

V. S. Naipaul's
"The Return of Eva Perón"
and the Loss of "True Wonder"

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... the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete.

STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *Marvelous Possessions*

IN "CONRAD'S DARKNESS," the concluding essay in *The Return of Eva Perón*, V. S. Naipaul laments the decay of Joseph Conrad's aesthetic ideals:

The novelist, like the painter, no longer recognizes his interpretive function; he seeks to go beyond it; and his audience diminishes. And so the world we inhabit, which is always new, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmeditated on; and there is no one to awaken the sense of true wonder. (245)

As a "fair definition of the novelist's purpose, in all ages" (245), this passage seems at least partially at odds with Naipaul's own increasingly bleak fiction and with his achievement in this volume. Here, in penetrating and contentious analyses of Third World corruption, he fulfills his own demands for examination, meditation, and interpretation, if not for wonder. Though he subordinates these essays to the thematically similar novels he wrote later (*Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*), though he claims no "further unity" than comes from "intensity" and an "obsessional nature" ("Author's Note"), the book is ideologically consistent and intricately designed: each essay offers "a vision of the world's half-made societies as places which continuously made and unmade themselves" (233), to borrow Naipaul's account of *Nostromo*; each of the first three essays has an apt citation from

Conrad, whom the last essay considers at length. Phyllis Rose states:

Indeed, there is so much consistency in these three portraits . . . that one must conclude either that Naipaul has discovered something true about history and colonial development, or (to me the more rewarding approach) that what we have in this volume is a masterly imagination organizing scraps of reality into an aesthetic construct of immense power. (154)

Perhaps the book's unity is more problematic than Rose implies: as Jack Beatty observes, "one begins to wonder whether the intensity of his prose and the singlemindedness of his vision do not come at the expense of representativeness. It is hard to separate the power of his work from the truth of it" (39). It is also hard, but not impossible, to assess the problems in regarding the Third World from a Conradian perspective in our time.

The opening essay, "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad," is a fine example of what Landeg White calls Naipaul's "appalled irony" (8). From the very title on, Naipaul takes a stand against both the murderer and the larger social forces that, in Naipaul's mind, created him. After two pages of extensively used ironic quotation marks, the targets come into focus:

During his time in England Malik had learned a few things; he had, more particularly, acquired a way with words. In Trinidad he was not just a man who had run away from a criminal charge in England. He was a Black Muslim refugee from "Babylon": he was in revolt against "the industrialized complex." (5)

The ironic oppositions imply Naipaul's disdain for the spokespersons of Black Power and the empty slogans of the 1960s revolutionaries. The irony becomes more caustic as Naipaul considers two other members of Malik's commune, Hakim Jamal, "an American Black Power man" (5), and his English companion, Gale Benson: "Malik claimed that he was the best-known black man in the world; and Jamal appeared to agree. Jamal's own claim was that he himself was God. And Gale Benson outdid them both: she believed that Jamal was God" (5-6). The opening section of the essay ends with this chilling revelation: Benson's "execution, on January 2, 1972, was sudden and swift. She was held by the neck and stabbed and stabbed. At that

moment all the lunacy and play fell from her; she knew who she was then, and wanted to live" (6-7). After describing a second murder and the subsequent arrest of Malik, Naipaul spends the rest of the essay explaining why the murders happened; after he has done so, in Rose's words, "Benson's murder seems the appropriate conclusion to this tale of corruption engendered not by Trinidad, but by England" (153).

Selwyn R. Cudjoe notes that "The Killings in Trinidad" picks up four themes from Naipaul's earlier work: the attack on Caribbean Black Power; the attack on sympathetic white liberals; the concept of colonial mimicry; "And finally, in the style of Conrad, [Naipaul] attempted to demonstrate the apparent inability of individual colonial subjects to free themselves from the debilitating effects of their past" (167). For Cudjoe, however, the essay "added nothing new to the ideas he had presented in earlier works" (170). Cudjoe is thinking of ideas like those in the 1970 essay, "Power?," where Naipaul argues that "[i]n the islands the intellectual equivocations of Black Power are part of its strength. After the sharp analysis of black degradation, the spokesmen for Black Power usually became mystical, vague, and threatening" (248). Much of this argument is indeed repeated in "The Killings in Trinidad," but this is because Naipaul regards the Malik incident as the confirmation of his theories. Furthermore, "The Killings in Trinidad" is as much a narrative as an argument, and it takes Naipaul into other areas than Caribbean politics. The point is important, because we do not have to share Naipaul's politics to read his essay. Naipaul has not always been helpful on this matter. As recently as 1990, and many times before, he has insisted, "You see, I actually have no views. I have no views, no philosophy—just a bundle of reactions" (Robinson 21). As Rob Nixon shows, when sympathetic critics follow Naipaul's self-characterizations, "[h]e is treated . . . as if he wrote out of a rhetoric-free zone" (158). Less sympathetic critics, like Cudjoe, find themselves doubly frustrated: at Naipaul's own conservative ideology and at the critical transformation of that ideology into incontrovertible truth. As Roland Barthes argued thirty years ago, however, "the capital sin in criticism is not ideology but the

silence by which it is masked" (257), and Naipaul does not mask his ideology in "The Killings in Trinidad."

For Naipaul, Malik's Black Power is an instance of colonial mimicry:

Black Power in the United States was the protest of an ill-equipped minority. In Trinidad, with its 55 percent black population, with the Asian and other minorities already excluded from government, Black Power became something else, added something very old to rational protest: a mystical sense of race, a millenarian expectation of imminent redemption. (41)

The implicit reference to Naipaul's own background as a Trinidadian of Asian ancestry (see Hassan 1-55) both situates and strengthens his critique. He is particularly concerned about the mystical expectations created by Black Power:

Race is an irrelevance; but the situation is well suited to the hysteria and evasions of racial politics. And racial politics—preaching oppression and easy redemption, offering only the theory of the enemy, white, brown, yellow, black—have brought the society close to collapse. (58-59)

Certain questions should be raised here: it is one thing to note that Blacks are in a majority in Trinidad, but quite another to say that therefore the strategies of Black Power are inapplicable or that race is irrelevant. As Earl Lovelace argues, "Naipaul misses the point completely when he suggests that we already have Black Power" (qtd. in Hassan 224). For Lovelace and others, a statistical majority does not make Black Power irrelevant. The colonial past makes strategies of empowerment as necessary in Trinidad as elsewhere. And the influence of North American ideals is not necessarily mere mimicry (see Nixon 156-58). Those who disagree with Naipaul on these issues will regard Malik as the degradation, and not the culmination, of Black Power. But "The Killings in Trinidad" is bracingly provocative in any case.

In his treatment of the other themes identified by Cudjoe—the attack on white liberals and the Conradian sense of colonial futility—Naipaul discovers an uncanny persistence of literature. Malik emerges as a grotesque man of letters: "Words were important to him; he had lived by words" (15). Nothing in Naipaul's own voice is as damning as the passages from Malik's writing: "I

have no need to play an ego game, for I am the Best Known Black Man in this entire [white western world *deleted*] country" (19); "A few weeks ago they were talking of Gas Ovens in the English Parliament but our morale is high" (50). Malik is an autobiographer who lives his delusions and a novelist *manqué* whose erratic manuscripts anticipate the events of his life. As such, he is a parody of Naipaul, as Peter Hughes notes (27). For Naipaul, "[a]n autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies: it reveals the writer totally" (67). Against such debased writing Naipaul sets his own frame of reference: "Redemption requires a redeemer; and a redeemer, in these circumstances, cannot but end like the Emperor Jones: contemptuous of the people he leads, and no less a victim, seeking an illusory personal emancipation" (74-75). In its precise phrases and its reliance on a "politically incorrect" stereotype of an earlier day, this passage is vintage Naipaul. To it, Edward Said objects in these terms: "Whatever perspicacity there is in Naipaul's deft narrative is betrayed, however, by his analogy of Michael X to O'Neill's Emperor Jones, the ravaged and misled Pullman porter who returns to the jungle" ("Bitter" 524). I accept Said's objection but not his accounting: the allusion to the Emperor Jones is a blemish, but it does not vitiate the essay, which is far more indebted to Conrad than to O'Neill.

It is in no small part because of Conrad's influence that "The Killings in Trinidad," unlike most of Naipaul's work (see Nixon 34), is as critical of the First World as of the Third World. If Naipaul has little sympathy for his victims, he has none at all for Gale Benson, who was "as shallow and vain and parasitic as many middle-class dropouts of her time; she became as corrupt as her master; she was part of the corruption by which she was destroyed" (75). For her epitaph, Naipaul turns to Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress," which he regards as "the finest thing Conrad wrote" (231-32): like the pathetic Belgian traders in that story, Benson is an "insignificant" and "incapable" individual, "whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds" ("An Outpost" 84; qtd. in *Return* 76). Because she is blithely unaware of her own dependence

on the values of the society she mocks, Benson becomes the representative of all that Naipaul loathes, including

all those who helped to make Malik, and . . . those who continue to simplify the world and reduce other men . . . to a cause, the people who substitute doctrine for knowledge and irritation for concern, the revolutionaries who visit centers of revolution with return air tickets, . . . all those people who in the end do no more than celebrate their own security. (75-76)

And Cudjoe is right to stress the theme of colonial futility, since Naipaul insists that the "outposts of progress" can still be understood in Conrad's terms, and that "the too easily awakened sense of oppression and the theory of the enemy point to the desert of Haiti" (75).

The number of parallels between "The Killings in Trinidad" and the second essay, "The Return of Eva Perón," is at first surprising, for Trinidad is a far remove from the Argentina of the years of terror. Again Naipaul focusses on the cult figures of debased myths, on the racial simplifications of colonial society, on the dangers of a "politics of rage," and on the violence towards which all these things lead. Again he shows "appalled irony": "So many words have acquired lesser meanings in Argentina . . . so many words need inverted commas" (162-63). Like Malik and his associates, Perón and the Peronists use "meaningless words" (151), and offer "hate as hope" (177). They too can best be understood in terms of the debilitating legacy of colonialism: "The parallel is not with any country in Europe, as Argentine writers sometimes say. The parallel is with Haiti . . ." (177). On all sides—Perón and his opponents, the military and the guerrillas, the cult of the macho and the pretensions of the aristocracy—Naipaul sees the same corruption: "A collective refusal to see, to come to terms with the land: an artificial, fragmented colonial society, made deficient and bogus by its myths" (123). In other contexts, I can agree with Nixon that "Naipaul's litany of doom takes on the aspect of an outsider's luxury—he can afford to be unstintingly derisory because he rests secure in the knowledge of escape" (28), but the objection has less force here. It is hardly Naipaul's fault that he can offer no consolations for these horrors, while his essay is more than "a pat performance of the Third

World Against Itself by someone secure both in his Third World credentials and in the knowledge that his words delight a ready audience in the metropolis, making those holding the center more secure in their presumptions of centrality" (42). Such charges are at least partially undermined by Naipaul's recent disclosure that he was "detained" in northern Argentina in March 1977 ("Argentina" 13).

Conrad has a minor but significant role in "The Return of Eva Perón." Since Naipaul assumes that "The politics of a country can only be an extension of its idea of human relationships" (166), he surveys all aspects of Argentine life for clues. And nothing escapes his censure, not even "Argentina's greatest man" (122), Jorge Luis Borges. Borges is seen more as a symptom of corruption than as a source of enlightenment; in so regarding him, Naipaul is also criticizing, and not merely delighting, Borges's metropolitan audience. The title of the second section, "Borges and the Bogus Past," suggests Naipaul's criticism:

Borges is a great writer, a sweet and melancholy poet. . . . But his Anglo-American reputation as a blind and elderly Argentine, the writer of a very few short and very mysterious stories, is so inflated and bogus that it obscures his greatness. (125)

The difference between Naipaul and many contemporary literary critics is that the former's demand for political engagement is not accompanied by Leftist sympathies. Naipaul's conservatism appears in his distaste for Borges's experimental stories and also in his sense that Borges "has always been irresponsible" (129). Borges's pride in his ancestors and interest in English literature constitute "a curiously colonial performance" (130). Against Borges's blindness, Naipaul sets Conrad's insight, arguing that Conrad's accounts of the Belgians' greed in the Congo "fit the Argentine frenzy; they contain the mood and the moral nullity of that Argentine enterprise which have worked down through the generations to the failure of today" (158).

The third essay, "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa," is a different kind of response to Conrad: in journeying up the Zaire river, Naipaul re-enacts *Heart of Darkness*:

The upstream journey that took one month in Conrad's time now takes seven days; the downstream journey that took a fortnight is now

done in five days. The stations have become towns, but they remain what they were: trading outposts. And, in 1975, the journey—one thousand miles between green, flat, almost unchanging country—is still like a journey through nothingness. (194)

As he does throughout a book that concludes by stating, “Conrad—sixty years before, in the time of a great peace—had been everywhere before me” (233), Naipaul argues that Conrad anticipated the course of history. In this case, he maintains that Pierre Mulele’s “reign of terror” in Stanleyville (Kisangani) in 1964 made Conrad prophetic: “To Joseph Conrad, Stanleyville — in 1890 the Stanley Falls station — was the heart of darkness. . . . Seventy years later, at this bend in the river, something like Conrad’s fantasy came to pass” (209). But Naipaul departs from Conrad when he attacks African traditions instead of imperialism; in so doing, he is vulnerable to Nixon’s critique. If the land is unchanged by the ravages of imperialism, then the burden is lifted from the Western conscience: “Everyone feels the great bush at his back. And the bush remains the bush, with its own logical life. Away from the mining areas and the decaying towns the land is as the Belgians found it and as they have left it” (200). Or as Naipaul says in his concluding paragraph, “[t]o arrive at this sense of a country trapped and static, eternally vulnerable, is to begin to have something of the African sense of the void” (219). In Conrad, the “heart of darkness” is more a metaphor than a place; in Naipaul, it is more a place than a metaphor. As Nixon writes, Naipaul “sets up a causal relation between [the Mulelists’] locale and their morality, reinscribing that easy ethical geography whereby Kurtz’s behavior and Mulele’s become most intelligible as emanations of place” (100).

No one would deny the corruption that Naipaul describes in Mobutu’s Zaire, but few would agree with his account of its causes. The Belgian Congo by all accounts—and certainly by Conrad’s—was imperialism at its very worst. Independence came in 1961 after “the Belgians concluded that their best chance of retaining their great economic interests in the territory lay in the grant of free elections and immediate independence” (Oliver and Fage 223). With few native administrators and almost no native professionals (see Nixon 101), the country was

hardly prepared for self-government. And when Mobutu seized power in 1965, he had the Western support that he has continued to enjoy. Crawford Young notes, "The United States' deep involvement in Zairian affairs since 1960 . . . transformed the country into a cold war battleground. There was almost certainly no other African country in which the Central Intelligence Agency was so heavily involved" (266). Therefore Peter Nazareth is right to argue against Naipaul that Mobutu is not really "in opposition to the Western world when colonialism has ended but a result of continuing Western interests" (180). At least since *In a Free State* (1971), the treatment of Africa and Africans has been a problem in Naipaul's writing. What good is a critique of imperialism if it is not accompanied by a recognition of the full humanity of the oppressed? For Naipaul, "Africans themselves seem to set higher standards for others. How quick they are in places managed by others; how quickly they degenerate in places run by themselves" (*Congo* 7). Along with the essay on Zaire, such passages show why Said feels that Naipaul "has allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution" of the Third World ("Intellectuals" 53).

The key point is the difference between *Heart of Darkness* and "A New King for the Congo." I fully agree with Nazareth that Marlow "could not know *from the inside* what African life was; he could only become aware that there was more in the African world than was dreamt of in his European philosophy" (183). Conrad could hardly be expected to escape the pervasive racism of his time and place, and Chinua Achebe has convincingly demonstrated that he failed to do so (see "Image"). But Conrad's racism did not prevent him from awakening "the sense of true wonder" or from fiercely attacking imperialism. As Said argues, "what Naipaul does *not* see is that his great predecessor exempted neither himself nor Europe from the ironies of history readily seen in the non-European world" ("Bitter" 524). At a crucial moment, Marlow is astonished to see in the Africans a "restraint" lacking in Kurtz: "Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me—the fact, dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a

ripple on an unfathomable enigma . . . ” (43). Marlow is able to view Africans with something of the wonder described by Stephen Greenblatt as “a sign of the eyewitness’s surprising recognition of the other in himself, himself in the other” (25). As Sir Thomas Browne has it, “wee carry with us the wonders, wee seeke without us: There is all *Africa*, and her prodigies in us” (20). Naipaul makes no such concession, even though his audience should be much more receptive to it than Conrad’s. He looks at the other and sees “an African nihilism, the rage of primitive men coming to themselves and finding that they have been fooled and affronted” (208). At one point, when Naipaul quotes Seydou Lamine on “the alibi of the past” (213), he seems aware that his criticisms have also been voiced by African writers, but he says nothing of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Wole Soyinka, to name the most obvious. All these writers are sceptical of Mobutist myths of African “authenticity” as Naipaul, but they believe that the alternative is a more profound understanding of African history. Naipaul’s difference is nowhere so apparent as in his opening sentence: “The Congo, which used to be a Belgian colony, is now an African kingdom and is called Zaire” (185). Later he speaks of “the plundering of the inherited Belgian state . . . ” (216). Here the past is reduced to the colonial era, the “African kingdom” is made to seem anomalous, and Mobutu can be compared to Duvalier of Haiti and Amin of Uganda (213)—all African nihilists.

In formal terms, “Conrad’s Darkness” provides a fitting conclusion to a book that is so influenced by Conrad. Calling Trinidad “one of the Conradian dark places of the earth” (230), Naipaul writes that he and Conrad lacked the advantages of the great writers of the past:

It came to me that the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society; I couldn’t share the assumptions of the writers; I didn’t see my world reflected in theirs. My colonial world was more mixed and secondhand, and more restricted. (230)

Through “a vision of the world’s half-made societies as places which continuously made and unmade themselves” (233), Conrad showed Naipaul how to depict such a world. To adapt

Naipaul's account of Conrad's debt to Flaubert, "Conrad's Darkness" demonstrates "yet again that art seeds art, writing seeds writing, that in the development of the imagination there is an unbroken chain" ("Note" 38). This tribute is not diminished by a recognition of the aesthetic and political conservatism on which it is based. Throughout the essay, the writers referred to—Beerbohm, Hardy, Wells, Ibsen, Bennett—show a taste that is conservative by any standards. And so is the sense of decay apparent in the reference to the "highly organized societies" of the past. Naipaul believes that the "great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked. Writing has become more private and more privately glamorous. The novel as a form no longer carries conviction" (244). For a formalist critic, the passage provides a rationale for Naipaul's travel writing, which adapts the novelist's "interpretive function" by re-examining "the world we inhabit, which is always new" (245), which certainly carries its author's convictions, and which has been increasingly important in the last part of Naipaul's career (Nixon 159).

In ideological terms, however, "Conrad's Darkness" is itself an instance of its own metaphysical sense of decay. As Cudjoe remarks (144-45), Naipaul is indebted to Conrad's 1897 preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* There Conrad defines the artist as follows:

He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn. (xxxviii)

As several critics have noted, Naipaul lacks Conrad's sense of solidarity.² Accordingly, he also lacks Conrad's capacity for wonder. Naipaul's criticism of Columbus returns to haunt him: "Not an anthropological interest, not the response of wonder—disappointment rather" ("Columbus" 204). As Greenblatt notes, "the very words *marvel* and *wonder* shift between the designation

of a material object and the designation of a response to the object" (22). Naipaul finds little wonder without because he carries little within (Halpé 47). Greenblatt observes further that "the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete." For the early explorers, the "most palpable sign of this incompleteness . . . was an inability to understand or be understood" (24). That experience never happens in the first three essays in *The Return of Eva Perón*, where Naipaul's "grasp of the world" is never questioned. As Kenneth Ramchand argues (89 n17), Naipaul's very consistency makes him vulnerable to his own criticism of Conrad: "Mystery—it is the Conradian word. But there is no mystery in the work itself, the things imagined; mystery remains a concept of the writer's" (240). Naipaul adds: "We almost begin with the truths—portable truths, as it were, that can sometimes be rendered as aphorisms—and work through to their demonstration" (241).³ And so a critic like Jack Beatty grows suspicious of the unity of *The Return of Eva Perón*.

Neither of the last two paragraphs can serve as a conclusion to this essay: the first is too reverent, the second too harsh. If formalist criticism can seem politically naive, ideological critiques threaten to reduce literature to its ideological assumptions. By accommodating both types of analysis and by focussing on the merits of "The Killings in Trinidad" as well as the flaws of "A New King for the Congo," I have attempted to find a middle ground. It is not merely because of his beliefs that Naipaul is an important writer—it is, in Said's revealing words, "[b]ecause he is so gifted a writer—and I write of him with pain and admiration" ("Bitter" 523). The question of weighing these qualities should continue to disturb Naipaul's critics for some time to come.⁴

NOTES

1 For this idea, I am indebted to Alan Morris.

2 See Duyck, 127; Anderson, 517; Nazareth, 178.

3 For my awareness of Ramchand's point, I am indebted to Paul Ciufu.

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