V.S. NAIPAUL : A COMMONWEALTH WRITER ?

" The problems of Commonwealth writing are really no more than the problems of writing; and the problems of reading and comprehension are no more than reading the literature of any strange society " (1), wrote V.S. Naipaul in a review of a collection of papers delivered at the first conference on Commonwealth literature (2). He went on to ask whether the emphasis on Commonwealth writing as such had'nt led, wrongly, to the discovery of problems peculiar to it. To him the importance given to regional writing is alarming because it derives from a political attitude and can lead to the use of literature as a political weapon. This is a danger of which the organizers of the Conference and some of its participants were certainly aware. Professor Jeffares and Professor Rajan, for instance, stated clearly that a writer must be appreciated for his supranational qualities, and they would obviously agree with Mr Naipaul that ' in the end it is the writer and the writing that matter '. In his paper on '*Identity and Nationality*' Professor Rajan insisted that social significance and literary nationality must be secondary to the artist's individual vision and to his creative conscience. This view was, however, challenged by the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, who regards the novelist as a teacher and stated that his own purpose was " to help (his) society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-denigration " (3) ; he even stressed the necessity of countering racism with an ' anti-racist racism ' (4). Mr Achebe's attitude is distinctly political, yet not exclusively so, for he feels that the need of his countrymen for self-confidence is as essential to culture and creative art as to political recognition. He is primarily concerned to help his people recover their pride and dignity, a task which demands the active cooperation of the artist as much as of the scientist or the politician. For him racism is a necessary stimulus at present, but it will lose importance as achievement helps to cure the frustration and humiliation resulting from oppression and denigration. However dangerous this attitude may seem to us, it no doubt reveals the pressures to which artists of the Commonwealth are subjected, particularly when they write about their own country. Most serious among these pressures is a sense, or a fear, of inferiority, whether due to race, to their awareness of immaturity, or to Philistinism.

(1) *New Statesman*, London, 24 September 1965, p. 452.
(2) This conference was held at the University of Leeds in 1964. The papers delivered were collected and edited by John Press in a volume entitled *Commonwealth Literature*, London, Heinemann, 1965.
(3) Chinua ACHEBE, *The Novelist as Teacher*, in *Commonwealth Literature*, p. 204.
(4) *Ibid.*

Not all writers of the Commonwealth react so aggressively. For instance, the Jamaican novelist John Hearne, who describes personal relationships between slightly coloured upper-class Jamaicans, who are broad-minded enough to accept intermarriage, tends to oversimplify the racial problem. Naipaul, on the contrary, has shown in *The Middle Passage* how complex the problem of race is in the Caribbean and how differently each West-Indian community reacts to it. This is best illustrated by the West-Indian short stories collected by Andrew Salkey (5), in which the authors' attitudes are coloured by protest, revolt, self-criticism, or sentimentality. Some writers, however, among them Naipaul, simply interpret their own experience of life in their native country or in England, because they consider self-knowledge, whether of the individual or the community, more important than self-confidence, or rather, they make the former a prerequisite to the latter. " The West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands " (6). To some extent, Naipaul does this, particularly in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Yet, as an artist who attempts to reach the universal, he tends to regard his origins or the West-Indian setting of his novels as purely accidental. But the universal is unattainable without a full grasp of the particular. If his countrymen need to be told who they are, Naipaul, as an artist, must discover what he is and come to terms with it. He himself refers to this problem in his review of *Commonwealth Literature* : " Students ... write ... to say that they get the impression from my books that I am engaged in a search for identity. At times like this I am glad to be only a name. I also feel that the search, whoever started it, has been pretty well abandoned ; and that what might have been a genuine stumbling in the early stages is now regarded as a necessary posture " (7). Postures of whatever kind are fatal to artists. Mr Naipaul's own experience happens to be that of an East Indian born and raised in Trinidad. Though he may not be subjected to the same pressures as those of the commonwealth writers who still live in their country, though he may dissociate himself completely from his birthplace, yet he cannot ignore the fact that it has helped to make him what he is as a man and as an artist.

In his first three novels Naipaul describes the Trinidad of his childhood. *The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira* and *Miguel Street* (8) create a vivid picture of community life among East-Indian villagers, in a multi-racial small town, and in a Port-of-Spain slum. A tragi-comic vein runs through these novels, arous-

(5) Andrew SALKEY, ed., *West Indian Stories*, London, Faber and Faber, 1960.
(6) V.S. NAIPAUL, *The Middle Passage*, London, André Deutsch, 1962, p. 68.
(7) *New Statesman*, London, 24 September, 1965.
(8) London, André Deutsch, 1957, 1958, 1959.

ing sympathy as well as amusement. What makes the characters attractive is their eccentricity. Ganesh Ramsumair, a figure of fun at school, then an incompetent teacher, spends the first years of his manhood and married life in relative idleness, merely reading and ' thinking ' about the book he is going to write. To keep the affection of his wife, he decides to make good, and he becomes one of the few successful masseurs in Trinidad when he understands how he can best exploit the people's ignorance and reverence for learning. Fame and fortune drive him to politics, at first anarchico-democratic, then frankly conservative. The author, who welcomes him at an English university and, in joyful recognition, calls him ' Pundit Ganesh ', is coldly rebuked for his familiarity, for Ganesh Ramsumair has now become G. Ramsay Muir, Esq., M.B.E. This is not merely a pose meant to inspire respect : Ganesh starts to take himself seriously as a pundit and a politician as success gives him confidence in his own powers, though we are never sure whether his exploitation of people's ignorance is deliberate or not. The same is true of Harbans, the timorous and inefficient candidate for Elvira, who is as uneducated and superstitious as his constituents : he wins the election because he can afford to buy the other parties and the talent for campaining of a young Muslim Indian.

These characters are only credible in the setting of Trinidad, of which they are true products. Like the majority of their countrymen, who live precariously on meagre or mysterious resources, they seem to have no fixed standards of conduct. The East Indians live in a fairly closed world, keeping up customs which, outside of India, have become quite meaningless. But apart from their conventions, their facile emotionalism and capacity for self-pity, and the greater warmth and solidarity of their communal life, they are not much different from other Trinidadians. They all seem to lead a haphazard existence, without well-understood principles, without efficient organization of any kind. They are as unorthodox in matters of religion as in politics, borrowing from each creed only what suits them. They are sometimes dishonest, though they do not resent it when they are found out, and they are mostly unreliable. Yet, underneath it all, one feels their humaneness, their genuine generosity, and, in spite of some prejudices and occasional squabbles, their tolerance even in matters of race. This is particularly striking in *Miguel Street,* in which street solidarity, understanding and unquestioning acceptance make life bearable. Popo, the carpenter eternally making ' the thing without a name ' expresses fairly accurately the philosophy of life which prevails in Miguel Street :

> " Popo said, ' Boy, in the morning, when the sun shining and it still cool, and you just get up, it make you feel good to know that you go out and stand up in the sun and have some rum '.

> Popo never made any money. His wife used to go out and work, and this was easy, because they had no children. Popo said, ' Women and them like work. Man not make for work '. " (9)

Some of the men collect rubbish, sweep the streets, milk cows or attempt to teach, but they all seem to have plenty of time for gossiping, playing cards, getting drunk, making fireworks, or playing the mechanic. Theirs is essentially a world of men. All we hear of the women is the beatings they get and their matrimonial and love quarrels. Only Laura, whose eight children have seven different fathers, is a real case herself. With ' her love of the human race and her passion for adding to it ', she is vivacious and gay, and she refuses to keep a man in the house because he would only be another mouth to feed. Tragedy enters her life when her eldest daughter follows her example and comes home pregnant. Then there is an end to all joy, and when she hears that her daughter has committed suicide, she merely says : ' It good. It good. It better that way ' (10).

Laura's misfortune is only an instance of the basic tragedy of life in Miguel street. There is also Man-Man, who forces people to crucify him and must be put away, or Bobo, the pessimistic hairdresser, who believes so much in his bad luck and is so afraid to be disappointed that he tears his sweepstake ticket in a rage when told that he has won. There are cases of alcoholic degeneracy and even crime. Destitution is presented with detachment and speaks for itself. Yet on the whole, like Naipaul's first two novels, *Miguel Street* is a funny book ; eccentricity, failure, inefficiency, or immaturity are gently mocked and shaped into comedy. Dialogue is the author's main instrument for building up his characters. The inventive and racy dialect he uses and his choice of suggestive incidents produce funny and disarming personages. Naipaul's sense of humour and his eye for the incongruous give rise to delightful scenes such as that which takes place at a reception given by the governor and his wife in honour of newly elected M.L.C.'s :

> " ' Why, Mrs Primrose ', she said brightly to the wife of the blackest M.L.C. ' You look so *different* today '.
> Mrs Primrose, all of her squeezed into floriferous print frock, adjusted her hat with the floral design. ' Ah, ma'am. It ain't the *same* me. The other one, the one you did see at the Mothers' Union at Granadina, she at home. Making baby. '
> Sherry, opportunely, passed.
> Mrs Primrose gave a little giggle and asked the waiter, ' Is a strong drink ? '

(9) *Miguel Street*, p. 19.
(10) *Ibid.*, p. 117.

> The waiter nodded and looked down his nose.
> ' Well, thanks. But I doesn't uses it. '
> ' Something else, perhaps ? ' The Governor's lady urged.
> ' A little coffee tea, *if* you has it. '
> ' Coffee. I am afraid coffee wouldn't be ready for some time yet. '
> ' Well, thanks. I doesn't really want it. I was only being social. ' Mrs Primrose giggled again. " (11)

Naipaul relies much on local colour as a source of fun, and more particularly on the language of Trinidad as the expression of its people's frame of mind. He also uses comic or even farcical situations, incidents, or customs, such as the wife-beating of the Indians, which is almost a ritual and gives the Indian woman status. Another source of fun is the way in which Trinidadians misunderstand and misapply the benefits of a civilization which they take for granted. In matters of politics, for instance, the confusion of the voters of Elvira, their eagerness and ability to bargain when they see the ' possibilities ' of a general election, their disregard for democracy — " If I go to a man in Elvira and I tell him to vote for so and so, I want to see him tell me no " (12) — these are only equalled by their superstition, the only weapon anyone need wield if he wishes to impress them. The Waugh-like absurdity of their inefficient and sometimes childish world makes them all the more attractive, but it also prevents them from being taken seriously. Everything in Trinidad is laughed at and turned into a calypso.

The main difference between the Trinidad of Naipaul's early novels and that of *The Middle Passage* or *A House for Mr Biswas* (13) is a matter of emphasis and lies in the author's approach to his subject. In his early work Naipaul laughs at his birthplace, and his laughter is communicative. Yet from *The Middle Passage* we realize how far he is from accepting his country as it is. What is turned into farce in his early novels is here subjected to merciless criticism, and the reader is struck by the amount of personal feeling that enters into it. He realizes that Naipaul is afraid to identify himself with Trinidad and that he feels he must reject it in order to survive as an individual.

> " As soon as the *Francisco Bobadilla* had touched the quay... I began to feel all my old fear of Trinidad. I did not want to stay. I had left the security of the ship and had no assurance that I would ever leave the island again... The years I had spent abroad fell away and I could not be sure which was the reality in my life : the first eighteen years in Trinidad or the later years in England. I had never wanted to stay in Trini-

(11) *The Mystic Masseur*, p. 202.
(12) *The Suffrage of Elvira*, p. 35.
(13) London, André Deutsch, 1961.

> dad... and for many years in England, falling asleep in bed-sitters with the electric fire on, I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad." (14)

Naipaul's fear of Trinidad inevitably comes to mind when we think of the vein of hysteria which runs through *A House for Mr Biswas* and of the utter negativeness of the Trinidad he describes in this novel. The subtitle of *The Middle Passage,* 'The Caribbean Revisited', indicates that Naipaul came back to his birthplace with the belief that he would be able to see it with new eyes, or at least that he intended to do so. But he could not look at it dispassionately, and Trinidad was still for him a land of failure, an 'unimportant, uncreative, cynical place', without a real community, without national feeling, with a society merely held together by its Britishness. With no historical past, no civilization of their own, Trinidadians take over enthusiastically all that is modern, particularly if it comes from America, and they despise all that is of local origin. The general impression is one of futility. Naipaul slightly qualifies his criticism by referring to the tolerance and humaneness of Trinidadians and to their affection for any demonstration of wit and style. But this doesn't make up for his recoil and rejection. He cannot even entirely approve of the progress made towards reliability and efficiency, for he feels that this has been achieved at the expense of humaneness, and he is exasperated by the general atmosphere of Trinidad, above all by its noisiness.

When Naipaul is not too upset by his own involvement in the situation he presents, his talents as a narrator and creator of characters blend happily with the perceptiveness and the common sense of his remarks. Many of the people he describes in *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness* (15) would not mar the character sketches in his early novels. His comments on the different West-Indian societies shed considerable light on the race and class problems which are the touchstone of community life in all its aspects in the Caribbean. When he looks at Caribbean countries other than Trinidad, it is either as a Trinidadian or as a Britisher. His own background makes him extremely sensitive to the peculiarities of each West-Indian country and the character of its inhabitants; he brings out idiosyncrasies which might escape the outsider, particularly when it comes to distinguishing between the different racisms of West Indians. The problem of race is made more complex yet by the self-contempt of the negroes, which explains both their rejection of white civilization, for instance by the Ras Tafarians of Jamaica, and their eagerness to achieve respectability according to white middle-class standards. West Indians, Naipaul says in effect, are afraid

(14) *The Middle Passage,* pp. 40-1.
(15) London, André Deutsch, 1964.

and ashamed of the past, of the slavery which gave rise to so much cruelty and greed, and which developed guilt and resentment but no sense of common purpose. *The Middle Passage* is a depressing book, because it shows that much of the febrile activity of the West-Indian middle class and of their efforts to catch up with civilization is futile. Moreover, they value money too much to be able to contribute to any lasting local achievement. Most islands sell themselves into a new slavery by allowing the best situated parts of the land to be bought by rich foreign tourists, while emigrants from the overpopulated areas are rejected almost everywhere except in Britain. The limited resources of most Caribbean countries, the great differences in wealth and the race problems make it difficult for a homogeneous society to arise, all the more so as most difficulties are exploited for political purposes. Naipaul's conclusions on Jamaica seem to apply to all West-Indian territories : " The pressures ... were not simply the pressures of race or those of poverty. They were the accumulated pressures of the slave society, the colonial society, the underdeveloped ... agricultural country ... The situation required not a leader but a society which understood itself and had purpose and direction. " ([16])

The chaotic and frustrating Trinidad which Naipaul describes in *The Middle Passage* is the uncongenial setting of Mr Biswas's life. *A House for Mr Biswas* is an ambitious book ; it is not merely the life story of an individual, but the portrait of a community and, through it, of a whole society. Naipaul's detailed descriptions of living and social conditions in Trinidad are mainly about the East-Indian community, but the tribulations of Mr Biswas are those of any man attempting to live decently and to give meaning to his existence in a money-minded and insensitive world. Mr Biswas is to some extent a victim of circumstances : after the death of his father, an Indian labourer, he spends his youth on his uncle's sugar estate, ' unnecessary and unaccommodated '. Very early in life he becomes aware of the brutishness of his environment. Just as he begins to see a way out and might make a start by supporting himself, he is trapped into marriage by dictatorial Mrs Tulsi, who is always on the look-out for husbands for her innumerable daughters. Mr Biswas is misunderstood by everybody because he is afraid to say what he feels or wants. He tries pathetically to protect his own self, but because of his ignorance and inexperience, he must learn everything the hard way. His marriage, which imposes on him a life of constant humiliation amid the large and indifferent Tulsi family, appears as an almost inevitable mistake. Yet, given the circumstances of his marriage, he is fairly lucky in his wife, who is devoted to him. Naipaul's exploration of the husband-and-wife relationship and

(16) *The Middle Passage*, p. 224.

of the conflicts which arise in their difficult daily existence is subtle and penetrating. So is his description of the affectionate yet often exasperated understanding between parents and children, particularly between Mr Biswas and his son Anand. Like all children who have themselves been humiliated, Anand soon discovers how weak his father is, and resents the latter's many humiliations. He cannot help being irritated, particularly when he is aware that his father's fits of authority at home are prompted by some concealed wound to his pride. Though he cannot express this clearly, all Mr Biswas's efforts to succeed are dictated less by the prospect of material reward than by his need for dignity. Through his repeated failures, we are reminded of Naipaul's assertion in *The Middle Passage* that ' power was recognized but dignity was allowed to noone ' ([17]). In a country that has no openings except for doctors, lawyers and merchants, and seldom requires skillfulness and efficiency, there are few chances of reaching fulfilment through well-accomplished work. Not that Mr Biswas possesses unusual talents. He is a self-taught man, who has acquired some knowledge in what books he could lay his hands on. He is for a while a successful journalist, mainly thanks to his inventiveness and his clownish or whimsical sense of humour ; but he is conscious of his own limitations : he cannot say clearly what he wants, yet he feels frustrated and yearns for something else. He belongs to a generation who are coming to consciousness : they are aware of the nature of their lives, but they merely wait for better times that may never come. They have ceased to expect anything for themselves and can only hope that their sons will succeed where they themselves have failed.

Mr Biswas's sense of failure is closely linked to his fear of life. When he is seized with loathing for his job or when he feels insecure, Mr Biswas becomes physically ill with anxiety and the more powerless to earn an adequate living. Fear of life is the basic theme of Naipaul's work even in such comedies as *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira,* in which Mr Harbans, a privileged man according to Trinadadian standards, is afraid of everything and everybody. The feeling of insecurity which most of Naipaul's characters experience seems to arise from the futility of life in Trinidad and from their realization that only money can give them status and a right to some sort of recognition. It is due to their incapacity to assert themselves as human beings and to acquire self-respect. This feeling of insecurity becomes most acute in Mr Biswas, who is driven to a state of absolute prostration. Yet, when he realizes that he has nothing more to lose and that he must act or die, he applies for a job and succeeds because of his audacity. Boldness pays in a society in which

(17) *The Middle Passage*, p. 41.

people usually have little initiative, though with Mr Biswas, it is the audacity and obstinacy of the desperate.

It is also in a mood of desperation that Mr Biswas buys a house. As he is inexperienced, he is swindled and pays for it twice the price it is worth. However, he is at last freed from the humiliation of living with his family in one room in the Tulsi house, and he can escape from the petty atmosphere in this disintegrating establishment. He seems to have struggled throughout his life in order to achieve this : to acquire some privacy and to be able to have a life of his own. He can now live as he wishes in his own house, indulge his own tastes and at last be himself. He no longer quarrels so often with his wife, and she develops a new kind of loyalty towards him. In fact, the house stands for life, or at least for the kind of life which is worth living at all. By buying the house, Mr Biswas has finally 'lain claim to (his) portion of the earth'. He hasn't conquered adversity but rather his own helplessness and his grumbling yet easy acceptance of an obsolete and self-destroying way of life. He even learns to master his self-pity and is able to encourage and reassure his son. For the children, however, the house is not an end but a beginning, the dawn of an ordered life propitious to learning and to the acquisition of purpose. They want to achieve or get what their father was never able to secure for himself. Savi, the kind and dutiful eldest daughter, comes home with a degree and saves the family from catastrophe. But for Anand, who is studying in England, Trinidad remains the land of failure, intimately linked in his mind with his father's frustrated aspirations and with his humiliation. He has escaped to a country where real life can be found, and he is not prepared to come home.

A House for Mr Biswas is a deeply human novel. It is also very funny a times : Naipaul can discern the humorous detail even in a tragic situation, and Mr Biswas's every-day life is full of tragi-comic incidents. He is too sensitive to adapt himself to his coarse environment, yet too weak and ineffectual to grab his share of happiness. His life is not romanticized, quite the contrary. Naipaul is not afraid to show the meaninglessness of certain Indian customs or the prejudices of a community that lacks real guidance. However, he is also careful to assert the value of traditions which give man a sense of dignity. He has been reproached with writing almost exclusively about the Indians of Trinidad ([18]), and ignoring the other communities. To this he answered that he was writing about his own experience and about what he knew best. The particular experience of any group doesn't matter so

(18) Notably by George Lamming. Naipaul refers to this criticism in *An Area of Darkness*, p. 37.

much as the experience of belonging, or having belonged, to a group with a distinctive tradition or way of life, then being confronted with new values. Mr Biswas lives in a colonial society which doesn't understand the English customs it would so readily adopt. As the years go by and Trinidadians are brought into contact with Americans, there is a general tendency towards education and material improvement. But for Mr Biswas, in spite of the house, life in Trinidad remains oppressive and ungenerous to the end. He dies shortly after he has been sacked by the *Trinidad Sentinel,* ignored by all except his family.

Mr Biswas is not a totally acceptable character : admittedly, his clownish gaiety, often pathetic and so seldom the expression of real joy, the duality of his character, at once courageous and cowardly, generous and selfish, arouse sympathy. But he is too often hysterical and self-pitying, and there is a curious inconsistency between his insight and his weakness. Actually, Mr Biswas is too much like his background ; his awareness of his own incompetence arouses in him insecurity and fear instead of resoluteness. Moreover, the author's attitude towards his character is ambiguous : Naipaul is both sympathetic and impatient with him. He doesn't seem able to accept Mr Biswas as he is : he resents his weakness and his inefficiency, as well as the lack of initiative of the men of his kind and of his generation. Writing *A House for Mr Biswas* certainly did not reconcile him with his birthplace. Nor did his visit to Trinidad, which took place shortly before this novel was published. Acceptance as a by-product of understanding is necessary if the artist is to interpret the human predicament. Fear and hysteria are real enough but can be very irritating both in life and in fiction.

From Mr Biswas to Mr Stone, V.S. Naipaul has moved a long way, from his Caribbean background to a typically English setting. This shift is the more surprising as the respectable, ' petit bourgeois ' people he describes in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* [19] live in a social milieu whose conventions have little attraction for the outsider. They are self-interested, conditioned by their job or the house they live in ; the kind of impression they make at a party or on their neighbours dictates their social conduct, and affectation strains their relations with one another. It must have been all the more difficult to present them in a new light. But for Naipaul, human beings are primarily individuals whose daily existence he observes, noting the most significant details, and thereby giving shape to their personality. He describes the habits and states of mind of Mr Stone, the ageing head librarian of a large firm, who has always lived in the past and has spent an eventless and monotonous existence. This unobtrusive bachelor is upset by fantasies and daydreams which make

(19) André Deutsch, 1963, p. 149.

him lose his sense of security and make him aware of his loneliness. As with Mr Biswas, we are struck by the discrepancy between the commonplaceness of his character and his sensitiveness, though the latter often manifests itself in an immature way. Attending a party at friends' who are of his age and social standing and whom he has known all his life, Mr Stone behaves and feels like an adolescent who makes his first entrance into society. The small humiliations he suffers cannot quite be taken seriously, especially since he is among people who are themselves ridiculous because they merely ape social attitudes. Naipaul does not even satirize them : there is occasionally some subtle irony but no satire in his works, which is probably why they are so humane. His characters, mostly average people, are what they are, 'uncreated' as Lawrence would say, submitting to life instead of directing it, yet conscious enough to be aware of its futility and of their own failure. In a period of crisis, Mr Stone gets married, soon to regret it, like Mr Biswas, though he and his wife gradually make a success of their marriage. During their honeymoon, he meets a pensioned workman reduced to utter uselessness and nothingness, the very embodiment of the fate he fears for himself. He rushes back home and devises the scheme of the Knights Companions, which consists in having his firm send visitors to their former employees to make them feel that they still belong to it and are still wanted. Surprisingly, his idea is accepted and made a success of by Whymper, a young man who 'licks it into shape', i.e. distorts it. Mr Stone is happy and successful both materially, after his promotion, and socially. After some time, however, he realizes that the spirit of his scheme is ruined, and he thinks that " Nothing that came out of the heart, nothing that was pure ought to be exposed ... All action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth. And in the process of this betrayal his world had come tumbling about him " ([20]). Again, he is made conscious of the darkness to come, but he can now accept this prospect with serenity because he sees it as an inevitable consequence of man's frailty and corruptibility.

As in Naipaul's other works, fear is the underlying motive of this novel : fear of life gives place to fear of death and of nothingness. The terrors of Mr Stone, his sense of void and futility are bound with his awareness that nothing durable can be achieved. Yet, the humiliations and the anguish of the ageing man are too often due to small unimportant failures. A rebuff at a party or at the office depresses Mr Stone as much as his fear of nothingness. Though they are often of the same kind as the humiliations suffered by younger men, they strike him as premonitions of nothingness. This is natural enough : we are temporarily more affected by small humiliations than by big ones. But should they be made the touchstone of life's significance in

moments of clear-sighted contemplation ? Does nothing more meaningful emerge from a whole existence ? Acknowledging the futility of his last attempt at creation, Mr Stone thinks :

> The order of the universe, to which he had sought to ally himself, was not his order. So much he had seen before. But now he saw, too, that it was not by creation that man demonstrated his power and defied this hostile order, but by destruction. By damming the river, by destroying the mountain, by so scarring the face of the earth that Nature's attempt to reassert herself became a mockery ([20]).

This mistrust of achievement and creation appears as a deprecation of all human activity. Naipaul's characters live in a state of passive acceptance, from which they only rouse themselves occasionally ; the temporary success they achieve when they are so prompted to action merely stresses the evanescence of the satisfaction and happiness that can be derived from attainment. It seems that things will happen whether they act or not, so that they are mostly overcome by a sense of their own uselessness. All of them are pathetically eager to be accepted and made much of, yet the same people who crave for acceptance are themselves cruel towards other human beings, not out of malice but simply because they are too absorbed in themselves to notice much about others. Naipaul expects nothing of people. He sees the good and the evil in them, the absence of real joy in their 'petty houses where (they seek) to accommodate themselves to life' ([21]). In *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* this disenchantment isn't due so much to a particular way of life, as it was in *A House for Mr Biswas,* as to the condition of man. Yet, Naipaul's attitude is not entirely negative, for he implicitly recognizes that life should be other than it is. The fear of life or of annihilation which paralyzes his characters gives them also some kind of self-knowledge and an awareness that self-satisfied people never possess.

Writing about English people doesn't seem to have convinced Naipaul that their attitude to life is fundamentally different from that of Trinidadians. The average man is for him a universal type, who may be as unadapted to modern life in London as to his uncouth surroundings in Trinidad ; the need to protect himself always restrains him from action. Without suggesting that Naipaul is to be identified with his characters, it can safely be said that the view of life his characters exemplify owes much to his own background and upbringing. Their scepticism towards the use and durability of achievement is an East-Indian rather than a Western attitude. Their constant fear of life is chiefly due to their awareness of the insecurity of their position in society.

(20) *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, pp. 158-9.
(21) *Ibid.*, p. 159.

It is their incapacity to control this feeling that is mainly responsible for the unresolved tension in *A House for Mr Biswas,* and it is not a little puzzling in an elderly Englishman like Mr Stone who has never questioned the world in which he lives. In this respect, the autobiographical element in Naipaul's travel books can hardly be ignored, for it shows to what extent he is still personally involved in, and perturbed by, the kind of situation he describes in his later novels. The spirit in which he returned first to Trinidad, then to India clearly indicates that the thought he was beyond the reach of these countries and of their influence : he felt that they could lay no claim on the artist he had become, and that he was in no way committed to them. The honesty with which he records his experience in *An Area of Darkness* denotes the concern of the artist to convey his own truth and to avoid sentimentality, but it also reveals his vulnerability and shows how far he was from true detachment. It was easy enough for Naipaul to accept India, even to claim it as part of his childhood, while India meant no more than objects and customs to which transplantation gave an additional glamour. The country itself was a reality which Naipaul could not face, not because it was so different from what he had imagined, but because it frightened him to the point of hysteria to be engulfed and annihilated in it. How artificial and self-defensive his position was as an uprooted artist in London can be judged by the fear and rejection which marked his first contact with India and rendered futile all subsequent effort at real communication. This first contact was spoiled by an incident which is as revealing of Naipaul's state of mind as of India. He had brought two bottles of spirits ; in spite of his permit these were seized by the customs. Trying to recover them, he came up against the red tape and inertia of Indian administration, which drove him mad. The stubbornness with which he went through many useless journeys from one department to another in the killing heat of Bombay shows his determination to prove his English standards right. Would a real Englishman have bothered so much ? He would probably have taken the Indian administration for what it was and left it at that. But Naipaul was in fact trying to shake the Indians into recognizing the individual in him and the individual's rights. This was his reaction even before he reached India : from Athens to Bombay he was faced with a type of humanity which forced him to reconsider his view of man : " Hysteria had been my reaction, and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was " (22).

Reviewers have not failed to compare *An Area of Darkness* with other writings on India, and they have praised or criticized

(22) *An Area of Darkness*, p. 16.

Naipaul for his personal approach. It is not that Naipaul never attempts to see India objectively. On the contrary, he never stops trying. There is no doubt much truth in what he says about English Imperialism in India, or about wealthy and snobbish Indians. His description of the hotel where he stayed in Kashmir and of the people he met there and lived with is in the same vein as his best fiction. It is certainly to his credit that he should have refused to be taken in by Indian spirituality and refused to make it an excuse for passivity and detachment. He is most desperate about the Indians' ability to ignore the obvious, which explains their refusal to act. Naipaul himself seems bent on showing the obvious : the importance attached to caste and status, which replace and often preclude efficiency, or the public defecating to which he alludes again and again as to a symbol of the Indian outlook. He is too exasperated by the Indians' negation to be able to discover genuine efforts where they are actually made. He refers to the Indians' ' sweetness ', which puts to shame the raging and shouting observer, but when he visits his grandfather's village inhabited by prosperous Brahmins, he cannot even accept their hospitality gracefully, though he reproaches himself with his callousness and useless cruelty. Naipaul did not learn acceptance in India, and when he left, India was still ' an area of darkness ' and himself ' content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors '. His rejection of India is so complete because identification would mean destruction of what he is. But he recognizes that his affinity with India is stronger than he had realized :

> It is only now, as the impatience of the observer is dissipated in the process of writing and self-inquiry, that I see how much this philosophy (of despair) had also been mine. It had enabled me, through the stresses of a long residence in England, to withdraw completely from nationality and loyalties except to persons; it had made me content to be myself alone, my work, my name (the last two so different from the first); it had convinced me that every man was an island, and taught me to shield all that I knew to be good and pure within myself from the corruption of causes (23).

Naipaul doesn't say more about himself, yet there is little doubt that the sense of insecurity aroused in him by contradictory feelings of kinship and alienation made him reconsider his position. He asserts that his distinctiveness as an Indian in Trinidad or in England is necessary to him, yet he shrinks from both India and Trinidad. This conflict between the need to keep his distinctiveness and the recoil from what gives him identity may explain the uncertainty which characterizes his best novels, particularly *A House for Mr Biswas*. Naipaul could hardly have

(23) *An Area of Darkness*, p. 198.

written a really great novel if he feared and rejected, even though unconsciously, what fed his imagination, for this must have deprived him of the imaginative freedom which he claims for the writer. Any writer may have to face some problem of that kind, but the strain experienced by Naipaul is peculiar to writers of the Commonwealth. What is his dread of Trinidad, his repulsion for India but the expression of his insecurity as a westernized, unattached artist ? It seems the more urgent that he should accept the reality of India and of Trinidad since he is directly indebted to them for the originality of his inspiration, so enriching an element for the present-day novel in English. His experience in these countries has also helped him to discover human qualities which transcend race and nationality. To be an outsider, perhaps to be humiliated, to suffer, leads to maturity and understanding : Naipaul's gentleness and compassion for his characters are major qualities in his writing (24).

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(24) Since this article was written, Naipaul has published another novel, *The Mimic Men* (André Deutsch, 1967). Like his previous novels, it tells of loneliness, cowardice and failure, though, unlike them, it is free of unresolved tensions and fears. Singh, an exiled politician, looks back on the four phases of his life : he recalls the boy he was on the West-Indian Island of Isabella, the student in London posing as a dandy, then, back in Isabella, the unsuccessful husband and the unreliable political leader. Attempting to rediscover the ' final truth ' about himself, he realizes that ' the chaos lies all within ', that neither London, in which he has vainly searched the god of the city, nor the barbarous Isabella are responsible for his failure. The metaphor of shipwreck which he repeatedly uses to describe his life, whether in London or Isabella, eventually proves false. The narrator recognizes as much when he confesses that he was not undone by the storms of life but by his own weakness. He is one of the mimic men, whose fear and insecurity, always dominant motives of Naipaul's characters, prevent them from showing themselves as they are and from acting to good purpose. Singh is a mere performer, who creates a new role for himself according to circumstances. He finally sees himself as a disturber, whose playacting has only brought disorder. While still an active politician, he had hoped to devote the period of his retirement to writing social and political history and to explaining the restlessness and deep disorder which prevail in the modern world. Ironically, he is left to explain the disorder in his own life. Yet, to some extent, he fulfils his initial purpose : his own disease is symptomatic of the malaise which undermines Isabella, just as his experiences both in the London of lonely immigrants and in sophisticated circles reveal the greater disorder of the big city. He explains the mechanics of power, how the oppressed become oppressors, and how their fear of the mob they manipulate make politicians powerless. *The Mimic Men* is a complex novel, in which significance emerges from the gradual exposure of pretence and chaos in individual lives and places. Here, the particular *is* the universal. One is sometimes tempted to confuse the author with the narrator. On the whole, however, Naipaul successfully maintains a distance between himself and his character ; his restrained and sensitive style records dispassionately Singh's progress towards maturity. Singh achieves detachment, what he calls ' the final emptiness ' ; then, as a free man, the first among Naipaul's characters, he prepares for fresh action confidently.