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Abstract

Once while sitting with other tourists in a government rest-house in the Egyptian desert, V.S. Naipaul witnessed a scene in which some Italians dropped food near their tables to entice local children to come within striking range of an attendant's whip - a cruel game staged so that the Italians could take snapshots. Impulsively, the enraged Naipaul sprang from his chair, grabbed the whip, and threatened to report the incident to the authorities. Ended at this point, the anecdote might exemplify the triumph of honest emotion over callousness. However, as Naipaul's account of the incident suggests, the show continued. Under the cool, appraising stare of the Italians, Naipaul himself became the selfconscious star of an unrehearsed mini-melodrama - a role in which he felt 'exposed, futile'.

Experience as Drama in the Works of V.S. Naipaul

Once while sitting with other tourists in a government rest-house in the Egyptian desert, V.S. Naipaul witnessed a scene in which some Italians dropped food near their tables to entice local children to come within striking range of an attendant's whip — a cruel game staged so that the Italians could take snapshots. Impulsively, the enraged Naipaul sprang from his chair, grabbed the whip, and threatened to report the incident to the authorities. Ended at this point, the anecdote might exemplify the triumph of honest emotion over callousness. However, as Naipaul's account of the incident suggests, the show continued. Under the cool, appraising stare of the Italians, Naipaul himself became the self-conscious star of an unrehearsed mini-melodrama — a role in which he felt 'exposed, futile'.¹

This story is, I think, indicative of Naipaul's tendency to describe various aspects of human behaviour, particularly that of Third World societies, in terms associated with drama, including film. Although not unaware of the positive qualities of dramatic action, Naipaul is inclined to view it more or less satirically. What one critic implies is an important feature of Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men*, enforced roles producing an atmosphere of unreality and powerlessness, is applicable to much of Naipaul's work.²

In *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* Naipaul satirizes the urge to inflate experience into theatre. A junior executive Mephistopheles to Mr Stone's reluctant Faust, Whymper has no patience with the plodding humanitarianism of the elder man's proposal: 'A rescue here and a rescue there is all very well', Whymper sighs, 'but in a few months even that will become routine. Everyone will become bored, even the Knights. We want something big. Something explosive.'³ More than an escape from routine, drama is a means of coping with a generalized anxiety that an ordered reality is in danger of violation, even engulfment, by the

forces of disorder — a feeling implicit in various characters' fear of housebreakers, the xenophobic outbursts of the British National Party, and the interest expressed in the films *Rififi*, with its vault break-in, and *A Night to Remember*, about the *Titanic* disaster (pp. 13, 22, 27, 32, 36-37). In the same way that Mr Stone's self-dramatizing anecdote about his flight from a trespassing tom is an attempt to control his private fear of cats, the origin of the pensioners' aid scheme that so quickly expands into a stagey crusade is Stone's primitive terror at the real or imagined disappearance of a man into a smokey nothingness (pp. 16-17, 63).

In the title story of *Free State* Naipaul, like Conrad before him, holds up to view the posturings of the European in an alien environment.⁴ The whites' barely suppressed anxiety at the mounting hostility of a surrounding and potentially inundating black Africa turns isolated outposts of colonialism into stages for the performances of die-hard *bwanas*, such as the stoically stiff-lipped 'colonel' — his hotel and its environs 'dissolving in mist' like a 'Bergman' setting — muttering a carefully timed and theatrically fatalistic 'exit line' (pp. 174, 194).

However, role-playing can be destructive. The liberal ideals that nourished the quixotic imaginations of various European adventurer-revolutionaries who attempted to create utopias in the West Indies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became scenarios for a theatre of annihilation: 'borrowed words that never matched the society, the private theatre of disguises and false names that ended in blood and ... heads spiked in public places'.⁵ If in *Guerrillas* Jane's attempt to play the part of Third-World activist under the left wing of Peter Roche, another player of roles, results in her murder,⁶ Gale Benson, the white English-woman on whom the fictional Jane is partly based, died at the hands of the very men (pseudo-Black Power revolutionaries themselves) she expected to be an appreciative audience for her performance as a black African slave girl.⁷

In *El Dorado* Naipaul views the early history of Trinidad as a series of dramatic, almost operatic, moments separated by lengthy entr'actes of inactivity. The event that sparked into existence the British Empire in the American tropics, the landing of an English force on Trinidad in the seventeenth century, was in effect the creation of a theatre — a 'blank space' transformed into a 'drama' (p. 32). In the twentieth-century world of the Caribbean archipelago — the Lilliputian islands with their simple socio-political organization — the self-assertive politician finds just the right stage for a one-man performance, a 'drama of the folk-leader'.⁸

Strongly motivating the West Indian's self-dramatizing behaviour is

the need to escape, at least in imagination, from a daily life offering little in the way of excitement or dignity. A comic Emma Bovary whose romantic dreams languish beneath the dead weight of the provincial and the humdrum, Mr Biswas makes himself the central character in a series of short stories (all of which seem to be entitled 'Escape') extending to but not beyond the point where the family-burdened hero meets a beautiful and conveniently barren girl. And understandably, in view of his dubious distinction of being dubbed the Tulsi family entertainer in residence, Biswas seizes on a promotional campaign for a Port-of-Spain newspaper to assume the role of a Trinidadian 'Scarlet Pimpernel'.⁹

Not infrequently the West Indian may have roles imposed on him. Looking back on his life in terms of his relationship with whites, Ralph Singh realizes that he has been a 'performer' in a cruel 'child's game', his 'every action done at the command of his tormentor'. This game is designed to reinforce a colonial mentality, a sense of inferiority and dependence, even when the 'tormentor' seems most favourably disposed to him, as is shown by Singh's brief, humiliating sexual affair with Lady Stella right after the equally humbling failure of his political mission to the British Government. In forcing upon Singh her copy of the *Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (its verse she considers 'frightfully sexual'), Stella is reducing him to two popular stereotypes, the West Indian as the sexual athlete of the whites' erotic fantasies and the dependent child of the parental country. The falseness of any relationship based on such game-playing becomes obvious when Singh's inability to live up to the sexual stereotype reveals the woman's selfish anger and lack of any genuine interest in him as a human being.¹⁰

Naipaul once described the Caribbean small islanders' feeling of unimportance in this way: 'To be in Trinidad was to be nowhere.... We expected no one to have heard of us and were surprised and grateful when someone had.'¹¹ One lesson to be learned from the career of Naipaul's character Blackwhite (or H.J.B. White), the writer of sentimental English countryhouse romances and embittered black American protest novels but not of realistic fiction about his own island society, is that 'we turn experience continually into stories to lend drama to dullness, to maintain our self-respect'.¹² In *Mimic Men* we are told that the need to bestow names on objects and locations in the otherwise 'drab landscape' of one's home island confers at least an apparent validity on the public activities of the West Indian leader troubled by doubts as to the importance of this place and, by extension, his political life. 'There was drama in that naming', notes Ralph Singh, and he admits that

however futile the leaders, they could enjoy for a while the heady experience of being the 'chief actors' in their society (pp. 256-7).¹³

The same belief held by the Colonial Office that the motion picture camera will confer on the election in the backwater village of Elvira a validity, even a reality, it would not otherwise possess, as though to be is to be filmed,¹⁴ may cause the immediate reaction of Ralph Singh, the mimic man, to the sight of his English wife's boarding of a plane for a permanent separation: he pictures himself as Humphrey Bogart watching Ingrid Bergman's departure at the end of *Casablanca* (p. 219). The card-playing 'Patience' re-names himself 'Bogart' to dispel chronic tedium,¹⁵ and in the title story of *Flag*, Selma, a typical small islander in being constantly on the prowl for an identity in a society without one of its own, fancies herself as Norma Shearer in the 1940 film *Escape* (pp. 178, 229). The heightened sense of existence these characters feel they are gaining from the American silver screen exemplifies what, according to Naipaul, is a characteristic of modern Trinidad: for decades eagerly feeding on 'every stock situation of the American cinema', the Trinidadian has become addicted to the 'Hollywood formula' and as early as the nineteen-fifties he was 'remaking' himself 'in the image of the Hollywood B-man'.¹⁶

'Flag' suggests that television is having much the same impact on the West Indies. In this 'Fantasy for a Small Screen', as it is subtitled, the transformation of an ex-British colony into the small-screen embodiment of the Yankee tourists' notion of the tropics involves the island's fictionalization into an episode of the American television series *The Millionaire*, with the islanders in the role of grateful recipients of wealthy Uncle Sam's tourist dollars and foundation grants.¹⁷ Like the faithful secretary, Michael Anthony (not to be confused with the real writer), tracking down the object of his billionaire employer's beneficence, the American Leonard eagerly announces his intention to give away a million dollars. The fact that at the end of the story Leonard is no more likely to hand out money than is the American Frank, the narrator, to give Selma sexual satisfaction (pp. 159, 229, 234) is an obvious comment on the small-screen disillusionment bound to follow the islanders' wide-screen fantasies.

Black Orpheus is at least partly Jean-Paul Sartre's vision of a black Africa heroically transcending the alienated existence forced upon it by the European imperative of assimilation and reclaiming its Negro identity. The reverse side of the coin is depicted in the monologue 'Tell Me Who to Kill', its references to made-in-Hollywood films indicating

the connection between the willing participation in the process of assimilation and existential betrayal. A 'joker and a mocker', the narrator's Mephistophelean Uncle Stephen dangles before the eyes of his country brother's simple-living West Indian Hindu family the temptation of a new and seemingly glamorous existence by giving his nephews movie money and later by encouraging the illusion that the youngest male nephew, Dayo, has what it takes for the educational rite of passage into upper-middle-class respectability as a 'doctor, lawyer, anything' (*Free State*, p. 77).¹⁸

So seductive has been the appeal of assimilation into the white world that, as the narrator bitterly acknowledges, he has allowed his own life to be deadened — 'now the dead man is me' — and his fraternal affection to be soured into hatred by years of thankless drudgery in London to sustain the fantasy that Dayo is being stamped with the vocationally *chic* identity of aeronautical engineer or computer programmer (pp. 80, 97). The ease with which the monologue slips from an account of the two brothers' relationship to the recollection of films and screen stars — Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca*, Henry Fonda and Tyrone Power in *Jesse James*, Robert Taylor in *Waterloo Bridge*, and Farley Granger in *Rope* (pp. 68, 73, 77-78, 102, 108) — suggests that these strangers in a strange land are being clamped into alien cultural identities which no more allow for their own development as West Indians (or, for that matter, as autonomous human beings) than do the scripts the screen stars, especially Hitchcock's, must follow. And in recalling films dealing with such themes as the loss of innocence, the destructive influence of a stronger personality over a weaker, and betrayal by a comrade, the narrator implicitly admits that in attempting to force Dayo into a social and cultural role the standards of which are as remote from the latter's very limited attainments as is the Farley Granger 'pretty boy' image from his 'labourer's face', he, the elder brother, has participated in his own as well as Dayo's betrayal and degradation, with their self-alienation completed by the marriage of the one into a family of British whites and the other's sado-masochistic liaison with his 'white bitch' lover, Frank (pp. 70, 106).

The two wives in *Rebecca*, the two brothers in *Jesse James*, the two murderers in *Rope* — these doublings remind us that role-playing fragments. In acting out a part the player may split into irreconcilable halves. Jimmy Ahmed becomes two beings — his upper body the Mao-shirted revolutionary, his public role, and his naked lower half the frightened youngster unable to give Jane, or any woman, sexual satis-

faction (*Guerrillas*, p. 75). Indeed, roles may proliferate uncontrollably, one spawning another until the divided self becomes an exploded non-self. The collection of pseudonyms used by the Trinidadian would-be Black Power hero, Michael de Freitas, during his short, violent career was a 'haphazard succession of roles' — roles not only assumed to escape from both a private neurosis and the law but also imposed on him by white liberals for purposes of their own — ending in a loss of self: 'so many personalities ... so many voices: the real man ... lost' ('Michael X', pp. 13, 23-25, 48).

Over the last decade Naipaul's attention has broadened from the problems of the West Indian to include other areas of the Third World, where he finds a similar tendency to allow pretence to parade as authentic, practical achievement — the people of an economically stagnant Uruguay acting as though still living in boom times that in fact ended years ago with the decline of foreign investment and revolutionary Iran rejecting modernity in its quest for an outdated ideal of Islamic purity.¹⁹ The finality of what Naipaul considers the contemporary Africans' simplistic interpretation of their past and present — the 'whole history of human deficiencies ... entirely explained by an interlude of (foreign) oppression and prejudice, which has now been settled'²⁰ — raises the suspicion that under the spell of political independence the black African thinks of his territory as a theatre stage easily made bare after the last act of one historical drama in preparation for the first act of the next.

A prominent theme in Naipaul's latest novel, *A Bend in the River*, is the destructive effect of substituting theatre for practicality, the heroic pose for political restraint, in the post-colonial Third World, specifically a black African state resembling Zaïre. The vacuum created by the end of colonial rule has been turned into a stage for an epic production starring the 'Big Man', the leader whose portrait posters are as ubiquitous as those of Orwell's Big Brother. It appears that the people are expected to be satisfied with bit parts as loyal spear carriers, or as an acquiescent chorus, in the leader's drama, that of the victorious son redeeming the hardships and humiliations once, during colonial times, suffered by his mother, now transformed into a symbol of the nation.²¹

The official slogans and proclamations notwithstanding, we suspect that this romance of political idealism masks a naturalistic drama of exploitation — a sub-genre borrowed from the Europeans' repertory (p. 17). What is billed as a new kind of African theatre dispensing with such colonial stereotypes as '*monsieur*' and '*madame*' is actually the revival of a much older play — its theme, republican virtue triumphant — that ran

for several years in pre-imperial Paris: the decree goes out that now the people must become '*citoyens* and *citoyennes*' (p. 160).

Within the Big Man's national stage is the showcase 'Domain', part holiday resort, part educational centre constructed in the middle of the bush. It is not only a model of the Africa of the future but also a 'miracle', a stage within a stage for a miracle play within a play — the drama of the chief's creation of a new African (pp. 100-101). However, as the narrative unfolds, we suspect that what is being enacted is not an extravaganza of Revolution Victorious but something far older — a ritual sacrifice in which leader and people exchange roles as sacrificer and sacrifice. Elsewhere Naipaul refers to the black leader who, using political power to cope with some private obsession, ends by scorning his followers and then being victimized by them ('Michael X', p. 70). In *Bend* the contempt and the victimization dovetail. The very signs of the African leader's power — the multiple identities of soldier, political Big Man, national President, potent tribal chieftain, even god 'creating a miracle' for his worshippers, and his effigies scattered across the land (pp. 100, 125, 168) — hint at the reverse, an exploded self, or, as though an assertion that he alone is fit to meet the ritualistic need of the masses, a dismembered sacrifice.

But the leader's near apotheosis, the process by which he is shown to be worthy for so sacred a role, involves the people's degradation. The preservation of the Big Man's power in the post-colonial state involves the common people's step backward into a condition barely distinguishable at times from their old colonial shame. As the President's white mercenaries swagger around a hotel lobby, the Negro employees, acting on cue, immediately become 'object' (p. 76), as though to demonstrate how easy it is for them to resume the role of white man's servant. Moreover, service under the leader is a burden crushing the spirit of the people, as is indicated by Naipaul's description of one of the President's young followers, Ferdinand, who, 'below' the 'larger-than-life' photograph of the Big Man, looks 'ill', 'shrunken, and characterless' (p. 271).

The theatrical gesturing Naipaul claims to find in the Third World ex-colonial societies is not so much the product of conscious choice as of the force of surrounding circumstances. It is as though roles are played out in conformity to a script handed out to the actors page by page. The passivity that inclines Salim, the narrator and central character in a private drama of adultery, to receive the sexual favours of the European Yvette as handouts — 'I took everything as it came' (p. 191) — is also that of Naipaul's passive, uncreative Africans who, it is claimed, 'simply

accept' the gifts of civilization from the outside world without working to add to their stock of benefits (p. 142).

The rebellion that breaks out reflects what Naipaul, in 'A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa', refers to as the 'rage of primitive men ... finding that they have been fooled and affronted' (*Eva Perón*, p. 24). In *Bend* this rage is like a state of trance, so that even the rebels become the participants in a ritual sacrifice in some magical way supposed to banish history and restore to the people the timeless simplicity of the 'beginning', of a primal paradise. From the bush emerges a guerrilla army of liberation that, as Salim's servant, Metty, predicts, is 'going to kill and kill' — which is the 'only way ... back to the beginning' (pp. 6, 275).

In 'Flag' a bare nightclub stage, empty of scenery and performers, is called the 'perfection of drama' (p. 227). In Naipaul dramatically intense action often moves toward its opposite, an anti-dramatic blankness, toward the silence and darkness that falls over a stage once the actors, their real or pretended passions spent, have removed their make-up and left. In *Bend* the concluding description of the refugee-filled barge disappearing into the thick tropical night makes one think of klieg lights extinguished on a movie set or the last fade-out of the completed film: 'The searchlight lit up the barge passengers.... Then there were gunshots. The searchlight was turned off; the barge was no longer to be seen' (p. 278).

However, Naipaul's own spotlight, his critical intelligence, is still trained on the large and small stages of the contemporary world. It is, I think, safe to assume that he is discovering new theatres and new performances.

NOTES

1. 'Epilogue, From a Journal: The Circus at Luxor', in *In A Free State* (New York: Knopf, 1971), pp. 252-53.
2. Alan Kennedy, *The Protean Self: Dramatic Action in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 277, fn.
3. *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (London: Deutsch, 1963), p. 102.
4. For a discussion of the theme of identity in Naipaul and Conrad see Linda R. Anderson, 'Ideas of Identity and Freedom in V.S. Naipaul and Joseph Conrad', *ES*, 59, No 6 (1978), 510-17.
5. *The Loss of El Dorado* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 153. Hereafter *El Dorado*.
6. *Guerrillas* (New York: Knopf, 1975), pp. 43-44.

7. 'Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad', in *The Return of Eva Perón* (New York: Knopf, 1980), pp. 57-58. Hereafter 'Michael X', *Eva Perón*.
8. 'St Kitts: Papa and the Power Set', in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (London: Deutsch, 1972), p. 221.
9. *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: Deutsch, 1961), pp. 169-70, 296-97, 311.
10. *The Mimic Men* (London: Deutsch, 1967), pp. 97, 272-77. Hereafter *Mimic Men*.
11. 'A West Indian Culture?' in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 30 May 1965, p. 23.
12. 'A Flag on the Island', in *A Flag on the Island* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 187. Hereafter 'Flag', *Flag*.
13. For a discussion of political role-playing, see Richard Johnstone, 'Politics and V.S. Naipaul', *JCL*, 14, No 1 (1979), 100-108.
14. *The Suffrage of Elvira* (London: Deutsch, 1958), p. 207.
15. 'Bogart', in *Miguel Street* (New York: Vanguard, 1959), pp. 9-10.
16. *The Middle Passage* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 58-61.
17. *The Millionaire* was shown in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, from April 1964 to August 1965, according to John T. Barsotti, Program Director of the Trinidad & Tobago Television Company, Ltd., in a letter to the author, dated 27 March 1981. In the article 'A West Indian Culture?' he indicates that he was visiting Port-of-Spain — perhaps for as long as several months — during the first half of 1965 (p. 23). Thus it is possible that he had some knowledge of the series while working on 'Flag', which was completed in August of that year.
18. Like Whymper in *Knights Companion*, Uncle Stephen and the narrator himself are in a sense demonic types ready to barter relief from the awareness of potential non-being (or of cultural inferiority) for a soul. See J.F.T. Bugental, *The Search for Authenticity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 43-44.
19. 'The Return of Eva Perón', in *Eva Perón*, p. 136; 'Among the Believers', in *The Atlantic*, July 1981, pp. 28-36, 38-45, 48 passim.
20. Interview with Adrian Rowe-Evans, *Transition*, No 4 (December 1971), p. 57.
21. *A Bend in the River* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 136.