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The World, the Text, and the Caribbean Writer:
Representation in the Work of V.S. Naipaul

Rafe Dalleo

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? [...] The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told.

—V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*

The representation of history is always a contested site. In the post-independence West Indies, these battles become magnified through centuries of slavery and one-sided tellings of history. Men and women from the islands have, for more than half a century, been writing their own versions of West Indian history, both as fiction and non-fiction. V.S. Naipaul, in the passage reproduced above, raises the salient questions: how is the history of the West Indies to be represented? How are we to get at the truth? Asking these questions raises many issues: whether history should be told from above or reconstructed from below; which genre best suits history writing in the West Indies—traditional history, the novel, or something else; the relationship of history and West Indian fiction; the role of imagination in narrative reconstructions of the past; and the possibility of realism, a style of writing in which words directly and unproblematically represent things. When documents from the past are scarce and frequently one-sided, efforts to reconstruct history ethically and accurately become especially acute.

I contend that these considerations have guided V.S. Naipaul's career since its beginning. His examination of the representation of history is limited neither to his only book of explicit historical writing, *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), nor to his non-fiction travel narratives, journalistic pieces, and autobiographical reflections. In his first three published books, all fiction, Naipaul pushes the limits of genre as he tries to

determine the form appropriate for representing the reality of an East Indian in the West Indies. *Miguel Street* is not quite a novel, but is more than a collection of stories. The narrator of *The Mystic Masseur* is never certain where his tale ends and Ganesh's begins; and Ganesh's tale itself combines a blend of "autobiography" and "spiritual thriller" (*Mystic Masseur* 119).¹ Not until his fourth book, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, does Naipaul settle into a style which resembles that of the realist novel.³ The style is overwhelmingly descriptive, assumes and produces a coherent narrative world, and no longer features the potentially unstable narrators of the earliest works. This style moves even further towards "objectivity" in Naipaul's subsequent writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, as a journalistic style comes to replace the early exploration. It is only with *A Way in the World*, Naipaul's major work of the 1990s, that the author returns to the earliest books in order to re-examine his previous assumptions about reality and style.

A recent collection of essays entitled "Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature" posits a divide between social realism and magical realism, in the Anglophone and Hispanic Caribbean respectively. I will use these terms as a model for discussing Naipaul's career. The volume's title refers on the one hand to Orlando Patterson's novel *The Children of Sisyphus*, as an exemplar of West Indian social realism. On the other hand, El Dorado alludes to the Latin American continent as site of myth and legend. In his preface, Kamau Brathwaite writes (in his distinctively anti-realist video style):

[...] the 'differences' between these two orientation—and it's more that than fixed position and there's also, need I say, overlap at times & places between & among these 'orientations'—are (however) significant & go beyond, I think, any bias of preference or fashion or zeitgeist & is telling me that in the Caribbean, the Sisyphian tradition, w/whatever individual & timely xceptions, is very much a part of our history & structure, and represents our 'reality' of stasis & emprison—the literature of the negative catastro phe; while MR/dorado represents (again w/cautions & qualifications) the optimistic creative rascal of (New World) encounter—the dream & pressure of metaphor breaking out of the prison s/hell to par ticipate in a literature (in both cases also orature) of optimistic catastrophe—catharsis—illuminated manu uscript of blindness ("MR" 16).

Brathwaite hints, here and elsewhere in this essay, that the tradition of

Sisyphus, of realist protest writing, is simply "Caliban using Prospero's language to trace him in great detail, in a way, but not getting/going beyond that into the image of Sycorax & 'beyond' even that unto Setebos at the mud of the making of nature & its transcription into human conseQu ences" (11). Brathwaite's notion of tracing Prospero has three possible meanings: either tracing Prospero's books, that is copying his style; or tracing Prospero's figure, that is representing Prospero as the cause of the present situation. In Jamaican parlance, it also means to curse.³ Yet perhaps these three meanings are not entirely opposed. As in *The Tempest*, Caliban's attempts to curse Prospero have generally come in Prospero's language; attempts to write protest literature have generally used the style of social realism to trace oppression in great detail. Other Calibans, like the early Naipaul, have tried to trace Prospero's style in writing their novels. Eventually, Caliban comes to find that Prospero's style, the style of social realism, cannot represent certain things. Getting beyond realism implies a broadening of vision, a move away from protest towards offering imaginative solutions.

Using Brathwaite's paradigm, I classify Naipaul's post-Biswas poetics, the style he employs during the middle period of his career beginning with *The Middle Passage* until at least *A Bend in the River*, as the poetics of Sisyphus. Brathwaite's argument, that protest literature is locked in an unproductive dialogue with the colonial past, a dialectic without synthesis, is a familiar one. He adds an original twist, suggesting that protest literature's limitation is its dependence upon the techniques of social realism. Although few would consider Naipaul a "protest writer," his descriptive style is based on the same poetic assumptions as protest literature's: charting the injustices of colonialism in great detail, without offering alternatives or solutions. These approaches, while perhaps motivated by different ideological positions, could be regarded as different sides of the same coin.⁴

The Jamaican section of *The Middle Passage* is the first occurrence in Naipaul's writing of a description of the "children of Sisyphus" without the lens of fiction and the novel. He describes the slums of Kingston, the infamous "dungle" where Orlando Patterson sets his novel, in relentless detail: "Hovels of board and cardboard and canvas and tin lie choked together on damp rubbish dumps behind which the sun sets in mocking splendour" (*The Middle Passage* 216). The passage continues in this vein for most of the page, turning a meticulous eye to the sights of the dungle. These types of physical descriptions are common in

Naipaul, whether he is describing landscapes or people. Naipaul's descriptions of landscape might be called naturalistic, representing in physical presence the values of the society and culture of which they are a part. In *A Bend in the River* and *In a Free State*, the landscape is chaotic bush, just like African history; in *The Enigma of Arrival*, on the other hand, ordered and manicured gardens are characteristic of British civilization. In his description of the jungle, Naipaul emphasizes the abject chaos, filth, and hopelessness which mark the life of poor Jamaicans. By investing so much energy in description, Naipaul manages to elide discussions of the causes of this destitution. For Naipaul, excessive moralizing clouds the writer's ability to be true to reality; these descriptions are simply the unromanticized truth.

Even in this early passage, with some excavation, we can see where Naipaul's discourse reach its limits. Naipaul, in trying to trace Froude and Trollope's style of travel writing, realizes that there are parts of the West Indian reality which this discourse cannot represent. Before launching into the description cited above, Naipaul gives this disclaimer: "The slums of Jamaica are beyond description. Even the camera glamorises them" (216).⁴ To call something "beyond description" and then spend the rest of the paragraph describing it is a curious strategy. Naipaul is still uncomfortable with his position as objective observer. As Naipaul refines his style, he will no longer foreground the inadequacies of his discourse: in *The Loss of El Dorado*, as we will see, or in the African-set novels, he gives up on trying to represent the unrepresentable Africans, slaves, or Amerindians. Yet these margins will return to encroach on the center. These margins become central to *A Way in the World*, in the "unwritten stories," those stories which the author has never been able to write, and even now, can only "partly" work out (*Way* 47). I will return to these stories at the end of this paper.

The traveller persona of Naipaul's middle period goes hand-in-hand with this poetics of Sisyphus. Thus this persona, standing at a remove from his surroundings, observing rather than participating, becomes the dominant form of narration for all of Naipaul's writings in this time period, whether fiction or non-fiction. Gordon Rohlehr, in a 1980 interview, notes that "A lot of [Naipaul's] recent work has a kind of journalistic finish. It is journalistic" ("Space" 106). After experimenting with narration and form, Naipaul during the late 1960s and 1970s uses, variously, omniscient narration, as in *In a Free State*, journalistic objectivity, as in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* and *The Return of Eva*

Perón, or the icily detached first person of *The Mimic Men* and *A Bend in the River*. Perhaps the best example of the vision of history which Naipaul adopts during this time period is his only extending foray into history writing, *The Loss of El Dorado*.

Selwyn Cudjoe has justly taken Naipaul to task for assuming an entirely European view of history by relying so heavily on European accounts of New World events and representing only Europeans as historical agents. Cudjoe uncovers the absences of Naipaul's version of history (the unrepresentable) in order to show the assumptions upon which this ideology rests. In particular, Naipaul's reliance on Western documents and therefore Western ways of seeing short-circuits his ability to say anything more about the substantial African population than "the slave is silent, faceless...he has no story" (*Loss of El Dorado* 376). This version of history reveals the "limitations of colonial discourse" (Cudjoe 118) for describing colonial history:

He was unable to penetrate deeply into the Negro culture and psyche and for that reason the African remained unreal, residing only within Naipaul's imagination. Because Naipaul was unable to locate the African in his 'real social world,' he was unable to reveal him as a fully constituted colonial subject. As a consequence, his work, particularly as it relates to the African person, is of limited value (119).

Cudjoe has no trouble arguing that Naipaul's depictions of Blacks are unsympathetic and unconvincing; whatever Naipaul himself thinks of Africans, his acceptance of a Western vision of history handicaps his ability to write history otherwise.⁶

During this period, wherever Naipaul travels, he interprets whatever is around him through the words of other writers, giving the impression that, as he says at the beginning of an article on Argentina, one could "outline it like a story by Borges" (*Return of Eva Perón* 101). By relying so overtly on the texts of other writers, Naipaul assesses these texts as representations of the "real" Argentina or Trinidad or Zaire or India. He generally goes to great pains to show the limitations of the perspectives of these writers, not to imply that writing cannot represent reality, but instead to show that *his* style of writing is better suited to that task.

Visiting India, for example, Naipaul spends a great deal of narrative space analyzing the literary works of Narayan, Anantamurti, and, of course, Gandhi. In Gandhi, he finds "no attempt at an objective view of

the world [...] the absence of the external world" (*India* 106); one example of this flaw is that "landscape is never described" (106). He concludes, questionably, that "it is less easy for Indians [than for Europeans, who are always Naipaul's implicit measuring stick] to withdraw and analyze" (108). Whatever the value of what Naipaul says about Gandhi, or of Indians in general, these sort of comments, which appear in virtually all of Naipaul's travel accounts, offer a window onto the system of writing the Naipaul privileges. Objectivity, description, analysis, and the dialectical interplay of the external world on the individual are the characteristics which Naipaul, writing in the 1970s, prizes above all others. As Erich Auerbach shows in *Mimesis*, the Western world believes these techniques to have reached an apogee in nineteenth-century realism.

Even as Naipaul's fictional style becomes increasingly detached and journalistic during the 1970s, we can see hints that he is moving away from documentary-based research as the privileged mode of history writing. *A Bend in the River*, for example, features the character Raymond, a European writing a history of Africa. Reflecting on Raymond's work, the narrator, Salim, comments with disappointment that "the article about the race riot [...] turned out to be a compilation of government decrees and quotations from newspapers" (*Bend* 180). His reservations are not because the newspapers are incorrect, but simply because "they left out a lot of important things—often essential things—that local people would know and gossip about" (181). Thus Salim "was always hoping that Raymond was going to go behind the newspaper stories and editorials and try to get at the real events" (181; my emphasis). Salim's final judgment sounds like an indictment of Naipaul's own attempt at writing history in *The Loss of El Dorado*: "He stuck with the newspapers; he seemed to want to show that he had read them all and had worked out the precise political shade of each. His subject was an event in Africa, but he might have been writing about Europe or a place he had never been" (181). During the late seventies, ten years after his attempt to write traditional history, he has come to regard fiction as having more access to reality than documentary history: in the (ironically non-fictional) essay "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad," Naipaul writes that "facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally" (*Return of Eva Perón* 67).

It is within this context of Naipaul's career, constantly navigating its way between fiction and non-fiction, that *A Way in the World* revisits all

of these concerns. This latest work is a significant break from what has come before, both in form and content. It is also marked by remarkable continuity: *A Way in the World* goes back through all of Naipaul's previous writing, to show how central the questions of history and writing have been to Naipaul's novels as well as his non-fiction. This book represents Naipaul's most extended meditation on the representation of history and reality. Happily, Brathwaite's metonymy for magical realism, El Dorado, is the central metaphor in Naipaul's two major explorations of the process of history writing. In many ways, *A Way in the World*, which reviewer Paula Burnett nicknames "Finding El Dorado," can be read as a counterpoint to *The Loss of El Dorado*. The later work defies classification as realist novel; the British edition avoids the title novel altogether, substituting the book "A Sequence." *A Way in the World* goes back to the beginning to discuss the process of writing *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Loss of El Dorado*, and other key books in the development of Naipaul's aesthetic. It also returns to the scenes of many of his earlier books, especially *The Loss of El Dorado*, as if to right (or re-write) the mistakes of the past.

As mentioned above, Naipaul's writing in the three decades leading up to *A Way in the World* is sometimes experimental in form, but rarely questions its own ability to represent reality. Yet after decades of narrators fully confident in their access to truth, *A Way in the World* features a decentered narrator who begins by observing that sometimes we can see only "a fragment of the truth" (*Way* 11).⁷ The narrative is fragmented, proceeds in fits and starts, and jumps from one locale to another, from one century to another, from one period of Naipaul's life to another. This is a new form for Naipaul, a new style, a new discourse, and Naipaul finds that his new form allows for new content; those who could not be represented in *The Loss of El Dorado*, Amerindians and Afro-Trinidadians, take centre stage in *A Way in the World*.

In a recent essay, Sandra Paquet makes the intriguing suggestion that Eric Williams' *Documents of West Indian History* can be considered as a precursor to contemporary fictional representations of Caribbean history, particularly Lamming's *Natives of My Person*, Benitez-Rojo's *Sea of Lentils*, and Naipaul's *A Way in the World*. She explains that all four of these texts present a method of writing Caribbean history which emphasizes fragmentation and discontinuity, and avoids the hierarchical and linear formulations of European history writing. She describes *A Way in the World* as employing a "poetics of El Dorado" which relies

on paratopic and mythic language rather than the "objective" discourse of traditional histories ("Documents" 770). Through intertextual references to a variety of West Indian historical documents, *A Way in the World* examines a series of attempts to express New World realities in writing, from Raleigh and Miranda to Lebrun (C.L.R. James) and Naipaul himself. Paquet ultimately concludes that all of these texts feed on the interplay of history and fiction in a West Indian context, uncovering fiction as an "ideologically and culturally conditioned way of reading history" and history "as an ideologically and culturally conditioned artifice."

From these observations, we can see how *A Way in the World* practices a poetics of El Dorado, in its presentation of history as episodic, its blending of styles and of genres, and what Brathwaite would call its imaginative efforts to re-present/re-construct Sycorax, in the form of Amerindian and slave characters whom traditional historical accounts have omitted. This poetics is developed through a variety of readers and writers who appear as alter egos for Naipaul himself: Leonard Side, Foster Morris, Lebrun, Walter Raleigh, Fray Simón, Francisco Miranda, Blair, and of course, the narrator himself. *A Way in the World* is an interrogation of each of these men's view of the world and his inadequate efforts to represent Trinidad and its environs. All of these men contain elements of Naipaul, and seem to represent aspects of his career, a garden of forking paths, some of which Naipaul took, and some of which he chose not to take. Including himself, the young copier of colonial documents (22-23) and naturalistic drawer of landscapes (28), in this lineage of attempts to find a language for talking about Trinidad gives the elder Naipaul a chance to both defend and repudiate his earlier positions.⁸

Naipaul begins this exploration of himself by revealing his changing attitudes towards Leonard Side, and the "idea of beauty" which Side represents: "It was his idea of beauty that upset me, I suppose [...] That idea of beauty—mixing roses and flowers and nice things to eat with the idea of making the dead human body beautiful too—was contrary to my own idea. The mixing of things upset me. It didn't upset him" (9). What is remarkable about this passage is its past tense. Naipaul is narrating a story from his first return to Trinidad, and the reactions of this young British colonial to the land of his birth. At this point in his career, purity is an ideal for which to strive: purity of thought, purity of form in writing. Forty years later, this passage, and this book as a whole, attest to Naipaul's complicated re-orientation with respect to Trinidad, to

history, and to reality. He is finally willing to come to terms with the creolization which characterizes Trinidadian society.

This new attitude towards being, as fragmented, mixed, and constantly in process, is reinforced by setting and space. The book's setting is constantly in flux, beginning in Trinidad, taking detours to England, the United States, West Africa, and East Africa, before ending on an airplane transporting Blair's body back to Trinidad. The action never dwells in any of these places; each is a brief stopover, a return or a departure always recalling or anticipating another place. The longest stretch of action takes place in and above the Gulf of Paria, between Trinidad and Venezuela during the longest chapters, chapters six, seven and eight. As the narrator himself admits, "at one time I thought I should try to do a play or a film—a film would have been better—about the Gulf" (247). Chapter six is set on Walter Raleigh's boat in the middle of the Gulf; chapter seven on an airplane flying over the Gulf; and chapter eight, titled "In the Gulf of Desolation," takes place in Trinidad, and traces the movement of Venezuelan Francisco Miranda throughout the world. More than anywhere else, *A Way in the World* is set in the Gulf, a particularly in-between space, between islands and continental bush, reality and fantasy: "The Gulf, with its confused currents, between an island and the estuary of a continental river, had always been part of the fabulous New World. Columbus had found salt water and fresh in it, and—thinking himself only between two islands—had never known why" (224). The Gulf, an impure space of creative mixture, becomes microcosm for the entire New World.

In a discussion set in the Gulf, the long interrogation of Raleigh identifies the source of the difficulty of Raleigh's attempt to narrate the New World:

A deliberately difficult book. It's only here that I understand why the book is so difficult. It's a deliberate mixture of old-fashioned fantasy and modern truth. Everything you write about this side of the Gulf, the eastern side, the Trinidad side, everything is correct and very clear, every name, every tribe, every little Indian port. Real knowledge, real enquiry. On the river side, it's a different story. When you get down to the main Orinoco, you write about a strange land of diamond mountains and meadows and deer and birds. It's beautiful, but only like a painting. The book's like the work of two different men (*Way* 175).

These metafictional passages (another comes on page 183) from the surgeon's interrogation of Raleigh identify the poetics of Sisyphus and El Dorado with islands and continent respectively, just as Brathwaite does. The Gulf lies between these poetics. The writer's location in Trinidad, on the edge of the West Indies and at the margins of the Spanish-American empire, leaves him between these two styles. Raleigh's writing becomes difficult and confused because of its inability to effectively negotiate this divide. Naipaul's self-awareness presumably makes him better able to derive energy from the interplay.

By thinking outside of European models of history the elder Naipaul can write the "unwritten" stories which eluded European travelers to the New World, as well as the younger Naipaul. These "unwritten" stories enact the imaginative reconstruction of the world of the Amerindians and African slaves during colonialism which Naipaul had never before attempted. They are that which the poetics of Sisyphus, social realism, obsessed with tracing Prospero, cannot represent. While *The Loss of El Dorado* saw only the dearth of documentation about the lives of these peoples, *A Way in the World* follows Wilson Harris' lead in using the imagination to fill in the gaps left by European history. Naipaul describes this evolution away from reliance on a Western view of history and towards imaginative reconstruction: "historical documents [...] gave me a sense of the crowded aboriginal Indian island [...]. A sense, rather than a vision: little was convincingly described in those early documents, and few concrete details were given. In my mind's eye I created an imaginary landscape for the aboriginal peoples living" (213). By contrast with the journalistic Naipaul, who assumed his descriptions of the world to be precise and unproblematic, this imaginative vision requires the admission of its own incompleteness, the realization that Amerindians possess "ideas I couldn't enter, ideas of time, distance, the past, the natural world, human existence" (213-14).

The central figures in each of the three "unwritten" stories lack this crucial self-awareness. In the first story, the revolutionary travelling into the Guyanese interior fails to realize that in his project he is retracing the steps of generations of European conquerors before him. As a result, he also fails to understand that his way of seeing the Amerindians is no different from those European ways of seeing. These are what Naipaul refers to as "certain historical ironies" (48).

Naipaul, ironically, gives the revolutionary traveller moving up the

river no name but "the narrator," yet allows him no chance to narrate; Naipaul will not surrender the privilege of narrating this story. Thus there is a curious distance created between the Naipaul who narrates and "the narrator," who is narrated. Naipaul can see and describe the Amerindians; "the narrator," trapped in European ways of seeing, cannot. We can have a passage in which Naipaul states: "a woman comes down the zigzagging yellow ramp with a basket of food for the man with the shotgun: various things in tins and wooden bowls, separately tied up in cloth." Yet this description could not have been given by "the narrator," who sees only "blank faces, the stillness of the staring people" (49). The narrator is in his own mental world; as he eats, rather than considering the people around him, he loses himself in abstraction, "thinks of all the world's staples" (50). He not only finds it "impossible to enter [the Amerindian] way of perceiving" (58); in the end, his complicity with his European predecessors is made explicit. His is only the latest betrayal of the Amerindians.

"A Parcel of Papers, a Roll of Tobacco, a Tortoise," Naipaul's unwritten story of Raleigh's second trip to the Guianas, plays with the historical fact that while Raleigh's troubled and troubling account of his trip has become a central document in the history of the region, the account of the Amerindian who accompanied Raleigh back to England has never received equal hearing. Naipaul's retelling portrays Raleigh as progressively losing his grip on reality, obsessed only with writing down his confused narration of his voyage (209-10), while Don José, the silenced Amerindian, gives an even and thoughtful version of the same events. As Naipaul puts it, "the narrative is now his" (188), even if that is not how European history will remember things.

The last "unwritten story," that of Francisco Miranda, follows the form of the Raleigh story, the action moved along almost exclusively through long passages of dialogue. The narrative is overtly monologic; the discourse, whether Miranda's voice, Hislop's, or someone else's, is all European. Well-crafted, this discourse elides the slaves, referring to them obliquely when speaking of "human turpitude" (276). Hislop realizes that his ability to frame that sentence so precisely "comforts" (277) him, as the younger Naipaul's precisely crafted prose must have comforted him too.

Yet the shadows at the margins undermine the central narrative. Miranda's daily routine is constantly interrupted by the incomprehensible

rumblings of slaves, speaking in their native African tongues. Later, "where there had been Africans in the grounds, speaking an African language, there were now Chinese" (329). In Miranda's writing, these figures appear fleetingly and are quickly forgotten; for the more sophisticated writer of the story, they linger as the unrepresentable margins of European discourse. Their presence reminds us of the insufficiency of Miranda to represent New World reality. As Miranda himself notes, "There were no Negroes in Tom Paine or Rousseau. And when I tried to be like them [Paine and Rousseau] I found it hard to fit in the Negroes. Of course, I knew they existed. But I thought of them as accidental to the truth I was getting at. I felt when I came to write that I had to leave them out" (341). If he cannot understand or account for the majority of the inhabitants of Trinidad, how can he expect to represent them, either in writing or as the leader of their revolution?

A Way in the World does manage an attempt to represent these people. Paquet notes that in indicting Raleigh's and Miranda's representations of the past as lies and partial truths, Naipaul is implicitly recanting his own use of their narratives in writing *The Loss of El Dorado*. That was the younger, immature Naipaul: as he notes in *A Way in the World*,

when I first read about Miranda and began to look at his papers, I too, but in my own way, thought of him as a precursor. I saw him as a very early colonial, someone with a feeling of incompleteness, with very little at home to fall back on, with an idea of a great world out there, someone who, when he was out in this world, had to reinvent himself. I saw in him some of my own early promptings (and the promptings of other people I knew). I feel now that I was carried away by a private idea of an ancestry (252).

Again, the past tense shows the naivety of the younger narrator, who, early in the book, works for the government copying colonial documents (22), rather than imagining anything outside of these documents (he also begins to write by writing descriptive landscapes: 28). The older writer can see Miranda for the mimic man of European thought that he was, and can distance himself from that position. This is a remarkable step for V.S. Naipaul, a new way in the world.

Like the author himself, V.S. Naipaul's writing has always kept moving, searching for new forms, structures and style to better represent the world. After he had seemingly settled on a journalistic, "objective"

style during the late 1960s and 1970s, *A Way in the World* marks a significant departure from this brand of realism. This "sequence" revises much of Naipaul's earlier work, and points to a new orientation towards history, reality, and the artist's role in its representation. The poetics which Naipaul introduces in *A Way in the World* is the poetics of El Dorado, the poetics of mixture, hybridity, migration, and ultimately, globalization.

Notes

1. R.C. Zaehner writes: "The Hindu mystical classics are not autobiographical and are not the record of actual experiences undergone by given individuals. They are either mystico-magical tracts [...] or the exposition of mystical doctrines in verse" (quoted in Cudjoe 44).
2. The realism of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is contested by Homi Bhabha, who recognizes elements which realism cannot quite reconcile; on the other hand, Fawzia Mustafa finds the overwhelming "totality" of "Naipaul's major novels" (Mustafa 221) to be in keeping with the realist tradition.
3. See the glossary at the end of *Lionheart Gal* for this definition of "trace."
4. Belinda Edmondson's *Making Men* makes a similar argument. She points out that writers as disparate as Naipaul, C.L.R. James and George Lamming have all written in the style of nineteenth-century Victorian England, that is, the style of social realism.
5. Gordon Rohlehr mentions the photographic quality of Naipaul's style: "I think that what unifies the late and early Naipaul is that the eye of the writer functions as a very selective camera which severely chooses its images and what it is going to photograph" ("Space" 102).
6. We might juxtapose Naipaul's historical narrative with C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*, as an alternative model of how West Indian history might be written if different discursive assumptions are made.
7. For a long discussion of Naipaul's faith in writing as a road to truth, see Lillian Feder's *Naipaul's Truth*.
8. For example, Foster Morris' criticisms of the young narrator are offered to explain the writer's shift from his early comic novels to the more serious *House for Mr. Biswas*.

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V.S. Naipaul's Ironic Visions

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Few modes of writing involve the author's subjective vision of the world with such immediacy as travel writing. The traveller himself, in many cases, projects the narrative of his adventures as a prospective horizon even while he is living through them: thus the experience of travel and discovery becomes a more or less self-conscious experiment in which the future author watches himself as actor, and weaves the material from which the narrative will proceed. This calculated rift within the traveller's persona, between the author watching the drama unfold and the actor involved in it, is particularly palpable in late twentieth century travel writings whose authors are 'professionals' of the genre, more or less seeking or provoking experiences worthy of being related. In the case of Naipaul, for instance, the travel experience is pre-tailored to fit the pedagogical and ideological aims of the author, and the narrative skilfully organises the apparently unexpected events or encounters around the axis of its demonstration. The traveller is thus constantly aware of the narrative to come, even in the midst of his experience; similarly, the narrator often maintains some critical distance vis-à-vis his own past actions as traveller, since the transcription of what has occurred inevitably acts as interpretation and dramatisation of it.

Such self-consciousness is particularly conducive to the practice of irony, understood both as a rhetorical form and as a vision of the world. Yet there are great differences between both forms: sustained irony is intimately connected with the questions of self-knowledge and self-expression, which are also the quasi-permanent companions of the travel writer. Of the ironist, in this sense, as of the travel writer, one could equally state that "life is for him a drama, and what engrosses him is the ingenious unfolding of this drama. He is himself a spectator even when performing some act."¹ Rhetorical irony is, however, a trope which can