

The Concept of Spring in V.S. Naipaul's *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*

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WHEN *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* appeared in 1963 critics and reviewers began to speculate that it was an attempt by Naipaul to liberate himself from the title of West Indian Novelist which he had found constricting. Here was a novel set so precisely in London, in a world far removed from the West Indies of the earlier novels, dealing so confidently with English middle class problems, written by a man whose criticism of the West Indies was so outspoken that it seemed to be an indication of Naipaul's intention to transform himself from a West Indian into an English novelist.

This attitude to *Mr. Stone* has been proved inadequate by Naipaul's most recent work. In any case, careful readers of Naipaul's comments would have realized that his embarrassment at being called a West Indian novelist had less to do with his desire to deny his native land than with his desire to be recognized as a serious writer whose observations can apply to human beings anywhere. Most of his novels have been set in the West Indies, the region Naipaul knows best, but their implications are to the human condition. Naipaul has said recently that nothing makes him more furious than to be told that his work reveals a great deal about life in the West Indies.¹ By the same token, he would object as strongly to the statement that *Mr. Stone* explained much about life at a certain level in English society. The fact is that Naipaul does not wish any reader's preconceptions about the nationality of an author to prejudice or limit his response to the work he is reading. All "West Indian" authors have suffered from this

prejudice. The reviewer in *Time Magazine*, for example, thinks that although *A House for Mr. Biswas* fails it is "built of excellent *exotic* materials."² [emphasis mine]

Though *Mr. Stone* may be an attempt to escape sensational appetites for race, colour and exoticism, it has little to do with a willingness to assume a new and limiting national label. To be read for his observations on class rather than race would be as irksome to its author.

It is clear to anyone familiar with Naipaul's work before and after *Mr. Stone* that this novel was written to allow him to explore from a different angle certain observations he had made about human beings. There is no doubt, of course, that Naipaul's view of mankind has been strongly conditioned by his West Indian background. The character of Mr. Stone, therefore, contains something of Ganesh and of Mr. Biswas.

Ganesh, Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone are all potentially creative individuals whose environments make it difficult for them to express their creativity. But whereas Ganesh and Mr. Biswas struggle against a background without standards or order, Mr. Stone is stifled by the rigidity of the order of his community. All three men desire escape; Ganesh and Biswas from chaos, Mr. Stone from the weight of his ossified order.

As one reads this novel one is occasionally struck by a certain similarity between Mr. Stone and Mr. Duffy, the character in James Joyce's "A Painful Case," who allows his passion for order, routine and an uncomplicated life to ruin not only his own life but someone else's as well. Mr. Stone too lives by routine and finds comfort in the simplicity of his life. But, unlike Duffy, Stone is aware from the beginning that the narrow boundaries that he and society have constructed around themselves exclude an abundance of life.

This awareness is at first unconscious, but Naipaul expresses it through Mr. Stone's preoccupations with the tree outside his window and with his neighbour's cat. At first

Mr. Stone merely uses the seasonal changes in the tree to mark the passage of time:

There was a tree in the school grounds at the back of his house by which he noted the passing of time, the waxing and waning of the seasons, a tree which daily when shaving he studied, until he had known its every branch. The contemplation of this living object reassured him of the solidity of things. He had grown to regard it as part of his own life, a marker of his past, for it moved through time with him. The new leaves of spring, the hard green of summer, the naked black branches of winter, none of these spoke of the running out of his life. They were only a reminder of the even flowing of time, of his mounting experience his lengthening past.³

But as time passes and Mr. Stone's life progresses he comes to feel excluded from the tree's rhythm and cycles. He comes to distinguish the dull monotonous routine of his life from the inexorable rhythm of the tree. The things he had come to equate with the regularity of nature — the sameness of the Tomlinson's Christmas decorations year after year; the regularity with which his assistant, Miss Menzies, rotated the clothes she wore to office; his house-keeper's weekly visits to the cinema on Thursdays — were significantly different in that they marked the passage of time without bringing about any kind of renewal. It is part of the cycle of nature that the tree outside his window will die in winter and be reborn in spring. His own death will bring no renewal:

Yet, communing with his tree, he could not help contrasting its serenity with his disturbance. It would shed its leaves in time; but this would lead to a renewal which would bring greater strength. Responsibility had come too late to him. He had broken the pattern of his life, and this break could at best be only healed. It would not lead to renewal. So the tree no longer comforted. It reproached. (p. 45)

The break in the pattern of his life to which he refers is, ironically enough, his marriage. Since Mr. Stone is over sixty and Margaret, the woman he marries, over fifty, there is no possibility of physical renewal by reproduction. In fact, the marriage is a singularly passionless one. We are told that on their wedding night they settle down, "each

silent in his own cot" (p. 36). No young Stones will be born of this marriage, but clearly Mr. Stone never hoped for that. He does have some reason, however, to expect that Margaret will provide him some social and intellectual stimulation. He is attracted to her because she has the strength and originality to say socially outrageous things: "The only flower I care about . . . is the cauliflower" (p. 13). Here is a social rebel who might help Mr. Stone express his unconscious hostility to social sacred cows. Margaret at the beginning of this novel is remarkably like Sandra of *The Mimic Men* in her gift of the phrase. As Ralph Singh does eventually with Sandra, Mr. Stone discovers that Margaret is not what he has expected. Instead of helping him break out of the prison of social routine, she moulds herself about him completely and becomes an extension of himself (see p. 57). Not only does she encourage him to keep up the empty routine of his former life, she reinforces it as well by encouraging him to undertake other socially acceptable formalities; he becomes the Master to his housekeeper, is cajoled into taking up gardening as a hobby, and is the host of many boring dinner parties. These parties at which wine is sipped like liqueur are pathetic imitations of the life style of the higher classes, meaningless and dull to Mr. Stone and his acquaintances, but to be endured.

Marriage does not bring about the renewal for which Mr. Stone unconsciously yearns. It separates him even further from his tree. Ironically, it brings him closer to the black cat. Ironically because the black cat is another symbol of nature's ability to renew itself, of nature's virility and energy. As one thinks back on the novel one realizes that Mr. Stone's original antipathy to the cat, which at first seemed like an ordinary idiosyncrasy, is in fact the result of his envy of and embarrassment at the cat's vigour and virility. It is significant that the war with the cat fades into the background when Mr. Stone is himself most creative.

The cat reappears when Mr. Stone is beginning to question the results of his own creativity and its ability to renew his life: "His communion with the cat, stretching every morning in the warming sunshine, made him more attentive to the marks of the approaching spring" (p. 133). Mr. Stone can only observe the cat and its oneness with nature. "Participation was denied him" (p. 134). The cat's rhythms are those of nature: "the cat woke, stretched itself in a slow, luxurious, assured action, and rose. It was as if the world was awakening from winter" (p. 132). By observing the cat Mr. Stone comes to realize that his society has cut itself off from the wide world of nature by choosing for itself a comfortable, narrow little life. It is not nature that has cut Mr. Stone off, but his own doubt that spring will come.

Mr. Stone identifies most strongly with the cat when he learns that it is to be destroyed because "The children liked him when he was a kitten. But they don't care for him now" (p. 141). Is this not what is happening to him as he approaches old age, as it has happened to many pensioners before him? Is he not allowing Margaret to get rid of Miss Millington since she is becoming decrepit? But Mr. Stone and Miss Millington have both ceased to be natural animals and become social ones. The cat in its numerous offspring leaves its own springtime behind it. After the black cat has been destroyed Mr. Stone sees a pregnant cat whose unborn kittens he senses are the progeny of his cat. Death is meaningless for the cat who is destroyed at the height of its vigour. A young black cat, probably its offspring, moves in almost immediately to take its place. Death is going to be final for Mr. Stone and for many like him.

Towards the end of the novel, Mr. Stone while gardening wonders rather pathetically about nature's cycle and man's relationship to it.

"Doesn't it make you think, though?" he said. "Just the other day the tree was so bare. And that dahlia bush. Like dead grass all winter. I mean, don't you think it's just the same with us? That we too will have our spring?" (p. 146)

To this his wife replies, "I think it's a lotta rubbish" (p. 147), recapturing for a moment her earlier assertiveness. Mr. Stone acknowledges that she is right and realistic. No doubt she is, because she and her husband and many others like them have ceased to believe in spring and the value of renewal. Stone's yearning for spring is pathetic because it expresses doubt rather than conviction and Margaret senses and understands this since she has no conviction herself.

Mr. Stone, then, comes to the conclusion that "the order of the universe, to which he had sought to ally himself, was not his order" (p. 158). In a way he is right. But how passionately had he searched to ally himself with nature's order? Marriage, his first attempt, proved a failure. His second and most important attempt was his plan for the Knights Companion. While he is creating his plan Mr. Stone is most in tune with Nature's rhythm for he experiences the vigour of renewal. Work becomes a joy for the first time, and proves invigorating. This genuine creativity is absolutely commendable.

Mr. Stone, however, soon discovers that the creator must inevitably face the dilemma of presenting his creation to others. No plan, no work of art can fulfill itself if it is kept secret by its conceiver. Unfortunately for Mr. Stone his plan proves a success. The pure dream he has of introducing renewal and springtime into the lives of old men by keeping them active and useful after their retirement is contaminated as the plan is used as a good public relations gimmick by his company. And Mr. Stone himself is not so devoid of vanity that he does not relish the social glory which success brings. It is only afterwards that he comes to understand that social success has nothing to do with the act of creation itself, that social success can help alienate the artist from the cycle of creation and renewal.

It is a young man named Whympier who makes Mr. Stone's plan work. Whympier is no creator or artist. He is instead a public relations officer, an administrator, a sales-

man. He makes nothing himself but enjoys licking other people's creations into shape. Stone's plan, which basically is to try to make contact with the order of the universe, is frustrated by Whymper, its executor, who wishes to use it for purely commercial and personal ends. The old men who had been predominant in Stone's mind become secondary to the efficient running of the plan.

The relationship between Mr. Stone and Whymper is analogous in a way to that between the old black cat and the young black cat. In each case, a younger generation takes over from an older one. But whereas the young cat is just as attuned to the universe as the old one, Whymper is even further removed from the natural cycle than Mr. Stone, and more firmly committed to the social one. Whymper never even considers the concept of spring and renewal. It is not surprising then that eventually Whymper is given all the credit for the Knights Companion plan. Society has traditionally given greater respect to salesmen and bureaucrats than to artists, to destroyers than to creators.

The destruction of the cat has no disastrous consequences because of the natural vigour of the cat and the provision it has made to renew itself. However, the destruction of Stone's plan means winter for Stone with no promise of spring. Society has succeeded in exiling Stone from the universe of nature. The name that Naipaul has chosen for his central character is significant in this respect, since a stone is a natural object which, however, remains unchanged by seasonal cycles.

Mr. Stone comes to regret that he ever attempted to share his creation with anyone. "Nothing that was pure ought to be exposed" (p. 149). Exposure merely leaves the pure open to corruption and destruction. This surely is a sensation that many an artist must have experienced as he listened to the response of others to his work. It is not, however, a final answer for the true artist. To see clearly that mankind has chosen to assert himself by attempting

to destroy rather than to identify with the rhythm of nature is not to justify destruction on an individual level. "He stripped the city of all that was enduring and saw that all that was not flesh was of no importance to man" (p. 158). The creative individual must go on cultivating his garden, as Mr. Stone does, expecting help from neither the universe nor society. It is to Mr. Stone's credit that, shattered though he is by his discovery, he refuses to join the destroyers and settles down instead to a little work as the book ends. He may never create another plan but he will not mock Nature by admiring man's destructiveness.

In his earlier books Naipaul had written about the problems of trying to be creative in a society which was without order. *Mr. Stone* makes it quite clear that creativity is as difficult in a society which is too highly ordered, in which natural responses have been replaced by stereotyped social ones. In his next novel, *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul presents us with a situation in which his protagonist detaches himself from both a chaotic and a highly ordered society in order to free himself to create an honest work of art.

NOTES

¹"Portrait of an artist: What makes the Naipaul Run," Vidia Naipaul speaking to Raoul Pantin, *Caribbean Contact*, I, 6 (May 1973), 18.

²Review of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Time*, 22 June 1962, p. 74.

³*Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (London: Deutsch, 1963), p. 20. All page references are to this edition, and are indicated in the text.