

‘Alien and Adrift: The Diasporic Consciousness in V.S. Naipaul’s *Half a Life* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Youth*.’ *New Literatures Review* No. 40, Winter 2003, 73-82. (Also published in *The Regenerative Spirit* ed. Nena Bierbaum, Syd Harrex and Sue Hosking. Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 2003, 118-125.)

## **Alien and Adrift: The Diasporic Sensibility in V.S. Naipaul’s *Half a Life* and J.M.**

### **Coetzee’s *Youth*.**

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Nobody would claim that V.S. Naipaul is not a diasporic writer. His grandparents were part of the huge dispersal of Indians to provide indentured labour for the British Empire after the abolition of slavery, and he himself is in self-imposed exile from his Trinidad birthplace, living in England but claiming never to feel at home anywhere. His consciousness of homelessness is at the root of his whole oeuvre, and he is always one of the first writers mentioned in any general discussion of the Indian diaspora. Leon Gottfried writes,

In a century marked by political upheaval, mass migration (forced and otherwise), colonization, revolution ... it is inevitable that much modern literature should be a literature of exile. Most poignant within this category is the literature of exile *pur sang*, of the displaced or dispossessed who do not have, never have had, and, by the nature of things, never could have a home against which their condition of exile can be assessed. ... [T]he writings of V.S. Naipaul draw upon an experience so totally based on layered levels of alienation and exile that his works become paradigmatic of the whole genre, and hence of a major current in twentieth-century life, thought, and art.<sup>1</sup>

J. M. Coetzee’s status as a diasporic writer is more contentious. Born in South Africa in 1940, he could perhaps be considered a member of the diaspora of Europe during the period of imperial expansion in Africa, but the more typical elements of the diasporic experience are

absent from his background. Makarand Paranjape points out that ‘considering that no human community has ever remained entirely static, we can argue that there are no pure natives anywhere—that, to some extent, we are all diasporic.’<sup>2</sup> In this essay, however, I do not intend to argue that Coetzee should be considered a diasporic writer in a literal sense. Rather, I will show that the fact that he cannot readily be categorised in this way does not prevent his work from dealing with very similar issues of alienation and uncertainty to those that so preoccupy Naipaul, a preoccupation which has often been attributed to his diasporic state. Paranjape states,

[t]he diaspora ... must involve a cross-cultural or cross-civilisation passage. It is only such a crossing that results in the unique consciousness of the diasporic. ... [E]ven if voluntary, the passage must involve some significant tension between the source and the target cultures. It is through this displacement and ambivalence that what we consider the diasporic is engendered.<sup>3</sup>

But displacement and ambivalence of this kind feature as much in Coetzee’s work as Naipaul’s, and that implies that they arise from a source more internal to the individual. Two recent novels, Naipaul’s *Half a Life* and Coetzee’s *Youth*, both deal with young men newly arrived in the England of the 1960s to make their way in the world. They form a convenient basis for comparison of these two writers who are so different in many ways and yet who share a detached, frosty and pessimistic outlook and prose of the greatest elegance, precision and power.

One of the most striking similarities between Naipaul’s main character Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* and John, the autobiographical figure in Coetzee’s *Youth*, is that they are in a constant state of alienation from their feelings. In London, Willie has to

re-learn everything that he knew. He had to learn how to eat in public. He had to learn how to greet people and how, having greeted them, not to greet them all over again in

a public place ten or fifteen minutes later. He had to learn to close doors behind him.

He had to learn how to ask for things without being peremptory.<sup>4</sup>

He passively allows his sister Sarojini to tell him, in her bossy way, what he should think. He is easily and thoroughly disheartened by the reviews of his book of stories: ‘Willie thought, “Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of it. I will write no more”’<sup>5</sup>.

Similarly, in *Youth*, after John’s girlfriend in Cape Town has an abortion, he does not know how he should feel:

He is out of his depth. ... Is Sarah still due to enter a period of mourning? And what of him? Is he too going to mourn? How long does one mourn, if one mourns? Does the mourning come to an end, and is one the same after the mourning as before?<sup>6</sup>

Later, in London, he is puzzled by an affair with an old girlfriend from South Africa, which drags on but appears to be going nowhere:

He believes in passionate love and its transfiguring power. His experience, however, is that amatory relations devour his time, exhaust him, and cripple his work. Is it possible that he was not made to love women, that in truth he is homosexual? If he were homosexual, that would explain his woes from beginning to end. Yet ever since he turned sixteen he has been fascinated by the beauty of women, by their air of mysterious unattainability. ... Reading the poets only heightened his fever. Through the blinding ecstasy of sex, said the poets, one is transported into brightness beyond compare, into the heart of silence; one becomes at one with the elemental forces of the universe. Though brightness beyond compare has eluded him thus far, he does not doubt for a moment that the poets are correct.<sup>7</sup>

He tries homosexuality and finds it unsatisfactory too. Only for a moment, after he has been in England for some years, lying on the grass on Hampstead Heath on a spring day, does he

feel 'blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth'<sup>8</sup>—a revelation unexpectedly unconnected with sex, love or poetry.

Sexual misbehaviour of the dreariest kind is a feature of the lives of both these young men. The physical needs of their twenty-year-old bodies drive them to actions they find unfulfilling and contemptible. In London Willie can find no way of forming relationships on his own initiative, finding a limited but ultimately frustrating success with the lovers of his friends. He blames his problem on his upbringing:

[I]f I stay here I would always be trying to make love to my friends' girlfriends. I have discovered that that is quite an easy thing to do. But I know it is wrong, and it would get me into trouble one day. The trouble is I don't know how to go out and get a girl on my own. No one trained me in that. ... All men should train their sons in the art of seduction. But in our culture there is no seduction. Our marriages are arranged.<sup>9</sup>

Staying behind in India, he would perhaps have had a marriage arranged for him, although his half-and-half family might have made that difficult. At least he would have known the sexual ways of his culture, whereas he is at a loss in London. But he cannot go back 'to the other thing', having lived 'like a free man' for two and a half years: 'I don't like the idea of marrying someone like Sarojini, and that's what will happen if I go home'.<sup>10</sup> It seems to be a great stroke of luck when he meets Ana, another 'half-and-half' from a Portuguese East African country. But although he lives more or less happily with her for many years, sexual satisfaction is elusive. Even, finally, the 'depth of satisfaction'<sup>11</sup> he has found in an affair with a married neighbour Graça is taken from him when he realises that she is 'deranged ... . Can it be true, what I felt I had with her?'<sup>12</sup> That Naipaul feels that the sexual difficulties of his characters in this novel are essential to the barrenness of their lives was made clear in an interview he gave at the Melbourne Writers' Festival in 2001.<sup>13</sup> Willie's problems are inextricably linked with his cultural displacement, not only that caused by his move away

from India, but also by the ill-conceived mixed-caste marriage of which he is the product. It is not that he cannot love. He falls in love several times throughout the novel, but his feeling of alienation leads to an inability to feel that he belongs anywhere and thus with anyone.

When he leaves Ana, he says, 'I can't live your life any more. I want to live my own'.<sup>14</sup> His problem is finding out what his own life is.

John's problems in *Youth* are equally perplexing. Like Willie, he manages to find sexual partners but no lasting satisfaction, and he treats the women coldly and insincerely, finding none of them measure up to his hopes of being initiated in the 'elemental forces of the universe'. Near the end of the novel, he begins to wonder whether

all the time he has been overestimating his worth on the market, fooling himself into believing he belongs with the sculptresses and actresses when he really belongs with the kindergarten teacher on the housing estate or the apprentice manageress of the shoe store?<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Willie, however, John does not have a ready explanation for his problems. He does not come from a highly structured culture where marriages are arranged. His family background is peculiar without having the straightforward stigma of the Chandran's mixed-caste marriage, made solely for reasons of defiance. In his case, his South African parents, mismatched by character and personality rather than class or caste, are Afrikaners who behave like English people. Although he despises the Afrikaners and longs to be English, he fits in with neither culture. His difficulties finding love or even friendship seem to stem from a coldness of personality and tendency to over-intellectualise bred from a dysfunctional family background and an uncongenial social milieu. The young John in the earlier memoir *Boyhood* 'thinks of Afrikaners as people in a rage all the time because their hearts are hurt. He thinks of the English as people who have not fallen into a rage because they live behind walls and guard their hearts well.'<sup>16</sup> He chooses to emulate the English with their immunity

to hurt, their 'straight blond hair and golden skins, their clothes that are never too small or too large, their quiet confidence,' and their sisters, 'so golden-blond, so beautiful, that he cannot believe they are of this earth'<sup>17</sup>.

The one place where he feels he belongs is the farm of his father's family, although he is conscious that he is not fully accepted there. But at least he has 'a home against which [his] condition of exile can be assessed'<sup>18</sup>. Willie does not have even this tenuous link to any place: he really belongs nowhere at all. Both feel that their immediate family is in some way abnormal. In *Boyhood*, John is conscious that

he comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day.<sup>19</sup>

At school, he is puzzled when he is asked what his religion is, because his family are 'certainly nothing'.<sup>20</sup> This has some faintly comic though unsettling consequences. In *Youth*, although this childhood is in the background, at the beginning, still in Cape Town, the nineteen-year-old John 'is proving something ... that you don't need parents'<sup>21</sup>. When he is in London, his mother writes to him every week, letters which he receives 'with exasperation'<sup>22</sup>:

What does she hope to achieve by her letters, this obstinate, graceless woman? Can she not recognize that proofs of her fidelity, no matter how dogged, will never make him relent and come back? Can she not accept that he is not normal? ... [But] If he were to cut all ties, if he were not to write at all, she would draw the worst conclusion, the worst possible; and the very thought of the grief that would pierce her at that moment makes him want to block his ears and eyes. As long as she is alive he dare not die. As long as she is alive, therefore, his life is not his own.<sup>23</sup>

Willie's relationship with his mother is a little less tortured. At first he loves his mother and takes her side against his high-caste father who has married her only in order to make a political point. However, he realises that

her family and group knew nothing about anything. They didn't know about the religion of the people of caste or the Muslims or the Christians. ... They had lived in ignorance, cut off from the world, for centuries. ... [G]radually as he grew up ... he began to look at his mother from more and more of a distance. The more successful he became at school ... the greater the distance grew.<sup>24</sup>

He is more successful than John at cutting ties with his parents: his father is relieved to get rid of him when he leaves for England, and his mother is barely mentioned in the later parts of the novel. If John returns to South Africa he will be stifled, but if Willie returns to India he will return to nothing: to a life of blankness and meaningless ritual.

There are some elements of autobiography in both these novels, but *Half a Life* is certainly not autobiography in the sense that *Boyhood* and *Youth* are. On the cover of the Vintage edition of *Boyhood*, the subtitle *A Memoir* appears. The British edition of *Youth* has no subtitle, but the US edition is subtitled *Scenes from Provincial Life* to match the title page of *Boyhood*. Both books follow closely the known history of Coetzee's life: date of birth, education and so on all correspond. *Half a Life*, on the other hand, has a protagonist who is several years younger than Naipaul and who was born in India of mixed-caste parents, none of which applies to him. It is autobiographical only in the sense that all Naipaul's work is. It deals with the themes of alienation and migration, of cross-cultural drifting he has always been concerned with. One of the most remarkable differences between Willie Chandran and Naipaul is that Willie allows his writing career to fail. He perhaps lacks the talent of Naipaul, but more importantly he lacks the motivation, the burning desire to be a writer; and when his book is published he allows himself to be discouraged. He is what Naipaul might have

become if he had not become a writer, a possibility the author contemplates with some horror. In 1983 he told an interviewer, 'I think if I hadn't succeeded in being a writer I probably would not have been around; I would have done away with myself in some way'<sup>25</sup>. This sense of the terrible fate that might have been feeds into the desolation of this novel, giving it an undertone of desperation. At the end of the novel, neither Willie nor the reader, nor, one feels, the author, knows what will happen to him next. There is no feeling of closure.

*Youth* ends in a similar mood of drifting, alienated hopelessness. John is 'a twenty-four-year-old computer programmer in a world in which there are no thirty-year-old computer programmers'<sup>26</sup>. He compares himself with his Indian friend Ganapathy:

He and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin: Ganapathy starving not because he is cut off from Mother India but because he doesn't eat properly ... ; and he locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat. One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy's flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too.<sup>27</sup>

This ending is of a piece with John's slightly comic self-dramatisation, which is viewed with frosty, detached irony by the third-person narrator throughout *Youth*, the older self looking back on the pretensions and vanities of his youth. The reader who is even casually acquainted with Coetzee's life story also realises that this young man is not going to be carted away to the morgue and will go on to be the great writer J.M. Coetzee. Indeed, before the novel ends he develops the idea of writing a novel whose 'horizon of knowledge' is that of South Africa in the 1820s. Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*, published ten years later in 1974, fulfils this aim. Although this awareness takes the sting out of the closure, however, as an expression of a mood of despair and alienation, the last pages of *Youth* certainly have considerable impact.



Despite John's belief that 'in real life all that he can do well, it appears, is be miserable'<sup>28</sup>, *Youth* is in many ways a comic novel. The most humorous passages meticulously describe his groping self-questioning. He observes West Indians in London, wondering

what draws them from Jamaica and Trinidad to this heartless city where the cold seeps up from the very stones of the streets, where the hours of daylight are spent in drudgery and the evenings huddled over a gas fire in a hired room with peeling walls and sagging furniture? Surely they are not all here to find fame as poets.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, Coetzee glances over his narrator's shoulder at the reader, exposing his younger self's conceit and pretensions. Why should he feel himself so much more ambitious and individually remarkable than other colonial immigrants?

*Half a Life* is superficially not a comic novel. The element of ironic mockery is virtually absent, possibly because Willie does not stand in the same autobiographical relationship to Naipaul as John does to Coetzee. The younger self viewed by the older and wiser is almost always the object of some irony, if not sarcasm, while a purely fictional character might carry with it an extra freight of emotions inspired by imaginative identification. The lives this novel describes are mostly joyless, but even so the novel is not without its moments of rather grim humour. Sarojini visits a reluctant Willy at his college in London, and insists on cooking for him in his room:

she lay the heater on its back and she set the pots on the metal guards above the glowing electric coils. ... Sarojini had never been a good cook, and the food she cooked in the college room was awful. The smell stayed in the room. Willie was worried about breaking the college rules, and he was just as worried about people seeing the dark little cook—clumsily dressed: with a cardigan over her sari and socks on her feet—who was his sister. In her new assertive way, but still not knowing too

much about anything, in five minutes she would have babbled away all Willie's careful little stories about their family and background.<sup>30</sup>

The narrative techniques used in *Half a Life* are varied, as is often the case with Naipaul's work. In this novel Naipaul has come back to pure fiction for the first time in more than 20 years. In the two books he has called 'novels' during that period, *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, his own presence as narrator is central. In this desolate tale of unfulfilled lives, however, he has used only fictional characters, perhaps to distance himself from its frank (although not explicit) treatment of sexual matters. Much of this novel is related in the first person. The first part is, after a very short introduction, narrated by Willie's father to Willie, giving the history which has made his family so strange and 'half-and-half'. The second part and the first section of the third, Willie's experiences in London and his arrival in Africa, are in the third person, but the last ninety pages or so are once again in the first person, narrated by Willie to his sister Sarojini in Germany. This alternation of narrative voices brings the importance of subjective experience to the reader's attention, but there is surprisingly little difference in the tone of the different sections of the novel, perhaps suggesting a similarity in sensibility after all between Willie and his despised father. Coetzee in *Youth* maintains the same present-tense, third-person ironic detachment throughout, suiting his material perfectly.

Part of the foreboding in both these novels concerns racial tensions. *Half a Life* ends as Willie escapes Ana's East African country before the coming civil war. He is deeply disturbed by the humiliation suffered by an illegitimate mulatto tiler whom he saw being abused by his employer:

Whenever I remembered the big sweating man with the abused light eyes, carrying the shame of his birth on his face like a brand, I would think, 'Who will rescue that man? Who will avenge him?'<sup>31</sup>

Willie, however, has no solution to offer, and leaves Ana because he ‘didn’t think I could live through another war. I could see that it would have a point for Ana. I didn’t see that it had a point for me.’<sup>32</sup> Despite Sarojini’s lectures, he does not see himself as a champion of the oppressed.

John, similarly, sees the violence inherent in his society, and escapes it. In *Boyhood*, a coloured boy of his own age lives with the family as a servant for a short time. Eddie disgraces himself by running away, is punished and sent back to his family. But John ‘knows that Eddie is thinking of him. ... One thing he knows for sure: Eddie will have no pity on him.’<sup>33</sup> And in *Youth*, it is the fear of being called up in the wake of Sharpeville which propels him to leave Cape Town for London:

In a week he could find himself behind barbed wire in Voortrekkerhoogte, sharing a tent with thuggish Afrikaners, eating bully-beef out of cans, listening to Johnnie Ray on Springbok Radio. He would not be able to endure it; he would slash his wrists.

There is only one course open: to flee.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, neither book suggests any solutions to political or racial problems, offering only flight. But this is a part of the condition of both these young men. They have no allegiance to a group, a race, a class, or a nation. They are both in a way ‘half-and-half’, belonging nowhere, diasporic in sensibility and consciousness if not in literal fact. The traditions of a culture or a society are absent for both, even though both grew up with their families in countries where they had lived for some generations. In *Half a Life* this absence is explained by the mixed-caste marriage; in *Boyhood* and *Youth* it is a matter of puzzlement: John does not understand why his parents, who are really Afrikaners, seem to behave like English people and are, apparently, ‘not proper South African[s]’.<sup>35</sup> If being part of a diaspora has any significance, both these young men surely have all the hallmarks. In their own ways, they are each as alien and adrift—as displaced and ambivalent—as any member of a diasporic population.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Gottfried, 'Preface: The Face of V.S. Naipaul,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.3 (1984): 442-443.

<sup>2</sup> Makarand Paranjape, 'Afterword: What About Those Who Stayed Back Home? Interrogating the Privileging of Diasporic Writing,' *Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures: Diasporic Writing of the Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Ralph J. Crane and Radhika Mohanram (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 229.

<sup>3</sup> Makarand Paranjape, 'Displaced Relations: Diasporas, Empires, Homelands,' *CRNLE Journal* (2000): 67.

<sup>4</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Half a Life* (London: Picador, 2001) 58-59. Further references to *Half a Life* will appear as page numbers preceded by 'HL'.

<sup>5</sup>HL 123.

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002) 36. Further references to *Youth* will appear as page numbers preceded by 'Y'.

<sup>7</sup> Y 78-79.

<sup>8</sup> Y 117.

<sup>9</sup> HL 117-118.

<sup>10</sup>HL 117.

<sup>11</sup> HL 205.

<sup>12</sup> HL 226.

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<sup>13</sup>V.S. Naipaul, Interview with Robert Dessaix at Melbourne Writers' Festival, 30 August 2001, *Books and Writing*, Radio National, ABC, Australia, 16 September 2001.

<sup>14</sup>HL 136.

<sup>15</sup>Y 150.

<sup>16</sup>J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002) 73. Further references to *Boyhood* will appear as page numbers preceded by 'B'.

<sup>17</sup>B 136.

<sup>18</sup>Gottfried 442.

<sup>19</sup>B 6.

<sup>20</sup>B 18.

<sup>21</sup>Y 3.

<sup>22</sup>Y 98.

<sup>23</sup>Y 99.

<sup>24</sup>HL 39.

<sup>25</sup>V.S. Naipaul, 'V.S. Naipaul: A Perpetual Voyager,' Interview with Bernard Levin, *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 94.

<sup>26</sup>Y 168.

<sup>27</sup>Y 168-169.

<sup>28</sup>Y 65.

<sup>29</sup>Y 104.

<sup>30</sup>HL 116.

<sup>31</sup>HL 166.

<sup>32</sup>HL 227.

<sup>33</sup>B 77.

<sup>34</sup>Y 40.

<sup>35</sup>B 18.