

Guerrillas and Gangs: Frantz Fanon and V. S. Naipaul

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I DIDN'T believe in the guerrillas . . . I believed in the gangs";¹ this remark by Peter Roche in Naipaul's novel of "revolution," *Guerrillas*, points to a certain calculated perversity in my chosen topic, Naipaul and Fanon: Fanon "the Guevara of black Africa," canonized by David Cauter as the "Modern Master" of Third World Liberation;² Naipaul castigated by a succession of third world writers as "a despicable lackey of neo-colonialism" (H. B. Sygne),³ "a literary guru, a smart restorer of the comforting myths of the white race" (Chinua Achebe);⁴ Fanon who gave his life to the cause of colonial independence, Naipaul who, with brahminical disdain, has consistently sought to preserve himself from "the corruption of causes" (*AD*, p. 188)⁵ — what can they possibly have in common? Indeed Paul Theroux, Naipaul's friend and fellow-novelist, has roundly declared the "irrelevance" of any attempt to link Naipaul's writing with the neo-Marxist polemic of Fanon.⁶ In the face of such unanimity amongst opposites it is tempting to accept Meredith's judgement of Roche's book in *Guerrillas* as a covert verdict on Naipaul's own apparently "political" fiction:

'One of my problems with the book is that, although it's very political — and I know that you consider yourself a political animal — there seems to be no framework of political belief.'
(*G*, p. 209)

Naipaul does indeed, in his quirkily oblique fashion, consider himself a highly "political animal": one of his favourite anecdotes concerns an earnest Scandinavian journalist who broke off an interview to announce, in tones of gathering astonishment:

"But Mr. Naipaul — you are a *socialist!*"⁷ Yet his scepticism about the possibility of programmatic action has seemed to render any consistent *framework* of political belief chimerical. It is for these reasons that criticism of Naipaul's writing has been consistently clouded by the question of politics — as much by those who have felt his detachment as a kind of political betrayal, as by those who have sought to rescue him from the mire of politics altogether. This paper is, as Ralph Singh might put it, an attempt to "clear the decks," to make possible a fresh start.

We should begin, perhaps, with Naipaul's own idea of artistic responsibility, set out in an essay called "The Documentary Heresy" — an attack on certain forms of committed political fiction: "The artist who, for political or humanitarian reasons, seeks only to record abandons half his responsibility. He becomes a participant; he becomes anonymous. He does not impose a vision on the world."⁸ This insistence on the duty to "*impose a vision on the world*" amounts to an intention (however indirect) to *change* it; the ambition is ultimately political, the method (with its rejection of participation) is not. It is possible, I think, to illuminate this contradiction by examining Naipaul's literary career in terms of a gradually unfolding argument with a very different kind of writer, his fellow West Indian, Frantz Fanon. To speak of an "argument" is, of course, artificial; though Naipaul is fluent in French, I think it unlikely that he had read Fanon before the appearance of the English translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1965, four years after its publication in France; and the equally influential *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) did not appear in English until 1967, the same year as Naipaul's first political novel, *The Mimic Men*. Moreover, while *In a Free State* (1971) and a number of the more important essays dating from the years 1967-72 in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972) show an intelligent appreciation of Fanonian (if not strictly "Fanonist") thinking, there are no clear references to Fanon in the writing before *Guerrillas* (1975) and he is directly cited only in the essay from the same year "A New King for the Congo." But the basis of the debate I shall be outlining is to be found less in any deliberate intellectual confrontation than in their experience of a common background and their resulting

preoccupation with common historical, social and political problems.

In the first place they belong (though Fanon was seven years Naipaul's senior) to roughly the same generation of West Indian intellectuals who grew up in the period immediately prior to that break-up of European empires of which each was to be a chronicler. Each, retracing the middle passage of his ancestors, came to maturity in the metropolitan country which had helped to shape his vision of the world — Naipaul, the Trinidad East Indian, reading English at Oxford; Fanon, the Martiniquan negro, studying medicine and psychiatry at Lyons. Each, in his different way, turned to writing as a method of exorcising the complex hurt and dislocation imposed by the double exile which was his colonial inheritance; and each, inevitably, in coming to terms with this alienation, was influenced by the dominant intellectual currents of the fifties — Fanon finding in the *Being and Nothingness* of Sartre (who was later to write a Marxian preface for *The Wretched of the Earth*) an essential starting point for his analysis of Negro "inauthenticity" in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952); Naipaul drawing from Camus his notion of that spirit of individual "rebellion" which he saw as fatally deficient in colonized societies.⁹ As a result, both to begin with espoused individualist solutions to the colonial problem. But in the long term the differences between them were to prove more significant. Naipaul's family history gave him, as the grandson of an indentured labourer from Uttar Pradesh, a degree of detachment from the brutal mainstream of West Indian history which Fanon, as the descendant of African slaves could not enjoy; and another kind of detachment was fostered in him by the particular imperialist ideology of which he was a product.

In *The Middle Passage* (1962) Naipaul tells a characteristic story of an encounter in a Martinique restaurant:

... during a tourist invasion I saw a white woman turn to a sun-glassed black Martiniquan and say, '*Nous sommes les seules français ici*'. 'You are English?' a white Martiniquan asked me. No, I said; I came from Trinidad. 'Ah!' he said, smiling. '*Vous faites des nuances!*' (MP, p. 212)

The point of all this is that it is precisely *not* an illustration of

the absence of racial feeling (the French West Indies traditionally recognized 128 different shades of "colour"),¹⁰ but a demonstration of a certain kind of colonial mentality — the same mentality which caused the Martiniquan leader, Aimé Césaire (poet and apostle of *négritude*) to continue speaking of Paris as his "capital" (métropole),¹¹ and drove Fanon to declare, at the end of his passionate exposure of the trauma produced by French colonial racism, "I am a Frenchman."¹² The English never learnt how to bind the wound of colonial inferiority with such comforting plasters; and Naipaul, (despite that meticulously cultivated "Englishness" which has tempted his detractors to guy him as one of the "mimic men" of his own satire) has never been seduced by such disabling fantasies. He has been able to go on working in the old imperial metropolis, and to become (in the estimate of some critics) "the best novelist now writing in England"¹³ precisely because he has never lost sight of his fundamental estrangement; like the tormented West Indian exile of *In a Free State* he recognizes that "the mystery land is theirs, the stranger is you" (*FS*, p. 79);¹⁴ but for him the sense of strangeness has been as much a blessing as a burden, offering the protection of a kind of private "free state." Of Fanon, on the other hand, one might speculate that it was in part the bitterness provoked by the inevitable betrayal of his high claim to Frenchness which motivated the revolutionary change of allegiance proclaimed in his second book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). That book continues Fanon's analysis of colonial deprivation in political terms which Naipaul would surely find as sympathetic as the psychological arguments of *Black Skin, White Masks*; but it proposes solutions and adopts a violent propagandist rhetoric which are equally anathema to him. Fanon, one is inclined to suspect, is one of those Ralph Singh has in mind when he proclaims that "there is no such thing as history nowadays; there are only manifestos and antiquarian research; and on the subject of empire there is only the pamphleteering of churls" (*MM*, p. 32).

Fanon, of course, rapidly became part of the common intellectual currency of those third world "free states" in which Naipaul has established his fictional "new domain." In "A New

King for the Congo," written after a visit to Zaire in 1975, Naipaul recalls the students he met at Kinshasa: "They have come from the bush, but already they can talk of Stendhal and Fanon"; this ferment of ideas is seen as potentially creative ("they have the enthusiasm of people to whom everything is new"), but ultimately dangerous because it "deserves a better equipped country" (*REP*, p. 201). Instead these young are trapped in a society which exploits a borrowed and degraded language of ideas to suppress any possibility of real political argument, a state whose media, "diluting the language of Fanon and Mao, speak every day of the revolution and the radicalisation of the revolution" when what they are really talking about is the "kingship" of General Mobutu (*REP*, p. 203). At the heart of Naipaul's suspicion of writers like Fanon is his sense of the ease with which their rhetoric lends itself to such corrupt sloganizing, becoming a vehicle of fantasy instead of an agent of thought. The character of Jimmy Ahmed in *Guerrillas* (1975) is perhaps his fullest exploration of the destructive effect of such fantasy. Like his prototype, Michael X, the plaything of London's radical chic, Jimmy is seen as a man created by the words of others and living on the magic of his own, an "entertainer," the star-boy of a kind of "guerrilla theatre" in essence no different from an old-style coon act. Included in the verbal "junk" which fills his head are those same bastardized slogans from Mao and Fanon which Naipaul heard in Zaire. From these prophets (mediated by the hippy pastoralism of the late 60's) he has absorbed the conviction that "*All revolutions begin with the land*" (*G*, p. 17); and in trying to account for the supposed betrayal of his revolutionary commune, he parrots the half-remembered title of Fanon's first book: "*it's always a case of black faces white masks*" (*G*, p. 86). The context ("*you don't know who your enemy is, the enemy infiltrates your ranks*") suggests an ignorant misunderstanding of Fanon's metaphor; but that is not the point. For the reader, the phrase provides a clue to the fashionable chatter which has helped to invent this "warrior and torch bearer"; and beyond that, as I shall argue, it invokes a framework of ideas which genuinely illuminate the rage

and self-hatred that are the motivating centre of Jimmy's character: the frenzy which consumes him when the words run out.

1. *Psychological Dependence and Individual Freedom*

In his earlier books, it is fair to say, Naipaul was scarcely a political writer in any conscious sense. Although both *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) deal with politicians of sorts, they use the careers of Ganesh Ramsumar and Surujpat Harbans only as occasions for mildly satirical evocation of the colonial world Naipaul had left behind him. They are the work of a regional, even provincial writer who, in his own words, still "thought [he] was writing about a world that was fairly whole."¹⁵ The first chapter of *The Suffrage of Elvira* is representative:

Democracy had come to Elvira four years before, in 1946; but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn't until 1950, a few months before the second general election under universal adult franchise, that people began to see the possibilities. (SE, p. 13)

The indulgent irony suggested by that bland "possibilities" is maintained to the end:

So, Harbans won the election and the insurance company lost a Jaguar. Chittaranjan lost a son-in-law and Dhaniram lost a daughter-in-law. Elvira lost Lorkhoor and Lorkhoor won a reputation. Elvira lost Mr Cuffy. And Preacher lost his deposit. (SE, p. 207)

It is the tone of humorous fabliau, as far from the hard-edged manner of the later work as (say) Synge's *Playboy* from O'Casey's *Plough and the Stars*. To place that early chapter opening beside a closely related excerpt from *The Middle Passage* (1962), is to understand something of the change that came over the novelist after his return visit to the West Indies in 1960:

Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad. In the colonial society every man had to be for himself; every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group. To understand this is to understand the squalor of the politics that came to Trinidad in 1946 when, after no popular agitation, universal adult suffrage

was declared. The privilege took the population by surprise. . . . The new politics were reserved for the enterprising, who had seen the prodigious commercial possibilities. (MP, p. 78)

After this, the "gang"¹⁶ society of *Miguel Street* (1959), with its petty cruelties and comic betrayals, would never seem quite so innocent again. Where those stories had celebrated the eccentric individualism of "a world, where everybody was quite different from everybody else" (MS, p. 63), Naipaul now began to see that careless individualism as the expression of a Hobbesian war of all against all, endemic in an inorganic society which acknowledged no authentic internal source of power — a society in which, as it seemed to him now "Everyone was an individual, fighting for his place in the community. Yet there was no community. . . . Nothing bound us together except this common residence" (MP, p. 45). The result of this fragmentation of interest was what he called a "picaroon" society "where it is felt that all eminence is arrived at by crookedness" (MP, p. 78):

This was an ugly world, a jungle, where the picaroon hero starved unless he stole . . . where the weak were humiliated; where the powerful never appeared and were beyond reach; where no-one was allowed any dignity and everyone had to impose himself; an uncreative society, where war was the only profession. (MP, p. 79)

We are close here to the world which terrifies Jimmy Ahmed a dozen years later: "*When everybody wants to fight there's nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerilla.*"¹⁷ A "guerrilla" here, with a neat etymological irony, is simply a privateer in his own "little war" — in effect a gangster. This picaroon condition was precisely what Fanon had earlier diagnosed in his native Martinique — "a neurotic society, a society of 'comparisons'":

The Negro is comparison. There is the first truth . . . The Antilleans have no inherent values of their own, they are always contingent on the presence of The Other. The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, less respectable than I. Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility . . . The Antillean is characterised by

his desire to dominate the other . . . Therefore in any given group . . . in Martinique, one finds the man on top, the court that surrounds him, the in-betweens (who are waiting for something better) and the losers. The last are slaughtered without mercy. One can imagine the temperature that prevails in that jungle. There is no way out of it.

Me, nothing but me.

The Martinicans are greedy for security. They want to compel the acceptance of their fiction. They want to be recognised in their quest for manhood. They want to make an appearance. Each one of them is an isolated, sterile, salient atom with sharply defined rights of passage, each one of them *is*. (*BS*, pp. 144-51)

For Fanon this cut-throat ethic was the expression of that black inferiority complex which resulted from "the internalization — or, better the epidermalization — of [economic] inferiority" (*BS*, p. 10); for Naipaul, similarly, it reflected "the problems of a client culture, and a client economy,"¹⁸ disabled by its slave past. The problems, both would argue, were to some degree common to all colonized societies, but in former slave colonies they appeared with a peculiarly painful clarity.

The theme of *Black Skin, White Masks* is the systematic appropriation of the blacks' identity by the slave masters and the dominant culture they represented. The slave, Fanon argues, was granted an identity only by virtue of his relation to the master.¹⁹ Since therefore it is only "in white terms that one perceives one's fellows" or oneself (*BS*, p. 116), liberation can be imagined only as supplanting the master, becoming the white man: "It is in fact customary in Martinique to dream of a form of salvation which consists of magically turning white" (*BS*, p. 33). It was a dream which, in the form of nightmare, returned to haunt Fanon himself on his deathbed: "Last night they put me in the washing machine."²⁰ The consequence was an alienation so intense that "as late as 1940 no Antillean found it possible to think of himself as a Negro" (*BS*, p. 108). This is the repudiation of identity exposed in the wounding comedy of an episode in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*:

While he hesitated a fat Negro woman went to Shama's counter and asked for flesh-coloured stockings, which were then enjoying some vogue in rural Trinidad.

Shama, still smiling, took down a box and held up a pair of black cotton stockings.

'Eh!' The woman's gasp could be heard throughout the shop. 'You playing with me? How the hell all-you get so fresh and conceited?' She began to curse. 'Playing with me!' She pulled boxes and bolts of cloth off the counter and hurled them to the floor and every time something crashed she shouted, 'Playing with me!' (*HB*, pp. 83-84)

Behind this rage, fuelling it, is the self-hatred implicit in the dream of whiteness. Under the tutelage of his white master, Fanon argued, the Negro was made to select himself "as an object capable of carrying the burden of original sin"; simply to "achieve morality" it was necessary "that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness. Hence a Negro is forever in combat with his own image" (*BS*, pp. 136-38). So also in *The Middle Passage* Naipaul found a Trinidad where "In the pursuit of the Christian-Hellenic tradition, which some might see as a paraphrase for whiteness, the past has to be denied, the self despised. Black will be made white. Pursuing the Christian-Hellenic tradition, the West Indian accepted his blackness as his guilt" (*MP*, pp. 72-73).²¹

In his first openly political novel, *The Mimic Men* (1967), Naipaul presents the failure of independence politics on Isabella as directly consequent on this self-violating fantasy. We see it first in the part-Chinese, Hok, for whom the public exposure of his Negro mother is as experienced as a kind of Fall: "he had been expelled from that private hemisphere of fantasy where lay his true life" (*MM*, p. 97); his black schoolfellow, Eden, is similarly tainted: "His deepest wish was for the Negro race to be abolished; his intermediate dream was of a remote land where he, the solitary Negro among an alien pretty people, ruled as a sort of sexual king. Lord Jim, Lord Eden" (*MM*, p. 151). Browne, with his cruelly self-burlesquing coon act, simply inverts the fantasy; and in Browne's dismissal of his father as "that black jackass," Singh finds the seed of their later political disaster: "How could anyone, *wishing only to abolish himself*, go beyond a statement of distress?" (*MM*, p. 151, my italics). It is a question posed, even more brutally, by the career of Jimmy Ahmed in *Guerrillas*, the Hakwai-Chinese Black Power leader who de-

spises his followers as “good for nothing natives. . . . black louts” (*G*, pp. 38-39), the revolutionary communitard who recognizes himself as “the friend of every capitalist in the country” (*G*, p. 27), the “Warrior and Torchbearer” who sees himself as the “playboy” invention of London liberals (*G*, pp. 17, 26), the maroon Heathcliff (“‘Your mother was an Indian princess, and your father the Emperor of China’”) who derides himself as “a Chinaman’s lucky shot on a dark night” (*G*, p. 62). All that Jimmy’s revolution amounts to is self-violation (expressed in the homosexual liaison with his deformed alter-ego, Bryant, or in the buggery and murder of Jane); all that he leaves amid the junk of his ruined life is a “statement of distress” which (despite his catalogue of superficial fraudulencies) makes him the spokesman for a whole abandoned society:

You were my maker, you broke my heart, you made me and then you made me feel like dirt again, good only for dirt . . . You people sent me back here to be nothing. . . . (*G*, pp. 228-29)

In his description of “the Christian-Hellenic tradition” as “a paraphrase for whiteness,” Naipaul points in the direction of one of the principal agents of imperial power — the alien language through which a colonized people are compelled to absorb the alienating values of the metropolis. “The Negro of the Antilles,” Fanon wrote, “will be proportionately whiter — that is he will come closer to being a real human being — in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language . . . for then in truth he is putting on the white world” (*BS*, pp. 13, 27). Thus a Trinidadian woman could feel personally affronted by Naipaul’s use of dialect in his fiction: “They must be does talk so by you . . . They don’t talk so by me” (*MP*, p. 74). Yet, as the writer best knows, the very act of linguistic self-assertion in a foreign tongue can serve to reinforce the colonial’s sense of inauthenticity since it constantly reminds him of the superior reality of a more complex world elsewhere.²² Literature is especially unsettling. Anand, in *A House for Mr Biswas*, is compelled by “the myths of English Composition” to experience a strange fantasy-world called “childhood”: “Only in compositions did they give delirious shouts of joy and their spirits overflowed into song; only there did they

indulge in what the composition notes called 'schoolboys' pranks' (HB, p. 382); it is a world of mimic-creatures called "Daddys," the world where Ralph Singh preposterously remembers "taking an apple to the teacher" — though it must have been an orange (MM, p. 90) — or where Fanon's black Martiniquan child claims to like vacations "because then I can run through the fields, breathe fresh air, and come home with *rosy* cheeks" (BS, p. 115 n.). "You know, Frankie," says Mr. Blackwhite, the novelist-chameleon of "A Flag on the Island," "I begin to feel that what is wrong with my books is not me, but the language I use. You know, in English, black is a damn bad word. You talk of a black deed. How then can I write in this language?" (FI, p. 182). Blackwhite is a buffoon, equally absurd as a *pasticheur* of Barbara Cartland, or in his reincarnation as the apostle of a *patois* literature. But the pathos of his complaint is real enough — a pathos which Naipaul elsewhere invoked with an epigraph from Joyce ("My soul frets in the shadow of his language," MP, p. 179) and which he explores in a moving essay called "Jasmine," where the alien language and its imported literature are remembered as constant reminders of "dissatisfaction at the emptiness of our own formless, unmade society" (OB, p. 24). The resulting sense of dislocation is concentrated in the poignant anecdote with which the essay concludes. The writer is in British Guiana, visiting a Christian Indian family; from the garden comes a scent he remembers from childhood; he knows the flower, but not its name:

'We call it jasmine.'

Jasmine! So I had known it all those years! To me it had been a word in a book, a word to play with, something removed from the dull vegetation I knew.

The old lady cut a sprig for me . . . I smelled it as I walked back to the hotel. Jasmine, jasmine. But the world and the flower had been separate in my mind for too long. They did not come together. (CB, p. 31)

The doubtful gift of language, however, is not one that a dependent society can readily discard — as Caliban (classically) discovers.²³ In this it epitomizes all those "gifts of civilisation," including the material language of technology, which continue to

define the "client economy." How shall Caliban, able only to dream of a wisdom, a "grace" that will match him with his "fine . . . master" (*Tempest*, V.i.294-95), ever enjoy his unviolated island again? Both Naipaul and Fanon ask the question: what happens "When, as in Haiti, the slave-owners leave, and there are only slaves"? (*OB*, p. 275). Enfranchisement, by the cruellest of ironies, can be experienced as the final withdrawal of identity, for "The Negro has not become a master. When there are no longer slaves, there are no longer masters" (*BS*, p. 156). This last betrayal is re-enacted with remorseless contempt by Roche at the end of *Guerrillas*:

'Do you understand? I'm leaving you alone. That's the way it's going to be. We are leaving you alone. I am leaving. I am going away. Jane and I are leaving tomorrow. Jane is in her room packing. We are leaving you here. Are you hearing me? Jimmy?'

'Massa'. (*G*, p. 253)

Roche's lie robs Jimmy even of the substance of his one act of rebellion, his assertion of mastery in the defilement and murder of Jane; it returns him from "guerrilla" to failed gangster; it reasserts his slave condition — acknowledged in the once ironic nickname "Massa."

As *Guerrillas* demonstrates, the problem has a political as well as a personal, psychological dimension. To begin with, both Fanon and Naipaul looked for the solution at the individual level. They did so partly because each recognized the obvious escape — the rhetoric of *négritude* and the politics of Black Power — as the expression of a disabling fantasy, an attempt to re-invent the lost antagonist, and with him the old dialectic of master and slave on which colonized identity had been founded. Such a course, they argued, can issue only in the futile quest for some "enemy" whose death (as even Ralph Singh, in moments of despair believes; *MM*, pp. 176, 226) will bring salvation. "When you find out who your enemy is, you must kill him" is the baffled theme of Naipaul's demented exile in "Tell Me Who to Kill" (*FS*, p. 77). But, as Naipaul had argued in "Power?", "there is no enemy." "The enemy is the past, of slavery and colonial neglect and a society uneducated from top to bottom;

the enemy is the smallness of the islands and the absence of resources. Opportunism or borrowed jargon may define phantom enemies: racial minorities, 'élites,' 'white niggers.' But at the end the problems will be the same, of dignity and identity" (*OB*, p. 271). Fanon's West Indian similarly expends himself "in uncovering resistance, opposition, challenge" (*BS*, p. 158), but finds that "there is nothing — nothing but indifference, or a paternalistic curiosity" (*BS*, p. 157). Fanon's solution (as the existentialist framework of his first book dictated) was one of individualist revolt:

There is no Negro mission; there is no white burden . . . I have no wish to be the victim of the *Fraud* of a black world. My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values. There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence . . . I am not a prisoner of history. . . . I am not the slave of the slavery that dehumanised my ancestors. . . . I am my own foundation. (*BS*, pp. 163-64)

In *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), that comic epic of existential rebellion, the hero's determination to free himself from subjugation to his Hindu past and from the family prison of the Tulsis — to become "his own foundation" — is symbolized by the struggle to build a house of his own. *Biswas* marks the end of the first phase of Naipaul's novel writing; with it, in Andrew Gurr's words, he "completed the work of establishing his home identity." *Biswas* has of course a political dimension: and Gordon Rohlehr has persuasively argued that it can be read as a novel about the struggle for independence in a slave society.²⁴ But its politics do not move beyond the unqualified individualism of Fanon's first book. The long gap in Naipaul's fiction between *Biswas* and his next major novel, *The Mimic Men* (1967), punctuated only by the false start of the English suburban comedy, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), prepared the way for a change of approach as radical in its way as that taken by Fanon in his second book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Important pointers to this change occurred in Naipaul's intervening non-fiction, but it was *The Mimic Men* which established his new political direction as a novelist of post-imperial crisis. In his analysis of the problems of "independence," Naipaul continues to

have much in common with Fanon; but on the matter of resolutions they are bitterly divided.

2. *The Politics of Neo-Colonialism*

The Wretched of the Earth (1961) is a book which grew directly out of Fanon's experience as a hospital psychiatrist in French-occupied Algeria. In the course of his work with the psychological casualties of the independence struggle, he had come to believe that the problems of identity with which he had been concerned in *Black Skin, White Masks*, since they were political in origin, could only have political solutions: to decolonize the individual it was first necessary to decolonize society. His starting points are familiar: colonial society is once again understood in terms of the sterile dialectic of master and slave: "it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence . . . The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor" (*WE*, pp. 28, 41).²⁵ But liberation from this condition can no longer be conceived in terms of some humanist intellectual freemasonry; for the conditions of such escape are now seen as dictated by the colonizing culture. In a startling passage of his opening chapter Fanon offers an implicit self-criticism: his earlier commitment to certain Western values of mind now appears as a sophisticated expression of the colonized mentality, a "sterile . . . and nauseating mimicry" (*WE*, p. 251):

The native intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas, and deep down in his brain you could always find a vigilant sentinel ready to defend the Graeco-Latin pedestal. Now it so happens that during the struggle for liberation [when he] comes into touch again with his people, this artificial sentinel is turned into dust. All the Mediterranean values — the triumph of the human individual, of clarity and of beauty — become lifeless, colourless knick-knacks. . . . Individualism is the first to disappear. . . . The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity . . . will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organisation of the struggle will suggest . . . a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend. (*WE*, p. 36)

In *An Area of Darkness* (1964) Naipaul records a similar crisis of faith in the individualist values which were triumphant in *Biswas*; the emotional poles of the new book are the writer's discovery of a desperate isolation in his metropolis ("I was lost. . . in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name") (*AD*, p. 42), and his terror of absorption into the anonymous Indian crowd, of becoming "faceless" (*AD*, p. 43), "One Out of Many." His journey to the home of his ancestors characteristically ends in "cruelty, self-reproach and flight" (*AD*, p. 263); but the retreat to Europe shocks him with a profound distaste at re-encountering a world where each individual "required to be noticed" (*AD*, p. 265), and leaves him with an abiding nostalgia for a quite different vision of the world: "I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again" (*AD*, pp. 266-67). *The Mimic Men* is a fictional attempt to work through that crisis of faith: its judgements are characteristically ambivalent.

Ranjit Kripalsingh ("Ralph Singh"), the hero, with his sense of shipwreck, his longing to be returned to the real world — London, "that city of the magical light" (*MM*, p. 223) — has a sensibility permeated with "Mediterranean values." It displays itself in his fondness for Latin tags, in his correspondence with Browne (at the height of their political power) on the nicer points of Roman military history, or in the grandiose mimicry of his house "modelled on the house of the Vetii in Pompeii" (*MM*, p. 38). Like his creator he finally succeeds in declaring his independence from the helplessness and disorder of his colonial birthplace. But the freedom he gains is of a peculiarly bleak and private kind, depending as it does on a final renunciation of the most compelling of his Graeco-Roman fantasies, the Idea of the City. In a sense the whole of his career, from the years as a student in London, to the founding of Isabella of the travesty-city of Crippleville (to which, like Romulus, he gives his name); through the construction of that mockery of *urbanitis*, the Roman house, to his political adventurism and final flight to the metropolis, can be construed in terms of his pursuit of "the god of the city" (*MM*, p. 18). But:

it is with cities as it is with sex. We seek the physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units. . . . So quickly London had gone sour on me. The great city, centre of the world, in which, fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order. (*MM*, p. 18)

In the end, of course, he must learn to be content with his own "cell" — seen no longer as a prison, but as a genuine "cell of perception" (*MM*, p. 27), an individual source of energy and illumination: "I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city" (*MM*, p. 250). Singh's acceptance of the inevitability of exile is prophetic. In the subsequent novels, the Idea of the City lingers only as an intimation of vanished order: the actual cities visited, metropolitan or colonial, represent merely the "world divided into compartments" (*WE*, p. 40) denounced by Fanon — agglomerations of lost individuals, without a "centre" (*G*, p. 31) where "Everyone [is] far from home" (*FS*, p. 104). As a source of order and the symbol of a protected world the city is replaced by the guarded compound, or the false community of privilege on a hill. But Singh's exile is prophetic in another way; it is also a withdrawal inwards, from the public world of action to the privacy of a writer; however he may console himself with the belief that writing has simply "cleared the decks . . . for fresh action . . . the action of a free man" (*MM*, p. 251), it is hard to imagine what kind of effective action might be based on this reclusive detachment. Naipaul's reservations about the extreme individualism into which Singh retreats are suggested by a harshly ironic analogy. The abiding image of Singh's new life is that supplied by the mirror-figure of the man he calls "Garbage," meticulously sorting through the chaos of his boarding house dinner, "maintaining order, defining garbage" (*MM*, p. 246). It is an image with disturbing implications for the novelist's conception of his own calling, which the later novels will extend.

But *The Mimic Men* and *The Wretched of the Earth* have more in common than a preoccupation with the poverty of individualism. Both are concerned with the nature and possibilities of colonial independence. The "independence" granted by a

colonial power, both recognize, is another form of imperialist fraud. It comes in two forms: in one the former colony is simply discarded, like so much used-up junk: "‘Since you want independence, take it and starve’" (*WE*, p. 77) — this is the "curse of independence" visited on those abandoned slave-barracoons (Mauritius, the smaller West Indian islands) whose plight Nairpaul has discussed in a number of essays — and it has a metaphoric equivalent in the deserted estate which is the site of Jimmy Ahmed's "commune" in *Guerrillas* — a fantasy of liberation set up by Sablich's, the former slave-trading company, and equipped with its junked machinery. Desertion too, Fanon argues, is the form of punishment inflicted on other ex-colonies (Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua) who resist the alternative form of spurious "independence" which he examines at length. This is the system of neo-colonialism which exploits the dream of usurping the master to create an ultimately powerless local elite who act as agents in the continuing exploitation of national resources. "Independence" here is merely a "fancy-dress parade" (*WE*, p. 118), or as Singh would say, "drama," a magic of spectacle and words.²⁶ The new bourgeoisie makes an elaborate show of taking over that symbol of colonial envy, the settlers' "brightly-lit town" of "stone and steel" (*WE*, p. 30); but their "new" town merely perpetuates the old relationship with an underdeveloped hinterland, masking the reality of economic regression with the spectacular theatre of prestige architecture and conspicuous consumption (*WE*, pp. 94, 125, 133). The brilliantly evoked town of *A Bend in the River* is a perfect illustration: on one hand the "New Domain" where a modern Africa of concrete, glass and imitation velvet chairs, is conjured out of urban dereliction; on the other a hinterland of bush filled with the vengeful *jacqueries* of the dispossessed. The enterprises by which money is made in this city — Salim's western trade-goods, Mahesh's Bigburger concession — reflect the essentially parasitic, intermediary function of the mimic-bourgeoisie as Fanon described it.

Because of its intermediary role, Fanon argued, this class would be incapable of accumulating the capital necessary for genuine industrial development. Sterile and unproductive, it would have no alternative but to assist in the stripping of raw

materials and the export of unfinished goods — as Ralph Singh finds himself effectively the agent of sugar and bauxite interests — and to pluck what rewards it could from the sort of “development investment” which only reinforces dependence on external power. This is the fraud of “industrialization” satirized through Ralph Singh’s Isabella:

An English firm began making biscuits. Someone else made toothpaste or brought down the machinery for filling tubes with toothpaste . . . We encouraged a local adventurer to tin local fruit. This was a failure. It hadn’t occurred to anyone concerned to find out whether local people wanted local fruit tinned; no-one else did either. The same man went in later for tinning margarine and was a success. The margarine was imported, the tins were imported. Our effort was to operate a machine that turned the flattened tins into cylinders. We capped one end, filled the cylinder with the imported margarine, and capped the other end. I remember the process well. I opened the factory. Our margarine was slightly more expensive than imported tinned margarine and had to be protected. I believe the factory employed five black ladies, whom we photographed looking grave and technical in white coats.

Industrialisation, in territories like ours, seems to be a process of filling imported tubes and tins with various imported substances.

(*MM*, pp. 215-16)

Running hand-in-glove with this economic fraud is the political fraudulence exemplified by the Singh-Browne clique, “chapmen in causes,” ruling with the magic of “borrowed phrases” in what Singh calls “the game of naming” (*MM*, p. 214). They speak of socialism — they achieve what Fanon dismissed as “nationalising the robbery of the nation” (*WE*, pp. 37-38); they speak of “revolution” and offer, through an army of expatriate advisers, only the symbolic “spectacle of the black man served by the white” (*MM*, p. 210). They trade in political programmes which (as in Fanon) amount only to new forms of the old colonial politics of envy, exploiting the antagonisms of race to distract from the real, but to them insoluble, problems of establishing a new form of order. The final product of such a politics as Fanon predicted it is illustrated in the African state of *A Bend in the River* (1979): an ex-colony given over to the depredations of a bourgeois “gang” (*WE*, p. 139), its power established in the

form of a one-party state, and secured by the magic of a "leader" ("The Big Man") whose "inner purpose [is] to become the general president of that company of profiteers" (*WE*, p. 133); but a state undermined by the manipulated tribalism through which, Fanon declared, political leaders show themselves as "the true traitors in Africa, for they sell their country to the most terrifying of all its enemies: stupidity" (*WE*, p. 148).

If Naipaul's vision of post-imperial corruption often seems wantonly cruel, then it is worth observing that Fanon's account of this brave new world, "the brothel of Europe" (*WE*, p. 123) and its mimic-masters, displays an equally savage indignation: his new class "is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness or the will to succeed of youth" (*WE*, p. 123); it is "only a sort of little greedy caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster . . . incapable of great ideas or of inventiveness . . . not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature" (*WE*, p. 141). The difference is that Fanon's outrage was not the outrage of despair.

His answer to the problem of neo-colonial corruption and dependence was for the people to realize their own power: repudiating the dream of a "famous man" or political "demiurge" who can give them freedom, they must recognize that "the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people" (*WE*, p. 159). Freedom is something that can be achieved and understood only through the process of violent revolution: "Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organised and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths. . . . Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets . . . a few reforms at the top, a flag-waving" (*WE*, p. 118). If Naipaul shares this contempt for the empty symbolism of "A Flag on the Island," he extends it equally to Fanon's quasi-mystical faith in the redemptive possibilities of popular violence.²⁷ In a truly revolutionary society, Fanon wrote "The art of politics is simply transformed into the art of war. . . . To fight the war and to take part in politics: the two things become one and the same" (*WE*, p. 105). Like the best slogans,

this has a kind of infectious innocence — and significantly it becomes part of the confused, borrowed guerrilla jargon of the “Liberation Army” which threatens the town near the end of *A Bend in the River*: “The ANCESTORS shriek. Many false gods have come to this land, but none have been as false as the gods of today . . . and *since war is an extension of politics* we have decided to face the ENEMY” (*BR*, p. 228, my italics). But behind the dream of violence, as the polemic against the “false gods of today” reveals, lies another which, to Naipaul’s eye, is even more disturbing: the vision of apocalypse.

3. *Revolution and Apocalypse*

Almost by definition, revolutionary programmes tend to embody some sort of millenarian vision. But in Fanon’s idea of radical decolonization this vision takes on at times a peculiarly nihilistic character. “Decolonization,” proclaims the opening trumpet-blast of *The Wretched of the Earth*, “is always a violent phenomenon” for it involves “quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men” and the only “proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up” (*WE*, p. 27). This means more than merely turning the world upside down, however: “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, *a programme of complete disorder*” (*WE*, p. 27; my italics). What is required is a “*tabula rasa*”; again and again he insists that “it is necessary to begin everything all over again” (*WE*, p. 79), “everything will have to be started again from scratch” (*WE*, p. 142).²⁸ The first object of this rage for abolition must be the brightly-lit city, whose mimicry of political order has stripped the country of its wealth and drained it of its population: “*the capital must be deconsecrated*” (*WE*, p. 150, my italics). The implications of this stance, though Fanon does not rigorously follow them through, are that the imperial past must be annihilated, and all present links with the controlling power severed. It can lead at one extreme to the self-destructive frenzy initiated by the Paris-trained intellectuals of Pol Pot’s Kampuchea, Year Zero; or at another to the bizarre double-think of the revolution explored in

Naipaul's most recent book where a Phantom jet is magically transformed into an "Islamic" weapon (*AB*, p. 40).²⁹

The millenarian dream of making a fresh start, and the accompanying fantasy of apocalyptic violence are a persistent theme in Naipaul's later writing, from that scene in "A Flag on the Island" where the islanders, in a mood of daemonic carnival, await the onset of a hurricane whose destruction holds out the promise of "A clean break, a fresh start," but where the equivocal "benediction" never comes (*FI*, pp. 191, 212). Against Fanon's simple conviction that the colonial world can and must be made anew, Naipaul poses a question about the foundations of power and legitimacy: "How, without empire, do such societies govern themselves? What is now source of power? The ballot box, the mob, the regiment? When, as in Haiti, the slave-owners leave, and there are only slaves, what are the sanctions?" (*OB*, p. 275). It is the question Ralph Singh has to face as he develops that programme of disorder which he sees as the inevitable path of the colonial politician: "the order to which the colonial politician succeeds is not his order. It is something he is compelled to destroy; destruction comes with his emergence and is a condition of his power" (*MM*, p. 36). In this, Singh is the true heir of his father, Gurudeva, the millenarian prophet, who preached the necessity of "[abandoning] the foreign city and [withdrawing] to the forests to rediscover the glory and a way of looking at the world" (*MM*, p. 126). Both movements, lacking any coherent political purpose, can do no more than generate disorder (*MM*, p. 127); they rely in the end, only on the inchoate power of a mob:

We had no trade unions behind us, no organised capital. We had no force of nationalism even, only the negative frenzy of a deep violation which could lead to further frenzy alone, the vision of a world going up in flames: it was the only expiation. (*MM*, p. 205)

"Expiation": sacrifice, like Gurudeva's horse-sacrifice, a superstition rendered futile by the real power it opposes. For here (as in *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*) "the power of money will cause the city to be built again" (*MM*, pp. 204-05).

For Naipaul, apocalyptic frenzy is only the extreme manifesta-

tion of that special kind of human folly which drives men to undermine those very institutions on which their lives depend.³⁰ Thus in *Guerrillas* it is shared by Jimmy, the “playboy” revolutionary, and Jane, the representative of the smart London world which invented him. In Jane “the vision of decay, of a world going up in flames” is a kind of self-flattering pessimism founded on the reassuring “certainties of class and money” (*G*, p. 100).³¹ Jimmy, asking about her “nice house in London” gives the game away:

‘Suppose it burns down while you’re away?’
 ‘It’s insured.’
 ‘You’ll just build another?’
 ‘I suppose so.’ (*G*, p. 241)

In Jimmy himself, by contrast, the conviction that “*The whole place is going to blow up*” is an expression of his profound sense of violation and deprivation: “*In my father’s house there are many mansions . . . But the house is full up now Roy, there are no more mansions . . . it [is] all going to end in smoke*” (*G*, p. 87). Yet ironically in his case, too, the world he seeks to abolish is the world that made him: the wish is ultimately for self-abolition and that is the most he will achieve. Jimmy declares that “*to destroy the world is the only course of action that is now open to sane men*” (*G*, p. 42); but the reality offers only a pathetic impoverishment of this grandiose mania, as the politician, Meredith, implies: “If those people down on the beach were a little saner, don’t you think they would burn this place down *twice a year*” (*G*, p. 140; my italics). Part of his point, a terrifying insight into the powerlessness and irrelevance of an abandoned people, is that it would make no difference if they did. The true source of power lies elsewhere, out of reach, manifesting itself only in the helicopters of an “external police” which descend from the sky to “dish out licks” (*G*, p. 189).³²

Jimmy Ahmed is partly made by the magic of Fanonian words: his proclamation that “*All revolutions begin with the land*” is a simple dilution of Fanon’s contention that the peasantry alone, isolated from the corruptions of the city, outside the class system and with “nothing to lose,” could make a revolution

(*WE*, p. 47). In fact, however, he and his slum-followers represent another strain in Fanon's argument — the belief that the revolution would find an “urban spearhead” amongst Marx's rejected *lumpen-proletariat*, in whose internecine violence could be discerned the seeds of revolutionary outrage. Fanon chose this class precisely because it constituted an active and visible portent of the inevitable imperialist collapse:

This *lumpen-proletariat* is like a horde of rats; you may kick them, and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they'll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree.

The shanty-town sanctions the native's biological decision to invade at whatever cost . . . the enemy fortress . . . [It] is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination. So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals, urged on from behind, throw themselves into the struggle for liberation like stout working men.

(*WE*, p. 103)

A passage like this illuminates the persistent connections made in *Guerrillas* between the oppressive images of urban decay, the smoking rubbish-heaps, the carrion-corbeaux, the junked machinery, the shanty-town huts and the omnipresent “bauxite pall,” with the human junk of Jimmy's commune and the urban gangs. But significantly the “revolution” when it comes resembles, from the privileged viewpoint of the Ridge, merely an enlargement or intensification of the perennial spectacle of burning rubbish-heaps: it is not so much a revolution as an expression of that millenarian nihilism represented by Marley's hit-song, “Burning and Looting.”

For Fanon, given the right historical conditions, gangs may become guerrillas; the petty gangster, dying in single combat with the police, provides (however unconsciously) an heroic blueprint for revolutionary action (*WE*, p. 54). This was the thesis brilliantly expounded in the Jamaican film, *The Harder They Come*, where Ivan the rude-boy hero, ganja-trader and would-be reggae star, is cut down in a shoot-out against overwhelming odds. With his blazing six-guns Ivan is consciously mimicking the heroes of those American movies on which his fantasies (like Bryant's in *Guerrillas*) are fed; but the political implications of his stand are clear, for the final showdown is

provoked by his attempt to form a rudimentary trade-union to protect his fellow ganja-dealers against the power of the crime bosses and their allies in the police. The ending gives an entirely new meaning to the song on Jimmy Cliff's sound-track: "You can get it, if you *really* want." In *Guerrillas* the equivalent of Ivan's last stand is the death of Stevens, the "little gang-leader," who, confronting a police-ambush, makes the required gesture and draws first (*G*, pp. 166-67); but it is an off-stage death, cruelly anticlimactic in the telling, and without political resonance. In the town of this novel, it is true, the "disordered men" of the shanty-towns *are* invading the "enemy fortress" (Jane finds one in the playhouse at the bottom of her garden), but there is no "programme" of disorder, only a rage to destroy which seems incapable of political direction. As Roche insists, there are no guerrillas, only gangs. Their "revolution" is as Jimmy describes it, everyone fighting "his own little war": "They don't know who they fighting," says Harry de Tunja, "or who they fighting for. Everybody down there is a leader now. I hear there isn't even a government" (*G*, p. 185).

The most despairing feature of this consummation of protest-politics, as Naipaul presents it, is that, for all their apocalyptic fantasies, its *enragés* do not really believe that the world can be turned upside down: this revolt is simply a new and more desperate version of the ingrown dialectic of slave and master. Harry again:

'All this talk of independence, but they don't really believe that times have changed. They still feel they're just taking a chance, and that when the show is over somebody is going to go down there and start dishing out licks. . . . They would go crazy if somebody tell them that this time nobody might be going down to dish out licks and pick upon the pieces.' (*G*, p. 189)

The helicopters, like the thunderbolts of a Calvinist God, represent a hideous kind of security — they guarantee that this world has not been entirely discarded, that the town (at least for as long as the bauxite company needs it) will be rebuilt. This ugly symbiosis of power, protest and punishment is one which Roche, the former South African guerrilla, understands only too well; for his rebellion also (as Meredith cruelly points out) can be

read as an appeal for the reassurance of punishment: "‘And that to me is the message of your book. You transgressed; you were punished; the world goes on’" (G, p. 211). Whether the patterns of authority and submission are those imposed by a form of authoritarian schooling or by the history of a slave-colony, the possibility of escape from their rigid dialectic has come to seem infinitely remote. The verdict pronounced by Meredith’s truth-game is one which embraces all the "guerrillas" of the book:

The life being described is the life the speaker lives or a life he has already lived. The setting may change, but no-one will make a fresh start or do anything new. (G, p. 149)

A Bend in the River (1979) is Naipaul’s fullest treatment of the "programme of disorder" announced in Fanon’s heady slogan. Its setting is a thinly disguised Zaire, Conrad’s Congo Free State, 80 years on; the town at the bend on the river is a version of Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville, the site of Conrad’s "Heart of Darkness"; and somewhere in the background is the story of Pierre Mulele, the former Minister of Education, in whom Naipaul saw the Kurtz of anti-colonial frenzy. The story of Mulele’s 1964 *jacquerie* is told in "A New King for the Congo": a rising which proposed the extermination not merely of a city, but of every man in Stanleyville who could read, write or knot a tie. "He was against *everything*," an African told Naipaul. "He wanted to start again from the beginning" (REP, p. 195). At the conclusion of *A Bend in the River*, a guerrilla army is once again closing in on the town:

‘They’re going to kill everybody who can read and write, everybody who ever put on a jacket and tie. . . . They’re going to kill all the masters and all the servants. When they’ve finished nobody will know there was a place like this here. They’re going to kill and kill. They say it is the only way, to go back to the beginning before it’s too late.’ (BR, p. 293)

The rhetoric of Fanonian excess is familiar; but here, in the novel, revolutionary nihilism is presented as the symptom of a much wider disorder. The book chronicles a whole series of new beginnings and falsely apocalyptic endings: it envisages a disin-

tegrating world in which there are neither new starts to be made, nor old homes to return to. In this, the life of the hero, Salim, mirrors that of the town to which he has come. Turning his back on East Africa and the life of an Indian community which he senses to be "almost at an end" (*BR*, p. 21), he comes to a place where he hopes "to start from the beginning" (*BR*, p. 9); but his life, like those of the community's other uprooted exiles unfolds only as a disconnected succession of such hopeful new starts, as the town rises, falls and rises again around him. Cut off from the security of his past, Salim finds himself amongst Africans equally severed from theirs and from the "safety of the bush" to which it belonged. Nor is the crisis confined to such places in the forest "far away." Salim's conversations with his friend Indar, the international "expert," and his brief visit to London evoke a metropolitan world which, like the African town, is "decaying in the centre" (*BR*, p. 267). London, that other city on its bend in the river, is also a place of uprooted people — refugees, exiles and aimlessly drifting tourists. It epitomizes the greater world discovered by Salim's benefactor, Nazruddin. Everywhere, Nazruddin explains:

People have scraped the world clean... Koreans, Filipinos, people from Hong Kong and Taiwan, South Africans, Italians, Greeks, South Americans, Argentines, Columbians, Venezuelans, Bolivians, a lot of black people who've cleaned out places you've never heard of, Chinese from everywhere. All of them are on the run. They are frightened of the fire. (*BR*, pp. 251-52)

What they are after is "some nice safe country" for their loot; what they find are places where their own compatriots are waiting to "take them to the cleaners" (*BR*, p. 252). Between the junk-heaps beside the African river, and the "cleaning establishment" by the Thames there is, morally speaking, little to choose: each in its way exemplifies the same post-imperial disorder, a war of all against all in which there are no "safe houses" any more. The differences are merely those between what Naipaul called "the congruent corruptions of colonizer and colonized" (*REP*, p. 71) writ large. *A Bend in the River* ends in a scene which parodies the catastrophe of *Heart of Darkness*: Salim, in flight from the fire, has caught the last riverboat out before the new

millenium of murder begins; dug-outs “desperate only to be tied to the steamer” crowd its departure and are swamped in its wake; downstream the boat is attacked and the barge it propels, filled with the poorest passengers, is cut loose to drift among the choking water-hyacinths:

The searchlight lit up the barge passengers who, behind bars and wire-guards, as yet scarcely seemed to understand they were adrift. Then there were gunshots. The searchlight was turned off; the barge was no longer to be seen. The steamer started up again and moved without lights down the river, away from the area of battle. The air would have been full of moths and flying insects. The searchlight, while it was on, had shown thousands, white in the white light. (*BR*, p. 296)

It is Naipaul’s most disturbing image of imperial desertion and colonial dereliction. If the denizens of the town, waiting for the slaughter, resemble those helpless prisoners on the drifting barge, then the denizens of the bush, huddled in the darkness beyond, are equally lost. For the bush, as Ferdinand (Salim’s African protégé) explains, is no longer a place of primeval security:

‘Nobody’s going anywhere. We’re all going to hell, and every man knows this in his bones. . . . They feel they’re losing the place they can run back to. . . . The bush runs itself. But there is no place to go to. I’ve been on tour in the villages. It’s a nightmare. All these airfields the man has built, the foreign companies have built — nowhere is safe now.’ (*BR*, p. 291)

But what is true for those left behind is also true for those on the steamer; it moves out of one darkness into another; “nowhere is safe now.” Between men going nowhere and men with nowhere to go the difference is small; and all that now distinguishes Salim from Metty, the former house-slave he leaves behind, is that (like other Naipaul heroes) he has learnt “to see”; he has become, in effect, an historian.

4. *The Novelist as Historian*

Fanon’s programme, through its insistence on starting again from the beginning, leans, I have suggested, towards the abolition of history. The only history which apparently remains in the colonized world is that “made” by the settler; it is not really “the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his

own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves" (*WE*, p. 40).³³ The very landscape, that "world of statues" (*WE*, p. 40) becomes part of this oppressive historical scripture, constantly reminding the native of his inauthenticity, inferiority and dependence. The iconoclastic rage revealed by the vandalized monuments which litter the townscape of *A Bend in the River* expresses the popular instinct towards the annihilation of a humiliating past. But, in Naipaul's analysis, such historical nihilism must prove as destructive and debilitating as the apocalyptic fantasy which inspires it. At the end of *The Middle Passage*, where he is reflecting on the blindness and futility of protest politics and its "thesis of the enemy," the writer concludes that "The situation required not a leader but *a society which understood itself and had purpose and direction*" (*MP*, p. 247; my italics). That understanding it is the business of the writer to supply. To begin with, this mission was conceived in almost entirely local terms: "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands" (*MP*, p. 73); to illuminate the benighted history of the slave colony would be to exorcise its disabling sense of shipwreck and desertion, to expose the true nature of its "enemy" — the past, and its legacy of impoverishment and neglect. Later, however, Naipaul came to see the problem in more complex and comprehensive terms: the problems of individual colonies could not be understood in isolation from those of the whole post-imperial world. It meant exploring the disorders of the old metropolitan cultures as well as those of the former outposts of empire: the two were "congruent."

The understanding of history, both private and public, and the value of the special kind of "vision" it grants — these are among the informing preoccupations of all Naipaul's later writing. There is a particular desolation which afflicts those (men as well as nations) who forget, lose touch with, or otherwise obliterate their own past. By the same token there is a special grace, sometimes alarming when first glimpsed, but potentially a source of profound consolation, which comes to those who recover and "impose order on" their own histories. Among Naipaul's lost individuals, the most desperate are those who, cut off from their

past, can experience the present only as inexplicable shipwreck. There is Dayo's brother in "Tell Me Who to Kill," exiled from a West Indian village which appears to have no reason for existence ("You wonder how people get to a village like that, how that place become their home" (*FS*, p. 67), and now isolated in a dislocated present of restless, unmotivated movement ("You are always taking trains and buses to strange places. You never know what sort of street you are going to find yourself in, what sort of house you will be knocking at" (*FS*, p. 80), a man possessed by a sense of entrapment, but unable to explain "how I trap myself" (*FS*, p. 79). Or there is Jimmy Ahmed, about to die amid the "junk" to which his present life is reduced, and tormented by the incoherence of a past which seems beyond logical explanation:

I forgot myself when I was in London, and when I think of London and those places I cannot work out how I got here, so far from human habitation and I cannot understand why I should end here like a ghost, this is my part of the world, I was born here, this is not London, it's like a bad dream, but I know I'm not waking up. (*G*, p. 227)

Or, equally desperate, there is Ralph Singh at that critical moment on an English railway station, "concentrating on the moment, which he mustn't relate to anything else" because of his overwhelming fear that to see himself historically would be to discover chaos:

To attempt to explain my presence in this station to myself, or to look forward to the increasingly improbable search that awaited me in a London to which I was drawing no nearer was to be truly lost, to see myself at the end of the world. (*MM*, p. 250)³⁴

In such crises of comprehension, the characters reveal the intellectual deficiency of the societies which have made them — a failure to accommodate the past which can take a variety of equally damaging forms. It may involve the systematic falsifications of bogus "historians," like the Big Man's kept-intellectual, Raymond, in *A Bend in the River*. It may involve that neurotic suppression of a past too brutal to contemplate which Naipaul discerned in the former slave-colonies of *The Middle Passage* and *The Overcrowded Barracoon*. It may, as in the Islamic world

explored in *Among the Believers*, involve the fabrication of a selective history to serve the interests of theological myth.⁸⁵ Or it may, as in the India of *An Area of Darkness* and *A Wounded Civilisation*, involve the paralysis of a culture which has simply failed to develop the necessary sense that the past is after all "another country." The "sense of history . . . is a sense of loss" (*AD*, p. 144); and without that sense of loss a society will be imprisoned by its past, as Salim feels his native community to be in *A Bend in the River* — blindly incapable of recognizing the changes which are about to sweep it away forever.⁸⁶ "The past" Naipaul insists, has not only to be seen, it "has to be seen to be dead; or the past will kill" (*WC*, p. 191).

The simple discovery of the past, though a necessary first step, is not in itself enough: the past has to be meditated on, understood, and given an order. Otherwise the grace of history will be fragile and temporary — as it proves to be for Mr. Biswas, who discovers a "great calm" only shortly before his breakdown at Green Vale:

He had for too long regarded situations as temporary; henceforth he would look upon every stretch of time, however short, as precious. Time would never be dismissed again. No action would merely lead to another; every action was part of his life which could not be recalled. (*HB*, pp. 265-66)

Uncovered merely as chronological process, moreover, the past can be an occasion for fresh panic and despair, as it is for Santosh in "One out of Many" when, looking back, he tries to locate the particular moment responsible for bringing him to the desolately "free state" of his life in Washington:

I could find no one moment; every moment seemed important. An endless chain of action had brought me to that room. (*FS*, p. 55)

To him the logic, inseparable as it is from his new and alien sense of individuality, seems "frightening . . . burdensome." By contrast, the effect of Ralph Singh's recovery of the past is to render it "manageable" so that each event can be "given its place [and] no longer disturb me" (*MM*, p. 243). This is not simply because he is the most rigorous and enquiring of Naipaul's histo-

rians of the self, but because his historical enquiry is of a more systematic and constructive kind. Repudiating the "disturbance" threatened by the mere chronicle-logic of a "narrative in sequence," he contrives, through the intricately parenthetical form of his memoir, "to *impose order* on my own history" (*MM*, p. 243; my italics). The phrase immediately suggests a parallel, confirmed by the antihistorical narrative shape, with the creative duty of the novelist to "impose a vision on the world"; and it has, indeed, been widely recognized that Singh's *Writer's Progress*, his pilgrimage of self-making provides an oblique analogue for Naipaul's own career.³⁷ But equally important is the fact that his self-recovery leads to larger historical insights which help to explain the growing interpenetration of history and fiction in this novelist's work. It is Ralph Singh who announces what is to be the unifying programme of all the later writing.

The problem which Singh confronts in trying to particularize and account for his "sense of loss," is one whose origins can be found in a question Naipaul posed early in *The Middle Passage*:

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? . . . The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies. (*MP*, p. 29)

For certain colonies at least, he seems to argue, Fanon's complaint that "history" has simply meant the history of the exploiting power is cruelly beside the point: for *they actually have no other*. History for them is like those giant driftwood tree-stumps which litter the shoreline of Singh's Isabella, uprooted fragments of a grander world elsewhere. His own *The Loss of El Dorado*, subtitled "A History," is like an illustration of this thesis: begun as an attempt to assuage the writer's own "sense of being cut off from a past" (*LE*, p. 13), it offers as a history of Trinidad two widely separated episodes of history (the El Dorado failures of Berrio and Raleigh at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and the disgrace of General Picton at the dawn of the nineteenth). The two episodes are examined, frequently in almost myopic detail, while the intervening and succeeding centuries are

barely touched on. This eccentric design (as Naipaul's Foreword makes clear) is programmatic: it is meant to "impose a vision":

An obscure part of the New World is momentarily touched by history; the darkness closes up again; the Chaguanes [Indians] disappear in silence. The disappearance is unimportant; it is part of nobody's story. But this is how a colony was created in the New World. There were two moments when Trinidad was touched by 'history'. This book attempts to record those two moments. (*LE*, p. 14)

The idea of history in Trinidad as a matter of temporary illumination, visited from without, is a radical one; amongst other things it consigns to the surrounding darkness even the arrival of Naipaul's own people. But in a sense that does not matter, because "the colony was created long before that," its fate already determined. The two stories of *The Loss of El Dorado* (narratives of greed and cruelty, incompetence and folly, fraudulence and self-deceit) are thus to be seen as exemplary: they encapsulate the nature of the island's relation with the imperial power and from them the informed imagination can exfoliate the rest of the lost past. The method — an historical equivalent of a parable — is in essence that employed in Ralph Singh's autobiography: the book sets out to describe the life "of a leader of some sort, a politician" (*MM*, p. 184); but the events which a conventional history might see as central to this project, all the details of Singh's actual political career culminating in his time as a minister in the Browne cabinet, are treated in almost disdainful summary, consigned to a kind of "parenthesis." The real meaning of Singh's career is discovered elsewhere through a patchwork arrangement of episodes, sometimes apparently trivial in themselves — like the recurrent memory of "holding the creased photograph of an unknown girl" on the day of his first London snowfall (*MM*, p. 184) — which progressively expose the source of his debilitating mimicry:

I have established his isolation, his complex hurt and particular frenzy. And I believe I have also established, perhaps in this proclaimed frivolity, this lack of judgement and balance, the deep feeling of irrelevance and intrusion, his unsuitability for the role into which he was drawn, and his inevitable failure. From playing to disorder: it is the pattern. (*MM*, p. 184)

As that last aphorism reminds us, the psychological interest of the book is secondary to a larger purpose: *The Mimic Men* focussed on individual psychology not from lack of political concern, but in order to explain why, in certain mutilated societies, genuine politics — the organizing activity of a *polis* — cannot exist.

Ralph Singh himself has a compelling interest in politics, but it is not one he either discovers or satisfies through the political action which he dismisses as “playacting”; instead it is something he acquires in the attempt to come to terms with his own past, in the recognition of his “instinct . . . towards the writing of history” (*MM*, p. 81). The history he dreams of writing is one which would account for his consuming sense of personal dislocation by placing it in a larger historical context — not merely that of his own obscure island, but of the whole imperial world responsible for its arbitrary creation, and displaced, castaway condition:

It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organisations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about. The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature. It was my hope to sketch a subject which, fifty years hence, a great historian might pursue. (*MM*, p. 32)

The Mimic Men itself is only an essay towards the historical project which its protagonist outlines; for Singh feels himself to be “too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject” (*MM*, p. 32). The novels which follow (and the non-fictional books on which they build) mark the stages of Naipaul’s progress towards fulfilling Singh’s ambition. In them he has sought to do for the inheritors of broken empire (colonizers and colonized) what, in his estimate, Balzac did for the French people a century ago — to tell them “where they stand.”³⁸

The vision of post-imperial restlessness and disorder lies behind the broken world of *Guerrillas*, at once cosmopolitan and hopelessly provincial; and Singh’s lament finds its degraded echo in Jimmy Ahmed’s nostalgic slogans: “*Men are born on the earth,*

every man has his one spot, it is his birth right, and men must claim their portion of the earth in brotherhood and harmony" (G, p. 17). The vision is even more prominently displayed in the maelstrom of *A Bend in the River* and stands, ironically emblemized, in the Virgilian motto which adorns one of the ruined colonial monuments in the jungle town: *Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi* ("[the god] approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union") (BR, pp. 32, 69, 171). But it has its fullest expression in the novel which followed *The Mimic Men, In a Free State* (1971) whose very disjunctive form proclaims the radical incoherence of its subject. The polyglot "refugee ship" of the opening journal section, with its shifting allegiances and hostilities, its aimless persecutions and futile demonstrations of power, is a familiar microcosm of the world revealed in the following pages. On one side of that world are the shipwrecked victims of the imperial diaspora (Santosh, Dayo's brother), psychological amputees, variously cut off from the ancestral past to which their security belonged; on the other are the enfeebled representatives of the vanishing imperial order (Bobby and Linda), agents of the fraud of "development," facing the inchoate anger of the displaced and dispossessed. As rootless as their counterparts in the first two stories, the expatriate couple travel through a landscape of bizarre imperial relics and ruins, on a journey whose only object is the temporary and insecure resting-place of a compound guarded by soldiers who are also agents of terror. Like the abandoned guard-dogs of the old colonial masters, the soldiery no longer observe the boundaries they were hired to defend: "They're attacking everything now" (FS, p. 189). A repeated motif in the stories which make up this novel is the human yearning for "brotherhood"; but when his rioting *hubshi* brothers scrawl a protective "Soul Brother" on the pavement outside Santosh's house in Washington, his response is a desolate, incomprehending "Brother to what or to whom?" (FS, p. 57). The only real source of social cohesion here is the brute force represented by the power of "the whip."

The vision of these books is profoundly pessimistic; for, matching Naipaul's Fanonian indignation at the destructive legacy of imperialism, is a deepening despair at the seemingly irremediable

confusion left in its wake. It implies, in its way, a critique of imperialism even more radical than Fanon's: for it asks us to contemplate the possibility of organic societies damaged beyond repair, of a world incapable, in any imaginable future, of putting itself together again. Civilizations (as Salim comes to see in London) are organisms constructed by centuries of painstaking human effort; but the tragedy of such Leviathans (even at their most complex) is their infinite fragility. The point is made by Peter Roche in a parable which may stand for the author's own desolate conviction:

'It's so frightening, when you begin to feel the sands shifting under you and there's nothing to cling to. There's no law . . . you don't think it's that kind of country. But every country is that kind of country. People would be frightened if they knew how easily it comes. Meredith wanted to know about torture. I should have told him. You only have to start. It's the first kick in the groin that matters. It takes a lot to do that. After that you can do anything. You can find yourself kicking a man in the groin until he bleeds. Then you find you've stopped tormenting. You've destroyed a human being. You can't put him together again, and all you can do is throw the bleeding meat out of the window.'

(G, pp. 220-21)

The danger of such despair is that it can sometimes appear as a perverse vanity, the anger and compassion which inspire it edging over into the irritation and contempt to which Naipaul has occasionally confessed.³⁹ What saves him, I believe, is an unexpected and surprising kind of humility, a disarming self-doubt expressed in the rigour with which his scepticism is extended to the very act of writing itself. For Ralph Singh, we might remember, the process of writing "cleared the decks . . . for *action*"; yet the novelist can never entirely rid himself of the suspicion that writing is less a preparative for action than a corrupt substitute, "just a sort of disease, a sickness. It's a form of incompleteness . . . a form of anguish, it's despair."⁴⁰ The importance of writing lies in its historical claim to "impose a vision on the world," but unless such a vision leads to purposive action it will be reduced to mere "point of view" — fundamentally no different from the voyeuristic privilege represented by the "view" from those houses on the Ridge in *Guerrillas*. There's a beggar's

cry which sounds like a refrain through that novel: "*Help de poor! . . . Help de blind!*" (*G*, pp. 115, 197). The question of how such an appeal might be answered is the one which preoccupies the novelist in the final section of *In a Free State* "The Circus at Luxor." From the security of their hotel restaurant a group of tourists is throwing food to some Egyptian beggar children; a man with a camel-whip repeatedly attempts to drive the children off; it becomes an obscene circus-act, a spectacle for cameras. In a frenzy of outrage, the novelist abandons his posture of detached observation and intervenes to stop the cruelty; snatching the whip, he threatens retribution: "I will report this to Cairo" (*FS*, p. 243). Ironically this gesture — with its calculated echo of earlier episodes in the novel (*FS*, pp. 148, 196, 231, 238) — leaves victims and oppressors equally untouched, for they recognize in it only another version of the unending opposition of master and slave. It makes the novelist feel merely "exposed, futile," seeking again the distance and anonymity of the onlooker, knowing that, once he has left, the brutality will start again. "Every onlooker," Fanon declared, "is either a coward or a traitor" (*WE*, p. 161) and the violence of the novelist's irruption into his own narrative suggests his sensitivity to the charge. But the impotence of his intervention is hedged about with further complex ironies: carefully set against this episode is the appearance of a striking group of communist Chinese. In a novel full of isolated individuals who dream of brotherhood, of onlookers who dream of action, they seem to represent a world where human community and intelligible action are still possible: "So self-contained, so handsome and healthy, so silently content with one another: it was hard to think of them as sightseers" (*FS*, p. 245). They seem for a moment, indeed, to be the heralds of a new kind of imperial order: but the optimistic speculation is immediately undercut:

Now another more remote empire was announcing itself. A medal, a postcard; and all that it asked in return was anger and a sense of injustice. (*FS*, p. 246)

With that disingenuous "all" the irony flicks back to the spectacle of anger and injustice at the hotel; and the Chinese are,

after all, a *circus* troupe, entertainers, purveyors of fantasy. The last suggestion of *In a Free State* is that the very idea of wholeness, the ideal of order may itself be the product of fantasy, an artist's fiction, a pastoral vision:

Perhaps that had been the only pure time, at the beginning, when the ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it as complete. But it was hard, travelling back to Cairo, looking with my stranger's eye at the fields and the people who worked in them . . . to believe that there had been such innocence. Perhaps that vision of the land . . . had always been a fabrication, a cause for yearning, something for the tomb.
(*FS*, p. 246)

Naipaul is left, then, with the desolating clarity of his "stranger's eye," with the vision of a disorder so appalling that it demands action, but so absolute as to render it impossible.⁴¹ The impasse is exactly that defined by Meredith in *Guerrillas*, who is allowed to put the criticism to which Naipaul knows his own lofty stance to be so vulnerable:

'We're all born as blind as kittens in this place. All of us. . . . It can take a long time to start seeing. And then you can see and see and see. You can go on seeing, but you must stop. You can start forgetting what you felt when you were a child. You can start forgetting who you are. If you see too much, you can end up living by yourself in a house on a hill.' (*G*, p. 144)

"What you felt when you were a child": there is a powerfully emotive image in Naipaul's writing whose recurrence suggests that it enshrines just such remembered emotion. It appears first as a scene glimpsed by Mr Biswas when his bus passes through a remote Trinidadian village at dusk:

the picture remained: a boy leaning against an earth house that had no reason for being here, under the dark falling sky, a boy who didn't know where the road, and that bus, went. (*HB*, p. 190)⁴²

It is both an image of "shipwreck" and (implicitly) a programme for exploration — follow the road, extend the little pool of light around the hut. The journey from that remote earth house has been, both literally and metaphorically, a long one. Yet poignantly enough the latest of the novels, *A Bend in the*

River, ends in what is, after all, merely a new and more desolate version of that haunting image: the picture of a steamer and its searchlight, moving down a dark river, floating, unstable, with nowhere certain to go. Salim's vision of the planet, "of men lost in space and time, but dreadfully, pointlessly busy" (*BR*, p. 258) is not one from which the novelist-historian can feel exempt. Like Ralph Singh, he may finally be himself "too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject" (*MM*, p. 32).

NOTES

- ¹ V. S. Naipaul, *Guerrillas* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 213. Henceforth cited as *G*. The other Naipaul texts used and their abbreviations are as follows: *Mys.M.* for *The Mystic Masseur* (London: Penguin Books, 1964); *SE* for *The Suffrage of Elvira* (London: Penguin Books, 1969); *MS* for *Miguel Street* (London: Penguin Books, 1971); *HB* for *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: Penguin Books, 1969); *MP* for *The Middle Passage* (London: Penguin Books, 1969); *AD* for *An Area of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1968); *FI* for *A Flag on the Island* (London: Penguin Books, 1969); *MM* for *The Mimic Men* (London: Penguin Books, 1969); *FS* for *In a Free State* (London: Penguin Books, 1973); *OB* for *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (London: Penguin Books, 1976); *LE* for *The Loss of El Dorado* (London: Penguin Books, 1973); *WC* for *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977); *BR* for *A Bend in the River* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979); *REP* for *The Return of Eva Peron* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980); and *AB* for *Among the Believers* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1981).
- ² See David Cauter, *Fanon, Fontana Modern Masters*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Fontana/Collins, 1970), p. 8.
- ³ Cited in Robert D. Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. xxvii.
- ⁴ Chinua Achebe speaking, à propos of *A Bend in the River*, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 February 1980. It is significant that Achebe did not feel it necessary to have read the book before making this attack. Cf. also George Lamming's accusation that Naipaul, crippled by shame at his colonial background, is incapable of moving beyond "castrated satire" (quoted in *Critical Perspectives*, p. 178).
- ⁵ The phrase recurs in *REP*, p. 216: "The new politics, the curious reliance of men on institutions they were yet working to undermine, the simplicity of beliefs and the hideous simplicity of actions, the corruption of causes, half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made: these were the things that began to preoccupy me" (my italics).
- ⁶ Paul Theroux, *V. S. Naipaul: An Introduction to His Work* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 130. For a critical approach to African and Caribbean literature — including Naipaul — which makes consistent and intelligent use of Fanon, see Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London: Heinemann, 1972).
- ⁷ Told in conversation with the present writer.

- ⁸ *Critical Perspectives*, p. 24. This useful anthology reprints a number of Naipaul's occasional essays which are not included in his own published collections.
- ⁹ See for instance, *OB*, p. 64: "We are in fact dealing with the type of society which Camus described in the opening chapter of *The Rebel*: a society which has not learned to see and is incapable of assessing itself, which asks no questions because ritual and myth have provided all the answers, a society which has not learned 'rebellion'." Cf. also Salim's discovery of "rebellion" in *BR*, pp. 247-48. For readings of the fiction which stress the importance of this doctrine, see Theroux, *Naipaul*, Ch. 6, *passim*; Gordon Rohlehr, "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr Biswas*," in *Critical Perspectives*, pp. 84-93; cf. also Ngugi, *Homecoming*, pp. 93-94.
- ¹⁰ *LE*, p. 183.
- ¹¹ *MP*, p. 212: "The myth of non-separation is carried to the extent that *routes nationales*, which presumably lead to Paris, wind through the Martiniquan countryside." It is the imperialist version of the fantasy which possesses Ganesh Ramusumair when he insists on taking the ritual of Brahmin initiation literally and sets firmly off to walk to Benares (*Mys.M.*, p. 21).
- ¹² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 144: "What is all this talk of a black people, of a Negro nationality? I am a Frenchman. I am interested in French culture, French civilisation, the French people. We refuse to be considered 'outsiders', we have full part in the French drama." This book is henceforth cited as *BS*. The text for *The Wretched of the Earth (WE)* is the Penguin edition (London: 1969).
- ¹³ See Karl Miller's review of *Guerrillas* in the *New York Review of Books* (quoted on the Penguin jacket); and cf. Francis Wyndham's judgement quoted in *Critical Perspectives*, p. xxvii, that Naipaul is "the finest living novelist writing in English."
- ¹⁴ Cf. "Without a Place," an interview with Ian Hamilton reprinted in *Critical Perspectives*, pp. 39-47: "London is my metropolitan centre; it is my commercial centre; and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of local people" (p. 41). For a discussion of exile as a key to Naipaul's work see Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Creative Use of Home in Modern Literature* (Brighton and New York: Harvester Press/Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 65-91. For Gurr even the later novels reflect the author's struggle to come to terms with the state of exile which is confronted more directly in the writing up to and including *Biswas*: "paradoxically the vision he now presents is still a mirror image. What he sees is his own alienation reflected everywhere" (p. 91).
- ¹⁵ *Critical Perspectives*, p. 42.
- ¹⁶ The word is used to describe the male community which is the main source of power and arbiter of status in the street (*MS*, p. 18).
- ¹⁷ *G*, p. 87; the significance of Jimmy's perception is highlighted by its use as an epigraph for the novel.
- ¹⁸ Prefatory "Note" to the Penguin edition of *The Middle Passage*.
- ¹⁹ The consequence, Fanon argues, is that the Negro's psychology is quite literally colonized, it becomes occupied territory. He quotes René Ménéil on "the replacement of the repressed [African] spirit in the consciousness of the slave by an authority symbol representing the Master, a symbol

implanted in the subsoil of the collective group and charged with maintaining order in it as a garrison controls a conquered city" (*BS*, pp. 102-03).

- ²⁰ Quoted in Caute, *Fanon*, p. 90.
- ²¹ The same ugly process can be seen at work amongst Polynesian converts to the Mormon Church: I recently witnessed a leading Maori member of that Church explain to a television interviewer that he accepted his skin colour as a mark of inherited sinfulness; he was confident, however, that by their devotion to the church his descendants would progressively "whiten" generation by generation. His own children, he explained with pride, were already fairer than him.
- ²² Compare C. L. R. James' argument in *The Black Jacobins*: from the beginning the slaves were "compelled to master the European languages, highly complex products of centuries of civilisation. From the start, there had been a gap, constantly growing, between the rudimentary conditions of the life of the slave and the language he used. There was therefore in West Indian society an inherent antagonism between the consciousness of the black masses and the reality of their lives" (quoted by David Ormerod in *Critical Perspectives*, p. 175).
- ²³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.ii.362-64: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language."
- ²⁴ Gurr, p. 65; Rohlehr "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr Biswas*" (see above, n. 9).
- ²⁵ Cf. Ralph Singh's dictum: "Hate oppression; fear the oppressed" (*MM*, p. 11).
- ²⁶ Naipaul's essay "Power?" in *OB*, pp. 267-75, turns the Carnival into a brilliant metaphor for the fraudulent spectacle of "power" in a fundamentally powerless society.
- ²⁷ See his withering account in "The Corpse at the Iron Gate" of the various justifications of popular "violence" he encountered in Argentina; he quotes Perón: "Violence, in the hands of the people, isn't violence: it is justice" (*REP*, p. 112).
- ²⁸ Compare the voice of Negro rebellion cited from Césaire in *BS*, p. 68: "'Start something!' 'Start what?' 'The only thing in the world that's worth the effort of starting: The end of the world, by God!'" Another version of this fantasy is the Argentine passion, discussed by Naipaul, for "those magnificent moments in which everything is remade": 'Esos instantes magníficos en que todo recomienza'" (*REP*, p. 145).
- ²⁹ A persistent theme of the book is that the fundamentalism of the Islamic revolution — its millenarian longing to return to a "pure" past — is undercut by its continuing dependence on the ideas and technology of the Western world whose essential corruption it proclaims: "That expectation — of others continuing to create, of the alien, necessary civilisation going on — is implicit in the act of renunciation, and is its great flaw" (*AB*, p. 19); cf. also pp. 158, 216, 350.
- ³⁰ Cf. above, n. 5.
- ³¹ The judgement of Jane's style of parasitic "adventuring" is essentially that which Naipaul, with brutal directness, pronounces upon her model, Gail Benson, in "The Killings in Trinidad":
Some words from [Conrad] can serve as her epitaph; and as a comment on all those who . . . continue to simplify the world and reduce other

men — not only the Negro — to a cause, the people who substitute doctrine for knowledge and irritation for concern, the revolutionaries who visit centres of revolution with return air tickets, the hippies, the people who wish themselves on societies more fragile than their own, all those people who in the end do no more than celebrate their own security. . . . insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds. Few men realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. . . . [E]very great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. (*REP*, p. 71)

³² See *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, p. 275: "With or without Black Power, chaos threatens. But chaos will only be internal. The islands will always be subject to an external police. The United States helicopters will be there, to take away United States citizens, tourists; the British High Commissions will lay on airlifts for their citizens. These islands, black and poor, are dangerous only to themselves." For an expression of African despair as profound as Naipaul's own at the possibility of revolutionary millenium see Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (London: Heinemann, 2nd ed., 1975): "So this was the real gain. The only real gain. This was the thing for which poor men had fought and shouted. This is what it had come to: not that the whole thing might be overturned and ended, but that a few blackmen might be pushed closer to their masters, to eat some of the fat into their bellies too. That had been the entire end of it all" (p. 126).

³³ Compare the remark made in a recent interview by the American Indian leader, Russell Means: "We did not make history because we were happy. Only unhappy people make history" (*Observer*, 8 November 1981, p. 3); and the ecstatic nihilism of a Césaire poem quoted in Caute (p. 25):

Eia for those who have never invented anything
for those who have never explored anything
for those who have never subjugated anything.

³⁴ A similar panic afflicts him during his first period in London, "the panic of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person . . . How could I fashion order out of all these unrelated adventures and encounters, myself never the same, never even the thread on which they were hung. They came endlessly out of the darkness, and they couldn't be placed or fixed." (*MM*, pp. 27-28).

³⁵ See, for example, *AB*, pp. 134-35.

³⁶ *BR*, 17-19: "We never asked why; we never recorded. We felt in our bones that we were a very old people; but we seemed to have no means of gauging the passing of time . . . the past was simply the past . . . People lived as they had always done; there was no break between past and present. All that had happened in the past was washed away; there was always only the present. It was as though, as a result of some disturbance in the heavens, the early morning light was always receding into the darkness, and men lived in a perpetual dawn." But such eternity of false dawn promises no new start; to Salim it merely reveals that "our way of life was antiquated and almost at an end"; for "The world is what it is; men . . . who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (p. 21). Compare the condition of Naipaul's own community of Trinidad East Indians, described in the first chapter of *An Area of Darkness*, for

whom the "past had fallen into the void into which India had fallen"; and the Zaireans of "A New King for the Congo": "For most the past is a blank; and history begins with their own memories" (*REP*, p. 191).

³⁷ See for example Landeg White, *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 153-84. White even goes so far as to talk of a deliberate "merging of identity between Naipaul and Kripal-singh" (p. 160) — overlooking the many ironic devices (including the final, portentous "Dixi") which maintain the author's distance from his protagonist.

³⁸ V. S. Naipaul, in conversation with the present author.

³⁹ See for instance the remark in a recent *Time* interview: "My sympathy for the defeated, the futile, the abject, the idle and the parasitic gets less and less as I grow older"; and the revealing confessions of *An Area of Darkness*:

I knew I was failing. I was yielding to the rage and contempt of the man beside me. Love insensibly turned into a self-lacerating hysteria in which I was longing for greater and greater decay, more rags and filth, more bones, men more starved and grotesque, more spectacularly deformed (*AD*, p. 230). . . . From the railway train and from the dusty roads India appeared to require only pity. It was an easy emotion, and perhaps the Indians were right: it was compassion like mine, so strenuously maintained, that denied humanity to many. . . . *Anger, compassion and contempt were aspects of the same emotion*; they were without value because they could not endure. Achievement could only begin with acceptance. (*AD*, p. 249; my italics)

⁴⁰ *Critical Perspectives*, p. 52.

⁴¹ Compare Naipaul's commendation (in "Conrad's Darkness") of *Nostromo* for its "vision of the world's half-made societies as places which continuously made and unmade themselves, where there was no goal, and where always 'something inherent in the necessities of successful action . . . carried with it the moral degradation of the idea.' Dismal, but deeply felt: a kind of truth and half a consolation" (*REP*, p. 216; my italics).

⁴² Cf. *HB*, pp. 237, 253; *MM*, pp. 75, 81-82, 87. Part of the significance of this complex private image is suggested by a passage in *An Area of Darkness*:

To me as a child the India that had produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was made as a period of darkness, darkness which also extended to the land, *as darkness surrounds a hut at evening, though for a little way around the hut there is still light. The light was the area of my experience, in time and place.* And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over the area which was to me the area of darkness, something of the darkness still remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine. (*AD*, p. 30; my italics)

For further discussion, see Theroux, *Naipaul*, p. 67, and White, *Naipaul*, pp. 101-08, 176. In Bobby's nostalgic dream from *In a Free State* there is an image which interestingly links the lighted hut with Meredith's disparaging "house on a hill": "I always consoled myself with the fantasy of driving through a cold and rainy night, driving endless miles, until I came to cottage right at the top of a hill. There would be a fire there, and it would be warm and I would be perfectly safe" (*FS*, p. 153).