Clarence Thomas and the Tough Love Crowd

Roberts, Ronald Suresh

Published by NYU Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15745

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=494032
Sir Vidi Naipaul’s Revolutionary Truth

Naipaul seems ... to be a writer beleaguered by his own truths, unable to get past them.

—Elizabeth Hardwick, 1979

Transfixed by country-and-western music’s inventiveness, [Naipaul] remains silent about the blues and jazz. White writers get a full billing as artists; black writers are scaled down to representatives of racial frenzy or despair. In encounters with southern churchfolk and political leaders, too, Naipaul manages to uncover the noble pathos of a vanishing past amidst white southern communities, but among black communities, he unearths self-violation and back-to-back dereliction. Predictably, Naipaul finds himself drawn to Booker T. Washington while recoiling in irritation from the more radical W. E. B. Du Bois. Naipaul’s general disdain toward southern black culture contains dim echoes of his more violent dismissals of the Caribbean, such as his scoffing account of Trinidadian carnival as “a version of the lunacy that kept the slave alive.”

—Rob Nixon, London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin

Tough Love Is an International Affair

Clarence Thomas’s unhappy inability to help Haiti’s refugees is merely the most obvious example of the international significance of America’s Tough Love Crowd. Beyond the direct impact of Clarence Thomas, Stephen Carter’s version of the original constitutional design would reduce congressional fetters on U.S. presidential war powers. At the height of the Gulf War crisis, Carter wrote in the Washington Post that war making is an executive prerogative and that congressional attempts to micromanage (his word) the executive’s war-making power are unconstitutional. More generally, Carter appears willing to exoticize foreigners in order to enhance the persuasiveness
of his scholarship before an American audience. Carter’s advocacy of an expanded role for religion in American civic life is a good example of this. Ignoring the U.S. role in destabilizing Iranian democracy after World War II, Carter attributes the scary Islamic Republic of Iran to religious zeal and goes on to say that his proposed vision of the U.S. Constitution’s establishment clause, while more accommodating of religious sentiment, is not akin to that foreign nightmare. Carter elsewhere bolsters his call for more religion in American life with a reference to “that anarchic no-man’s land that the maps still insist is a nation called Lebanon.” Carter portrays this Lebanese anarchy as the result of a kind of religiosity that is foreign to America—as an emanation of some other place. America’s role in the plight of Lebanon entirely disappears in such asides so that Carter can bolster his argument for greater religiosity in American life. Edward Said has long emphasized the role of an invented “other” in every nation’s definition of itself. Carter’s invented Lebanon, the product of an ostensibly un-American religious zeal, is invoked to assure Americans that their system can surely accommodate a bit more religiosity without reaching what he calls “the bottom of the slippery slope.”

Carter’s America is unique among nations. For Carter, this presents a “Uniqueness Puzzle,” deserving of serious scholarly attention. That puzzle is “why the American experiment in constitutional government has succeeded so well for so long, when so many other efforts at establishing democracy have failed so miserably.” Carter’s puzzle might resolve itself if he tried to explain how and why a discrete group of Americans has uncannily remained at the bottom of America’s well throughout America’s history. Or where the Native Americans disappeared to. Or why America’s neighbors were so churlish as to question U.S. manifest destiny to rule the Western hemisphere. Such concerns are feather-light fetters on Carter’s romantic geopolitics.

Again, in his Reflections, Carter recants his prior “glowing reference” to the intervention of the U.S. Marines in Guatemala. Yet he recants not because U.S. adventurism is wrong, but because (in a burlesque of imperialist inexactitude) he got the name of the country wrong. Carter, ostensibly correcting himself, lauds the intervention of the Marines in 1965 to enable “free elections” in the Dominican Republic (not Guatemala). Without entering into an historical excursus, suffice it to say that Carter’s version of the American role in the 1965 events in the Dominican Republic is acontextual and self-righteous. Every West Indian school child knows that U.S. policy in the Dominican Republic, and throughout the Caribbean, was and is directed
by very specific American corporate interests (e.g., the United Fruit Company and its corporate successors). American support for "democracy" was and is sporadic. U.S. intervention had and has an uncanny tendency to accord with the desires of American property in the region. Bush’s and Clinton’s modest efforts in the cause of Haitian President Aristide (where the U.S. has little at risk), contrasted with their overkill responses to Iraq (where oil prices are at risk), conform to a pattern that is as old as America. In 1987, even after the U.S. laid mines in Nicaragua’s harbors, after the U.S. withdrawal from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), where Nicaragua initiated a lawsuit, and after the ICJ’s decisions in favor of Nicaragua, Carter remained comfortable discussing whether, without regard to international law, it is “morally desirable” for the United States to “try to prod or pressure the government of Nicaragua into a shape that is like that of some other policies that are called democratic.” Carter posed this question while serving as a moderator in a panel discussion entitled “Promoting Democracy.” It is clear, in context, that Carter is comfortable with American proddings and pressurings. On the panel, Carter repeatedly addressed the anti-interventionist view with a loaded question that made clear his own opinion. He repeatedly asked not whether the U.S. has a unilateral right to intervene in other countries, but rather whether it has a “right to be indifferent” to the “form of government” in Nicaragua, Angola, and elsewhere. When the discussion turned to South Africa, Carter had to ask whether the African National Congress (ANC) should be seen as “primarily for some form of democratic change,” and he helpfully pointed out that the South African government (circa 1987) “does not see it that way.” The reason for Carter’s ambivalence is, as the course of the panel discussion confirms, the Communists under the ANC’s bed.

Again, Carter lauds as “sensible” the Reagan administration’s self-serving distinction between dictatorships that are acceptable and merely “authoritarian,” like Pinochet’s Chile, and those that are unacceptable and “totalitarian,” like the U.S.S.R. Unsurprisingly, despots who were Reagan allies tended to be classed as benign authoritarians, while U.S. opponents were, with uncanny regularity, classed as totalitarian. Yet Carter is ostensibly mystified when he finds that this distinction was deployed by Reagan in such a way as to preserve trade with the unreconstructed South Africa of the 1980s.

Finally, while Carter is always careful to separate the evils done in the name of American meritocracy from the ideal of meritocracy itself, and the evils done in the name of religion from the ideal of American religion itself,
he rushes to conflate the failures (alleged as a generality) of Marxists with Marxism itself, and the failures of Eastern-bloc communism with the failures of both communism and Marxism themselves.²

Beyond abandonment (Thomas) and apologetics (Carter), Tough Love is international in a more general sense. Thomas Sowell, for instance, does not confine his social-scientific methods to America’s shores. His Preferential Policies (1990) provides, according to its subtitle, “An International Perspective.” An identical subtitle adorns Sowell’s earlier book, The Economics and Politics of Race (1983), and others. Moreover, as is by now familiar, we are told on the back covers of these books that “by substituting fact for rhetoric, Thomas Sowell has made an invaluable contribution to our seeing the world as it really is” and that “emotional controversies” are “examined in factual terms, with many myths being exploded along the way.”

The ineffectiveness of Sowell’s claims to capture underlying realities through empirical enquiry was canvassed earlier and will not be repeated here. What remains interesting, turning to V. S. Naipaul, is that Naipaul’s publishers make even more exorbitant claims for their man’s truth-finding capacity. They nearly claim that Naipaul out-truths economists like Sowell: “With a few swift and beautifully calculated strokes, Mr. Naipaul brings the essence of a social situation so vividly to life that one begins to wonder whether all the sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have not laboured in vain.”³

Naipaul himself encourages such reckonings of his ability to detain essential truth—in both his fiction and his nonfiction. He has written, for instance, that “the novel is a form of social enquiry” (emphasis added). And Rob Nixon has demonstrated, in a brilliantly condensed discussion, the manner in which Naipaul pursues a “convergence of aesthetic and social scientific conceptions of culture.” As Nixon suggests, Naipaul skillfully appeals to an autobiographical genre of writing in order to deflate the easy critique to which a straightforward social scientist (Sowell) or ethnographer might be vulnerable. Naipaul’s introspective prose appears to cast off narrow scientific pretensions. Yet Naipaul does not abandon the claim that he can capture essential truths about the various cultures he visits. On the contrary, Naipaul claims that his finely tuned sensibility (or “vision”) gives him unusual access to authoritative cultural knowledge. Naipaul said in 1993,

In the modern period the rendering of reality has always been an issue. Judgments and forms have constantly varied. Hazlitt (who died in 1830) thought that Byron’s personality display obscured the world. Scott was the truer writer, he said, because
Scott did not stand between the reader and the world. To render the truth of his own life Hazlitt had only the essay. It wasn’t enough. The novelists who came after used the novel form to get at truths the essay could not get at, truths about society and mental states, for instance. The great novels of the 19th century still have this quality of truth. (Emphasis added)

While Naipaul’s claim to detain truths about diverse societies and collective mental states recalls Shelby Steele’s claim to have discovered a universal destructive African American “anti self,” Naipaul’s claim appears to have had some success among American critics. Alfred Kazin has called Naipaul “the most compelling master of social truth that I know of in the contemporary novel” (emphasis added). Kazin’s faith in Naipaul’s mastery of something called social truth survives the contrary evidence of Naipaul’s own utterances:

Hindu civilization stopped growing a long time ago. Nothing has been happening except plunder, war, decimation.

I don’t count the African readership and I don’t think one should. Africa is a land of bush.

QUESTION: What is the future, in Africa?
NAIPaul: Africa has no future.

This sort of truth is a pervasive feature of Naipaul’s writing, and postcolonial critics have generally emphasized these failures. Yet Naipaul’s claims of access to social truth have remained unchastened. This is how Naipaul describes the failings of Indian and West Indian intellectual activity, respectively:

The sweetness and sadness which 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.

The insecure wish to be heroically portrayed. Irony and satire, which might help more, are not acceptable; and no writer wishes to let down his group. . . . If the West Indian writer is to be blamed, it is because, by accepting and promoting the unimpressive race-and-colour values of his group, he has not only failed to diagnose the sickness of his society but has aggravated it.

This, then, is Naipaul’s agenda: to tell the bitter truths for the good of those he cares about. Whereas optimistic placebo analyses fail, Naipaul will unflinchingly diagnose the sickness of his society. Naipaul is confident of the accuracy, indeed the predictive value, of the knowledge he has spent his life amassing: “You must read [The Middle Passage] and tell me that the chapter
on Jamaica is not wonderfully prescient, pre-visionary of what has happened lately. If you can tell me that, then attack me” (emphasis original).

Naipaul claims, then, that he is telling truth; that if he is heeded future disaster can be avoided; that past failure to heed him has in fact resulted in present disaster. Naipaul’s claim to be contributing to real-world solutions recurs in his innumerable dismissals of postcolonial politics as mere drama. The real solution is, for Naipaul, beyond politics. It is in the hands of the small phalanx of genuinely diagnostic intellectuals—those rare, stern, tellers of unpalatable truths such as Naipaul. Naipaul claims that the intellectual’s caustic appraisals (and corresponding actions) are the sole authentic means of progress. It is fair to say that this is an incessant theme of Naipaul’s work.

Consistent with Naipaul’s self-promotion, his admirers detect no oddity in the most clamorous oxymorons, as where William Walsh says that Naipaul has “the novelist’s objectivity and insight.” Naipaul’s novelistic objectivity is as odd as Stephen Carter’s empirical hunchmaking, only more audacious. Naipaul’s Western admirers consistently describe him as “beyond partisanship” and therefore capable of detaining truth: “His mind is not weighed down by any heavy inherited Indian burden, biased by subjective and arbitrary convictions, nor hagridden by self-pity. His is a very clear and naked intelligence—his only prejudice is to be in favor of reality.”

Examples like this can be multiplied among Western critics, but one example in particular is instructive because its slippery use of language takes us near the heart of the problem. Eugene Goodheart acknowledges (indeed treats as obvious) that Naipaul, like the rest of us, is subject to an “incorrigible subjectivity” that reflects itself in “unattractive prejudices” that are “of course unpleasant.” But, Goodheart continues,

To flaunt one’s prejudices as Naipaul does can be a rare virtue—or vice—in what I’ve called the ethos of congeniality, which demands that we publicly tolerate one another, a condition that produces either hypocrisy (in which we affect attitudes we privately disavow) or self-deception (in which we no longer recognize our true feelings). In either case perception and truth suffer.

Goodheart’s conclusion that perception and truth suffer in one of the two specified ways is entirely unargued. His hypocrisy claim assumes that even Naipaul’s concededly prejudiced utterances contribute to a stockpile of something called “truth.” But perhaps truth is not a kind of widget? Goodheart’s second claim (“self-deception”), with its attendant notion of our no longer recognizing our true feelings, smacks of the infinite regress of “false consciousness.” Even if it is, by some unspecified and metaphysical standard,
true that we postcolonials don’t “know” our true selves, who is to say that Goodheart knows us better?

Next, from the negative assertion (above) that those without prejudice suffer a loss of perception and truth, Goodheart heroically asserts the affirmative—that Naipaul’s prejudice advances his truth telling and clear-sightedness: “Prejudiced utterance is authentic expression. Naipaul’s power as an observer of the ideological landscapes of developing nations . . . owes a great deal to his prejudiced clear-sightedness. . . . [His] anti-faith, anti-ideological skepticism is wedded to a kind of radical empiricism, a passion for observation.”

This reference to prejudiced clear-sightedness is offered without irony. Goodheart clearly thinks he has built his case for clear-sightedness by pointing out that Naipaul flaunts his prejudice in defiance of the ethos of congeniality, with its attendant hypocrisy and self-deception. Yet there’s a failure of logic: the preparedness to speak up is no guarantee of the truth of what is said. A zany willingness to flout the ethos of congeniality may be entertaining to those with a taste for Friar’s Roasts, but this in itself hardly confers the privilege of truth upon what is said. Goodheart has been tripped up by his own sleight of phrase: “Prejudiced utterance is authentic expression.” This “authentic” means “honest,” not “accurate.” There is perhaps a laudable Nietzschean-individualist streak in Goodheart’s instincts here. “More important than the particular prejudices,” Goodheart says, “is the freedom to be prejudiced and the power to express it, which is associated with the freedom and power of the imagination itself.” Yet this principle is hardly a societal blueprint (which is almost what Naipaul’s diagnostic “social truth” aims at). Moreover, Goodheart’s sleight of phrase, his slippage from authentic prejudiced utterance to the superior truth of the view expressed, might have been avoided by a closer reading of Nietzsche: “Truth has never yet clung to the arm of an inflexible man.”

Naipaul, too, apparently invests little serious thought in the question of what to dignify as truth: “Unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one’s done some writing, one has not really done much. That is my gauge of whether I have hit something true.”

This is Tough stuff. Or else it is semiserious, and equally irresponsible. Naipaul, while capable of considerable humor, claims to be more than a simple jester. He claims to care. Naipaul’s rhetoric of concern for postcolonial peoples is, however, given short shrift even by his most sophisticated adversaries. Rob Nixon’s London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin
discusses at length Naipaul’s disdain for frivolous and privileged travel writers (Waugh, Norman, Byron, Greene, Dinesen, Hemingway) and Naipaul’s insistence that he is, because of his seriousness and his concern, different from them. Nixon distinguishes Naipaul’s admitted “political interest” from his lack of “concern,” admitting that Naipaul has the interest but doubting that he has the concern. At a very important level Nixon is indeed correct. Naipaul’s regurgitation of nineteenth-century British disdain for brown peoples is the precise opposite of concern for those peoples. Nixon correctly points out that Naipaul’s protestations of concern deflect attention from his affinities (of sensibility and of privilege) with the frivolous travel writers from whose company he would depart. Yet Nixon’s short way around Naipaul’s rhetoric of concern forfeits an important ethical resource. If Naipaul were an avowed imperialist, important moral criticisms would be unavailable to his adversaries. Yet those moral criticisms are in fact available. Naipaul is not an avowed opponent, but rather a failed partisan of postcolonial peoples. This is a view that other critics of Naipaul have reached. Selwyn Cudjoe, a consistently unfriendly postcolonial critic of Naipaul, basing himself on psychoanalytical writings, concludes that “Naipaul’s hysteria”—and hysteria is a state of mind to which Naipaul frequently confesses—“tends to displace the reality of the postcolonial world.” Cudjoe continues that Naipaul “does not deliberately and consciously defame Third World societies, nor does he believe that he is not telling the ‘truth’ as he perceives it. Rather he accuses these countries of living a gigantic ‘lie.’”

Naipaul’s concern for postcolonials in exposing such lies is far more than a casual one. He sees moral concern as central to his most profoundly held artistic ideals. Any failure of concern is, for Naipaul, a key ingredient of moral and artistic failure. Naipaul’s own manifest failures of concern are thus not merely irrelevant political complaining. They represent the collapse of his own moral and aesthetic project: truth as revolution.

Naipaul’s Ideal of Truth as Revolution

It is impossible to overstate Naipaul’s commitment to an ethic of art. For him, writing is a vocation in the strictest sense of the word: “I think that if I hadn’t succeeded in being a writer I probably would not have been around; I would have done away with myself in some way.”

Writing is a vocation that Naipaul sees as given to him by his father, a
journalist and short story writer in the (for Naipaul) culturally barren landscape of Trinidad’s colonial society. The son cherishes this vocation all the more because such an impulse of high civilization might so easily have been snuffed out in such an adverse environment. This sense that the artist’s vocation is at once the ultimate value, even the only one available to him, coupled with a sense of how random was its successful inheritance from his father, how easily (Naipaul thinks) it might have eluded him, sharpens Naipaul’s reverence for the writer’s art. Naipaul freely admits this unusual intensity: “I became a writer because of this overwhelming sense of its nobility as a calling which was given to me by my father and probably exaggerated by me.”

Naipaul’s profound appreciation of the life of art, coupled with a visceral conviction that the societies that were to be his subject, being “backward,” could not sustain that life, might easily have fueled a turn inward, a sharp move away from any notion of the artist as any kind of legislator. This would have placed the postcolonial artist, retreating in the face of the irreformable barrenness of Third World life, among those who, like Benda, say “my Kingdom is not of this world.” This is not, however, Naipaul’s view. Naipaul, like the other Toughs, admits and approves that no hermetic seal separates art from civic life. As a young Trinidadian reader, Naipaul tells us, he attempted to enter into British literature but failed because “no writer, however individual his vision, could be separated from his society.” And in his early experience as a writer, Naipaul found this, to his detriment, confirmed:

I’ve often said that when I was younger and thought of being a writer, I thought I was serving a thing called art, and that art was something divinely judged, and that what was good would be rewarded. I very quickly found out that this wasn’t so, that I was always being judged politically. . . . What a labor it has been to ignore this and break out of it.

And Naipaul’s labor was not a private, introspective effort. It was a public campaign. Naipaul wrote in the 1950s, in the Times Literary Supplement, that “it isn’t easy for the exotic writer to get his work accepted as being more than something exotic, something to be judged on its merits. The very originality of the material makes the work suspect.” In making such statements, Naipaul became an active and deliberate participant in a political project. When Chinua Achebe envisaged the novelist teaching that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry, he explicitly linked this project with the further one of helping his society regain its belief in itself. Naipaul is quite self-
consciously an adherent of the first project, and (implicitly or else despite himself) he also participates in the second—for the former entails the latter, as Naipaul’s own words acknowledge:

If landscapes do not start to be real until they have been interpreted by an artist, so, until they have been written about, societies appear to be without shape and embarrassing. . . . Fiction or any work of imagination, whatever its quality, hallow its subject. To attempt, with a full consciousness of established and authoritative mythologies, to give a quality of myth to what was agreed to be petty and ridiculous—Frederick Street in Port of Spain, Marine Square, the districts of Laventille and Barataria—to attempt to use those names required courage.

Naipaul’s manifesto here might suggest an end product resembling Derek Walcott’s Omeros, which successfully relocated Homeric epic in a West Indian setting. And Naipaul’s novel A House for Mr. Biswas is exactly such an achievement. Biswas spans three generations and renders a particular West Indian milieu with a vividness that is frequently—and justly—compared to the best of Charles Dickens.

If such work flies in the face of received mythologies, writing becomes literally subversive. In 1993, Naipaul rendered his most explicit statement of this creed to date. The project, which he summed up as “the ideal of truth as revolution . . . is a moral one. It is the striving after truth, the hard look at the world, and its effect is subversive. That may be too strong a word, but many of the great original writers of the nineteenth century and this have helped to undermine and remake their civilization” (emphasis added).

Naipaul’s much earlier criticisms of Indian fiction (specifically that of R. K. Narayan, though Naipaul generalizes the point) further underline his commitment to the moral ideal that the writer ought to be a subversive truth teller for the benefit of those he or she writes about. Naipaul detects in Indian fiction an (to him) unsatisfactory fusion of the novel form with the (to him) Hindu belief in the vanity of all human action and human life:

The form of the novel implies a concern with the conditions of men. Narayan’s message in all his books is that the condition of men is not important. So there is this oddity—writing about people as though human life matters, and the deeper pessimistic rejection of a concern with men. I don’t think Indians quite understand what the novel is for. They do not quite accept that it has to do with a concern for human existence. (Emphasis added)

For Naipaul, art minus human concern is morally and aesthetically unsuccessful. Naipaul rejects any view in which the ultimate value is the somehow untethered pursuit of beauty; he denies that the aesthetic is somehow to be
elevated above the human. Rather, the alleged aesthetic failure of the Indian novelists is for Naipaul the direct result of a failure of human concern. Thus, arguments that Naipaul is a free, untethered soul can be little more than trite references to his expatriation and frequent travel. For Naipaul, “It is impossible to think of a writer, a novelist, as being anything but attached” (emphasis added). The bedrock of Naipaul’s aesthetic vision is thus very different from his casual remark, in an interview, that he was “willing to believe that the element of pleasure is almost invariably paramount.” Naipaul is closer than might first appear to Achebe’s view that the notion of art divorced from service to people is deodorized dogshit. Certainly, many questions remain. The question, for instance, of what constitutes adequate service to people is radically controversial. But it is a project into which Naipaul has avowedly entered. Peter Nazareth quotes the following passage from Naipaul’s work: “The people of Elvira . . . have their funny ways, but I could say one thing for them; you don’t have to bribe them twice.” Nazareth comments: “Uniform contempt for life is not an asset to a novelist.” It is less interesting to pronounce on where the fine line between irony and contempt is transgressed than to emphasize that Naipaul agrees with Nazareth’s premise. Naipaul frequently insists that “one can’t write out of contempt.” Naipaul always insists that he writes out of concern. At a reading in New York, he senses that his audience is troubled by a particular story. His unsolicited response: “I assure you, I write from the deepest sympathy for all my characters.” Again, faced with the question of whether he had become an “unstitcher of systems” for himself and his readers, he resists the view that his art is a private self-indulgence enacted at the expense of real people:

Put like that it sounds as though I’ve decided to look after myself and to try to preserve my own calm and happiness—as though I’m shutting out the distress. To some extent, this may be so, but I also think I have an understanding of what is possible in our world: that the oppressed or depressed cultures of the world have really to look after themselves.

Responding to the criticism that his Turn in the South had provided an unduly “charmed and gentle account of redneck culture” in the American deep South, Naipaul insisted that while others urged him to express outrage about slavery, he was concerned about slavery “long before [his critics] were.” He sarcastically rejected the view that his critics “care much more” than he does. Naipaul is moreover certain that one needs a “conversation with a society” and that “one cannot write in a total vacuum.” Naipaul rejects cloistered art and, for instance, wants India to “do something in the
world”: “A country with 600 to 700 million people which is now offering
the world nothing but illegitimate holymen should be ashamed of itself. . . .
For a time I hoped my little proddings would start something.”

True, this concern is sometimes, as here, expressed in the past tense. In
1977, for instance, Naipaul said that his “concern for India” had been “beaten
out of [him]” and that it was now “every man for himself.” But even if this
rhetoric were regarded as more representative than the overwhelmingly
more consistent rhetoric of concern, Naipaul would still be presenting him-
self as a disillusioned and battle-weary partisan rather than a person who is
indifferent or hostile to postcolonial societies. Despite harsh clashes with
West Indian critics, Naipaul has always insisted that “I Cannot Disown
Trinidad and It Cannot Disown Me.” At any rate, the rare and unrepresenta-
tive rhetoric of disillusionment never threatens Naipaul’s view that a position
of concern is essential to aesthetic success. While Naipaul has said, “I write
out of a sense of duty to myself, to my talents,” his exercise of those talents
always remains, purportedly, within the project of concern for postcolonial
societies: “When people say ‘This book is so pessimistic,’ my attitude now
is ‘But it can’t be pessimistic, because I have written it.’ And by that I mean I
am ancestrally of the culture—so the fact that I have written it might be
taken as a sign of a mind at work.”

Thus, the view that “the expatriate writer, like Naipaul, enjoys a unique
position—he is not ‘committed,’ except to his private sensibility or vision” is
simply wrong. Attention to Naipaul’s own rhetoric discloses an ethical
commitment to the well-being of postcolonial societies.

Naipaul’s Trojan Truth

Naipaul’s commitment to postcolonial peoples hangs, however, by a thread.
Naipaul’s ideal, like that of Julien Benda, is nonideological truth telling. His
commitment is, as he tells it, not to political doctrine in an ordinary (he’d
say, vulgar) sense. Rather, Naipaul espouses an unexacting humanist ideal:
“I am aware that I have probably been rather feeble and uninvolved. Yet I
find it very hard to commit myself to any doctrine except my own private
values which I think are liberal and humane.”

Naipaul, then, is a committed truth teller. He is concerned but remains
ostensibly beyond political doctrine. While Clarence Thomas claims to oper-
ate like a monastic recluse immune to political pressures, Naipaul claims to
have reached the “Buddhist ideal of non-attachment” to politics. For Naipaul,
the novelist must thus be attached to and in conversation with society, yet
unattached to conventionally political causes.

Predictably, this leads to grief. Naipaul believes that “people with a cause
inevitably turn themselves off intellectually.” Naipaul makes no pretense,
however, that his strong ideological independence is the same as disinterest
or neutrality. Naipaul urges that art should be more than a passive process
of documentation: the artist who seeks only to record commits the “docu-
mentary heresy.” Rather, the artist should “impose a vision on the world.”

The writer, then, must impose an individual vision while yet avoiding the
seduction of political causes. That this is a very fine (nonexistent) line to
tread Naipaul does not seem to appreciate. Nevertheless, and with gusto, he
sets about imposing his ostensibly private and personal vision. He empha-
sizes that “I can’t go to a place just to see and be any longer. I like to go to a
place now to look at something, to investigate a particular aspect. I like a
mission.” And, speaking of his 1977 book on India, he explains, “I was
unwilling always to describe simply; I always try to make a description part
of an argument.”

Naipaul’s theory of individualistic description, wedded always to an argu-
ment, gives him a way to avoid voices he would rather not contend with. On
his Islamic journey he talks to few political leaders because “their views are
well known... They have nothing to tell me.” Nothing? The point that one
might prefer to look at the “real people” is well taken, but unsurprisingly,
Naipaul is not consistent in enforcing the idea that politicians are irrelevant.
He talks, for instance, to the Guyanese politicians Forbes Burnham and the
Jagans in his 1962 Caribbean journey, and on a return journey he revisits the
Jagans (in government during his first visit; in opposition during the revisit).
My point here is not to prescribe either disregard of or concern with politi-
cians as a general rule, but merely to illustrate the inconsistency of Naipaul’s
dogma over time. Today the politicians (Burnham, the Jagans) contribute
to truth, tomorrow the politicians (of the Islamic world) don’t contribute
to truth.

Naipaul’s dogma, while inconsistent, is not random. He deliberately treats
certain artistic reverences and canons of evaluation as fixed and beyond
anyone’s power to control: “The published book, when it starts to live,
speaks of the cooperation of a particular kind of society... it has the means
of judging the new things that are offered... This kind of society did not
exist in Trinidad.”

Upon Naipaul’s receipt of the 1993 inaugural David Cohen British Litera-
tute Prize recognizing “a lifetime’s achievement by a living British writer,” his acceptance speech affirmed that “writing is more than a matter of spirit. A book is a physical, commercial object. It requires a well-organised society. If you are going to make a living as a writer you need publishers, reviewers, bookshops, libraries, a public looking for new work: a book trade.”

Such concessions compromise Naipaul’s more grandiose assertions of absolute independence (“I have no enemies, no rivals, no masters; I fear no one”), and they confirm the complaints of his critics that while Naipaul claims to present truth about the dispossessed, his work is accountable to the cultural institutions of the dispossessioners. This paradox assures a certain kind of failure.

Naipaul assumes that standards of literary value are unchangeable and are foreign to the places with which he is ostensibly concerned. This view of literary value is, in turn, underlain by Naipaul’s more general idea that real history and value are a peculiar kind of achievement, off limits to some. Naipaul believes that without such achievement, there can be no authentic human activity. What exactly is this achievement that is vital to authentic history? Naipaul explains:

Let’s think. Can you write a satisfactory history of England from pre-Roman time up through the Roman occupation, the Roman withdrawal, the time of the little savage Kings, and their being wiped out by the Danes—the consequence of all this being that nothing happened? It wouldn’t make sense to write weighty histories about that; whereas if you make all of this a chapter of something larger, the material conceivably can stand that kind of inquiry. Remember what I said long ago, that history was built around achievement and creation.

Naipaul next takes the now-plausible step of asserting that people lacking “real” history likewise lack authentic personality. He joins in the view that West Indian society

has never assumed any particularly noble aspect. There has been splendour and luxurious living, and there have been crimes and horrors, revolts and massacres. There has been romance, but it has been the romance of pirates and outlaws. The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own.

This passage, which Naipaul adopted from the nineteenth-century British writer James Anthony Froude, hardly represents objective truth. In 1938, C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* provided exactly the kind of compelling
account of Toussaint L'Overture and the Haitian revolution that Froude would evidently dismiss as "philonegro enthusiasm." James was, moreover, no indiscriminate celebrant of postcolonial society. James's uncompromising ethical commitments led his more pragmatic political and intellectual contemporary, Eric Williams, to conclude that James was lost to "the absurdities of world revolution." Naipaul nevertheless chose to follow Froude rather than James, actually adopting Froude's language as the *epigraph* of his work on the Caribbean. Naipaul chose to peddle Froude's unhappy truth.

This truth defines history as built on achievement, then defines "achievement" as nothing other than imperialism itself. For Naipaul, imperialism bends the destinies of subject peoples into conformity with the ends of empire and makes the subject peoples a mere chapter of something larger. While Naipaul's view underestimates ever-present indigenous resistance to imperialism, there is at least arguably a sense in which subject peoples, under the empire's boot, indeed lacked the power to implement agendas of their own. But with independence this becomes, precisely, inaccurate. The ends of formerly subject peoples are for the first time at their own disposal. *At the center of Naipaul's work is a denial of the "truth" of this shift.* Postcolonial politics is mere drama. In reality it is impotent maneuvering. This is confirmed, for Naipaul, by the "external policing" and eventual suppression of the Grenada revolution by U.S. intervention. It is confirmed by the U.S. prodding and pressuring that Tough Stephen Carter, for example, takes to be America's worldwide prerogative. It is confirmed, too, by America’s pro-Naipaul literary establishment. Alfred Kazin is remarkably explicit when he says that Naipaul makes "clear today, as it was not to Dickens, Balzac and all those realists, that you shall know the truth and it shall *not* make you free" (emphasis added).

Naipaul's lucrative truth is, however, premised on an odd definition of authentic human action. The ideal Naipaul presupposes, that of utter self-determination, is *everywhere* (not just in postcolonial societies) absent. If Americans feel constrained to haggle at the UN or within NATO before attacking another country, or if the real value of the British pound is constrained by that of the deutsche mark within the European Monetary System's exchange-rate mechanism, are British and American citizens therefore incrementally less people "in the true sense of the word" than when laissez-faire gunboat diplomacy held free reign? And in the colonial era, were the British less real because the Spanish had a more sprawling empire? Startlingly, it is far from clear that Naipaul would admit the absurdity of such a
view. Naipaul has referred to Britain’s increasingly “colonial” sense of security—the sense that all the real decisions are being made in Washington, D.C. For Naipaul, Britain’s new plight somewhat resembles the invented Trinidad of his *Loss of El Dorado*. In that book, the real decisions were being made elsewhere (Spain, England), rendering local action insignificant. In the late twentieth century, where are the “real” decisions being made? By Bill Clinton, or by his political handlers? By politicians, or by Wall Street? If by Wall Street, then really by its well-heeled Asian investors? When Clinton goes soft on China’s human-rights abuses because he wants access to its burgeoning consumer market, are the Communists now ruling us all?

Naipaul’s vision is paralyzed by such questions, like that of a deer caught in the headlights. The logic and explicit content of Naipaul’s vision increasingly suggest the inauthenticity of all human action. The escapist romance of Naipaul’s recent work—*The Enigma of Arrival, A Turn in the South, India: A Million Mutinies Now*—has been widely noted (in the last instance Naipaul, for the first time, was criticized for undue optimism about India). Naipaul’s newest truth, like the old, is very far from the radical empiricism that Western critics have long attributed to him. Naipaul uses the alleged technological backwardness of India, the Middle East, Africa to show that they are outside a “Universal Civilization” built on high technology and liberal humanism. Yet the romantic British countryside of Naipaul’s *Enigma* easily resembles the antimodernist pantheism of D. H. Lawrence and has led some of Naipaul’s most enthusiastic British readers to blush. While Naipaul has for a long time freely admitted to being “feeble and uninvolved” in conventional political agitation, he led a band of lobbyists in writing an August 1993 letter to the London *Times* campaigning against the reckless high-tech upgrading of the road system near Stonehenge. Naipaul’s laudable and uncharacteristic concern in this letter for “larks, lapwings, stone curlews and English partridges” had less to do with a conversion to Greenpeace politics than with the perceived vulgarization of that revered English tableau: “the countryside.” Naipaul’s latest truth, no less than the earlier variety, reflects his personal preoccupations. While his earlier work screeches venom, his newer offerings remain quietly oppressive.

**Naipaul’s Tough Stuff**

Naipaul’s Tough diagnosis foredooms his suggested solutions. He divines that the problem is history, which is inherently beyond the reach of current
mortals. What, then, is to be done about postcolonial societies? “Nothing! There’s nothing to be done. Except we mustn’t romanticize them. People must do things for themselves.” Naipaul believes not only that history is built on (imperial) achievement but also that the dead hand of history’s grip is wholly unshakable. In the following interview, this view is emphatic:

**QUESTION:** [Trinidad] has always had England as a reference and things English as reverences. Do you think it is possible with independence to build or create new reverences?

**NAIPAUL:** No, no, no, No, no, No. Because you know, whether you like it or not the reverences have already existed. Within a kind of political system one knew that there was a good way of behaving: there was a way of being upright and a way of being good and a way of not being good.

This reinforces Edward Said’s view that “Naipaul carries with him a kind of half-stated but finally unexamined reverence for the colonial order.”

What greater reverence is possible than to make imperial achievement the litmus test of real history? Naipaul’s bedrock belief that the political and cultural reverences are fixed makes an attitude of despair the appropriate tonal posture for his fiction. In *The Mimic Men* the lead character says, “The empires of our time were short lived; but they have altered the world forever; their passing away is their least significant feature.” Yet this felt fixedness emerges from Naipaul’s consciousness rather than from simple fact. This realization allows us to criticize Naipaul’s account of postcolonial truth. Naipaul’s concern reflects what Rob Nixon has called return-ticket progressivism. *The values that underlie Naipaul’s descriptive effort betray the values that underpin his concern.* His espoused concern is for those who inhabit postcolonial places and must make something of the pressure to act; his prescriptions make sense only to his Western camp followers. This is an ethical failing. It amounts to secular sin. It is entirely plausible that in the still-colonial world in which Naipaul matured through his formative years, British domination might have carried with it cultural baggage that enthroned English reverences. But that is no longer the case. And this last assertion is not just postcolonial bravado. Anthony Burgess, English novelist and virtuoso of a self-conscious style of fiction that some might associate with the most refined culture as judged by traditional reverences, makes a similar suggestion. In a 1991 article entitled “Joseph Kell, V. S. Naipaul, and Me” (Kell is a Burgess nom de plume), Burgess wrote about his own exile from England. As Burgess explained the problems of the modern British writer, the parallel between his situation and Naipaul’s own complaint in his 1958 article on the
“Regional Barrier” is striking. Burgess, in this article, which is a 1991 excerpt from his memoirs suggestively entitled *You’ve Had Your Time*, is doubtless parodying Naipaul, even while he marks the collapse of old reverences:

The problem of the contemporary British novelist—my problem—is knowing who to write for. To write for the British is not enough: it means choosing for subject matter the emancipated women living in Hampstead or holidaying in small hotels by Swiss lakes... . To write for America, where the large advances are, is a temptation, but American publishing houses want the British less and less.

This recalls Naipaul in 1958: “The Americans do not want me because I am too British. The public here [Britain] do not want me because I am too foreign... . It isn’t easy for the exotic writer to get his work accepted as being more than something exotic.”

In the contemporary erosion of Britannic reverences—an erosion effected by others’ efforts—Naipaul seems eventually to have been swept up. His 1990 book *India: A Million Mutinies Now* treats with a new respect what was once violently dismissed. Whereas the latest work celebrates the suddenly fertile million mutinies that is India, an interview contemporaneous with one of Naipaul’s earlier India books records differently Naipaul’s response to analogous energies: “Now that the British presence is no longer there, what you are seeing now in India... is an awakening of a very old, very village, very petty India, that really has lost its way.” This idea of lost European authenticity is present also in Naipaul’s 1967 novel, *The Mimic Men*, in which a mediocre Belgian school teacher in the Caribbean island of Isabella is yet able to conjure the magic of the real place across the seas:

There, in Liege in a traffic jam, on the snow slopes of the Laurentians, was a true, pure world. We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretend to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new.

Conversely, in 1990, Naipaul detects new reverences on the rise in India: “The increased wealth showed; the new confidence of people once poor showed. One aspect of that confidence was the freeing of new particularities, new identities.”

That this is framed as a change in India itself does not obscure the likelihood that, as Naipaul says in his harsh 1964 India book, “It was my eye that had changed.” (Naipaul made this latter remark upon revisiting Bombay, months after his initial 1964 visit.) The dust jacket of the U.S. edition of
Naipaul's 1990 India book is studded with "Praise for V. S. Naipaul." Heading the list is Joseph Lelyveld's remark, cited from the *New York Times Book Review*, describing Naipaul as "the most notable commitment of intelligence that Post-colonial India has evoked" and opining that Naipaul is "indispensable for anyone who wants seriously to come to grips with the experience of India." Lelyveld's remark is based on Naipaul's track record prior to his latest, revisionist book. On the basis of those early vituperative and anxiety-ridden books, one wonders whether Naipaul had himself as yet come to grips with the experience of India. Naipaul is, doubtless, a notable intelligence. Yet one is reminded of a story the anthropologists tell: a clever boy in a traditional society, told by his mother to "go and find a quiet girl to marry," returned with a corpse.

*What Naipaul's Tough Stuff Does*

The risks in Naipaul's rudderless truth telling are not difficult to detect. Notice how the impressionable Paul Theroux was influenced by Naipaul when the two were acquainted over a period of time at an African university: "It was Naipaul who showed me that Africa was more comedy than tragedy, and that perhaps I should spend more time writing and less time organizing extra-mural classes [for the locals]."

"Truth" that has this effect is not self-evidently of value. Again, on November 5, 1990, as the war drums rose against Iraq, Naipaul wrote a *New York Times* op-ed piece under the headline "Our Universal Civilization." According to Naipaul's byline, the article was "adapted from the Walter B. Wriston lecture at the Manhattan Institute, a public policy organization." Naipaul, lecturing the policymakers, portrayed a fanatical Islam "where the faith was the complete way, filled everything, left no spare corner of the mind or will or soul." And he contrasted this with the West, "where it was necessary to be an individual and responsible." This Western world was governed, according to Naipaul, by a "pursuit of happiness" that simply "cannot generate fanaticism." Having just denied the possibility of Western fanaticism, Naipaul concludes in language that, ironically, exactly recalls Ronald Reagan's more zealous moments. Where Reagan earlier threatened that America's ideological opponents would end on the "trash heap of history," Naipaul now concurs that "other more rigid systems in the end blow away." On the same day and on the same page—literally alongside
Naipaul’s article—William Safire, baying for war, contrasted the world’s “civilized capitals” to Iraq, which was a different kind of place. Where Naipaul said that our “universal civilization has been a long time in the making,” Safire chorused that immediate attack on Iraq was vital because “we are dealing here with our own survival.” Days later, then-President Bush made a unilateral and fateful decision vastly to increase U.S. troop commitments in the region.

Next observe Sir Vidia Naipaul’s rendering of the Third World: “To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder.” Hear now Sir Peter de la Billière, British commander in the Gulf War, on Saddam Hussein: “It’s the sort of behavior you’d expect from the rather low-grade, second-hand sort of person that he is.”

Taken with U.S. general Norman Schwarzkopf’s view that Iraqi soldiers were not part of the same human race, and with the disparate sensitivity of American public opinion to the loss of a few Americans (versus many Iraqis), Edward Said’s 1981 remark on Naipaul’s book on Islam, Among the Believers, is prescient: Said points out that for Naipaul, the “other” people “are to be castigated for not being Europeans, and this is a political pastime useless to them, eminently useful for anyone plotting to use Rapid Deployment Forces against Islam. But then Naipaul isn’t a Politician: he’s just a Writer.”

Naipaul hardly caused George Bush’s resort to force rather than negotiations with Iraq. Bush’s approval rating soared above 90 percent in the war’s aftermath, and Bush had long independently held the view that every worthy president ought to be “tested by fire.” However, Naipaul’s expert and timely op-ed article, contrasting inherent Western reasonableness with inherent Islamic fanaticism, unquestionably facilitated Bush’s deployments and sanitized the scorched-earth military strategy that followed.

The foregoing provides a context for remarks like the following: “Naipaul has not demonstrated that he has that sense of genuine commitment to the endurance of the human spirit and the upliftment of the human person and the triumph of the human ... [necessary] to give a meaningful criticism of [the then-contemporary “Black Power” movement] taking place in the Caribbean today.”

This passage is not simply a wistful cry for new empathy from Naipaul. It is, rather, a straightforward and credible assertion that failures of vision derail Naipaul’s ability to engage postcolonial societies in meaningful criticism. “Criticism” that asserts futility is literally meaningless, since life con-
Naipaul has long denied that humans in postcolonial societies can generate value. This ability has, says Naipaul, been taken away from us by our history. Naipaul, who begins with an ideal of “truth as revolution,” ends with the news that reality is fixed. Naipaul commits the very sin of which he misaccuses the Indian novelists: the form of his work entails the worth of human life, while the infused vision denies it.