

**The Long Walk Home:
V. S. Naipaul and the Narration of Home**

Andrew Martino
Southern New Hampshire University

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nerval@msn.com

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Per sopravvivere bisogna raccontare delle storie.

Umberto Eco, *L'isola del giorno prima*

Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*

Home is, I suppose, just a child's idea. A house at night, and a lamp in the house. A place to feel safe.

V. S. Naipaulⁱⁱ

V.S. Naipaul is a writer who has gone to great lengths to represent himself as completely exilic. Born in Trinidad in 1932, Naipaul grew up in a transplanted Brahmin household. His grandfather emigrated to Trinidad from India as an indentured servant. In 1950 Naipaul left Trinidad to attend Oxford on a scholarship and began to actively pursue writing. All of Naipaul's writing, including novels, essays, and travel literature, can be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with his colonial condition and Indian ancestry. The confrontation between Naipaul's idea of an India of his ancestors and his encounter with the "real" India is detailed in his book, *An Area of Darkness: A Discovery of India*. It is, I believe, at that ontological intersection, the intersection where romantic idea and

reality meet, that Naipaul's conception of himself, and ultimately his view of civilization matured. The topic of this paper is to explore Naipaul's juxtaposition of the narratives of India he heard while growing up with that of his first visit to India as recounted in *An Area of Darkness*. Ultimately, Naipaul discovers that the notions of India (in family lore and physically) are incompatible. Furthermore, this paper argues that home for Naipaul exists within his writing and not in a geographically specific place such as Trinidad, India, or England.

If one is to take Naipaul's statement concerning home in the epigram above seriously, then one would be forced to confront the *possibility* that traditional conceptions of home have outlived their usefulness. Certainly the concept of security, warmth, and comfort are indissolubly related to our conceptions of home. Yet, as *An Area of Darkness* makes quite clear, those concepts prove to be false, or trap doors in the human need to feel at home in the world. As Naipaul states quite early in *An Area of Darkness*: "And it was clear that here [India], and not in Greece, the East began: in this chaos of uneconomical movement, the self-stimulated din, the sudden feeling of insecurity, the conviction that all men were not brothers and that luggage was in danger" (3). Especially after September 11, 2001, our notions of security have undergone a fundamental shift. What was once comfort, now leans toward a militaristic sense of security; a security I would add, that is ultimately false. In this post 9/11 world the reader of *An Area of Darkness* can identify with Naipaul's moody desperation concerning humanity that had been largely absent before. Home and being at home can no longer be considered the inalienable right of the Occident.

An Area of Darkness functions not only as a title, but as a metaphor for the idealized India of Naipaul's ancestors. *Darkness* is a resonant and complex metaphor that runs all throughout Naipaul's writing. In some cases it stands for the obvious; the unknown or the unknowable. In others it stands for the outside world beyond the safety zone of familiarity and community. In others still it may stand for the past; both personal and collective. The reader of this incredible and at times maddening book follows Naipaul's episodic excursions through various parts of the sub-continent. Through his journey Naipaul is hoping to discover that the ambiguous idea of the India he grew up with in Trinidad would correspond to the actual India he physically encounters in his travels. But such a correspondence cannot occur because, as Naipaul comes to realize, the reality of something can never live up to the idea. Although traces of its customs and traditions were evident in Trinidad, Naipaul states that India was never "real for him in any significant way" beyond that of a place from which his ancestors had come. India, in this sense, was never "home" for Naipaul, just as Trinidad had never been "home" for him: "And India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; and from it our journey had been final. It was a country suspended in time" (21). Naipaul's project in *An Area of Darkness* is to return to India in order to reclaim the real India for himself. However, when Naipaul arrives in India he simultaneously feels a part of the crowd (in that he now resembles others in skin color) and apart from the crowd (in that he cannot connect with the mentality of the physical India). As we shall see, the increasing

momentum toward a vagabond-like persona lends a powerful aura of spectrality to Naipaul the traveler and Naipaul the errant narrator.

“India is a country of chaos, both bureaucratic and social,” Naipaul informs us over and over. It is against the backdrop of this chaos that Naipaul begins (rather quickly) to disassociate himself from not only the India he finds himself in at the time he is writing but what he calls the “idea of India,” which informs so much of his past. Out of this collision between past (the idea of India as indoctrinated in him through his ancestors) and present (what Naipaul will call “India, the world’s largest slum”), Naipaul begins to form a persona that will render him enigmatic and ontologically homeless. It is at this stage that his correspondence with the notion of the picaresque begins to take seed.

Alexander Blackburn defines the picaresque in his book *The Myth of the Picaresque*, as “A member of a caste subject to scorn, suspicion, forced into a marginal position” (9).

Naipaul’s self-projected marginality coincides with certain characteristics of the picaresque, especially as conceived as “the one who is apart from the crowd.” Naipaul’s marginality marks him as a continuous threat to the sedentary custodians of literature. That is, those who deem what literature and what authors should or should not be representative of a culture. Naipaul’s frequent outbursts and general ill humor often makes him an easy target for academics across the globe.

As Stuart Miller writes in his 1967 study, *The Picaresque Novel*, the hero of the picaresque stands apart from the “accepted” definition of what we usually come to think of as the hero:

The hero of the picaresque novel differs from characters in other types of fiction. His origins are uncertain. He becomes a rogue in a world full of roguery. His roguery differs from comic roguery in being gratuitous. He cannot love or feel

strong emotion; he is incapable of anchoring his personality to some idea or ideal of conduct. His internal chaos is externally reflected in his protean roles. This instability of personality is seen in the picaresque novel as a reflection of the outer chaos discovered by the plot patterns. (131)

It is this profound sense of marginality, of homelessness, of not belonging to any one place, time, or community, combined with the fact that Naipaul finds himself in a chaotic and unstructured world (the Postcolonial World itself is a shambles precisely on account of the pullout of Empire) that will inform his highly opinionated view of *civilization*: “To define is to begin to separate oneself, to assure oneself of one’s position, to be withdrawn from the chaos that India always threatens, the abyss at whose edge the sweeper of the gay girl sits” (44). I do not feel that Naipaul is speaking only of the chaos of India here; he is making an assessment of his own relationship to his past—a past that he discovers in *An Area of Darkness*, which cannot correspond to the structured ideal. Thus, what Naipaul ultimately discovers is that he is indefinable; ontologically homeless in the most resonant sense. With a writing that is steeped in bitter disappointment, Naipaul separates himself from his past by judging it, and in the harshest manner possible. However, this judgment is also an auto-critique in the sense that he is taking himself to task for undertaking the search for his past in the first place. As Naipaul states in his novel *A Bend in the River* (1979), “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it” (3). That “the world is what it is” constitutes the harsh realization Naipaul comes to while traveling through India, the land of his ancestors, fifteen years before *A Bend in the River*.ⁱⁱⁱ

An Area of Darkness was written while Naipaul was still a young man (in his early thirties), and it can be a devastating experience to discover that one’s past is largely

based upon an illusion, or a fairy tale, containing only fragments of fact. Naipaul's bitterness emerges through his interactions with other Indians while on the sub-continent. Yet that bitterness is also self-directed. Naipaul resents the living conditions of the Indians and their third world status. Everywhere he looks he sees filth and extreme poverty. I believe that Naipaul's harsh criticism of India is inspired by a fear of locating this same uncleanness in himself. *An Area of Darkness* represents a defining moment in Naipaul's life because it constitutes a fundamental break with the past that will submerge Naipaul into a dualism: "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (289). From 1964 on, Naipaul would continue to fight that dualism by writing and by traveling throughout the world. In many respects his travel books are much more "literary" than his novels. However, I suggest that attention should be paid to how Naipaul looks at the world, rather than to what he says. His judgments are often harsh to the point of racism, but his tireless pursuit of the "truth" (to allow people to tell their own stories) is, I believe, sincere. What Naipaul discovers in India between 1962 and 1964 is that, while we are all products of our time, as well as our heritage, an attempt to reclaim the past is always accompanied by a danger of losing ourselves completely to a bitterness informed by the illusion of the past. Therefore, one of the central motifs of *An Area of Darkness* could be a warning that not only can one not go back, perhaps one should not even try. For Naipaul the price was the loss of any mooring to his heritage—a heritage that turned out to be utterly foreign to him.

Yet, to hypothesize that the title, *An Area of Darkness* suggests merely that "you can't go home again" (to borrow a phrase from Thomas Wolfe) is both simplistic and erroneous. Naipaul does return to the land of his ancestors by returning specifically to the

nineteen acres of his grandfather's land. What Naipaul comes to realize is that despite everything he is the one who is out of place. He does not belong to India, just as he does not belong to England or Trinidad. Naipaul, for what little effort he makes to discover India (to be honest about this, Naipaul is not exactly culturally understanding),^{iv} comes to realize not only his alienation from that land but his alienation from England as well. In one particularly illuminating section of *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul discusses the search for identity during his childhood in Trinidad:

For in the India of my childhood, the land which in my imagination was an extension, separate from the alienness by which we ourselves were surrounded, of my grandmother's house, there was no alien presence. How could such a thing be conceived? Our own world, though clearly fading, was still separate; and an involvement with the English, of whom on the island we knew little, would have seemed a more unlikely violation than an involvement with the Chinese or the Africans, of whom we knew more. Into this alienness we daily ventured, and at length we were absorbed into it. But we knew there had been change, gain, loss. We knew that something which was once whole had been washed away. What was whole was the *idea* (emphasis mine) of India. (199-200)

The "idea of India" dwells in the house of his grandmother; an "idea" that is progressively receding into the darkness of forgetfulness. Naipaul's bitter disappointment at encountering the "real" India calls that India into question, and it also calls the legitimacy of his grandmother's house into question. That, I would suggest, is key in understanding Naipaul's exilic nature, which is absolute and consuming, as well as satirization of the Third World. Belonging to no place and no time, Naipaul continually returns to the only "home" he knows; his writing. Naipaul's home is constructed through the agency of his writing. That is, if Naipaul's exilic condition informs every fiber of his being, and it is inherent in human nature to build a home, to put down roots, then Naipaul must be constructing a home through the writing of his texts. The text becomes the only ground

to which Naipaul can cling. Through the text Naipaul is assuring himself that he is human, that he is somehow, fundamentally a part of something. The text in this sense becomes not only an artifact leaving a record of one man's life and assumes the role of ontological informant. The "idea of India," that "area of darkness" which Naipaul attempted to penetrate physically (the actual journey to India), failed (through an unwillingness or inability to understand "them"), and has now been redirected toward an exploration of that darkness through the agency of writing. Naipaul is an intellectual (regardless of whether one agrees with his ideology, he does constitute a resonant "voice" in the contemporary world) who has attempted not to understand, because he is often unwilling, but to afford others the opportunity to tell their own stories. Naipaul begins his book *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998) with a clear outline of his project: "This is a book about people. It is not a book of opinion. It is a book of stories. The stories were collected during five months of travel in 1995 in four non-Arab Muslim countries—Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia. So there is a context and a theme" (xi). The "context and theme" is that people would be allowed to speak for themselves. Yet, interestingly with Naipaul this is never quite possible. Naipaul is the quintessential "outsider," whose presence continues to haunt the landscapes of his writing. He is that specter-like character who constitutes the apparition of the "great" writers of the nineteenth century. When Naipaul stated that the novel as genre was bankrupt, he was alluding to the authority of the nineteenth century masters and the renegades of postmodernism. With postmodernism the author as authority figure is called into question.

The “too overwhelming reality” that is India must be assimilated into the psyche for Naipaul to come to grips with his past, and this is done through the agency of writing about India. In the final section, “The Village of the Dubes,” Naipaul returns to his ancestral land; the remaining 19 acres of his grandfather’s farm. It is here that Naipaul comes to a complete realization that he is fundamentally *exilic*:

India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into the land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate.

In a year I had not learned acceptance. I had learned my *separateness from India* (emphasis mine), and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors. (274)

Naipaul’s definition of the colonial as “without a past, without ancestors” is telling.

What we must keep in mind is that Naipaul is always speaking in the context of the first person: this is *his* ontological condition. When he finally arrives at the thinking which informs *Beyond Belief*, he has moved further toward the margin of story-telling—he has assumed the role of the post-colonial picaro—that roguish traveler who calls the hegemonic discourse of the Occident into question.

Naipaul exists in an “area of darkness” that he is constantly trying to penetrate through the agency of writing. As such, he has consciously decided to leave his own past behind because it was not, nor could it have been, the past for which he had been searching. That past belonged to the memory of his grandmother’s house, replete with people, smells, talk, and emotions. The India that Naipaul had been searching for existed (note the past tense—for now it has been tainted by the “real” India) entirely within his imagination. As he states in his follow up to *An Area of Darkness*, titled *India: A*

Wounded Civilization: “In India I know I was a stranger; but increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past” (xiii).

Naipaul’s search for India ends in bitterness, a bitterness that has carried over into his writing since that time. The notion of a search can, if we are to read Naipaul carefully, reveal only the simulacra; the copy of a copy from which there is no original. He discovered that he was not what he thought he was, which caused him a profound sense of anxiety. The danger resides in finding oneself, as Naipaul did, completely cut off from the past:

The world is illusion, the Hindus say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulation. It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly *against my own homelessness* (emphasis mine), that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already, with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me. I felt it as something true which I could never adequately express and never seize again. (290)

Naipaul’s slip toward the edge of the “negation” of his Indian heritage was not complete. There exists a spark which still has a claim on him. *An Area of Darkness* was Naipaul’s first book on India; there would be two more: *India: A Wounded Civilization*, and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. However, it is India’s claim upon him, and not Naipaul’s claim upon India that emerges after his first journey there. *An Area of Darkness* is an intensely personal account of the sub-continent, and should be read as such. It is during his travels in India, and not upon the occasion of his first travel book, *The Middle Passage* that Naipaul begins to form his exilic persona. Naipaul’s exilic state has afforded him the opportunity to *exist textually* within the “space of encounter.”

Naipaul's errancy (in the sense that Blanchot defines it) is one that both threatens negation continuously (the idea of India is always in strife with the reality of the encountered India) and informs his being. Fundamentally tied to this negation is the vocation of writing. He states in his essay "Prologue to an Autobiography" that he inherited his "fear of extinction" from his father: "...His fear of extinction. That was his gift to me. That fear became mine as well. It was linked with the idea of the vocation: the fear could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation" (111). Naipaul's father's madness resided in his failure to become a writer. He failed to heed the call to writing; the will to narrate—thus imposing a form—without which hover the voices of madness and estrangement. Writing becomes not only an act of resistance against negation, but, and perhaps most importantly, a way of dwelling in the world. "And it was that fear, a panic about failing to be what I should be, rather than a simple ambition, that was with me when I came down from Oxford in 1954 and began trying to write in London. My father died the previous year. Our family was in distress. I should have done something for them, gone back to them. But, without having become a writer, I couldn't go back" (111). In order to combat the very real possibility that he had inherited his father's madness, Naipaul knew he had to become a writer (implying something much more than simply "the act writing," but writing as a process of discovery). In order to write he had to go back—but in literary form first—then physically. Naipaul's status as a writer functions to combat madness and extinction by imposing a form; and that form is narrative. However, this existential homelessness should not be thought of as completely negative. Without his state of homelessness Naipaul would not be able to explore other "areas of darkness."

Naipaul has stated over and over again that he belongs to no literary tradition. What he does belong to is a will to form (his own orientation is inspired by the “great” novels of the nineteenth century), to narrate the stories of what he sees as outsider—as dissident voice fighting against the noise of a postmodern schizophrenic howl.

As Pankaj Mishra states in his introduction to Naipaul’s recent collection of essays, appropriately titled, *The Writer and the World*, “It is hard to think of one writer so fundamentally exilic, carrying so many clashing fading worlds inside him. But what’s more remarkable is that Naipaul’s acute sense of lost glory and contentment [and here I must interject and ask what glory, what contentment? And whose? Naipaul’s, or the worlds he chooses to explore?], his anguished perception of deception and tragedy—[again I must interrupt and recall that Naipaul states ‘The world is what it is’—our inherited tragedy as a species]—things inseparable from his background and experience—co-exist with an attitude of acceptance and optimism, with a well founded faith in human striving and perfectibility. These visions aren’t usually compatible. But they work together in Naipaul, give his work its peculiar tension and richness, and make it the most sustained and wide-ranging meditation on our world” (xv). Naipaul’s “meditation on our world” somehow suggests that it is not *his* world, that he cannot belong to it, that he dwells in a condition of spectrality. In this sense, Naipaul is surely on the periphery of community, but community in the sense of the world at large. It is only such an individual, who may perhaps resist the impulse to keep moving at first, that can truly make an engagement with the world because the individual has no reference points from which to form a prior opinion, or “view.” Naipaul is a writer without definition.

His texts are the closest thing we have to understand the writer, and his texts are always in a process of becoming.

ⁱ An early version of this paper was delivered at the 2003 South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

ⁱⁱ *The Observer*. September 12, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is perhaps also significant that the title of Naipaul's recent novel is *Half a Life* (2001), a title that suggests that Naipaul has yet to come to terms with his colonial condition. In his latest novel, *Magic Seeds* (2004), Naipaul continues the trials and tribulations of Willie Chandran, his character who is in search of belonging to anything.

^{iv} Naipaul's preoccupation with the display of public defecation is almost excessive. The sanitary conditions of India are never truly explored in his book, but they are judged quite harshly and unforgivably. It is almost as if Naipaul can recognize himself in the "filth" he describes, in part, because he does come from India and is unable to come to terms with that recognition. Naipaul has dubbed the Third World, the "Turd World" exclusively for its lack of "civilized" restroom practices and sewage disposal. It is a fundamental motif in his travel literature, and one wonders at the degree of impact the (to my knowledge, unthought) practice of public defecation has had on Naipaul.

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