NAIPAUL'S SELF-REFERENTIALITY – FROM THE MARNGIN BACK TO THE CENTER

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Abstract: This paper presents different images of both Naipaul and his work. Its content will start with a general presentation of Naipaul's autobiographical writings that concentrate on self-discovery, identity crisis, and a continual memory from his early childhood to old age, each of which is a related part of the material of Buckley's 'ideal' autobiography. Naipaul's reflections are a mixture of literary critique and professional self-definition. Insightful Naipaul bases his writing on his extensive readings in history, which eventually will be at the very core of his writing. Naipaul's characters are real and historical, especially in his West Indian fiction.

Another part of the paper concentrates on the different shades of meaning and the connotations of both biography and autobiography analysing the similarities and differences between the two as well as the relation between autobiography and memoir.

The main subject of the paper is the "authorized biography" of Naipaul, written by Patrick French. The biographer is dealing with a living subject who did authorize him to write the biography, giving him open access to a huge archive of letters and manuscripts. French does not hesitate to reveal to the audience the controversial, contradictory, and not to easy to capture personality of the writer. In this way, French's book fully fits into the frame of Abrams' definition of biography which should connote "a relatively full account of a particular person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject's activities and experiences" (Abrams 22).

Finally, the conclusions underline the difficulty of placing Naipaul's Indian travelogues into a well-defined genre category.

Keywords: Travel writings, autobiography, biography, memoirs

It is now the time to round up this incursion into the domain of cultural studies. Naipaul's mobility as a traveller neither obsessed with his own past nor enfeebled by other people's needs and woes takes on the force of an argument identifying humanism with the categories of health, strength, and freedom. Naipaul withdraws into baffled uneasiness whenever his Indian subjects show signs of being unfree, even when their forms of bondage follow recognizably appealing human patterns. The nostalgia in the Dalit Panther's recollections of his impoverished and humiliating past, for example, has enough analogy in Western literature and life to seem rather less incomprehensibly pitiable than Naipaul implies when he calls him "the prisoner of an Indian past no one outside could truly understand."

In our approach to Naipaul's Indian trilogy we have considered his travel writings as the unusual, original and difficult-to-define examples of a particular literary genre which I might term as "Naipaulian": an unexpected and more than often intriguing mixture of autobiography, field documentation, and fictional techniques. In the attempt at defining it, we are re-considering several approaches to the genre which formed the essence of our theoretical discourse.

Thus, Paul de Man's seminal essay on autobiography, *Autobiography as De-Facement*, signals the end of autobiography, the genre having been "plagued" by questions it could not answer. Accordingly, when compared with other "major genres" – by which he means fiction (the novel), poetry, and drama – autobiography does not seem to attain what he

calls "aesthetic dignity"; it cannot possibly provide a useful way for the understanding of the text simply because "each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm." ([1])

On the other hand, Lejeune – a remarkable theoretician of the genre – finds it difficult to distinguish between autobiography and autobiographical novel and, as a result, he develops his own understanding of the autobiographical genre, which essentially is (as summarized in Paul John Eakin's*Touching the World*) what he calls "the author-reader contract", or the "formal mark" of it being "the identity posited among author, narrator, and protagonist, who share the same name" (Eakin, 24). In an attempt to distinguish between different kinds of a novel of emergence, Mikhail Bakhtin considers that the biographical (and autobiographical) type

"... takes place in biographical time and passes through unrepeatable, individual stages… Emergence here is the result of the entire totality of changing life circumstances and events, activity and work. Man's destiny is created and he himself, his character, is created along with it." He then opposes the other type that shows a typically repeating path of man's emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality" (Bakhtin, 22).

We could place Naipaul's work between Bakhtin's definition and Jerome H. Buckley's definition of the 'ideal' autobiography, which is a "retrospect of some length on the writer's life and character." As if having Naipaul in mind, Buckley's conclusion is that, in an ideal autobiography contains "a voyage of self-discovery", actually a

"a life-journey confused by frequent misdirections and even crises of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration. It traces through the alert awakened memory a continuity from early childhood to maturity or even to old age" (Buckley, 1970).

One conclusion would be that Naipaul's autobiographical writings concentrate on self-discovery, identity crisis, and a continual memory from his early childhood to old age, each of which is a related part of the material of Buckley's 'ideal' autobiography. And Naipaul commented on his writing process as a process based on intuition, which allowed him "to find the subjects" and he made no secret of his intuitive approach to his subjects: "I have written intuitively. I have an idea when I start, I have a shape; but I will fully understand what I have written only after some years" (*TW*, 6). For Naipaul, a novel is an "investigation of society which reports back to society how it is changing" (King 5). Mustafa remarks that, by "Inaugurating the autobiographical inflection that will come to full measure in the next decade, Naipaul's reflections are a mixture of literary critique and professional self-definition" (Mustafa, 141). Insightful Naipaul bases his writing on his extensive readings in history, which eventually will be at the very core of his writing.

Further, Naipaul develops an imaginative formulation of his vision of fiction through Conrad that leads him to observe, "When art copies life, and life in its turn mimics art, a writer's originality can often be obscured" (Naipaul *Eva Peron*, 233). Bruce King argues that Naipaul's characters are real and historical, especially in his West Indian fiction: "'Man-man' was a well-known character in Port of Spain who has been written about by several Trinidadian authors. *The Mystic Masseur*is based upon an Indian masseur who became a famous Trinidadian politician. Biswas is modelled on Naipaul's family history" (King, 18).

FINAL NOTES:

POSTSCRIPT: *The Indian Way - from Chaguanas to the Bombay TajMahal*

FINAL CONCLUSION: *Naipaul's self-referentiality – from the margin back to the centre*

([1]) Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", in *Modern Language Notes*, 94, 1979, p. 919-30 (qtd. in Anderson, 12).

Considering the different shades of meaning and also the connotations of both biography and autobiography, we come to the conclusion that there are similarities and differences between the two. One similarity is that both of them reveal the life aspects of a particular subject, and depict factual events, and bring the audience closer to the author-character. Then, we are reading a biography if the book is written by someone else about the subject, and an autobiography, if the subject creates the work him/herself. The composer of the work makes the difference.

An interesting example is the already mentioned "authorized biography" of Naipaul, written by Patrick French: in this particular case, the biographer is dealing with a living subject who did authorize him to write the biography, giving him open access to a huge archive of letters and manuscripts. French does not hesitate to reveal to the audience the controversial, contradictory, and not to easy to capture personality of the writer. In this way, French's book fully fits into the frame of Abrams' definition of biography which should connote "a relatively full account of a particular person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject's activities and experiences" (Abrams 22).

Of course, there are the other two instruments which might be used to the purpose of presenting an insight into the mind of the subject: the autobiography and the memoir. There are similarities and differences between the two: the 'auto-' segment of the term sends to the writer's accounts written by himself, and covering all the details in his life – his interaction with his family, circle of personal friends, his involvement in the community actions – up to that particular time of writing. Anything that the author considers useful for the understanding of the general, informative background of his existence will be put into the book.

Memoirs are different, in that they concentrate on the author's personal accounts, written by himself, of events which have, more or less, influenced his existence. There is no particular stress on details. One can establish a parallel between autobiography and the timeline of the events, which does not exactly apply to memoirs, which do not closely follow the chronology, and thus allows the author a certain freedom to gather a number of personal events with an emotional load which had a determining impact on the author's personality and personal development. M. H. Abrams distinguishes between forms of personal accounts such as biography, autobiography, memoir, diary, journal and the like, and draws a clear-cut distinction between *autobiography* – essentially a biography which the author writes about his/her own life, and the *memoir*,

"in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private **diary** or **journal,** which is a day-to-day record of the events in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication." (Abrams, 22, emphasis in the original)

An autobiographical novel is based on the subject's life and personal experiences. It is distinguished from an autobiography and memoir by being partially fiction, in which names, locations are changed and events are dramatically and thematically rewritten with close resemblance to that of the subject's personal experiences. There is one major trait of the autobiographical novel: the protagonist is modelled after the significant subjects and events in the author's life. The most important elements that play important roles in constructing such a novel are: plot, settings, and narration and realism. Citing Wolfreys, "if all books were merely the author's biography retold with the names changed there would be no such thing as fiction" (Wolfreys 88).

The autobiographical novel is different from autobiography in that in the former the subject reconstructs talks and may "describe early life without participating the future, and

can, in principle, evoke the child's experience with complete freshness in itself, without reference to what he is to become" (Roy 136). On the other hand, in a semi-autobiographical novel the protagonist's life and timeline are not quite identical with true events.

I have already stressed the difficulty of placing Naipaul's Indian travelogues into a well-defined genre category. There is another aspect which baffled Naipaul's readers and critics alike: his travelogues in countries of the Third World contain statements about the independent nations of the Indian subcontinent, Africa and South America, which are not always favourable. In "The Rediscovery of India", Zahiricomes to the conclusion that these narratives contain "negative representations of the struggles of these countries in the throes of shedding their colonial deficiencies and moving towards a future that holds greater promises of accomplishment, progress, and self-sufficiency" (Zahiri, 2005).

An explanation may be found in Naipaul's responses as a diasporic writer directed towards such concepts as home, homeland, and native ethos. Even in the case of Naipaul, such responses cannot be homogenous. One reason is that the main feature of the Indian diaspora is not its unity. The distance that each diasporic writer travels in space and time away from his homeland, in a way decides his responses towards both his filiative and affiliative spaces. ([2])

Also the different native backgrounds of the diasporic writers exert a strong influence upon their poetics of negotiation in the alien land. Indian diaspora, spread as it is across space, time and native languages, reveals a range of response towards the homeland, its institutions and nationalist icons. Naipaul, the Indian diasporic writer, encounters different dimensions and realities of his ancestors' native land which, unfortunately, is alien to him. It partly explains his obsessive references to religion, society, politics, and the almost obsessive recurrence of certain motifs in all his writings connected, more or less, to India: mimicry of the West, Gandhism, the response to Islam, colonialism and postcolonialism, the unavoidable, intimate connections between the former colony (India, in this case), and the colonial centre of the former British Empire.

Naipaul's work reveals the author's extensive literary heritage. In his writing he draws on a tradition of displaced writers (James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Joseph Conrad, among others). This said, the literary influences in his work are difficult to delineate. The texts in this study reflect Naipaul's creative engagement with and revisionism of modernist aesthetics. To capture both the subjectivity and sociality of the colonial condition Naipaul enters the spatial, temporal and cultural territories of colonisation through a literary persona who is either directly or indirectly affiliated with the Western literary tradition. He uses his various literary personas and his "extra-traditionalism" to re-inscribe and re-write the English text and English landscape from the migrant's perspective.

In his essay, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes", Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that "canonical texts of the Western literary tradition have been defined as a more or less closed sets of works that somehow speak, or respond to, 'the human condition' and to each other in formal patterns of repetition and revision" (2).Gates implies that canonical texts respond to other texts in the Western literary tradition, and, so creates a historical corpus of

([2])Edward Said develops on the concepts of 'filiation' and 'affiliation' – hence, 'fialiative' and 'affiliative' spaces. The notion of *affiliation* is fully explained in R. Radhakrishnan, *A Said Dictionary* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2012): "Said is keen to celebrate the human as affiliative and not as naturally filiative for the simple reason that the filiative scheme tends to reduce the broadly historically human into umbilical containments such as Hindu, Arab, Muslim, Christian, and so on." Said deals with it in his volume, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

Western Literature. Naipaul enters this literary landscape by inscribing his own displaced, minoritarian and marginal voice onto particular texts from the Anglophone tradition. The move signals a politics of writing in English and within an English literary tradition the migrant figure is compelled to face. As the author-narrator of Naipaul's *A Way in the World* writes, "literature wasn't a neutral subject […] Background entered into it" (89). Thus, Naipaul's concern with the literary is not simply the text as a reified, aesthetic object devoid of political and personal concerns, but is strongly a material object that is part of the world and interfaces across personal and political boundaries.

"Double consciousness" poses a challenge to the reified ethnocentrisms and essentialisms adopted by nationalist discourses both in the West and in its erstwhile colonies. Naipaul is similarly engaged in the rhetoric of nationalistic discourse both in the West and the Third World. Choosing to structure his narrative in the form of a memoir, Naipaul reflects on the sense of dislocation of the colonial subject in the colonial periphery but also the subject's disenchantment with the metropolitan world he had idealised in his fantasy. The narrative elucidates the double discourses and cultural assemblages in which the narrator is located and his feelings of alienation and belonging nowhere. With the loss of home and community, the narrator retreats into a literary world where he can buttress the disorder of his fragmentary life, assert a semblance of order, and atomise moments in his life in order to reach a degree of self-knowledge.

The idea of "home" operates on at least two levels: geographical (physical/spatial locus) and conceptual. On a conceptual level, the notion of home is closely affiliated to culture and society. Nationalism and ideologies of the state seek to create a notion of national belonging that serves to unify the nation, in order to create a singular and united culture, which encourages feelings of belonging, of being "at home". The idea of home, at a more personal and intimate level, is associated with family, with mores, moral and traditional values; this "private" or domestic sphere is shaped by the context in which that "home" is located and vice versa. This boundary between public and the private, as HomiBhabha claims in "The World and the Home", is not as distinct and absolute as has been endorsed by a world-view based upon a binary logic, but overlaps and opens up spaces that are disjunctive, hybrid and ambivalent. Bhabha uses immigrant identities to show how the migrant figure occupies a liminal space and thereby disrupts the dialectic.

In his critical essay on Naipaul's position as exile, Rob Nixon takes issue with the rhetorical way Naipaul uses his marginalized position, claiming that the notion of "writer in exile" or Naipaul's "willed homelessness" is one that is used with poetic license where "Naipaul can trumpet his alienation while implicitly drawing on a secure, reputable tradition of extratraditionalism" ("London Calling" 11). Nixon's argument is premised on the fact that Naipaul has chosen to remain in England and has been since the 1970s, which raises the question of the extent to which the writer be considered an exile, or without nationality, when he holds a British passport and when, in a material sense, Britain provides Naipaul with a home. Whatever Nixon's position, for those who have been long dispossessed of a homeland, the world becomes a place that is transient, and thus the idea of home is always something that is provisional. Furthermore, in an age of mass migrations and transnational movements, the notion of home has become increasingly tenuous and perhaps no longer exists except as an affect of acculturation in the claim of nation and citizen. It is, perhaps, an explanation of

Naipaul's restlessness, and his similitude with Nietzche's wanderer; his condition is one of restlessness, determined by the lack of absolutes. ([3])

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([3])Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Collected Works*. Online edition: <http://www.davemckay.co.uk/philosophy/nietzsche/nietzsche.php?name=nietzsche.1878.humanalltoohuman.zimmern.12>