

V.s. naipaul: travelogues, truth, and the new novel

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In his essay "Conrad's Darkness and Mine," V. S. Naipaul uses Joseph Conrad's short stories and novels as a basis for articulating his own views on narrative construction and the decline of the novel form. Naipaul states that Conrad was "the first modern writer I was introduced to" and the influence of Conrad is clear in many of Naipaul's works (Occasions 162). In "Conrad's Darkness and Mine," Naipaul alternately criticizes and praises Conrad's stylistic choices, and utilizes the latter selections to inform the construction of his ideal narrative. Naipaul's later works, in particular his travelogues, adhere to this ideal model and reflect what Naipaul points to as the best aspects of Conrad's narratives. Naipaul's earlier travelogues however, reflect much of what Naipaul derides in Conrad's short stories and novels. "Conrad's Darkness and Mine" serves not only as Naipaul's guide to readers as to how to evaluate his own works, but also an explanation, and perhaps apology, for the weaknesses of his early works. The essay also leads the reader to an alternative to the novel form whose decline Naipaul so carefully articulates: the travelogue. "The Lagoon" was the first Conrad story that Naipaul encountered; it was read to him when he was a child in Trinidad. The elements of the story - narrative style, character development, rich descriptions of place - all combine to deliver, for Naipaul, an ideal work of fiction, "And if I say it is a pure piece of fiction, it is because the story speaks for itself; the writer does not come between his story and the reader" (Occasions 163). A successful work is therefore not about the author and his own narrative voice, but rather about the story. If the author is a true craftsman, his intentions will emerge through narrative elements other than or in addition to his own voice. As Naipaul moves further into his discussion,

he introduces Conrad's preface to a collection of his own short stories: The problem was to make unfamiliar things credible. To do that I had to create for them, to reproduce for them, to envelop them in their proper atmosphere of actuality. This was the hardest task of all and the most important, in view of that conscientious rendering of truth in thought and fact which has always been my aim. (Occasions 165) In the early part of his writing life, Naipaul confuses Conrad's "conscientious rendering of truth" with the compulsion for his own voice to dominate the narrative. His instinct is to deliver, without reflection, the reality that he encounters. Naipaul equates truth and credibility with his immediate reactions to people and places; he does not allow the stories to speak for themselves. This is particularly evident in his first two travelogues, *The Middle Passage*, which Naipaul completed in 1961 and *An Area of Darkness*, which Naipaul completed in 1964. In *The Middle Passage*, his first travelogue, Naipaul does not allow the people and places he visits upon his return to the Caribbean to reveal themselves, he instead assigns to them his interpretation of their place in the world. During his journey from England to the West Indies, Naipaul writes, "the West Indian, knowing only the value of money and race, is lost as soon as he steps out of his own society into one with more complex criteria" (Passage 13). These pronouncements continue once back in his native Trinidad: Each of the island's many cliques believes that it is the true elite. The expatriates believe they are the elite; so do the local whites, the businessman, the professional men, the higher civil servants, the politicians, the sportsmen. This arrangement, whereby most people don't even know when they are being excluded, leaves everyone reasonably happy. And most

important of all, the animosity that might have been directed against the whites has been channeled off against the Indians. (Passage 76) In this early work, Naipaul relies too heavily upon his own narrative voice in an attempt to render the truth and credibility to which Conrad refers. He offers “ dismissive summaries of the region’s history” and criticizes the “ existing culture” (King 56). Because Naipaul has not yet developed his own sense of purpose as an author, when he returns to the West Indies he quickly reverts to the attitude of his Trinidadian upbringing. The insecurities and anger that he felt as a child are delivered, via the narrative, obscuring the many other stories of the West Indies. This authorial domination of the narrative continues in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul’s first journey to his family’s ancestral homeland of India. In this travelogue, Naipaul relies almost solely upon his own voice to re-present this place, its people, and its political and religious dynamics: Every man is an island; each man to his function, his private contract with God. This is the realization of the Gita’s selfless action. This is caste. In the beginning a no doubt useful division of labor in a rural society, it has now divorced function from social obligation, position from duties. It is inefficient and destructive; it has created a psychology which will frustrate all improving plans. It has led to the Indian passion for speech-making, for gestures and symbolic action. (Darkness 79-80) In addition to his thoughts on the function, or dysfunction, of caste in contemporary Indian society, Naipaul articulates his views on the value of the contemporary Indian arts, “ The sweetness and sadness that can be found in Indian writing and Indian films are a turning away from a too overwhelming reality; they reduce the horror to a warm, virtuous emotion. Indian sentimentality is the

opposite of concern" (Darkness 231). In these terse pronouncements, Naipaul offers judgment on India because he cannot resolve his relationship to the nation and the people and the decay he observes there. As evidenced in *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul does not feel at home in Trinidad, and it is clear from the narrative in *An Area of Darkness* that he is equally uncomfortable in India. He is angry that "the India of his imagination and longings, of his imagined origins, is just another oriental Third World country" (Darkness 67). He is disappointed that yet another place has failed to fulfill him, or failed to fill out the dark parts of his personal history, in the way that he had hoped. Rather than articulating the disappointment he felt, Naipaul instead lashes out against virtually all aspects of the society he encounters. In *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul draws a clear link between his ancestral stake in both the West Indies and India, but he fails to make a more personal, interior link. Without a revelation of this personal stake, or an understanding of his authorial intentions, much of Naipaul's narrative comes off as cavalier and at times, uninformed. In his essay on Conrad, Naipaul refutes this method of storytelling and consequently his own early non-fiction, "And there were the words, the words that issued out of the writer's need to be faithful to the truth of his own sensations. The words got in the way; they obscured," (Occasions 166). The vigor of Naipaul's pronouncements in both *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness* render the narratives ineffective; his own words are getting in the way. In "Conrad's Darkness and Mine," Naipaul writes, "When art copies life, and life in its turn mimics art, a writer's originality can often be obscured" (Occasions 171). This statement illuminates even more greatly

the flaws of his two early travelogues. Naipaul is, through his writing, attempting to mimic the displacement that he feels in both the West Indies and India, the two areas that both Naipaul and the reader are likely to consider “home” for the author. But while the vehemence of his writing may succeed in replicating that displacement, it also creates a barrier between the reader, the text, and the places Naipaul endeavors to re-present. The intensity of Naipaul’s feeling does not allow for the reader to move beyond the narrative and to actually gain access to the people and places he encounters. He does not interpret; he instructs. Naipaul posits that the key to the success of Conrad’s best works is not the reality that he re-presents, but his meditation on that reality, “Nothing is rigged in Conrad. He doesn’t remake countries. He chose, as we now know, incidents from real life; and he meditated on them” (Occasions 173). An effective narrative must strike proper balance between this re-presentation and meditation, a balance that Naipaul does not achieve in either *The Middle Passage* or *An Area of Darkness*. In his later travelogues however, Naipaul achieves this balance, primarily because he has a better understanding of why he is writing. A familiarity with the reality one is re-presenting is not the foundation of sound narrative construction; rather it is the author’s familiarity and comfort with his own purpose. Naipaul writes that for Conrad “the drama and truth lay not in events but in the analysis: identifying the stages of consciousness through which a passionless man might move to the recognition of the importance of passion” (Occasions 179). For Naipaul himself, the drama and truth lay in illuminating the world for his own purposes, to fill out his own sense of self: The aim has always been to fill out my world picture, and the

purpose comes from my childhood: to make me more at ease with myself. Kind people have sometimes written asking me to go and write about Germany, say or, China. But there is much good writing already about those places; I am willing to depend there on the writing that exists. And those subjects are for other people. Those were not the areas of darkness I felt about me as a child. (Occasions 191-192) He has moved from an external focus, where in works like *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness* he attempted to impose his own order on the people and places he encountered, to an internal focus. "Most imaginative writers discover themselves, and their world, through their work," Naipaul writes in his essay on Conrad (Occasions 173). This is especially true for Naipaul in his later travelogues, *A Turn in the South*, published in 1989 and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, published in 1990. *A Turn in the South* is rife with the stories of religious and civic leaders, authors and artists, all from the Southern United States. Naipaul doesn't prompt and prod those he meets in order to drive the conversation in a particular direction, rather he allows his subjects to ramble on about their diverse experiences and history. He comments at length only when their perspective gives rise to something in Naipaul's own consciousness, when their stories illuminate in a sense his own personal history: I was taken back to some of the feelings of my childhood in Trinidad. There, though most of my teachers were Negroes (brown, rather than black), and though for such people (as well as for policemen, Negroes again) I as a child had the utmost awe and respect . . . I became aware of the physical quality of Negroes, and of the difference, even, to me the unreality of their domestic life. (South 58) This parenthetical empathy with his subjects is a far

more engaging and effective technique than the didactic prose in the earlier *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness* travelogues. This narrative mode gives credibility to Naipaul's voice because it ties his own experience to that of his subjects: It brought him unexpectedly face to face with his Trinidadian ancestry and childhood. The bonds he discovered between the South and Trinidad – bonds of slavery, racial conflict, and plantation society – stirred in him a mixture of anguish and serendipity. A powerful strand of the book traces his attempt to review, from the paradoxical distance and proximity of the South, the roots of his old rage at Trinidad. (Nixon 160) The commonalities of Naipaul and his subject are revealed through their shared narrative, “ And I understood what Ellen was saying better than I said. No situation or circumstance is absolutely like any other; but in the Indian countryside of my childhood in Trinidad there were many murders and acts of violence” (South 161-162). The stories and experiences of his subjects are put on equal footing with his own. It is not his story; it is a shared story that can only be told using many different voices, “ over half of *A Turn in the South* falls between quotation marks. The implications are clear: southerners deserve to be heard, and Naipaul is quick to listen, tardy in judgment” (Nixon 164). Naipaul writes, “ To take an interest in a writer's work is, for me, to take an interest in his life; one interest follows automatically on the other” (Occasions 174). For Naipaul to be able to fully appreciate Conrad's work, he had to delve into the author's life and motivations, “ One wonders about the surrender of the life of the senses; one wonders about the short-lived satisfactions of the creative instinct, as unappeasable as the senses” (Occasions 174-175). Through the instances of parenthetical empathy in *A*

Turn in the South and India: A Million Mutinies Now, Naipaul allows the reader to move through this same exercise. In India: A Million Mutinies Now, Naipaul returns to his ancestral homeland and, as in A Turn in the South, meets with a diverse group of religious and cultural figures. Again, much of the narrative consists of Naipaul's subjects telling their own stories, with little if any interruption by the author, "It came to me . . . when I set out to write my third book about India - 26 years after the first - that what was important about a travel book were the people the writer traveled among. The people had to define themselves" (Occasions 194). This travelogue is "filled with the voices of a wide variety of people who are allowed to speak for themselves without much authorial commentary . . . the interest is more in what has created such voices than in imposing an order" (King 149). Not only does Naipaul utilize his subjects' threads to illuminate his own experience, he also utilizes them to help illuminate his inexperience, "But on this kind of journey knowledge can sometimes come slowly; the traveler can sometimes listen selectively; and certain things - because they appear to fit the country or culture - can be taken too much for granted" (India 243). He does not make the assumptions or pronouncements that were so prevalent in An Area of Darkness, his earlier attempt to chronicle life in and his relationship to India. In fact, he addresses some of the shortcomings of the earlier text in India: A Million Mutinies Now: There, as the grandson and great-grandson of agricultural immigrants from India, I had grown up with my own ideas of the distance that separated me from India. I was far enough away from it to cease to be of it. I knew the rituals but couldn't participate in them; I heard the language but followed only the simpler words. But I was near enough to

understand the passions; and near enough to feel that my own fate was bound up with the fate of the people of the country. The India of my fantasy was something lost and irrevocable. (India 491) In *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul is a "fearful traveler," afraid of connection that he had assumed existed and might not be able to recover (India 491). Whereas in his latter India travelogue, Naipaul does not endeavor to discover or recover a specific aspect of his self, because he has learned that the revelation will inevitably occur. Travel writing is about discovery of self through the people and places one encounters, not the discovery of people and places through the author's narrow lens, "It would be impertinent and wrong for a writer to use real people to illustrate some of his own philosophical feelings" (Meyers). A conclusion Naipaul shared in the 1990s, well after the publication of his first two travelogues. Naipaul eventually recognized the flaws of the didactic narrative style of his early travelogues, "I had trouble with the 'I' of the travel writer; I thought that as traveler and narrator he was in unchallenged command and had to make big judgments" (Occasions 17). In these later works, Naipaul the travel writer has clearly evolved. He no longer approaches a place with an explicit purpose; rather he allows the purpose to appear organically through the conversations with those he meets, "his purpose is not to admonish or deplore but to understand" (Woodward). Travel is no longer a burden, but an important link in his own self-discovery, an interior journey that now, in turn, allows him to enjoy his external journeys, "Naipaul has moved into a new phase when the pains and insecurities of the past, such as the need to travel to find subject matter about which to write, are admitted to be a source of discovery and pleasure,

an opening of world experience and insight that he now celebrates" (King 137). This very different mode of discovery is made especially clear in an interlude from *A Turn in the South*: "And I thought that afternoon that it would have completed my pleasure if I didn't have to write anything; if I didn't have to worry about what to do next and who to see; if I could simply be with the experience. But if I wasn't writing, if I didn't have a purpose or at times a sense of urgency, if the writing hadn't given me a schedule, places to go to, how would I have passed the days . . ." (South 221) The seemingly accidental discoveries are what make Naipaul's recent travelogues succeed where his earlier works failed, "What at first seemed an entirely serendipitous jaunt turns out to be a tightly-structured rigorously thought-out work" (Roberts). The parallels between his current travels and his own difficult history seem to blossom effortlessly, "for the first time, fixations with the past - his own and others' - are not dismissed as self-destructive or escapist but found to be brimming with poetic pathos" (Nixon 168). We know however, from "Conrad's *Darkness and Mine*," that none of this is accidental. Naipaul is a disciple of a purposed narrative form, "style in the novel, and perhaps in all prose, is more than an 'arrangement of words,' it is an arrangement, even an orchestration, of perceptions, it is a matter of knowing where to put what" (Occasions 166). So while some of the encounters in both *A Turn in the South* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* may have been serendipitous, their appearance in these travelogues is not. There is as much purpose to these latter works as there was to Naipaul's first two travelogues, but there is a marked difference in the narrative style. The author has become increasingly facile with the construction of the narrative, particularly the allowance for

others to help impose order on his own experiences, rather than him on theirs. This facility creates a more accessible text for the reader; the author's words are no longer getting in the way of the story he has set out to tell. In the conclusion of his essay "Conrad's Darkness and Mine," Naipaul comments on what he believes to be the decline of novel form: The novel as a form no longer carries conviction. Experimentation, not aimed at the real difficulties, has corrupted response; and there is a great confusion in the minds of readers and writers about the purpose of the novel. The novelist, like the painter, no longer recognizes his interpretive function; he seeks to go beyond it; and his audience diminishes. (Occasions 180) Ironically, what Naipaul highlights as the contemporary novelist's greatest weakness, the inability to recognize his interpretive function, is precisely what he is guilty of in *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness*. However, the constructive ideals that Naipaul presents throughout this essay and practices in his travelogues *A Turn in the South* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* counter this trend and offer an alternative to the beleaguered novel form. Rather than experimenting with the fiction form, as have so many of his peers, Naipaul instead offers a non-fiction solution that not only adheres to his own declared rules of construction and narrative, but can also be compared favorably with the works of authors such as Conrad. The reflection, or parenthetical empathy, that is so common in Naipaul's later travelogues is a key component of exemplary narrative form and is often missing from contemporary novels, "And so the world we inhabit, which is always new, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmeditated on; and there is no one to awaken the sense of true wonder" (Occasions 180). The

writer's role is to serve as a conduit for the reader, a means of accessing that sense of wonder that has been rendered moot not only because of experimentation in form that renders the text inaccessible to the reader, but also technology. "Conrad's *Darkness and Mine*" was written in 1974, well before many of our current technological advances, advances that could make this sense of wonder even more unattainable. However, the wonder can be awakened as long as there is an assumption of unfamiliarity with the subject, on behalf of both author and reader. The presumptions that Naipaul makes about both the West Indies and India contribute to the failure of his first two travelogues. Naipaul, and thus the reader, "experienced a sense of exclusion implied paradoxically through familiarity" (Rastogi 277). However, when Naipaul looks inward, and forsakes these assumptions, his best writing - writing that adheres to his own constructive ideals, occurs. Additionally, *A Turn in the South* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* not only adhere to Naipaul's constructive ideals, but also to the tenets of travel writing, "the journey's impulse is always closely aligned with the traveler's autobiography and his or her search for origins and identity" (Siegel 3). In both of these works Naipaul is "concerned with other people and what their situation has in common with his own. How have they learned to adapt?" (King 149). He discovers, along with the reader, the lessons that can be found in these places and people. *A Turn in the South* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* are not only exemplary travelogues, but also exemplary narratives that function and achieve the goals of the novel form as articulated by Naipaul in "Conrad's *Darkness and Mine*." Naipaul does not allow his own voice to dominate; he mediates - allowing both his own reflection and the selection

and placement of other voices to shape the narrative. This purposeful construction creates the idea, and in some instances the illusion, that both the writer and reader are experiencing these places and people for the first time. This re-presentation of reality, or exile from the familiar for both writer and reader, is what makes these pieces serve the function of both travelogue and novel. They illuminate our shared human experience while delivering unique and compelling story.