancestors".³⁴

And so travel, which began with a brief, has become a necessity. Being of "no other nation but the diaspora itself"³⁵ experienced in homelessness, Naipaul finds travel a "necessary stimulus"; it is the "substitute for ... mature social experience", it gives him material - and life, a life as art. "I live, as it were, in a novel of my own making, moving from not knowing to knowing, with person interweaving with person and incident opening out into incident", he writes in 'The Crocodiles of Yamousoukro', the second narrative in *Finding the Centre*. The process is complex and bracing:

To arrive at a place without knowing anyone there, and sometimes without an introduction; to learn how to move among strangers for the short time one could afford to be among them; to hold oneself in constant readiness for adventure or revelation; to allow oneself to be carried along, up to a point, by accidents; and consciously to follow up other impulses - that could be as creative and imaginative a procedure as the writing that came after.³⁶

32. *The Middle Passage* New York 1963, p. 28, 29.

33. *The Overcrowded Barracoon* London 1972, p. 16.

34. *An Area of Darkness*, London 1964, p. 266.

35. Peter Scharen, *History in the Work of V.S. Naipaul Diaspora, Myth, Recurrence and Leadership in the Third World*. Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the History Honours Degree, Univ. of New South Wales, 1980 (unpubd.), p. 5.

36. *Finding the Centre*, p. 12.

Life and art nourish each other in a peculiar interaction - Naipaul approaches experience as a writer approaches material, giving himself a life as novels but with a special immediacy - it's much more than a "procedure" or a performance:

Travel of this sort became an intense experience for me. It used all the sides of my personality; I was always wound up.³⁷

But at the same time he is living to give himself novels - or books, anyway.

Consequently, the results are highly subjective, impressionistic. He gives himself only a "short time" and when "the intellectual adventure is over" he "becomes anxious to leave"³⁸ He takes, he gains from or utilizes the experience, but unlike a writer centred in a culture, he has nothing to give. Significantly in the Ivory Coast, the setting of *The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro*; the "people (he) was attracted to" were "not unlike" himself³⁹ and were "expatriates white and black".⁴⁰

The Ivorians tend to be singular exhibits: Djédjé, rocking back and forth, his eyes going red, "wild"; Professor Niangoran-Bouah, who is the world authority on Drummologie, having invented the discipline himself; the only exception is Mr. Bony, the ex-Minister - who is an outsider, out of favour, and who sounds very much like any westernised ex-colonial intellectual. They are singular, or just "Africans": one would be hard put to distinguish the people of *In A Free State* from those of *A Bend in the River* from those of 'Crocodiles', though these books derive from experiences in widely separated territories: Kenya, Zaire and the Ivory Coast.

In 'Crocodiles' Naipaul admits us to his process, and so we realize that we are actually getting a kind of novel, watching Naipaul at work, living his novel, the writer "in his latest development, going about one side of his business: travelling, adding

37. *ibid.* p. 12.

38. *ibid.* p. 103.

39. *ibid.* p. 10.

40. *ibid.* p. 104.

to his knowledge of the world, exposing himself to new people and new relationships".⁴¹

West Indians have been furious about *The Middle Passage*, Indians irritated by *An Area of Darkness* and *India, A Wounded Civilization*, and not only Muslims take objection to many things in *Among the Believers*. Perhaps we have been wrong all along, challenging these works as reports, when they were all novels of a kind? Yes and no - Naipaul does appear in the guise of commentator, saying things like "nothing was created in the West Indies" or "the Prophet, who would settle everything - but who had ceased to exist"⁴² and even "I really do hope that by the most brutal sort of analysis one is possibly opening up the situation to some sort of action".⁴³ But he is actually moving to a rhythm of his own, pausing and leaping, pushing and provoking, rather than seeking the rhythms of a people or culture; he is *generating* interesting episodes and conversations.

Thus 'Crocodiles' is fascinating on those terms; but what it conveys of interpretation is the rather trite observation that "Africans" live in two worlds, "two ideas of reality", and in fact the whole narrative is built on the duality. The "new world" of white men is real, and Africans want to enter it, or "to integrate Africa into the new world".⁴⁴ But at the same time there is an "African Africa... in its own eyes complete, achieved, bursting with its own powers".⁴⁵

A doubleness common, almost normal, in any people confronted with the new - modern, progressive, attractive in its amenities - but also conscious of their own history, of inherited values, places with memories, myths. Naipaul himself provides us with many examples. In *The Return of Eva Peron* Borges talks of a real

41. *ibid.* p. 10.

42. *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* London (Penguin) 1982, p. 331.

43. Michael, Thorpe, *V. S. Naipaul*, London 1976, p. 35.

44. *Finding the Centre*, p. 188.

45. *ibid.* p. 92.

nation with a past, while all around him is the macho-ridden waste of new dictatorship. In 'Prologue' we have the maternal grandfather who went back to India: "Trinidad was the interlude, the illusion. My grandfather had done well in Trinidad ... But he was willing, while he was still an active man, to turn his back on this and return home, to the real place".⁴⁶ In the Indian books Naipaul is enraged by Indian self-sufficiency and by Gandhi's India of the spirit, but he also gives us the woman "crazy phor phoreign", and Jamshyd becomes Jimmy among the smart young executives who keep the mills rolling. There were Caribbean slaves, who were kings by night, borne in palanquins, or sorcerers. To take an example from outside Naipaul's work, a Government advertisement in a local paper read:

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR KINGS...
Our forbears endowed with a rich irrigation
culture transformed the undulating lowlands
into smiling paddies...

Today, following on the footsteps of
our ancient tank building kings, we have
launched the Accelerated programme of
Mahaweli Development...⁴⁷

Any South Asian would probably know dozens of unimportant clerks who rejoice in their pedigrees - and are respected for them.

No irony is intended - one notes, simply, that our pasts are as real to us as the present. Naipaul feels no such past in his bones - "A literature can only grow out of a strong framework of social convention. And the only convention the West Indian knows is his involvement with the white world".⁴⁸ It is significant that his English is remarkably without echoes, just as he has repudiated nearly every important writer of the last two hundred years from Jane Austen to Henry James and "nearly every contemporary French novelist".⁴⁹ Now, as if at a climactic, there is a changed perception at least of the immediate

46. *ibid.* p. 60.

47. *The Ceylon Daily News*, Apr. 21, 1984, p. 11.

48. *The Middle Passage* p. 70.

49. 'The Little More', *London Times*, July 13, 1961.

past, of his own early experiences and the tales of his family and their effect for good or ill. Thus he recognizes the duality of his inheritance from his father: the anxiety and hysteria as well as the interest in Trinidad Indian life - he had earlier revealed something of this awareness in the introduction he wrote in 1976 to his edition of his father's stories. (q.v.)

It could also be that sustained reflection on his processes in the role of writer as traveller has moved him towards a more objective, almost acceptant, understanding of ways of seeing different from his own. This wasn't much in evidence even in his last book, *Among the Believers*: "such effort, such organisation, to duplicate the village atmosphere, to teach villagers to be villagers!"⁵⁰ or, say, in *A New King for the Congo*: "the African sense of the void" - the essay was sub-titled 'The Nihilism of Africa'⁵¹ In 'The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro' there is a new perception of the African right to an African vision, though not entirely without irony in the total detachment with which he presents Africans (he is perceptibly closer to some of the expatriates) and in such things as the exaggerated amazement of "I was so taken aback by what Mr. Niangoran-Bouah said that I asked for a sheet of paper to write down his words".⁵² The words were:

The world of white men is real. But, but.
We black Africans, we have all that they
have... we have all of that in the world
of night, the world of darkness.

But the substance of those words is affirmed in the last word, which is given to a black expatriate woman (from the West Indies), who says of a clutch of black female evangelists newly arrived from Harlem:

They bring their own psychic sickness to
Africa. They should come instead to be
converted by Africa. They are mad. *Ils
sont fous.*⁵³

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50. *Among the Believers* p. 318.

51. *The Return of Eva Peron and Other Essays*, London (Penguin) 1981 p. 196.

52. *Finding the Centre* p. 174.

53. *ibid.* p. 189.