

‘Those Difficult Years’

by Gillian Dooley

Letters Between a Father and Son by V.S. Naipaul. London: Little, Brown, 1999. ISBN 0-316-63988-5.

Reading and Writing by V.S. Naipaul. New York: New York Review of Books, 2000. ISBN 0-940322-38-2.

In *A Way in the World*, published in 1994, V.S. Naipaul writes at length about a writer called Foster Morris, someone who, past his prime in post-war London, had provided a critical opinion – not always constructive, and certainly not always kind – of some of his early attempts at fiction. At first, he was grateful to Morris for advising him to abandon a novel which was not working, and ‘to think more about writing’ (87), and regarded him as ‘this unlikely figure from the past who had set me free’ (88). Later, however, more secure in his own work, he began to find it necessary to ignore Morris’s critiques, not to ‘allow any further word to fix itself on my consciousness’ (96).

That Morris is a fictional character is not obvious, and more than one reader has no doubt scoured reference books in vain for information about him and his book *A Shadowed Livery* – a book about pre-war Trinidad, unusual in the serious way in which it treated local people ‘as though they were English people – as though they had that kind of social depth and solidity and rootedness’ (79). Whether Morris has a real-life equivalent or not, the fictional character plays a crucial role in Naipaul’s narrative of his career. The recent publication of Naipaul’s family correspondence dating from his first years in England throws a little more light on his experiences of this time – but only a little. ‘Last year’ he writes to his sister Kamla in early 1956, ‘I wrote not one, but three books. The first I sent to a critic who criticised it so severely that I gave it up altogether and didn’t even send it out to a publisher. I think it was the best thing. Because after that I decided to change my style of writing completely’ (*Letters* 321) – and the result was *Miguel Street*, his first publishable book. The critic is unnamed in the letters, but it shows at least that there was a figure who played the role he assigned, nearly forty years later, to the fictional Morris.

This letter comes very near the end of the correspondence included in this book, and is ‘the letter I have been longing to write home ever since I left Trinidad’ (321) – the one announcing that his novel has been accepted for publication. It forms a natural climax to the narrative which has unfolded in the letters, of years of striving, of small triumphs and larger disappointments, with this aim always in view. The young man, not yet eighteen, leaves Trinidad for Oxford in August 1950, fearful but excited, and in the first letters home one can already see the particular combination of pride, self-consciousness, insecurity, and what one may have to call conceitedness: ‘At first meetings I usually do impress people, but I soon become my normal clowning self, and consequently go down in their esteem. But, I suppose, that is my character. Let it be’ (26). The high-minded disdain of that last phrase is amusing in a boy of eighteen, but it is an important element in the man and writer he has become – the capacity to regard with a cool eye both himself and his surroundings, to notice, accept and describe his relations with those surroundings.

Anyone who has read Naipaul’s work in the past sixteen years or so, since the publication of *Finding the Centre*, is familiar with the story he has constructed of his career. Apart from the three travel books of this period, on the southern United States, India and the Islamic countries, in which he makes a point of allowing the people he met to talk, ‘keeping himself more in the background’ (Robinson 110), he has in the later work become his own subject matter and made this explicit. Most recently, he has published *Reading and Writing*, a slim volume containing two essays which appeared in *New York Review of Books* last year. These essays take the narrative begun in *Finding the Centre* beyond the discovery that his natural subject matter for fiction was his Trinidad past, and relate his need to travel and explore the world and to understand his own place in it: ‘Fiction, the exploration of one’s immediate circumstances, had taken me a lot of the way. Travel had taken me further’ (*Reading and Writing* 31).

He has had to make a pattern of his personal history so that it may be narrated. Briefly stated, the story of his pre-publication years goes thus: he emerges from the half-made society of Trinidad, with an ambition passed on to him by his father, to be a writer. He works relentlessly at school, wins a scholarship, and leaves Trinidad in 1950 to study English literature at Oxford. Oxford, he finds, is a lonely place where

he feels intellectually superior and socially uncertain, where he makes no progress with becoming a writer, and suffers a nervous collapse. After Oxford, he spends many lonely blank months in London, until abruptly it occurs to him to write about people he knew from Port of Spain, in a simple concrete way, and finally his career as a published writer begins.

The lineaments of this narrative are on the whole supported by the primary evidence which the letters now provide. It is amusing, of course, to compare the contempt in his statement to Derek Walcott in 1965, that 'I am not a cricketer' (7), with his enthusiastic summary of a college cricket match in which he starred in Oxford in June 1952: 'In my last match I top-scored with 25 (3 fours) and bowled 3 wickets for 33 runs. So I have developed my cricket, if anything' (201). More interesting is to read his early attempts at poetry in his first Oxford term, as conveyed to his father in a letter:

Beautiful words force themselves on you in this delightful climate. Listen to this. Read it aloud. I was trying to capture the sound of a racing train:

*... noisy trains
clangorously clattering towards nothing.*

I don't care what anyone says, that is a really excellent line. Again, describing Oxford:

*this elephant's cemetery where the cracked and the decrepit
philosophies crack conglomerately in death.*

Really fine, don't you think? You can see for yourself how vastly my poetry has improved. (26-27)

Six weeks later, and already his taste has improved: although the BBC has broadcast one of his poems and sent him a guinea, he admits to Kamla, 'I, as you probably know, am not poet. ... They are very bad poems. I know it' (38). His prose, however, is already showing the signs of its future power:

Christmas never meant much to me or to any one of our family. It was always so much of a glorious feeling of fun we felt existed somewhere, but we could never feel where it was. We were always on the outside of a vague feeling of joy. The same feeling is here with me in London. Yet there is so much more romance here. It gets dark at about half past three and all the lights go on.

The shops are bright, the streets are well lit and the streets are full of people. I walk through the streets, yet am so much alone, so much on the outside of this great festive feeling. (43)

No clumsy experiments with alliteration or attempts at profundity, just simple statements, concrete observations building to a desolate conclusion. Later in the same letter, he admits that he has stopped writing: 'I suddenly feel dry. I express myself in abominable cliches, and expressive words just don't come' (44). Whether he carried his style of the letters into his fiction at this time, or tried a more sophisticated style as he implies, is a matter of conjecture. He completed a novel in September 1951, which, he reported 'a man from the Ashmolean Museum' who had befriended him found 'readable, funny and extremely well-written' (139). This was the novel he described in *A Way in the World* as not 'of any value (though there would have been things hidden in it); but the fact that I finished the book – two hundred or so pages of typescript – was important to me' (83). The demarcation between fact and fiction is once again blurred, when we see this novel referred to in the letters as *The Shadow'd Livery* (133) – the same title that, forty years later, he gave to Foster Morris' fictional book. He submitted it for publication in October, and its rejection in November fed into the depression and breakdown which overcame him early in 1952.

The Oxford years figure only sketchily in Naipaul's life story as it appears in *Finding the Centre*, *The Enigma of Arrival*, *A Way in the World* and, most recently, *Reading and Writing*. He remains reluctant to discuss the period in detail with interviewers, although he told James Atlas in 1987:

It was a difficult time. ... There was lack of money, uncertainty, great worry about my family. I was very isolated. My studies were of no importance. They didn't interest me. ... I had a mental disturbance owing to the strangeness of where I was, to loneliness. One was so far from home. ... So far from what one knew. It was an alien world, Oxford. ... It was clear one would remain a stranger. (101)

His letters confirm this memory, although there were, inevitably, times when the letters were more cheerful than others. Some of the cheeriness is no doubt bravado, intended to raise morale at the Trinidad end, but some must be genuine, such as his delight at the success of a paper he gave to an Oxford literary society: 'Well, my dear

people, my paper went down like a glass of the best champagne' (166), and the loneliness he remembers is contradicted by a letter in June 1952: 'I have formed a very wide circle of friends. And it is with difficulty that I can avoid, during term, seeing people I know. One man has made a point of coming up to my room about midnight to tell me of his success or failure in love' (202-3).

But the overriding impression is one of anxiety – caused, it seems clear, by the situation in which the family found itself. The ambition shared by father and son, that either or both of them should be a writer, could not be fulfilled if the son stayed in Trinidad; but the homesickness on his part, and the worry on his family's part, connected with his protracted years away from home, brought with it many problems. As well as Naipaul's own breakdown, the elder daughter Kamla, who was studying in Benares at the same time, implies that their father's illness and early death was brought on partly by worrying about his children studying overseas. This is a dilemma terrifyingly played out in one of Naipaul's stories, 'Tell Me Who to Kill,' from *In a Free State*, in which the protagonist pays with his sanity for his younger brother's limited academic and social success in England.

Naipaul has said that he does not intend to read the letters in their newly-published form: 'There are certain things that are too painful for people to even write about sometimes, and there are certain things that are too hard to read about again. One doesn't want to be reminded of those difficult years' (Suarez 1). He clearly consulted them, though, when he was writing the Foreword to his father's stories in 1976, as he quotes verbatim several passages where his father advises him about writing, or discusses his own stories. These stories, some of which had been published locally in 1943, were not published in England until 1976. He encouraged his father's hopes of publication – for example in a letter dated 3 February 1953, he wrote, 'you ought to know that I am perhaps more keen on your work than anyone else is,' and went on, 'if I try to hawk your book around, I wouldn't be doing you a favour. I would be trying to sell stuff that deserves to be published' (238). Nevertheless, he admitted in the 1976 foreword that at the time he 'did not think the stories publishable outside Trinidad, and I did nothing about them' (19). This must have been an added source of stress for him at the time, since both his father and

Kamla were urging him to do all he could to hasten their publication. His quandary was, of course, solved, brutally, by his father's death in October 1953.

These stories do as much as the letters to show that Seepersad Naipaul, although the inspiration for the title character in *A House for Mr Biswas*, is not to be identified with him. Biswas tries to write, but, apart from his journalism and a couple of other short pieces, manages only versions of his fantasy of escape, which he never completes – which never goes beyond the hero's meeting with the young, barren heroine. Seepersad Naipaul, on the other hand, had his 'Adventures of Gurudeva:' a hundred pages long, not quite a novel, but certainly a literary achievement, as well as nine or ten other stories, which he worked on whenever he could spare time and energy from his increasingly tiresome journalistic duties. Reading these stories, one has the sense of a writer developing: reading the letters, one can see the frustration and ambition behind that development, but also the generosity with which he shared it all with his son. Vidya was probably not old enough to produce a worthwhile novel at eighteen, even with his precocity – and precocity can be a trap in itself, as says in *A Way in the World*: 'a precocious writer doesn't have much experience to work on; his talent isn't challenged. The quickness of such a writer lies in assuming the manner and sensibility of his elders' (101). Had Seepersad lived, he might have developed into a writer of real power, but he left the baton in his son's hand, and in a way this gave Vidya a head start. Seepersad's writing advice is exemplary:

Your letters are charming in their spontaneity. ... If you can bring the same quality of spontaneity in whatever you write, everything you write will have sparkle. I believe this free flow in one's written thought is due largely to absence of anxiety. It is due to one not setting oneself too big, sometimes impossible ideals. (29)

And later, 'write of things as they are happening now, be realistic, humour where this comes in pat, but don't make it deliberately so' (177). He also, flatteringly, trusts his son with the editing of his own stories for publication: 'I think "Uncle Dalloo" could be considerably improved by some careful cutting and pruning. You may try your hand at this, if you like, after the exams' (255). By the middle of 1952, the son is offering advice to the father:

You manage a type of humour I cannot manage. Your view of life is surprisingly good-humoured. Well, don't write a novel then. Just let me have your short stories. And here: MAKE NO EFFORT TO THINK ABOUT DRAMATIC PLOTS. You can't manage them. Neither can I. Observe episodes. (193)

This kind of mutual morale-boosting occurs everywhere in the letters. The suggestion is made by both father and son at different times, that one should work for money to support the other, who would devote himself to writing – it almost seemed not to matter which was which. This feeling of close identification between father and son does not occur in *A House for Mr Biswas*, which instead provides an opportunity for a veiled exercise in self-chastisement:

Anand's letters, at first rare, became more and more frequent. They were gloomy, self-pitying; then they were tinged with a hysteria which Mr Biswas immediately understood. He wrote Anand long humorous letters; he wrote about the garden; he gave religious advice; at great expense he sent by air mail a book called *Outwitting Our Nerves* by two American women psychologists. Anand's letters grew rare again. (586)

After his first heart attack, home again from hospital, he writes to Anand again:

He wrote to Anand that he hadn't realized until then what a nice little house it was. But writing to Anand was like taking a blind man to see a view. ... He continued to write cheerful letters to Anand. At long intervals the replies came, impersonal, brief, empty, constrained. (587)

On his relapse a few months later, his wife Shama writes to Anand, but he replies with 'a strange, maudlin, useless letter' (588). This is a highly exaggerated version of the correspondence we can now read, much more severe on the son than the reality of the situation warrants, since in fact there were reproofs for delays in writing on both sides, and there is clearly meaningful and affectionate communication between them. But there is also a sense in which their close identification is recorded in the novel. Mohun Biswas suffers a mental breakdown, which takes the form of a terror of other people. Seepersad Naipaul also had a breakdown of some kind, which he mentions in the letters, in response to Vidya's admission of his own mental problems:

About your troubles ... I should know a good deal about it, for I was the victim of a neurosis myself many years ago. You will perhaps remember our sojourn in Chase Village; and before Chase Village my hard days at your Nanie's, then at Wilderness with Aiknith. (209)

Naipaul didn't know the precise nature of Seepersad's neurosis until he asked his mother, years after writing *A House for Mr Biswas*, and she told him, 'he looked in the mirror one day and couldn't see himself. And he began to scream' (*Finding the Centre* 70). Not knowing this detail when he wrote the novel, Naipaul gave his father-character his own form of neurosis, as he described it to Satti in a letter of June 1952:

I couldn't bear to see anyone. I couldn't bear to read, because it made me think about people; I couldn't go to the cinema; I couldn't listen to the radio. So please try to realise that for me it has been a near-miracle that I can walk in the streets without being afraid that I talk to someone and not feel to run away. (201)

Their anxiety, their desperate ambition, was something father and son shared, and became a responsibility the son felt he had to bear after the father's death, as he acknowledged in *Finding the Centre*:

He never talked to me about the nature of his illness. And what is astonishing to me is that, with the vocation, he so accurately transmitted to me – without saying anything about it – his hysteria from a time when I didn't know him: his fear of extinction. That was his subsidiary 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.

And it was that fear, a panic about failing to be what I should be, rather than simple ambition, that was with me when I came down from Oxford in 1954 and began trying to write in London. (72)

Probably the biggest dichotomy between Naipaul's later life narrative and what is evident in the letters is his attitude to his Trinidad childhood, especially as it related to his writing. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, he describes 'the separation of man from writer' which occurred when he left Trinidad for England in 1950:

And then, but only very slowly, man and writer came together again. It was nearly five years ... before I could shed the fantasies given me by my abstract education. Nearly five years before vision was granted me, quite suddenly one day, when I was desperate for such an illumination, of what my material as a writer might be.

I wrote very simply and fast of the simplest things in my memory. (135)

But in April 1951, he was writing home, advising his father that 'he should begin a novel. He should realise that the society of the West Indies is a very interesting one – one of phoney sophistication. ... Describe the society just as it is – do not explain or excuse or laugh' (87). August 1953, and he is himself writing about Trinidad, it seems: 'My, the stories that I seem to be writing. There is no lack of material. I feel sure a three-month stay in Trinidad would keep me writing for three years' (293). The suddenness of his revelation in 1954, 'that afternoon in the Langham Hotel,' of his 'Port of Spain memories, disregarded until then' (*Finding the Centre* 20) – a 'tract of experience I hadn't before contemplated as a writer' (26), must therefore be exposed as a later adjustment of memory, a dramatic turning point in his career narrative which is, in essence, a fiction.

His distrust of plots stayed with him, though, from that Oxford period. 'Plot,' he told Stephen Schiff in 1994, 'assumes that the world has been explored and now this thing, plot, has to be added on. Whereas I am still exploring the world. And there is narrative there, in every exploration. The writers of plots know the world. I don't know the world yet' (148). However, he may, if he were to re-read his letter of December 1950, wince as the reader does at his youthful arrogance towards another writer who expressed a similar opinion:

I met a bunch of West Indians the other day. ... Selvon was there, with his wife, and Gloria Escoffery. Gloria is a girl who, Harrison tells me, will be somebody one day. From the look of her, I doubt it. She passed around a manuscript of a short story she had written about the race problem. She didn't want me to see it. Then she began talking some rubbish about writing being an exploration.

'I write because I don't understand. I write to explore, to understand.'

Me: 'Surely you're starting from the wrong end. I always thought people understood before they wrote.'

... She was writing a short story to explain the colour problem. ... I said, 'My dear Gloria, why not write a little pamphlet on the colour question, and settle the whole affair?' (45-6)

This gauche assurance is one aspect of the extreme sensitivity that has always characterised Naipaul as a writer and, it seems, as a man. One might imagine that he privately relived this conversation many times with a horrified shudder. His editor, Diana Athill, says that 'he was born with a skin or two too few' (Schiff 141). His great gift is to distil that hypersensitivity, and his compulsion to voice his opinions, in the most serene and elegant prose, which nevertheless manages to convey anxiety and disquiet held, temporarily, at bay.

In 1949, before he left Trinidad, he wrote to Kamla, 'I am longing to see something of life. You can't beat life for the variety of events and emotions' (9). Life, then, was something he felt happened outside Trinidad, something he had to travel to discover. It is not strange that he felt this way: after all, what seventeen-year old does not wish to leave home and start living? The dream of independence and adventure, however, must often have seemed illusory during those years. The double bind of distance from family and poverty must have at times felt crippling, despite the bravado of some of the letters. Problems which could have been solved by a little money, like faulty typewriters, loom large – the first sentence of the first letter in the book is 'I wonder what is the matter with this typewriter' (3), and in May 1952, he announces that 'In August last year, I think, my typewriter was fatally dislocated. You have perhaps already noted that it is only since then that my letters have grown scarce. I find it difficult to write with pen or pencil' (191). Seepersad's excuse for not writing is often a lack of airletter forms. The simplest material lacks and desires, seldom mentioned in later narratives, are invested in these letters with the emotional uncertainties and longings of the correspondents. There are the constant appeals for cigarettes to be sent. Cigarettes represented, for the young Oxford student, a passport to the friendship of his fellow students. And each is always promising to send the other money, although neither have anything to spare, and the smallest accident – broken glasses, new tyres needed for the car – makes the promised gift impossible

after all. These details impress on one the sheer human cost of a young man – really still a boy – striking out from his home, the only world he has ever known, travelling halfway across the world to land full of strange customs and unfamiliar food. He had relatives in London, it is true, but they were hostile, and he soon found ways of managing without their help.

These letters are priceless, invaluable. In fifty years from now, will we be able to live through the early years of struggle of a future great artist in this way? Will there be a record like this for inquisitive readers to devour? Present-day forms of communication are more evanescent. Perhaps there will be collections of email messages, or downloaded chat sessions, but it is hard to imagine that they will have the charm of a correspondence such as this. The question remains, however, of what is the intended audience for this book. It has no index, and the notes are sketchy. The notes would have been made considerably more useful by the simple addition of the reference word from the text. Each person, for example, is only identified in the notes the first time they are mentioned, and with no headwords, they cannot be retraced by a scan of the notes if they are mentioned again, which places more strain on the reader's memory than is reasonable. A biographical index would have been even more useful. This lack of editorial apparatus makes the book frustrating for both the general reader and the scholar. And for the general reader, it is a book which cries out for photographs. Photographs are occasionally sent back and forth with the letters: some of them must be still extant in the Naipaul archive. There is one which has been published several times to illustrate book reviews, showing Seepersad with five of his children, and another of him sitting on the bonnet of his car which appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in January 2000. It is unfortunate that the book did not make use of them.

But it remains a delightful book, an unrivalled source of insight into one of our most important writers, providing all sorts of illumination into the development of his art, and of his personality. For the sake of *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, one is prepared to forgive a great deal. For the sake of the young man revealed in these letters, and also for his beloved father, who suffered and sacrificed day by day for his family's welfare, it will perhaps even be possible for those of his fellow West Indians whom he has enraged with his outspoken refusal to endorse any

nationalist ideals, and with his oft-expressed horror of limited, colonial, 'half-made' societies, to forgive the extraordinarily complex being whom that young man became.

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Note:

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Bio

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