

Mr Biswas, Mr. Polly and the Problem of V.S. Naipaul's Sources.

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IN an article, "Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly,"¹ Martin Fido has pointed out a number of interesting and striking similarities between V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and H. G. Wells' *The History of Mr. Polly*. His illustrations are convincing and leave no room for doubt that Naipaul did use Wells' novel as something of a model for his own. But Fido goes from there to take two West Indian critics to task for their debate on whether rootlessness is an important theme in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Such West Indian themes, he contends, are irrelevant as "Naipaul's almost explicit literary roots are extra-Caribbean" (p. 36). This seems to be yet another attempt to place Naipaul's work exclusively in the tradition of English literature. It is worth pointing out that Naipaul himself has on a number of occasions resisted such attempts by critics and reviewers.

The similarity between *Mr Biswas* and *Mr. Polly* had not in fact gone unnoticed, as Fido acknowledges in a footnote. The following two paragraphs were written in 1966:

In creating his central character, Naipaul, it would appear, has borrowed heavily from H. G. Wells' *The History of Mr. Polly*. As Wells had done, Naipaul gives his hero the title Mister from his very infancy. By this he emphasizes Mr Biswas' lack of a real childhood and by talking of him as a man from his birth his childishness as a man is brought out and his seriousness as a child. Like Wells, Naipaul gives a very frustrating education to his hero, allows him to stir his imagination by his own reading, makes him undergo a soul-stunting period as a shopkeeper, lets him glimpse romance by falling in love briefly, and then has romance killed when he is trapped by marriage into a large, slovenly family, and finally permits him to escape. Naipaul, as Wells had done, even parallels the

pain in his hero's mind with acute stomach pains, thus using the common but excruciating pain of indigestion to make clear the pain of mental indigestion and frustration. Unlike Wells, however, Naipaul does not allow his hero to achieve contentment in the end, his vision being more pessimistic than Wells'.

For all the similarities between the two heroes, it is impossible to feel that Naipaul is merely copying. Borrowing Wells' tools he has created a structure which is typically Trinidadian. Mr Biswas is not just a Hindu; he is a Trinidadian Hindu. Mr. Polly, on the other hand, is undoubtedly English.²

This passage is quoted at length because in many ways its conclusions about Naipaul's debt to Wells seem fairer to the spirit of *A House for Mr Biswas* than are Fido's. Mr. Polly has a difficult and frustrating life it is true, but it is lived against the background of a society which has roots and standards. Mr Biswas has to forge for himself the standards by which he is going to live.

It is dangerous to take Naipaul's sources in English and European literature at face value, for they are often used ironically. Take, for instance, the remarkable similarity between the way Mr. Lewisham of H. G. Wells' *Love and Mr. Lewisham* and Titus Hoyt of Naipaul's *Miguel Street* set about educating themselves. A superficial glance at certain passages might suggest that Naipaul is copying from Wells. The following passages occur in Wells' novel:

Over the head of the bed, for example, where folks hang texts, these truths asserted themselves, written in a clear bold, youthfully florid hand: — 'Knowledge is Power,' and 'What man has done man can do'. . . .³

Attached by a drawing-pin to the roof . . . dangled a Time-Table. Mr. Lewisham was to rise at five. . . . 'French until eight', said the Time-Table curtly. Breakfast was to be eaten in twenty minutes; then twenty-five minutes of 'literature'. . . . (pp. 3-4)

Could anything be simpler or more magnificent? In six years Mr. Lewisham will have his five or six languages, a sound, all-round education, a habit of tremendous industry, and be still but four and twenty. (p. 5)

Compare these with the following from Naipaul:

The walls of his house were now hung with improving quotations, some typed, some cut out of magazines and

pasted on bits of cardboard.

I also noticed a big thing called 'Time-Table'.

From this I gathered that Titus Hoyt was to rise at five-thirty, read something from Greek philosophers until six, spend fifteen minutes bathing and exercising, another five reading the morning paper, and ten on breakfast. It was a formidable thing altogether.

Titus Hoyt said, 'If I follow the time-table I will be a educated man in about three four years.'⁴

Naipaul, I think, deliberately uses this source in *Wells* to help him make a point ironically. Mr. Lewisham is lower middle class and poor. However, he aspires to get a degree from London University, and to teach at a regular school. Titus Hoyt, on the other hand, lives in Miguel Street and runs a school in his house. His most prominent student is Elias and the Miguel Street community "felt it wasn't fair, making a boy like Elias do litritcher and poultry" (*Miguel Street*, p. 34). It is significant to note that Mr. Lewisham makes these idealistic and naive plans while he is still a boy of eighteen. Titus Hoyt is a middle-aged man. Another slight correspondence between *Mr. Lewisham* and *Miguel Street* is the red tie Lewisham wears when he turns socialist, and the red scarf Eddoes wears when he is on strike.⁵ Again Naipaul makes his reference ironic as he indicates that Eddoes also goes about with a red tooth-brush in his mouth on such days.

The careful reader can also detect relationships between the work of Naipaul and that of Dickens. *A House for Mr Biswas* is like a Dickensian novel in its scope, its range of characters, the eccentricities of some of its characters, its family relationships, and its overall structure. But here again one must be careful. Kenneth Ramchand, usually a very perceptive critic, describes Naipaul as a very conventional novelist⁶ without taking into account that the form of *A House for Mr Biswas* or *The Suffrage of Elvira* may in fact be very ironic. An examination of some scenes from *Great Expectations* and *A House for Mr Biswas* might help illustrate this. The similarities between the scene of Pip's first departure for London and Biswas' for Port of Spain are suggestive enough to indicate that one is a

source of the other. Each is a climactic scene: Pip's coming at the end of the first stage of his expectations, and Biswas' at the end of the first part of a two part novel. As Pip leaves his village the mists rise solemnly, he says, "as if to show me the world."⁷ Biswas feels as he departs that "the world had been restored to him."⁸ Biswas and Pip make similar preparations for departure: Pip is to leave carrying his little hand-portmanteau (*G.E.*, p. 170), and Biswas finds that "the small brown cardboard suitcase . . . was enough for what he intended to take" (*Biswas*, p. 304). Even their final meals are alike: "When Savi brought him the cocoa and biscuits and butter he told her, 'I am going away' " (*Biswas*, p. 305); "It was a hurried breakfast with no taste in it. I got up from the meal, saying with a sort of briskness, as if it had only just occurred to me, 'Well! I suppose I must be off!' " (*G.E.*, p. 171). The states of mind of Pip and Mr Biswas as they leave their villages and arrive in the cities are not dissimilar. As parallel as these scenes are, however, at least two ironic differences must be pointed out: Pip is just a boy as he begins this new adventure and some concessions must be made for his immaturity. Mr Biswas is a married man with a family. Secondly, as Pip leaves Joe's forge for the corruption of London he is leaving something good and positive behind. Mr Biswas leaves no such haven; he must create his own.

Two other episodes which bear comparison are the scenes which describe the illnesses of Pip and Mr Biswas. It would seem clear from the contexts of the novels that both Dickens and Naipaul intend these scenes of illness and recovery to be symbolic of death and rebirth. From his illness, which comes near the end of *Great Expectations*, Pip emerges as a mature and chastened man. He has learnt much from his suffering and from his mistakes. Mr Biswas on the other hand is reborn as innocent and as immature as he had been before: "The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning" (*Biswas*, p. 305).

Once again there are suggestive similarities between the state of mind of Pip during his illness and that of Biswas during his. Two small incidents, however, emphasize the ironic difference between the two. When Pip is sick he is carried by Joe: "Joe wrapped me up, took me in his arms, carried me down . . . , and put me in, as if I were still the small helpless creature to whom he had so abundantly given the wealth of his great nature" (*G.E.*, pp. 505-506). During his illness Biswas is carried by Govind: "By carrying Mr Biswas in his arms Govind had put himself on the side of authority: he had assumed authority's power to rescue and assist when there was need, authority's impersonal power to forgive" (*Biswas*, p. 295). The Tulsis have nothing to forgive Mr Biswas for. Joe, on the other hand, who has much to forgive Pip, is not impersonal or authoritarian about it. The second incident is the concern about money which both Pip and Mr Biswas have as they recover and look forward to a new life. Joe, it turns out, has looked after Pip's financial problems and in his generosity he insists to Pip that "You must have your supper and your wine-and-water, and you must be put betwixt the sheets" (*G.E.*, p. 508). Biswas is evicted from his sick-room and made apprehensive by Seth's remarks about money, and the Tulsis are much richer than Joe:

His money dwindled: Ovaltine, Ferrol, Sanatogen, the doctor's fees, the midwife's, the thaumaturge's. And there was no more money to come.

One evening Seth said, "That tin of Ovaltine could very well be your last, if you don't decide to do something". (*Biswas*, p. 304)

At the centre of the ironic difference between Pip's situation and that of Mr Biswas is the fact that Pip has Joe in his world, while Mr Biswas is all alone.

Another source that Naipaul uses very ironically in *A House for Mr Biswas* is Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Enough has been said about the relationship to *King Lear* of Naipaul's treatment of the theme of being unnecessary and unaccommodated to make further elaboration pointless.⁹

Barrie Davies suggests that Naipaul also makes allusions to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* to help him explore further ironies in his use of the word "accommodated". It has also been pointed out how interestingly Naipaul adapts Shakespeare's introduction of the theme of nothing — "Nothing will come of nothing" — to his Trinidadian world. "Ought oughts are ought" (*Biswas*, p. 44) is a lesson Mr Biswas is whipped into learning. Naipaul's concern with this theme is well known and his statement, "Nothing was created in the British West Indies,"¹⁰ is one of the most contentious lines in West Indian literature. It cannot be argued that Naipaul's adaption of Shakespeare puts him in the tradition of English letters. For Naipaul, the theme of nothing has a very special relationship to West Indian history.

The relationship between Lear's mad scene at the height of a storm and Biswas' mental breakdown under similar conditions has also been noted several times, but it is important to emphasize that while Lear competes with the storm in power, Biswas only mutters and cringes when his storm is at its height. Even when he is drawing our attention to similarities in the predicaments of Biswas and Lear, Naipaul is emphasizing that Biswas is no Lear.

No doubt there are many other allusions to Shakespeare in Naipaul's work. In *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Mimic Men* there are echoes of Shakespeare's treatment of politics in *Julius Caesar*. Could the foul odour of the political crowds in *The Mystic Masseur* — "The heckler took off his hat and waved it up and down. 'Oh God!' he screamed. 'But it making stink!'"¹¹ — and in *The Mimic Men* — "And sometimes, when we were on the platform: 'Did you get the old booky?'"¹² — have anything to do with Casca's unsentimental account of the foul breath of the crowd that cheered Caesar?

T. S. Eliot is one English (or American) poet whose work Naipaul seems to allude to without irony. Naipaul's description of Fuente Grove in *The Mystic Masseur* as a place

in which "in the dry season the earth baked, cracked, and calcined" (p. 68) brings to mind *The Waste Land*. Often in his work Naipaul uses landscape, as Eliot had done, to suggest the sterility and narrowness of the world in which his characters have to operate. Of course, Eliot is not the only writer from whom Naipaul might have learned this technique, but he must be given credit for making the Waste Land so widely accepted as a metaphor for the modern world. The suggestion that Naipaul is drawing from Eliot comes, for instance, from the distinct similarity at times between Ralph Singh of *The Mimic Men* and J. Alfred Prufrock of Eliot's poem. The following passages in which each author sums up the futility and the frivolity of the life of his character are too similar to be coincidence: "And, indeed, after the champagne, the caviar on buttered toast, the barbecue, what was there to do?" (*Mimic*, p. 74). This formulates Singh's boredom, just as Eliot's lines do for Prufrock:

After the cups, the marmalade, the tea
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
 Would it have been worth while
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile. . . .

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, ll. 88-91

But Naipaul's use of Eliot does not place him in Eliot's tradition any more than does his use of his reading of Thomas Mann place him in the tradition of Thomas Mann. One thesis on Naipaul's work finds strong similarities between *The Mimic Men* and *Tonio Kröger*:

The Mimic Men occupies the same central position in Naipaul's development as *Tonio Kröger* in Thomas Mann's. The parallels in theme and manner between the two novels are so remarkable that one is tempted to offer Mann as a probable influence. Naipaul, it must be pointed out, is a writer who is intimately acquainted with Mann's career, and he shares some of the personal dilemmas of Mann himself. The main issues in the two novels are: the artist's growth into self-knowledge through creative process, and the rewards he gains and the tolls he must pay for creativity. Tonio's and Ralph Singh's artistic and self-critical thoughts arise from their sense of exile.¹³

The connections between the confessional tone of *The Mimic Men* and Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull*, *Confidence Man* are even more striking in the tension which each author maintains between the narcissism and the desire for truth in the respective narrators, Ralph Singh and Felix Krull. Victor J. Ramraj sees correspondence between Naipaul's work and that of Chekov:

Like Chekov, Naipaul is deeply and personally acquainted with people; his ironical treatment never becomes brutal and his comic incidents are always balanced by the tragic. He captures effectively vacancy, frustration and futile aspiration.¹⁴

There is also the suggestion of an echo of Voltaire's *Candide* throughout *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* as Mr. Stone discovers that he is alone in an impersonal and frequently hostile world and that to maintain his dignity and indeed his identity he must "cultivate his garden" by doing a little work.

This very variety of Naipaul's sources in European literature makes it difficult to place him in any one tradition. And critics have made many more comparisons than I have indicated. The influence of Restoration Comedy, for example, has been detected in Naipaul's plotting of *The Suffrage of Elvira*. The form of this novel is, however, highly ironic and Naipaul is, no doubt, using the similarities to the comedy of manners to illustrate how far from accidental are the goings on in *Elvira*.¹⁵ Naipaul's name has often been mentioned in the same breath with that of Evelyn Waugh, but, although he has been accused by George Lamming of writing a "castrated satire",¹⁶ Naipaul contends he is no satirist:

I am not a satirist. Satire comes out of a tremendous optimism. One simply does not indulge in satire while one is awaiting death. Satire is a type of anger. Irony and comedy I think, come out of a sense of acceptance.¹⁷

If then one cannot place Naipaul in the tradition of European letters because he lacks the optimism of writers who come from rooted societies, it may be reasonable to attempt to

fit him into the tradition of Indian literature, to place him side by side with R. K. Narayan, for instance. H. H. Anniah Gowda would probably not object to this: "But rarely does he forget to document the country to which his ancestors belonged. This is seen in his choice of names and customs and use of cultural ideas. It seems to provide the base for his work."¹⁸

Certainly there are sufficient similarities to Narayan's work in V. S. Naipaul to suggest more than just coincidence. There are, for instance, a number of parallels between Ganesh of *The Mystic Masseur* and Margayya of *The Financial Expert* (1953). Each rises from poverty and obscurity to a certain prominence in his community. Their rise is associated with books in spite of their incredible naiveté about the world of books. The scenes when each arranges to get a book printed leave no doubt about Naipaul's debt to Narayan. When confronted by the printer both Margayya and Ganesh have to resort to bluff:

Margayya true to his principles did not wish to show his ignorance.

Lal asked: 'Shall we print in demy or octavo?'

What was demy and what octavo? What strange terms were these; to what universe did they belong? . . . He said grandly: 'Each has its own advantage, it's for you to decide; you are a technical man.'

Lal said: 'You see, demy will give us greater area.'

Margayya was hearing the word for the first time in his life.¹⁹

Ganesh's manoeuvring is almost identical:

'Look, how much you know about this thing?'

'Printing?'

Ganesh smiled. 'I study it a little bit.'

'What point you want it to be in?'

Ganesh didn't know what to say.

'Eight, ten, eleven, twelve, or what?' Basdeo sounded impatient.

Ganesh was thinking rapidly about the cost. He said firmly, 'Eight go do me.' (*Masseur*, p. 96)

The similarities of these two scenes suggest to us that their authors are making similar points about the functions of books in an illiterate society. But the overall impact of Naipaul's book is very different from that of Narayan.

Perhaps this can be illustrated by a device which occurs in each novel. Both authors associate their central characters with trees; Margayya with a banyan tree, and Ganesh with a mango tree. In each case the tree suggests something distinct and potentially fine about the character. Both characters move away from their trees as they achieve material success. Margayya is forced at the end to go back to his, but Ganesh never returns. There is no doubt that Ganesh has turned his back on his past, but critics cannot agree on whether Margayya's return is intentional because he has recognized the error of his ways, or, because, having no alternative, he is forced to begin again as immature as he always has been. This ambiguity in Narayan's work has been commented on by Naipaul:

Some years ago he told me in London that, whatever happened, India would go on. He said it casually; it was a conviction so deep it required no stressing. It is a negative attitude, part of that older India which was incapable of self-assessment. . . . There is a contradiction in Narayan, between his form, which implies concern, and his attitude, which denies it.²⁰

This is the difference between the work of Naipaul and that of Narayan and other Indian writers. Naipaul cannot be casual or negative. His work drives towards self-assessment even though, one senses, this is a painful process. This basic difference in attitude suggests that Gowda is wrong in his assumption that India is the basis of Naipaul's consciousness. The Indian names and customs to which Gowda refers are only apparently Indian. Instead, they emphasize the fact that Trinidad is no India. "Colonial India I could not link with colonial Trinidad" (*Area*, p. 188), says Naipaul.

In the foregoing pages an attempt has been made to indicate that although Naipaul makes liberal use of his wide reading in his fiction, he cannot easily be placed in the tradition of either European or Indian literature. His allusions to these literatures often help point out his differentness. His references to Wells, Dickens or Narayan often seem to suggest that West Indian society demands a tradi-

tion of literature all its own. Naipaul, it would appear, is in the process of helping to establish it.

But he did not start from scratch. He has always acknowledged his father as an important influence: "A great deal of my vision of Trinidad has come straight from my father. Other writers are aware that they are writing about rooted societies; his work showed me that one could write about another kind of society."²¹ In an article in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (August 1975), I go into some detail about the relationship of Naipaul's work to his father's little book of short stories, *Gurudeva and other Indian Tales*. Naipaul himself has recently brought out an edition of his father's book.²² The point is that it can be demonstrated that Naipaul's vision developed directly out of his father's. Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*, a book Naipaul admires, has a similar, but much less powerful, influence. No such claim can be made for his European sources, which he uses ironically and less intrinsically.

Another significant energizing source is the calypso. Naipaul has written admiringly about the calypso in a number of places. No other work of West Indian literature is as thoroughly permeated with the spirit of the calypso as is *Miguel Street*. Each episode in that book is like a calypso in itself, and Naipaul sprinkles snatches of calypsoes generously in it to help him in the creation of his characters. In that book his vision is that of the calypsonian who, recognizing his society for what it is, can bring to bear on it gifts of irony and compassion which permit him to accept it without attempting to justify its lack of roots and standards; in short, without sentimentalizing it.

Just as intrinsic to Naipaul's vision as these literary sources is the course of West Indian history. Critics have commented on the relationship between the structures of some of his novels and the past of the West Indies.²³ His preoccupation with West Indian history can be seen not only in his novels, but much more explicitly in his non-fiction work. Important themes such as mimicry and root-

lessness find their sources in the peculiar past of slavery and colonialism that belongs to the West Indies. Far from being clearly "extra-Caribbean," then, Naipaul's sources can roughly speaking be divided into two categories: those from his general reading which he uses to help him make a point; and those from the West Indies — notably his father, West Indian history, and the calypso — which have both shaped and inspired his vision.

Now that all this has been said, where does it leave Naipaul? Is he a purely provincial writer, of interest and significance only to West Indians? Obviously not. Even if the problems he chooses to explore are especially West Indian they are universal as well. Furthermore, the people who contend with these problems are complexly human and their struggle to survive with dignity is the struggle of mankind.

A writer of the stature of Naipaul has to be approached more sensitively than Fido does in his attempt to prove him universal. The effect of an insensitive approach is to re-colonialize him, as does Paul Theroux: "Some people still think of him as a Trinidadian, but when he flies to Port of Spain he has to produce an air ticket showing he intends to leave. So much for his being a Trinidadian."²⁴ Naipaul is like Biswas, who, with no tradition to turn to, must create his own. And this tradition has its roots in the rootlessness of West Indian society rather than in the well-established European and Indian societies.

NOTES

¹"Mr Biswas and Mr. Polly," *Ariel*, 5, No. 4 (October 1974), 30-37.

²Anthony Boxill, *The Novel in English in The West Indies: 1900-1962*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1966), pp. 361-62.

³*Love and Mr. Lewisham* (New York: Scribner's, 1924), p. 2.

⁴*Miguel Street* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 79.

⁵See *Mr. Lewisham*, p. 73, and *Miguel Street*, p. 94.

⁶See "Concern for Criticism," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 16, No. 2 (June 1970), 55.

⁷*Great Expectations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p. 172.

⁸*A House for Mr Biswas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 305.

- ⁹See for instance Barrie Davies, "The Personal Sense of a Society — Minority View: Aspects of the 'East Indian' Novel in the West Indies," *Studies in the Novel*, 4, No. 2 (Summer 1972), 284-295; and F. G. Rohlehr, "Predestination, Frustration and Symbolic Darkness in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 10, No. 1 (March 1964), 3-11.
- ¹⁰*The Middle Passage* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 27.
- ¹¹*The Mystic Masseur* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 216.
- ¹²*The Mimic Men* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 194.
- ¹³Subramani, *Search for a Country: A Study of V. S. Naipaul's Fiction and Non-Fiction Writings* (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1972), p. 90.
- ¹⁴Victor J. Ramraj, *A Study of the Novels of V. S. Naipaul*, (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1968), p. 33.
- ¹⁵See my article "The Physical and Historical Environment of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 3, No. 4 (1975), 52-55.
- ¹⁶George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), p. 225.
- ¹⁷Derek Walcott, "Interview with V. S. Naipaul," *Sunday Guardian* (Trinidad), (March 7, 1965), 5.
- ¹⁸H. H. Anniah Gowda, "India in Naipaul's Artistic Consciousness," *The Literary Half-yearly*, 16, No. 1 (January 1975), 28.
- ¹⁹R. K. Narayan, *The Financial Expert* (New York: Noonday Press, 1964), pp. 83-84.
- ²⁰V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 216.
- ²¹David Bates, "V. S. Naipaul," *The Sunday Times*, (May 26, 1963), 13.
- ²²Seepersad Naipaul, *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories*. With a foreword by V. S. Naipaul (London: Deutsch, 1976).
- ²³See my article referred to in Note 15; and Gordon Rohlehr, "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr Biswas*," *New World Quarterly*, 4, No. 4 (1968), 66-72.
- ²⁴Paul Theroux, "Perfection, Punctuality and Gloucester Cheese," *The Daily Telegraph Magazine*, No. 417 (October 27, 1972), 37-40.