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Cécile Girardin

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8725>  
DOI: 10.4000/ces.8725  
ISSN: 2534-6695

**Publisher**

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 September 2009  
Number of pages: 66-76  
ISSN: 2270-0633

**Electronic reference**

Cécile Girardin, "Such Plotting! Such Symbolism!': Narratives of Power in V.S. Naipaul's Essays", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 32.1 | 2009, Online since 23 December 2021, connection on 17 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8725> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8725>

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## **‘Such Plotting! Such Symbolism!’: Narratives of Power in V.S. Naipaul’s Essays**

V.S. Naipaul’s political thought as developed in *The Writer and the World* stems from the minute observation of the processes of empowerment in postcolonial countries, and the causes of failure. By debunking political impostures and the debilitating theatricality of dictatorships, the writer constructs a case against simplification and becomes the playwright of a world that oscillates between tragedy and farce.

[L]ike an episode in a dense novel, it served many purposes and had many meanings. And it had been devised by a man who was writing a novel about himself, settling accounts with the world, filling pages of the cheap writing pad and counting the precious words as he wrote, anxious for world fame (including literary fame): a man led to lunacy by all the ideas he had been given of who he was. (*The Writer and the World* 201-202)<sup>1</sup>

V.S. Naipaul’s political essays consistently feature “men led to lunacy” by mere ideas and words. Like the leader Michael X in Trinidad, the dictators and would-be rulers he presents are men whose words turned their countries into chaos. Their megalomaniac fantasies of power are shown to be pompously rehearsed, staged, and acted out, and people become enmeshed in real nightmares. This article focuses on several key pieces of *The Writer and the World*, a wide-ranging collection of essays which all address the ways in which societies formerly affected by colonialism narrate their histories and construct their political future, throughout Asia, America and Africa. Published in 2002 and edited by Pankaj Mishra, the collection offers a panorama of Naipaul’s nonfictional work from the early 1960s to the 1990s. I contend that these essays not only map out the ground for fiction writing by offering documentary material for the novels, but exist in and of themselves, testifying to the independent mind of a writer constantly struggling with the issue of modernity<sup>2</sup>. I shall first assess the method developed by the essayist, one which resorts to imposing his moralist worldview everywhere he goes, and then proceed to discuss the writer’s literary staging of the world tragedy unfolding before his eyes.

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1. Otherwise specified, page references provided directly in the text refer to this volume.

2. Essay writing accounts for at least half of Naipaul’s oeuvre: there are more than ten collections of nonfiction from *The Middle Passage* (1962) to *A Writer’s People* (2007). Criticism of Naipaul’s essays usually focuses on specific geographical areas (for example, Cronin, Neill, Teltscher, Ware), but rarely considers his nonfiction as a whole.

The elaboration of an interpretative grid to comprehend the world, however ruthless and condescending it may be at times, characterizes all of the essays of the collection. Through a broad theorization of specific situations, this method points at the need, consubstantial to essay writing, to constitute convincing scenarios of the representation of the culture by itself, to paraphrase the theoretician of the French essay in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Macé 28). It is the avowed ambition of the essayist to impose his vision: “The artist, who, for political or humanitarian reasons, seeks only to record abandons half his responsibility. He becomes a participant; he becomes anonymous. He does not impose a vision on the world” (quoted in Hamner 24). The Naipaulian project is affiliated with the genre’s historic role in the construction of knowledge, for, as Macé observes, the form has an ‘instituting’ vocation (20). It is oriented towards the readability of history, which was at the heart of the knowledge project of the nineteenth century, Macé adds, as if the genre were able to reveal the epistemological foundations of its time (28). As a matter of fact, these essays were written in the context of a debate (tangible yet kept unacknowledged within the texts) concerning the voices of the formerly colonized. Naipaul’s nonfictional writing can be seen as a counter-discourse to the postcolonial criticism that gained considerable strength in the 1980s, and that focused on the hope to construct new identities in the parts of the world that were once affected by Western imperialism<sup>3</sup>. Where writers such as Walcott and Rushdie believe in the ability of the former colonized people to build a future by coming to terms with the colonial past (politically and aesthetically), Naipaul sees the colonial past as, paradoxically, both a curse and a cause for nostalgia, as seen in the excruciating poverty, lack of education and general hopelessness which the traveler records on three continents.

According to the essays, there is no social contract to rely upon, past the hysteria of independence: “They feared what would happen if Anguilla officially declared itself outside the Commonwealth. Anguilla, like Rhodesia, would be outlawed. It would attract outlaws” (91). The danger of lawlessness seems to be everywhere the colonizers have withdrawn from. Naipaul observes the slow and insidious slippage into a barbarous state. In Argentina, he laments the “artificiality of the society” (352) marked by the “absence of links between men and men [...] between men and the meaningless flat land” (352-353). The inability to “relate” the past with the present leads to “the loss of law, the seeking out of the enemy, endless civil wars, gangster rule” (360). This worldview, which has consistently been dismissed as sterile and cruel by Naipaul’s detractors<sup>4</sup>, provides recurring images

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3. In the 1970s and the 1980s, this view was widely advocated by writers like Achebe, Ngugi, Walcott or Rushdie, in a period when the so-called conservative voice of V.S. Naipaul was precisely the target of political furore.

4. The traveler Naipaul is said to be lacking a “capacity for wonder”, the one quality necessary to write travelogues (Ware 111). On the contrary, other critics point at his anger, like Derek Walcott, wondering as soon as 1967: “Is V. S. Naipaul an angry young man?” (9). This anger has been at times viewed as mere “hysteria”, especially in his early

of chaos, decay and corruption, which have become the author's main aesthetic imagery over the years. The essay becomes the form through which the writer can define a method for looking and deciphering, in order to construct a set of moral values with which to judge his world. In "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", he exposes his method as follows:

I travel to discover other states of mind. And if for this intellectual adventure I go to places where people live restricted lives, it is because my curiosity is still dictated in part by my colonial Trinidad background. I go to places which, however alien, connect in some way with what I already know. When my curiosity has been satisfied, when there are no more surprises, the intellectual adventure is over and I become anxious to leave. It is a writer's curiosity rather than an ethnographer's or a journalist's. So while, when I travel, I can move only according to what I find, I also live, as it were, in a novel of my own making, moving from not knowing to knowing, with person interweaving with person and incident opening out into incident. The intellectual adventure is also a human one: I can move only according to my sympathy. I don't force anything: there is no spokesman I have to see, no one I absolutely must interview. (239)

This confident statement establishes a profound desire for independence, in keeping with the immense ambition of this "intellectual adventure". Naipaul views the form of the essay as a demanding exercise involving truth-seeking and knowledge-building – an outlook that places him in the great tradition of the genre: "What the essay expresses is a yearning for conceptuality and intellectuality, as well as a resolution to the ultimate questions of life" (Said 52). As a case in point, the essayist holds the view that these traditional societies are incompatible with modernity, because tradition favors fixed functions and roles, "every man in his caste, his community, his clan: divisions not strictly racial and not strictly social" (39). People do not feel the urge to achieve anything, to compete or to have vocations – aspirations that, according to Naipaul, are essentially modern. The more he is in contact with this traditional fatalism, the more he acknowledges the need for more effort. Engaging with essays on works of art, Edward Said states: "What the critical essay does is to begin to create the values by which art is judged" (52). Similarly, what Naipaul's political essay does is to begin to create the values by which action is judged.

Naipaul's stern stance calls for a radical reform of traditional societies. Motivation, for instance, seems to have been "excised out" of Indian people: "A Second Visit" tells the story of a young Indian who has returned from the United

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essays: "Hysteria is what Naipaul takes with him when he travels abroad. He looks at alien cultures as into a mirror, tense with the fear that he will not find there any comforting reflection of his own humanity, that the mirror will be empty, and he will start to scream" (Cronin 103). Other critics yet imply megalomania and see travel writing as a foil to the writer's persona: "With the writer's subjectivity centrestage, India usually serves as a backdrop – be it charming, exotic, infuriating, or comic – to the narrator's travels" (Teltscher 194).

States and wonders about the cultural gap he has experienced. He finds out that what he lacks is “that profound apprehension of cause and effect, which is where magic ends and the new world begins” (29). Naipaul keeps on addressing the notion of an unbridgeable gap between tradition and modernity<sup>5</sup>, which defines the dilemma of postcolonial societies: by remaining traditional, societies do not risk fundamental disruption, yet they bar individuals from accessing freedom and escaping the determinism of their birth. In “The Shipwrecked Six Thousand,” he declares that, in the absence of basic education, “few Anguillans act without divine guidance” (84). In his essay “Argentina and the Ghost of Eva Peron”, he states that work is “the missing moral idea” which could endow the society with a purpose (422), and that “To be Argentine was to inhabit a magical, debilitating world” (362). Everywhere he goes, the essayist sees superstition and magic as substitutes for “reliable institutions or codes or law [or] secular assurances” (399). This distance between tradition and modernity can shrink when people travel and want to adopt modern ways, but most of the time it remains. This argument has been one of the writer’s recurrent motifs, both in the essays and the novels<sup>6</sup>, in which characters are anxious to leave traditional societies and to make their way into the modern world while still suffering from that lack of proper disposition to make the most of modernity.

Trying to establish the conditions of a functioning society, the writer calls for a reform of what, in essence, can hardly be modified: geography and landscape. All the pieces of *The Writer and the World* dwell on this apparent paradox: Naipaul scrutinizes landscapes and judges them unsatisfactory. For example, in “In the Middle of the Journey,” he states about India:

here is a vastness beyond imagination, [...] a landscape made monotonous by its size and frightening by its very simplicity and its special quality of exhaustion: poor choked crops in small crooked fields, under-sized people, under-nourished animals, crumbling villages and towns which, even while they develop, have an air of decay. (3)

The vastness of the Indian landscape conjures up feelings of awe, “unease”, “discomfort”, “disquiet” (3). It is “terrifying” (5), “frightening” (6), “overwhelming” (3, 4), “insupportable” (3), with its “endless repetition of exhaustion and decay” (3). According to the traveler, the “oddly fraudulent” vastness of the country is a hoax, because there is no common idea of civilization

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5. The author hardly ever uses the word “modernity”, whereas he writes about “traditional societies”, “the world of faith”, as opposed to what he calls the “universal civilization” or “the new world”. He views Trinidad, India or the Ivory Coast, as “half-made societies” or “half-modern countries”, suggesting that a process has been started that cannot be completed.

6. The most recent novels, such as *Half a Life* (2001) or *Magic Seeds* (2003), continue to explore this issue in the context of a globalized, contemporary world, and assess the inability of the global to make room for the universal, thus re-affirming the divide between modern and traditional.

which could endow it with a meaning. This landscape only emphasizes the physical smallness of the people and their psychology of “the cell and the hive” (6), according to Naipaul, who notably deplores the caste system.

Geography is, of course, more than landscape and natural resources: it is a repository of cultural identity, which reveals what human beings have created. In tropical islands, the smallness of territories also excites Naipaul’s anger, because it amounts to a trap and a sure way to decadence. The writer recurrently develops the idea of geographical “irrelevance”, especially when he tries to make sense of the desire of such small entities for independence. He sees “arbitrary” settlements and “untidy” coastlines in the British Honduras (96), suggesting that the use of land was never the subject of any long-term policy. One cannot get lost on the tiny round island of St Kitts, around which a single road perpetually leads to nowhere new. He also reminds the reader that the island of Mauritius is where the dodo forgot how to fly because it had no enemy (107). Idleness and the absence of challenge seemingly lead to decay, and the traveler Naipaul, constantly on the lookout for civilization, directs his anger at the lack of achievement. In Anguilla, he laments: “there are not even ruins” (86). In Mauritius it is worse, because what he first takes to be the ruins of a civilization turns out to be just stones coming out of the clearing of the sugarcane fields: “this island of disaster looks empty and green, dotted with half-pyramids of stone that are like the relics of a vanished civilization” (108).

The essays can be seen as the testimonies of a writer trying to find a secure ground on which to stand: from the outset, traveling to these “half-made” societies is an unsafe endeavor, where the stable positions and roles of the colonial times have been challenged, yet not replaced:

If travel has been indispensable for Naipaul to ‘release’ his imagination from the ‘deadening’ familiar, he has also distinguished his kind of travel from that of writers like Graham Greene. Their world has been ‘made safe for them by empire’, and so, traveling ‘for the picturesque’, they are free to ‘imagine the Europeanness of their characters against the native background.’ (Barnouw 6)

Even as his ideological background is firmly oriented towards the West, Naipaul’s travel writing retains a complexity of interpretation, precisely because safety always eludes him. As a case in point, he remarks, anguished, “bush remains, and scattered little bush communities” (96) in Belize, where processes of modernization have been attempted. This imagery of the bush as a great barbarous void strikingly looms in all of Naipaul’s pieces about Africa. In the Ivory Coast, it takes pharaonic works for the omnipotent king to maintain the splendor of his palace in Yamoussoukro. But this spurious hold on nature, “so far steadily maintained against the fast-growing bush” (230), proves more fragile than it seemed at first sight. The flawed civilizational transformation of nature has led to half-made or incomplete societies, where the return of the bush is always an imminent risk.

This motif of incompleteness is pursued beyond landscapes in order to picture the tragedy that unfolds when individuals start struggling for power. Naipaul is an essayist interested in the individual embodiment of leadership in countries striving to achieve independence – cultural, economic or political (Anguilla today is still a British territory, and the British Honduras became independent Belize only in 1981). He doubts the capability of former colonized people to develop an independence of the mind, and sees the formation of a local political scene as tinted by corruption, borrowed rhetoric and mimicking. In all three continents, Naipaul condemns “borrowing” and “plundering”: people cannot help adopting a colonial attitude of “self-distrust” and “pathetic philistinism” (6). Indian government officials, for example, still “look to Westminster as to the answers at the back of the book” (28). Genuine creation is out of reach: Trinidadians “will never create” because “identity depends in the end on achievement, and achievement here cannot be but small” (138). Similarly, he condemns Argentinian society, based upon mimicking and plundering the remnants of European civilization: “Their habits of wealth made them, profoundly a colonial people, educated but intellectually null, consumers, parasitic on the culture and technology of others” (378).

Naipaul justifies his assertions by interviewing a significant number of political figures, who turn out to be corrupt individuals bent on maneuvering in order to serve clans and family interests. In India, far from being a vocation, politics is a hobby, he asserts with contempt. Political dichotomies such as rich/poor, left/right, popular/elitist, liberal/conservative do not exist, and Naipaul marvels at the time it took for Indian politicians to make use of the divide between the poor and the rich – only appearing in Indira Gandhi’s slogan, “Remove poverty”. These binary oppositions, which have shaped Western political life for centuries, hardly make sense to Indians, according to Naipaul. The political rhetoric he analyzes in relation to the famine plaguing Bihar is revealing: the fatalism of people and politicians in particular, derives from the idea that India was “infinitely old and would go on” (17). “There was no goal and therefore no failure. There were only events. There was no tragedy” (17). The tragedy and the despair, as Naipaul likes to repeat, lie “more with the observer than the people” (4), who “lack a sense of tragedy”<sup>7</sup>.

The essayist becomes this tragedian uncovering the ‘hybris’ to be seen in the excesses of power and internal conflicts, and staging the fatal impact of political decisions on the masses. “Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad” (1979) addresses power, corruption and the morbid borrowing of an imported ideology. This long essay recounts the story of Michael X, a Trinidadian who

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7. It must be noted that the harsh condemnation of India in the essays of the 1960s was tempered by his more recent reassessment of the subcontinent’s modernization, which offered new insight and an ambivalence that was almost absent in his early Indian journalism. See in particular *A Million Mutinies Now*.

became a Black Power leader in London. After he was condemned for racial hatred he came back to Trinidad, where he established a commune with the help of various well-known benefactors from the West, including John Lennon. The movement turned bloody as he was found guilty of murdering three people, for which he was sentenced to death in 1975<sup>8</sup>. The chronicling structure of this piece reveals a minute concern for drama, as it is based on a cyclical repetition of the key events that escalated into the three murders. In the first part, Naipaul assesses the facts (the background of Michael de Freitas, turned Michael X, his time in London, his emergence as a Black Power leader in Trinidad, and the murder of three of his community members). The following three parts attempt at deciphering the personality of the protagonist (his broken childhood, his feeling of estrangement, his opportunism and megalomaniac dream of grandeur through writing), in order to recreate a chronology of causes and effects, thereby drawing a striking contrast with the superstitious and irrational beliefs of the main characters.

In this essay, Naipaul develops a potent imagery of politics being staged, with Michael X viewed as a “carnival” figure and an “entertainer”: “through jest and fraud, disappointment and self-deception, Malik had reached the position that every racist power-seeker occupies” (169). This morbid, yet grotesque figure was used as the direct inspiration for his 1975 novel *Guerrillas*, and the darkness of the essay mirrors that of the novel. In fact, the essay stands close to his fictional works about dictators and imposters (*Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River*, *Magic Seeds*), as they rely upon the same tight focus on farcical characters imbued with an obsession for power. This closeness between fiction and nonfiction confirms the status of the essay as “literature *in potentia*”, according to Claire de Obaldia, who develops an argument in favor of a blurred frontier between categories, in her study about the modern essay<sup>9</sup>. Naipaul’s entire oeuvre is dedicated to an inquiry into the illegitimate leaders of postcolonial societies; after his early innocent fabliaux, such as *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), he began “to see that careless individualism as the expression of a Hobbesian war of all against all, endemic in an inorganic society which acknowledged no authentic internal source of power” (Neill 27). The dictator characters to be found in both essays and novels are treated with the same sensitivity to theatricality, rhetoric and potential for violence. In *A Bend in the River* (1979), the character named

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8. Naipaul covered the trial for *The Sunday Times Magazine* and the essay first appeared in a two-part series entitled “The Killings in Trinidad” (Part 1, May 12, 1974, pp. 16-35; Part 2, May 19, 1974, pp. 24-41). Then the whole essay, complemented with a postscript, was reprinted as “Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad” in the collection *The Return of Eva Peron*.

9. “Approaches to great essayists as (creative) writers presuppose a continuity rather than an alternative between what is ‘fictional’ and what is ‘good’, since both appeal to the notions of imagination, invention, creativity, and originality adumbrated above” (de Obaldia 11).

“Big Man” exerts absolute power on his country by establishing a personality cult which resembles that of Mobutu as described in the essay “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” (1975). The quality of Naipaulian essay writing thus lies in this capacity to inhabit the fine line between the objective observation necessary to explore the complexity of reality and the acceptance of the writer’s own subjectivity, of “living in a novel” of his own making<sup>10</sup>.

In “Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad”, the imposture and the lies are made all the more enduring by the portrayal of the protagonist as a writer. The essay focuses on his various attempts at playing with words so as to establish his leadership. In London he published an autobiography that was a commercial failure, but he pursued his fantasy by writing a novel, which Naipaul describes as “a childlike grafting of fantasy to fact” (165), encouraged by others’ ideas of himself: “In England there were people who had told him that he was a writer, even a poet; and often, in a marijuana haze [...], he had tried to be a writer” (149). At his commune, Naipaul remarks ironically, “Letterheads had been printed, and copy prepared for a brochure” (142). Michael X is viewed as a man “made of words” (152), who “acquired a way with words” in London (142). From the closeness between novel writing and political rhetoric, he suggests a similitude between the processes of both truth-telling and action-taking. He develops an ethics of writing that would require to avoid simplifications and to anticipate effects, as shown in his descriptions of the murders committed in the name of words:

Malik had no skills as a novelist, not even an elementary gift of language. He was too self-absorbed to process experience in any rational way or even to construct a connected narrative. But when he transferred his fantasy to real life, he went to work like the kind of novelist he would have liked to be. Such plotting! Such symbolism! The blood of the calf at Christmas time, the blood of Gale Benson in the new year. And then, at the end of the sacrificial day, the cleansing in the river, with Benson’s surrogate pyre on the bank. So many other details: so many things had had to be worked out. [...] It had been thought out over many weeks. And it worked. (202)

Michael X, a talentless writer, became a dangerous psychopath who transferred his morbid libido onto reality. The failure with words was transformed into a successful acting-out: by marveling at “such plotting” Naipaul can only point at the continuous fraud insidiously enforced upon gullible believers.

The essay is extremely severe regarding the glamorous “fringe groups” of the West, the hippies and the liberal intelligentsia who encouraged Black Power

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10. From his early essays, the style developed by Naipaul to write about his contemporary world has resorted to techniques that have more to do with novel writing than history writing: “*The Loss of El Dorado* attempts to put the past back into a book, but not into a history textbook; rather, from scholarly research into archives and from the author’s own translations emerges a novelist’s interest in characters” (Nightingale 241).

by subsidizing it, oblivious to the possibly disastrous consequences on a whole people. It is then no surprise that Naipaul should come to conclude his essay with a quote from Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" (1896), a story in which the inability of the colonizers to understand the political and social issues at stake eventually led them to their deaths – an outcome similar to the murder of the British hippie in Naipaul's essay. The Conradian characters mimic a role assigned to them *ad absurdum*, until the trading post breaks into murder and suicide. If Conrad's story can be read as a parable of the decaying of empire, Naipaul's essay on Trinidad points at a self-destroying tendency of people caught in an enterprise that also negates otherness. The chronicling process consists in endowing the political and historical situation in Trinidad with complexity while depriving the main character of his so-called aura, thus preventing romance from altering the understanding of historical events: "This was a literary murder, if there was one. [W]riting had for too long been a public relations exercise, a form of applauded lie, fantasy. And in Arima it was a fantasy of power that led both men to contemplate, from their different standpoints, the act of murder" (192).

Naipaul explains the success of the politics of race in Trinidad by their simplicity, their avoidance of the population's real problems, their preaching "oppression and easy redemption, offering only the theory of the enemy, white, brown, yellow, black" (178). This, according to the author, "brought the society close to collapse" (*ibidem*). By theorizing the impossibility of a universal project in Trinidad, Naipaul endorses the complex position of the conservative, and possibly neocolonial, native. In this respect, his political thought can be considered as a postcolonial version of the French thinker of conservatism, Julien Benda, whose work focused on nationalism and the failure of the democratic process to prevent gregariousness and authoritarianism in the 1920s. According to Benda, the desire to accept only oneself as a judge and to show contempt for any other opinion, is a force for a nation, as any pride is a force for an institution whose organic principle is, whatever can be said, the affirmation of an I against a not-I (Benda 164). This renewal of a conservative outlook, which hinges upon the doubt that people can decide for themselves, can be seen as outdated and infuriatingly unfair given the violence of the colonial past in the Caribbean. Yet Naipaul's focus rests on the irresponsibility of the political discourse and actions, which he witnesses in his travels, rather than on a desire to turn history backwards. This irresponsibility prevents the constitution of societies based on universal principles (equal justice for all, responsibility of political leader before the people, and so on), which for the essayist should be considered as paramount. Instead, Black Power offered "easy threats and easy promises", "words that glamorize and seem to give dispensation to those who beg and steal" (189). All the essays point at a demand that Naipaul makes on himself and on others, one which consists in rejecting simplification. In Argentina, "the guerrillas have simplified the problems" (349), and Eva Peron "preached a simple hate and a simple love. Hate for the rich [...]. And love for the 'common people' [...]. This was her 'work': a child's vision of power, justice

and revenge” (354). In “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa”, Naipaul writes that “Mobutism simplifies the world, the concept of responsibility and the state, and simplifies people” (226). He not only debunks the political rhetoric of the leaders but also satirizes the gullible crowds: “Mobutu speaks all the time. He no longer speaks in French but in Lingala, the local lingua franca, and transistors take his words to the deep bush. He speaks as the chief, and the people listen. They laugh constantly and they applaud” (227). The show performed by the king before his clapping audience reminds the essayist of a childish play preventing the societies from growing up, just as in Argentina, “in spite of the real blood, the real torture – there has always been an element of machismo and public theatre” (392).

Throughout his essays, Naipaul thus reactivates the eighteenth-century debate between *Volksgeist* and Enlightenment, that is to say between resorting to a so-called national eternal past and endorsing universal values applicable to humankind. With romantic patriotism, Benda reflected, people desire nothing less than to feel that their ambition goes back to their ancestors, to vibrate with centennial aspirations, with an attachment to historical rights (118). Naipaul applies this analysis of the rise of nationalism in Europe to postcolonial societies: the theatrical appeal to folkloric attire, to a vernacular language, to the symbols and fetishes of the so-called ancestral tradition, represent a postcolonial form of demagoguery after independence left numerous parts of the world ill-equipped to deal with democratic processes. All of the pieces of *The Writer and the World*, by consistently addressing these issues in a confrontational style, offer a rare political, but also literary, unity. They all echo his novels, as they rely upon the same need to construct a definite interpretation of the world while telling stories. Essay writing is at its most complex when the writer problematizes his own subjectivity as a storyteller, as the only method to reconstruct his contemporary world and denounce the fake “plotting and symbolism” of real power struggles.

Cécile GIRARDIN  
Université d'Orléans

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