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CHAPTER V

The Elusive Ideal of Secular Writing: V.S. Naipaul and India

We can forget about the temporal scheme and about the pathos of the oedipal son; underneath, [Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*] deals with the difficulty or, rather, the impossibility of reading and, by inference, with the indeterminacy of literary meaning. If we are willing to set aside the trappings of psychology, Bloom's essay has much to say on the encounter between latecomer and precursor as a displaced version of the paradigmatic encounter between reader and text.

—Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight*

Naipaul's Slant on History

Benjamin Disraeli, a Jew who converted to Anglicanism, was fond of describing himself as the blank page between the Old Testament and the New. It doesn't sound quite as momentous to say it, but there is a Naipaulian correlative: V.S. Naipaul is the blank page between the ethos of British colonialism and that of the postcolonial intellectual. He is at once a latecomer to the colonial world, especially the genre of colonial travel-writing ("Conrad had gone everywhere before me") and a precursor to a new kind of transnational writing,¹ to be taken up and extended by writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Caryl Phillips. And Naipaul is in-between in a more personal way too, influenced by his father's struggles with language and self-representation as well as that of the metropolitan world of writers and publishers he encountered in London. His writings are often strikingly "readerly" in the sense that they quite often focus on characters who are themselves engaged in scenes of reading. But if colonialism and influence are two powerful themes in Naipaul's work, there is also a third, less discussed, site of entanglement in the writing, and that is the tension between Naipaul's secularism (or atheism) and a sense of religious identity as a Hindu. This tangled relationship to religion is hinted at in some of his novels, but is palpably present in his more recent nonfiction works. Needless to say, Naipaul's ambivalent relationship to secularism is closely

¹ On Naipaul's transition from a colonial to a postcolonial sensibility, see Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Nixon reads Naipaul's first work of nonfiction, *The Middle Passage* (1964) as the key work in this regard.

imbricated in both of the other, more familiar, stories of a writer “in between.” Our purpose here is to aim for a balanced look at Naipaul’s controversial comments regarding secularism in India in particular. Naipaul’s anti-secular comments will be explored in detail, but so will aspects of his writing that might paint a more sympathetic portrait. Even after close reading, some aspects of Naipaul’s writerly persona remain troubling and self-contradictory, reminding one that the posture of secularism can at times be abused.

On the matter of secularism in India, Naipaul has made numerous statements that bring his commitment as a secularist into question. Naipaul has usually identified himself as a secularist and a modernist interested in observation and narrative rather than “ideas,” and he generally resists any kind of categorical fixity—whether it be national, religious, or ideological. He begins the “Prologue” to *Beyond Belief*, for instance, with a strong disclaimer in this vein: “This is a book about people. It is not a book of opinion. It is a book of stories.” And he directs the reader to see his nonfiction work specifically as a travel narrative, presuming an aura of objective neutrality:

So in these travel books or cultural explorations of mine the writer as traveler steadily retreats; the people of the country come to the front; and I become again what I was at the beginning: a manager of narrative. In the nineteenth century the invented story was used to do things that other literary forms—the poem, the essay—couldn’t easily do: to give news about a changing society, to describe mental states. I find it strange that the travel form—in the beginning so far away from my own instincts—should have taken me back there, to looking for the story; though it would have undone the point of the book if the narratives were falsified or forced. There are complexities enough in these stories. They are the point of the book; the reader should not look for “conclusions.”²

Note again the directive comment—do not look for arguments in this book, and don’t think of marking my position. But the insistence on the turn to “narrative” rather than “conclusions” nevertheless falls flat, for two reasons. First, Naipaul’s directive Prologue fails to acknowledge the numerous ways in which narratives and arguments can be complementary rather than opposed. And secondly, through his turn here to the travel narrative genre as a kind of alternative to more overtly politicized forms of writing (such as journalism), Naipaul overlooks the numerous ways in which travel narratives themselves have long been ridden with ideological baggage, as a range of postcolonial critics have shown.

Because Naipaul’s non-fiction writings so frequently move between personal and social reflections, this chapter will explore Naipaul’s relationship to religion and secularism at both levels. In terms of broad social issues, Naipaul has recently been accused of being an ally of communalists in India, and his support for the BJP as a political party and the RSS hostility to Islamic civilization in South Asia poses a serious problem for an attempt to claim him as a secularist. For instance, he seemingly endorsed the illegal destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992 by right-wing Hindu mobs. This event led to widespread riots around the country, and more than a thousand deaths. But Naipaul is quoted as saying: “Ayodhya is a sort of passion. Any passion is to

² Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People*, xii.

be encouraged. Passion leads to creativity.”³ Statements such as this are irresponsible, since they could just as easily be used to endorse all manner of extremist religious and political activity. Indeed, one could well imagine an observer saying this of Hitler and the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930s: full of “passionate intensity.”

But this explicitly communal voice in Naipaul’s writing is relatively new. Historically, Naipaul’s hostility was directed at all manner of religious fanaticisms, including Islamic, Hindu, and Christian varieties. While the hostility to Islam and Islamic fundamentalism is now consistent, a close look at Naipaul’s autobiographical writings and his writings on India reveal a strong sense of dislike for Hindu rituals and religious beliefs as well. Along these lines, one thinks of the protagonist of *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), mocking the Brahminical ritualism of his wealthy in-laws soon after marriage: “Idols are the stepping-stones to the worship of the real thing. . . They are necessary only in a spiritually backward society” (Biswas, 130). Mr. Biswas’ dabbling with Hindu reform movements such as the Arya Samaj (closely related to the Brahmo Samaj with which Tagore was associated) leads to a direct confrontation with the family’s hierarchy, and results in humiliation. Similarly, the protagonist of the comic novel *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), Ganesh Ramsumair is an aspiring author and mystical entrepreneur, who learns to mimic the postures of a holy man theatrically and for commercial as well as political advantage. Naipaul has a great deal of fun with Ganesh, nowhere moreso than when he has him author two books in close succession—*What God Told Me*, a religious confession, and *Profitable Evacuations*, an essay on constipation. The juxtaposition of the two radically different titles is Naipaulian comedy at its best: the material world brings mystical idealism back to earth with a jolt. Like Eliot, Naipaul adoption of a secular world-view seems instinctual and ingrained. It’s more a temperament than it is an adopted ideology, and it is so strong that it seems to undercut Naipaul’s recent problematic public comments.

Which brings us back to the Hindu right. Here it’s important to note initially that Naipaul’s positive embrace of the Hindu right may be new, but his hostility to Islamic culture goes back thirty years or more. In books like *India: A Wounded Civilization* and the more recent *Reading and Writing*, Naipaul attacks the history of Mughal dominance in South Asia prior to the British. He argues that the Mughal era was a period of desecration and waste, a kind of dark ages dominated by a religious obsession rather than a flourishing period for arts, business, architecture, and cultural blending. Naipaul dismisses writers like Kabir, Amir Khusrav, Ghalib, and Iqbal, and shrugs at the extravagance of Mughal architecture, posing it against the poverty of those who lived outside the walls of the palaces. In this vein, Naipaul even recoils against the Taj Mahal because of the fact that it may have been built with slave labor: “the Taj is so wasteful, so decadent and in the end so cruel that it is painful to be there for very long. This is an extravagance that speaks of the blood of the people.”⁴ Finally, and most importantly, against the enlightened rule of some Mughal emperors, Naipaul vividly narrates a rather idiosyncratic account of the sacking of the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar in the sixteenth century, where he speculates: “Many men would have been killed; all the talent,

³ Quoted in William Dalrymple, “Sir Vidia Gets It Badly Wrong.” *Outlook India*, March 15, 2004. Accessed online at: <http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20040315&fname=Naipaul+%28F%29&sid=1&pn=1>.

⁴ Quoted in William Dalrymple, “Sir Vidia Gets It Badly Wrong.” (2004)

energy, and intellectual capacity of the kingdom would have been extinguished for generations. The conquerors themselves, by creating a desert, would have ensured, almost invited, their own subsequent defeat by others” (6-7) In fact, Naipaul's vision of a blindly destructive Islamic incursion is not at all accurate, as the historian William Dalrymple shows in an essay in *Outlook India* (“Sir Vidia Gets it Badly Wrong”; March 15, 2004). Dalrymple examines recent scholarship that explores the true complexity of the Hindu civilization at Vijayanagar including its demise, before complicating Naipaul's claims about the character of Indo-Islamic civilization in the late medieval era. On Vijayanagara, Dalrymple draws on the work of Phillip Wagoner, and argues that the city-state was itself to a considerable degree Islamized:

Far from being the stagnant, backward-looking bastion of Hindu resistance imagined by Naipaul, Vijayanagara had in fact developed in all sorts of unexpected ways, taking on much of the administrative, tax collecting and military methods of the Muslim sultanates that surrounded it—notably stirrups, horseshoes, horse armour and a new type of saddle, all of which allowed Vijayanagara to put into the field an army of horse archers who could hold at bay the Delhi Sultanate, then the most powerful force in India. (Dalrymple, 2004)

The interaction between the Muslim “invaders” and the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara was much greater than Naipaul's account allows, extending to the kinds of clothing worn by the Hindu kings there. Moreover, Dalrymple argues that Hindu-Muslim hybridity was a “two way street,” showing the manifold ways in which Islam in the Indian subcontinent adopted elements for Hindu culture and, to some extent, even religion. Most importantly, once the kingdom was defeated by the Delhi sultanate, Hindu arts and crafts were not annihilated by the Mughals, as Naipaul suggests. Instead, the artists were re-employed on major projects at Mughal centers like Bijapur and Fatehpur Sikri, where the detail-work is written in Hindi script rather than Persian, and where Gujarati-Hindu sculpture graces the gardens of the palace. Naipaul's description of the Mughal-Islamic presence in India is, in short, as Dalrymple puts it, “jaundiced,” and this jaundiced hostility has only intensified in Naipaul's recent comments on this and related questions.

Finally, the concern one has with Naipaul's image of the Mughals is also applicable to his two sizable books on Islam outside of India, where he expresses severe, strident criticisms of Islamic history and the Muslim world. For Naipaul, global Islamic fundamentalism amongst the “converted peoples” is especially devastating because it leads to violence against local history, language, and literature. To be fair the characterizations of madmen, prophets, and revolutionaries, alternately as “hysteria” or “fanaticism,” are found in many of Naipaul's works dealing with non-Muslims in Trinidad and Latin America. One thinks, for instance, of the many narratives in his 1994 book *A Way in the World* that foreground ideological or racial obsessions. Or perhaps the explorations of terroristic violence in *Half a Life* and, earlier, *The Killings in Trinidad*. In Naipaul's historical analysis, fanaticism—whether Islamic or ethnic or “postcolonial”—produces rigid convictions again and again ruin the prospect of modernization of backward societies. In the aforementioned *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul describes the dangerous ability of religious partisans to erase history and destroy distinctions in space: Indonesia and Pakistan become extensions of Arabia, and their local histories become debased. But there's some confusion in Naipaul on this point, as the erasure of the past

can also be a sign of modernization (or indeed, secularization).⁵

Even if he harbors certain egregious anti-Muslim sentiments, it is far from clear that Naipaul has ever been a devout Hindu. Indeed, in the very same book where he inveighs against the Mughal Empire, and laments what he sees as a thousand years of cultural and religious subjugation in the subcontinent, Naipaul also robustly attacks Hindu fatalism as it operates in Indian politics in the midst of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. While Naipaul attacks Islam's destructive ferocity, Hinduism's waste lies in its tendency to promote an attitude of passive acceptance, which is encapsulated in the conversion of Mohandas Gandhi's politics into a kind of state religion in independent India. In the domain of literature, Naipaul sees Hindu fatalism most directly expressed in the writing of R.K. Narayan, whose statement that "India will go on" becomes a kind of index to a litany of failures Naipaul sees in early Narayan novels like *Mr. Sampath*, which ends in the eponymous protagonist's withdrawal, following the failure of his various worldly endeavors. Naipaul reads Narayan as resorting to an unfortunate kind of mysticism, which combines a misuse of Gandhi with a timeless, "Hindu" passivity:

Gandhian nonviolence has degenerated into something very like the opposite of what Gandhi intended. For Srinivas nonviolence isn't a form of action, a quickener of social conscience. It is only a means of securing an undisturbed calm; it is nondoing, noninterference, social indifference. It merges with the ideal of self-realization, truth to one's identity. These modern-sounding words, which reconcile Srinivas to the artist's predicament, disguise an acceptance of karma, the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in past lives: so that everything we see is just and balanced, and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves, our future lives.⁶

Here Naipaul is performing somewhat of a tricky operation. He takes a literary narrative written in the 1930s that invokes Gandhi, and applies it to the political situation of the 1970s—as something timeless, though the meaning of Narayan's novel in 1940 and its meaning in 1975 must be two separate things. Another questionable move is the mistranslation of "karma," which strictly speaking refers to deeds and duty; the emphasis on past lives is somewhat of a western misinterpretation of the concept. Karmic fatalism may indeed be an unfortunate state of mind, but it's unclear whether it refers to the western idea of Hinduism of Hinduism per se.

For Naipaul, it becomes clear, the problem is not just Gandhianism in decay, but the continued prevalence of a religious mentality in general, and he develops this in detail in his second book on India, *India: A Wounded Civilization*. Here, Naipaul gives many examples of religious customs and traditions stifling schemes for modernization and development. Gandhianism isn't his primary target so much as Hinduism, though Gandhi

⁵ Amitav Ghosh alludes to the modernism of the new Islamic movements in his Naipaulian nonfiction work, *In an Antique Land*. At one point he encounters an Imam during his studies in Egypt. The Imam can't fathom the idea of the Hindu custom of cremating one's dead, and attacks it as "primitive," much as an unreconstructed western anthropologist might have, fifty years ago: "Why do you allow it? Can't you see that it's a primitive and backward custom? Are you savages that you permit something like that? Look at you: you've had some education; you should know better. How will your country ever progress if you carry on doing these things?" (Ghosh, 1992, 235).

⁶ Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 15.

seems to provide a symbolic alibi for various kinds of archaic beliefs. What's more, Naipaul clearly doesn't like the unmodern aspects of Gandhi himself, though he acknowledges the historical importance of the independence movement he led. The kind of circumscribed, parochial thinking Naipaul criticizes in Narayan's novels is in Gandhi's own writing in the latter's autobiography, *My Experiments in Truth*, and Naipaul fixates on Gandhi's failure to represent his life in London with any degree of specificity:

Though Gandhi spent three years in England, there is nothing in his autobiography about the climate or the seasons, so unlike the heat and monsoon of Gujurat and Bombay; and the next date he is precise about is the date of his departure.

No London building is described, no street, no room, no crowd, no public conveyance. The London of 1890, capital of the world—which must have been overwhelming to a young man from a small Indian town—has to be inferred from Gandhi's continuing internal disturbances, his embarrassments, his religious self-searchings, his attempts at dressing correctly and learning English manners, and above all, his difficulties and occasional satisfactions about food.⁷

In effect Naipaul condemns Gandhi's failure to see the world outside his own circumscribed, ritual-oriented experience. This comment gains force in Naipaul's account because he clearly prides his own travel narratives on just the opposite quality—their ability to see the world as it really is, without personal baggage. And while the critique strikes home, and clearly rhymes with similar kinds of imaginative lapses Naipaul sees in Narayan as well as in the numerous other ways Gandhi's ideas and image have been appropriate in India, this rhetorical success is not the end of the story. For even as he bemoans the corrosive effect of Hindu traditions in public life in independent India, Naipaul's more personal writings concede a continued intimate, if not strictly voluntary, connection to them.

Going Within, Going Back: Naipaul's "Prologue"

In "Prologue to an Autobiography," Naipaul describes his experience of Hinduism as a space of complacent enclosure associated with ritual practice. For Naipaul this is effectively the traditional and ritualized Hinduism of his family life in Trinidad, a theme which recurs often in many Naipaul texts (from *A House for Mr. Biswas*, to the recent essay "Reading and Writing"). It is a religion in the family and of the family, markedly Hindu and even markedly Brahminical. And it is frustrating to Naipaul because it prevents modernization and independence of thought and action, the independence that is essential to defining oneself as a writer. And while Naipaul works hard to distance himself from the baggage of his Hindu background in early books like *An Area of Darkness*, in "Prologue to an Autobiography," that experience presents itself as a kind of blot on Naipaul's secular self.

But at the beginning there was little in the way of ambivalence, just an unblinking hatred of linguistic blindness, inexplicable ceremonies, and his father's "appetite for Hindu speculation":

I came of a family that abounded with pundits. But I had been born an unbeliever. I

⁷ Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 86-87.

took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long, and the food came only at the end. I did not understand the language—it was as if our elders expected that our understanding would be instinctive—and no one explained the prayers or the ritual. One ceremony was like another. The images didn't interest me; I never sought to learn their significance. With my lack of belief and distaste for ritual there also went a metaphysical incapacity, this again a betrayal of heredity, for my father's appetite for Hindu speculation was great. So it happened that, though growing up in an orthodox family, I remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism. What, then, survived of Hinduism in me? Perhaps I had received a certain supporting philosophy. I cannot say; my uncle often put it to me that my denial was an admissible type of Hinduism. Examining myself, I found only that sense of the difference of people, which I have tried to explain, a vaguer sense of caste, and a horror of the unclean.⁸

It's notable that even in this statement of strong unbelief, Naipaul finds himself unable to fully extricate himself from the Hindu fold, as his uncle accepts his rejection as “an admissible type of Hinduism.” Moreover, Naipaul is willing to explore the trace of ritual sensibility that lingers on in his own orientation to the material world. He goes on explain his revulsion at mundane practices he finds to be unclean:

It still horrifies me that people should put out food for animals on plates that they themselves use; as it horrified me at school to see boys sharing popsicles and Palates, local iced lollies; as it horrifies me to see women sipping from ladles with which they stir their pots. This was more than difference; this was the uncleanliness we had to guard against.⁹

In effect, Naipaul is admitting the unconscious power of certain taboo behaviors that have the same force on him as on any orthodox Hindu. He is not trying to exorcise himself of the feelings. Rather, he is conceding that he is helpless to his feeling of repulsion at the sight of lollipop-sharing or ladle-sipping—while affirming that he continues to find these practices repulsive. To contemporary sociologists of religion like Talal Asad, these confessions of the body are as much “religion” as a conscious declaration of faith – religion as a disciplinary practice of the body, or a habitus¹⁰.

In a later chapter of *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul credits Gandhi with being able to see the ills of Indian society. This might seem odd given Naipaul's bitterness about Gandhi in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, and indeed there seem to be some claims about Gandhi in this work that are contradicted by his later work. But Naipaul is driving at a different point in *An Area of Darkness*. Here, he argues that Gandhi was able to see India clearly, in large part because he too was an outsider:

He looked at India as no Indian was able to; his vision was direct, and this directness was, and is, revolutionary. He sees exactly what the visitor sees; he does not ignore the obvious. He sees the beggars and the shameless pundits and the filth

⁸ Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 32-33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ See Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* for an example of an anthropological approach to religion beyond the (Christian-centered) orientation to expressions of “belief.” Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

of Banaras; he sees the atrocious sanitary habits of doctors, lawyers, and journalists. He sees the Indian callousness, the Indian refusal to see. No Indian attitude escapes him, no Indian problem; he looks down to the roots of the static, decayed society. And the picture of India which comes out of his writings and exhortations over more than thirty years still holds: this is the measure of his failure.

He saw India so clearly because he was in part a colonial. He finally settled in India when he was forty-six, after spending twenty years in South Africa. There he had seen an Indian community removed from the setting of India; contrast made for clarity, criticism and discrimination for self-analysis. He emerged a colonial blend of East and West, Hindu and Christian.¹¹

For Naipaul, the problem isn't so much the Hindu religion as it is a generalized sense that Indian society is thoroughly wiped out. It's Gandhi's experiences abroad that enable him to inject fresh ideas into the social fabric. Some of those ideas—the Gandhian emphasis on compassion, and respect for the downtrodden—clearly come from the Christian context:

It needed the straight simple vision of the West; and it is revealing to find, just after his return from South Africa, how Gandhi speaks Christian, Western, simplicities with a new, discovering fervour; 'Before the Throne of the Almighty we shall be judged, not by what we have eaten nor by whom we have been touched but by whom we have served and how. Inasmuch as we serve a single human being in distress, we shall find favour in the sight of God.' The New Testament tone is not inappropriate. It is in India, and with Gandhi, that one can begin to see how revolutionary the now familiar Christian ethic must once have been.¹²

Naipaul isn't implying that Gandhi had actually converted to Christianity, but rather that his "ethic" is informed by his exposure to Christian rhetoric. The argument seems a bit speculative, for while Gandhi certainly knew quite a number of devout Christians in England, he quotes many different scriptural traditions freely in his various essays and speeches.

Whether he is arguing that India desperately needed a crypto-Christian Gandhi to come in as an "outsider" in order to shake up the old religious mores of Hindu society, or that Gandhi himself had fallen prey to a kind of religious fanaticism, it's clear that Naipaul's approach lacks symmetry. There is no shade in the face of the Naipaulian gaze; all the societies he studies seem equally symptomatic. Moreover, there is a steadfast sense that religion is responsible for the slow, troubled emergence of real modernity in the Indian outlook, and that religious practices are so engrained as to be unchangeable.

Naipaulians Against Naipaul: Amitav Ghosh and Amitava Kumar

Greater symmetry with regard to religion specifically can be found in the work of writers who have acknowledged the influence of Naipaul on their development as writers, especially Amitav Ghosh and Amitava Kumar. Along with symmetry, there is a clear

¹¹ Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 73.

¹² Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 74.

sense of mission in these writers' works that challenges Naipaul's passivity. For some Indian literary secularists, at least, the task of the writer is not merely to diagnose the problem but to participate in some fashion in resolving it.

Ghosh both acknowledges Naipaul and distances himself from him in an essay on communalism and the responsibility of the writer that he wrote in the wake of the deadly riots that took place in Delhi in 1984. The essay was written in 1995, and reprinted in Ghosh's recent volume of essays, *Incendiary Circumstances*:

Years before, I had read a passage by V.S. Naipaul that has stayed with me ever since. I have never been able to find it again, so this account is from memory. In his incomparable prose, Naipaul describes a demonstration. . . . To his surprise, the sight fills him with an obscure longing, a kind of melancholy; he is aware of a wish to go out, to join, to merge his concerns with theirs. Yet he knows he never will; it is simply not in his nature to join crowds.

For many years I read everything of Naipaul's I could lay my hands on; I couldn't have enough of him. I read him with the intimate appalled attention that one reserves for one's most skillful interlocutors. It was he who first made it possible for me to think of myself as a writer, working in English.¹³

In a way this is a very Naipaulian passage. For Naipaul himself frequently marks the turning points and literary figures who made it possible for him to conceive of himself as a writer. Just as Naipaul read Conrad and wanted to do what Conrad did, Ghosh reads Naipaul and wants to do what Naipaul does. But with a difference:

I remembered that passage because I believed that I too was not a joiner, and in Naipaul's pitiless mirror I thought I saw an aspect of myself rendered visible. Yet as this forlorn little group marched out of the shelter of the compound, I did not hesitate for a moment: without a second thought, I joined.¹⁴

This is a key moment for Ghosh—one of the critical ethical revelations that informs his project as both secular and ethical. For Ghosh, there is no contradiction in choosing the life of the detached, secular writer while also contributing to movements that further the cause of social justice.

And yet, at the same time Ghosh's novels and nonfiction books have responded to the challenge of identifying as a fully secular being in the South Asian context. Here religious identity is personal—it is marked in one's name, in the texture of one's family life, and of course, on the body. Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land* both contain powerful revelations of the intimacy of both religious identity and the "veil" it casts over secular self-definition. For the secular intellectual at the contemporary moment, Ghosh argues, there is always a certain anxiety about the failure of one's own secularity, which comes from within:

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe... It is a fear that comes out of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand

¹³ Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances*, 197.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *Incendiary Circumstances*, 198.

million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world-- not language, not food, not music-- it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.¹⁵

For Ghosh, the aspiration to secularity is perpetually fraught in spaces where religious identity is always associated in some way with violence. Whether it is Sikhs in 1984 or Hindus in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1964, the friend or neighbor can instantly be recoded as a communal enemy. And given that instability, the “war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (the war with one’s neighbour and oneself) forces the secular intellectual to consider the ways he himself is implicated in a social order whose secularism continues to be contingent.

Another difficulty with secularism besetting writers in the South Asian context is the problem of elitism. The recent surge in communal sentiments has been accompanied by an unprecedented shake-up of the political system. The old Nehruvian Congress Party structure—controlled by English-speaking, “secular” elites—has been replaced by a much more tumultuous multi-party political landscape, in which Communists and the Hindu right have emerged as major players. In such an environment, English speaking writers in particular have to acknowledge that their distance from the new mass-movements is partly a function of their elite background. Amitava Kumar responds to this problem in particular at several moments in his recent quasi-Naipaulian travelogue, *Husband of a Fanatic*. In the following passage, he defends his interest in a certain Hindu extremist named Jagdish Barotia:

I am not sure whether I would ever, or for long, envy Mr. Barotia’s passion, but I find myself sympathetic to his perception that the English-speaking elite of India has not granted the likes of him a proper place under the Indian flag. Once that thought enters my head, I am uneasily conscious of the ways in which I found myself mocking Mr. Barotia’s bigotry by noticing his ungrammatical English. Like Mr. Barotia, I was born in the provinces and grew up in small towns. For me, the move to the city meant that I learnt English and embraced secular, universal rationality and liberalism. Mr. Barotia remained truer to his roots and retains his religion as well as a narrower form of nationalism that went with it. His revenge on the city was that he also became a fanatic.¹⁶

For the cosmopolitan Indian writer from a non-cosmopolitan background, the experience of resentment that so drives Mr. Barotia is not so terribly alien. Kumar here marks his secularism as clearly tied to the metropolitan life he chose to live, and he can see how Mr. Barotia’s parochial Hindu chauvinism might have been his own fate had circumstances been different. Kumar sees the commonalities he has with his “fanatic” neighbour; this is an admission that neither Naipaul nor the left critics of communalism are keen to admit.

Of course, revelations like these about the challenge of sustaining a secular outlook in the face of changing discursive norms in the Indian subcontinent are nothing compared to the personal challenge Kumar faces as the husband of a Pakistani Muslim woman. These challenges are political, familial, and in some ways extremely intimate—

¹⁵ Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 204.

¹⁶ Kumar, *Husband of a Fanatic*, xxiv.

and they force Kumar to confront the limits of his sense of religious identity. For in order for his wife's family to accept the marriage, he is required to nominally convert to Islam and take on a Muslim name. The strangeness of the experience leads Kumar to the following Naipaulian meditation:

There was a phrase of V.S. Naipaul's, from his novel *The Mimic Men*, that came back to me, '... the convert, suspect to both the faithful and the infidel.' It was a precise, evocative description, and it touched on a fear inside me, a fear that arises from the feeling that one does not belong anywhere. But there was no danger of my claiming that space for myself; I did not think of myself as religious. Mine was a more secular claim about how different religions are a part of our lives and that, especially in the context of the Indian subcontinent, the fact of mixed influences as well as historical co-existence is indubitable. I wanted to echo the sentiment that I had heard voiced by the writer Intizar Husain: 'I am a Muslim, but I always feel that there is a Hindu sitting inside me. . . I still feel that I am an exile who wanders between Karbala and Ayodhya.' Husain was born in India and migrated to Pakistan after Partition. He lives in Lahore and is one of Pakistan's leading writers. I was struck by the beauty of his words, and his sense of sublime rootlessness.¹⁷

In some sense, Kumar's act of conversion (which is "real" because of its social consequences—even if it is not the sincere conversion of a devout believer) is the most radical experience of secularity imaginable. Like Daniel Deronda in Eliot's novel, Kumar has to confront the limits of his intellectual sense of tolerance as he experiences a change in his fundamental social identity through the experience. The "sublime rootlessness" he sees in Intizar Husain's words is a powerful metaphor for both the deep implication of Hindu and Indo-Islamic cultures in the Indian subcontinent, and the challenges Kumar faces as he travels across it.

Though both Kumar and Ghosh affirmatively invoke Naipaul in their introspective writings, their articulation of a troubled secular literary sensibility differs from Naipaul's in one important way. Both Kumar and Ghosh are both directly self-conscious about the limits of their ability to be utterly detached. At times, the writer is implicated merely by the accident of a name or heredity. But even where the "joining" the cause of social justice or secularism is seen as purely elective, the disavowal of total detachment is one of the key components of literary secularism. Though Naipaul experiences much of the same doubt and internal struggle described by Ghosh and Kumar, he insists upon his detachment despite evidence to the contrary. For Naipaul, this detachment is tied up with a discourse of writing as a profession of "purity" or "nobility," but upon reading closely one sees that these terms are themselves derived from religious experience.

Secularism in a Sentence: Naipaul's Writerliness

As I have suggested, Naipaul's early non-fiction autobiographical engagements with Hinduism paint a rather more complex portrait of his relationship to Hinduism than his chauvinistic comments might lead us to expect. We could just as easily turn to one of the autobiographical fictions (such as *A House for Mr. Biswas*), since the line between

¹⁷ Ibid., 210.

fiction and autobiography is frequently arguable: so many of the plots revolve around events like the discovery of literacy, the hunger for education, the explosion of print-culture, father-son conflicts, and of course the moment of departure from the marginal society for the metropolitan center. But for the purposes of simplicity, it might make sense to stay with a text that is clearly marked as autobiographical, Naipaul's 1982 "Prologue to an Autobiography." And within that text, which is roughly about 70 pages in length, I'll focus on the question of religion through Naipaul's concept of the sentence. For Naipaul, it is the sentence that is the key to the existence of the writer, the entity that defines him over anything else. I'll examine just a few carefully crafted but telling sentences where Naipaul foregrounds this atomistic core of writerly effort, with an eye to the growing incursion of the Hindu background into the scene of writing. The first sentence describes Naipaul's situation as he wrote the very first sentence of his first book, *Miguel Street*, in the early 1950s:

It is now nearly thirty years since, in a BBC room in London, on an old BBC typewriter, and on smooth, 'non-rustle' BBC script paper, I wrote the first sentence of my first publishable book.¹⁸

By placing himself so pronouncedly at the BBC, Naipaul establishes himself at one of the great centers of the modern media, and as completely separate from his Trinidad background. Note how often he repeats the acronym in the sentence above: "BBC room" (secular space), "BBC typewriter" (secular equipment, modern technology)¹⁹, and "BBC script paper" (modern medium). The BBCentrism of this passage raises a question about authorship—did the BBC write the novel, or did Naipaul? The sentence itself answers, with its turn to the declarative: "...I wrote the first sentence." But context returns subtly—it's not the first sentence of his first short story ever, but the first sentence of his first publishable book. This first sentence of Naipaul's "Prologue to an Autobiography" isn't the beginning of Naipaul's story, so much as it is the beginning—or prologue—to a publication history.

Even though it is evidently the BBC that makes Naipaul's jump into a career as a writer possible, the actual act of writing requires the implication of oneself in one's own history. As Naipaul writes later in the same essay (the theme is echoed often), "To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of self-knowledge" (34).

It turns out that the key to self-knowledge for Naipaul here as elsewhere is his father, and as the "Prologue" moves forward it comes to feel more like a post-script to his father's career than as the prologue to his own. It is Naipaul's father who transmits the "vocation" of writing to his son. And it is his father's failure as a writer that is the core of the story here, just as it is in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The reasons for failure²⁰ are

¹⁸ Naipaul, *Finding the Center*, 3.

¹⁹ It's intriguing to think of the centrality of the typewriter here, given its contested status in the halls of the 'serious' writer in 1952. Elsewhere Naipaul talks about how he found using a typewriter very natural. In this he wasn't especially unusual, but perhaps the typewriter belies his obsession with writing as a "noble thing," as a vocation separate from all others.

²⁰ This failure is also everywhere evident in the volume of recently published letters called *Between Father and Son*. Seeparsad Naipaul repeatedly suggests they collaborate on volumes, or asks his son in London for help in finding publishers. But Vidia clearly has his eyes on his own career.

multiple and somewhat overdetermined—a mix of colonial marginality, lack of formal education, and the pressures of Hindu family life. What is not mentioned is how the son, who inherited his father's vocation, managed to avert his father's fate.

What is striking in all of this is the importance of the Hindu religious and social framework to Naipaul despite his avowed distance from the religion. To begin with, Naipaul's father was expected to become a Pandit, and his turn to writing seems to be marked as an only partial escape from that calling: "It was a version of the pundit's vocation" (54). Writing, as a form of solitary and detached work that nevertheless carries the burden of representation for an entire community, does seem to be a possibly secularized version of a priesthood. But how secular is it? Naipaul's father signs his weekly column with the *Trinidad Guardian* with the byline, "The Pandit," and writes more or less consistently about the Hindu community in Chaguanas. Naipaul also repeatedly describes his father's career in terms of a kind of spiritual quest²¹, which is in some sense continued in Naipaul:

From the earliest stories and bits of stories my father read to me, before the upheaval of the move, I had arrived at the conviction—the conviction that is at the root of so much human anguish and passion, and corrupts so many lives—that there was justice in the world. The wish to be a writer was a development of that. To be a writer as O. Henry was, to die in mid-sentence, was to triumph over darkness. And like a wild religious faith that hardens in adversity, this wish to be a writer, this refusal to be extinguished, this wish to seek at some future time for justice, strengthened as our conditions grew worse in the house on the street.²²

It can't be an accident that Naipaul's metaphor for the desire to be a writer he cultivated in the wake of his father's failure is of "wild religious faith that hardens in adversity." Writing is for Naipaul the surest means of asserting his individualism and leaving a mark upon the world, but in some ways the desire for it follows the contour of profound religious faith.

The root of Naipaul's father's failure, in this account, is his incomplete disavowal of his religious identity as a Pandit. Some of the passages in the "Prologue" describing his father's relationship to religion resemble the sections of *A House for Mr. Biswas* above, in that they describe the tension between a reformer affiliated with the Arya Samaj and his orthodox family:

The family, with all its pundits, were defenders of the orthodox Hindu faith. My father wasn't. Later-- just ten years later-- when we were living in Port of Spain and our Hindu world was breaking up, my father was to write lyrically about Hindu rituals and Indian village life. . . . He belonged, or was sympathetic, to the reforming movement known as the Arya Samaj, which sought to make of Hinduism a pure philosophical faith. The Arya Samaj was against caste, pundits, animistic ritual. It was against child marriage; it was for the education of girls. ("Prologue," *Finding the Center*, 66)

²¹ "The Hindu who wants to be a pundit has first to find a guru. My father, wanting to learn to write, found MacGowan. It was MacGowan, my father said, who had taught him how to write; and all his life my father had for MacGowan the special devotion the Hindu has for his guru." (*Finding the Center*, 55).

²² *Ibid.*, 31-32.

But as with Mr. Biswas in Naipaul's semi-autobiographical novel (and as with Gora in Tagore's novel), reformers must eventually decide on which side of the fence they stand. In Tagore's *Gora*, the protagonist is forced to leave the fold of his conservative milieu once his heritage is revealed, but in Naipaul's father's case, what follows is humiliation that leads to psychic dissolution.

In the "Prologue," the key moment for his father Seepersad Naipaul's struggle with his identity comes when his father begins to be pressured to participate in a goat sacrifice. Initially he responds lightly, and goes so far as to publish a satirical story on the trend of Trinidadian villagers to sacrifice goats in response to paralytic rabies, rather than have their cattle vaccinated. But then he receives a threatening letter from family members demanding that he participate in the ceremony, and quietly gives in. The ritual sacrifice in which he participates draws him into the world he had tried to reject against his will:

My father. . . is, it might be said, a little to one side: a man who (unknown to Rodin) had been intended by his grandmother and mother to be a pandit, now for the first time going through the priestly rites; a man in white, garlanded like the goat with hibiscus, offering sacrificial clove-scented fire to the image of the goddess, to the still living goat, to the onlookers, and then offering the severed goat's head on a brass plate.²³

Here Naipaul's father is ostensibly being honored for his participation—he is garlanded like a pandit. But beneath the screen of white, the aspiring journalist is roughly in the position of the goat, forced to acknowledge the authority of a power outside of himself. The authority can be described as Kali, as his patriarchal family hierarchy—or, in a Durkheimian reading, as both²⁴. In a way it's not the goat whose sacrifice is being foregrounded here, but his own. In Naipaul's version of the event, the embarrassment of primitive ritual linked to the slaughter of the goat becomes simply a side-story to his father's failure to insist upon his right to be modern, to define himself separately from the expectation of the Hindu social structure. Needless to say, within Naipaul's nuclear family the incident is entirely suppressed; Vidia Naipaul, the son, only finds out about it when an American journalist sends him a clipping many years later. This incident, central to Naipaul's "Prologue," demonstrates the repeated marginalizations of the subject from his own narrative. This marginalization consists at one level of Seepersad Naipaul forced to participate in a Hindu ritual, to be Hindu against his wishes and contrary to his idea of himself as free from religion. But it is also echoed formally in the grammar of the text as a whole, from the title ("Prologue to an Autobiography") to the character that is at its center (Naipaul's father takes over the text of the autobiography). Seepersad's marginalization in life seems to prefigure Naipaul's marginalization in narrative.

Naipaul reads this incident as the beginning of his father's fall into what he calls "hysteria" ("He looked in the mirror one day and couldn't see himself. And he began to scream" [70]). The failure of the writer to sustain his secularism in an adverse situation leads necessarily to his failure as a writer, and even as a psychically coherent individual. If Naipaul's father is at the displaced center of Naipaul's autobiographical narrative, how then does Naipaul himself manage to assert a secular persona as a writer? At some point

²³ Naipaul, *Finding the Center*, 69.

²⁴ Emile Durkheim explores the idea of "effervescence" in the conclusion to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

in this transmission the form and the content of the message has undergone a fundamental transformation. Sometimes the text suggests that the transmission is only partial and contingent, as in the following passage where Naipaul acknowledges the transmission of hysteria alongside the vocation as a whole:

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 the 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.²⁵

But more often than not Naipaul simply glosses over the break between his father and himself, erases or defers the "fear of extinction" referred to here in the interest of a career, a publishing history, and the stamp of BBC authority. The inconsistency makes it difficult to escape the conclusion that the hysteria he attributes both to his father and to himself is an inevitable by-product of his marginal origins. But the anguish of marginality and the authoritarian demands of Hindu family life and ritual are thoroughly commingled. Moreover, the attempt to escape the Hindu world, and become a writer, is repeatedly marked as a version of nothing other than a religious vocation. And finally, even that limited form of self-determination is undermined by the coerced goat sacrifice described in the text.

The epigram with which I began this chapter was Paul de Man's review of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. And the chain of readers inherent in my use of De Man (De Man reading Bloom reading how great writers read each other) seems fitting to my reading of Naipaul as well. In Naipaul, as in Bloom, the world is full of writers learning to read, and whose anxiety stems from the fear that the only story they have to tell is someone else's. In Naipaul the familial anxiety takes on a unique hue because Naipaul's father is both the model of the secular writer whose story becomes the stuff of the son's fiction (and autobiography), while at the same time he is the unwitting transmitter of the pre-modern bubble of Hindu ritualism. And though it may be tempting to dwell on the themes of broken paternalism and familial psychology that may be tied to Naipaul's use of the word "hysteria," what is really at issue here (as De Man argues with regard to Bloom) is the relationship between reader and text. In Naipaul, the reader seems to desire secularism, while the text (the precedent) demands religious authority. And if reader-text relationship has to be one of indeterminacy and negotiation in De Man, it may be so here as well. In Naipaul, I have been arguing, unconscious religious influence competes with fierce acts of secular refusal—of reading against the religious grain.

²⁵ Naipaul, *Finding the Center*, 72.