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William Vincent

"The world is what it is;
men who are nothing,
who allow themselves to become nothing,
have no place in it."

Although *A Bend in the River* is generally taken to be novel whose subject is contemporary Africa, and while I have no wish to suggest that that assumption is not at least partially true, we should note that the opening sentence suggests a far broader subject matter--the world as it is, or, rather, as it has been and is becoming. In short, the novel is about recent history, but also about history itself and the process of making history.

In this light also, I think, we should recognize that it is not simply from the location of the nameless city in which most of the action occurs that the novel takes its title. The river, I think, is history itself, and the bend in the river is history in the process of changing direction.

The symbolic value of the recurring image of the water hyacinth reinforces this idea:

. . . in the local language there was no word for it. The people still called it 'the new thing' or 'the new thing in the river,' and to them it was another enemy. Its rubbery vines and leaves formed thick tangles of vegetation that adhered to the river banks and clogged up waterways. It grew fast, faster than men could destroy it with the tools they had. . . . Night and day the water hyacinth floated up from the south, seeding itself as it travelled." [p. 46]

Throughout the novel, the water hyacinth, this new thing in the river, continues to float down the river, emblematic of the new thing in the flow of history, a change that grows "faster than men can destroy it with the tools they have."

If, as these images and the repeated references to time, history, and the making of history suggest, the novel is about the author's sense of history and his belief that we are living at one of those critical moments when history changes course, the question which arises is what is the nature of this bend in the river of time as Naipaul conceives it. First of all, I think that there is no mystery as to where he thinks the "new thing in the river" comes from: it comes from the Third World, and specifically from Africa itself. Since Ken Harrow deals with the African dimension of the novel in the accompanying essay, I shall not discuss that side. Nor will I discuss in detail Naipaul's apparent prescription for individual survival in the changing world as considered by Surjit Dulai. My own charge here is discuss Naipaul's vision of the West--European/American civilization--and its role in the change that is taking place.

For, again although the novel is considered to be about Africa, it is also very much about European civilization. It is, for example, not about a single city at the bend of a river, but about two such cities, the second being London--located at a great bend in the Thames. Although the nameless African city dominates the novel, there can be no doubt, I think, that Naipaul intends to suggest that London, no less than the African city, will be affected by the "new thing" clogging the course of history.

And there is still another European city whose ghost is conjured up at different points in the novel, and that is ancient Rome, also situated at the bend of a river. It is Rome which gave Africa its name, and whose description of Africa serves as the motto for the lycée which Ferdinand attends--*semper aliquid novi*, "always something new." "Out of Africa always something new," the Romans said. The motto, so inappropriate for the lycée of colonial days, becomes perfectly appropriate for the resurrected lycée, producing the new men of Africa's future. It also suggests again the theme of change, of the "new thing in the river." Out of Africa always something new.

Another Latin phrase, from Vergil this time, had been applied by the colonials to the steamer service. "*Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*. 'He approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union.'" [p. 62] Salim is incredulous when the words are translated for him: "I was staggered," he says. "Twisting two-thousand-year-old words to celebrate sixty years of the steamer service from the capital! Rome was Rome. What was this place? . . ."

[p.63] The answer to his question is, of course, very simple, although at this early point in the novel he does not as yet see it. What was this place? A city, like Rome, at a bend in the river. A city which, as Indar realizes about London, . . . "wasn't simply a place that was there, as people say of mountains, but that it had been made by men. . . ." [p. 151] And if Rome is the great city of the past and London the great city of the present, perhaps the African city is the great city of the future. Perhaps Father Huismans is at least correct in his belief of the African city that "Out of simple events beside that wide muddy river, out of the mingling of peoples, great things were to come one day." [p. 64]

All of this reinforces my understanding of the novel as a meditation about history and the difference between history as the unmediated flow of time and events and history as a discipline, or rather history as a product of a particular mental construct. ". . . all men live in constructs," says Indar. "Civilization is a construct." [155] And it is those who project their particular construct upon history who control history.

Naipaul leaves no doubt that recent history has been a product of the European construct of civilization. During the colonial period, the Europeans imposed their own sense of history upon Africa, and, by extension, the world. "All I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean," says Salim early in the novel, "I have gotten from books written by Europeans. . . . Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away. . . ." [pp. 11-12] It was the Europeans who taught Africa to see itself in a new light: thus, the Arab dhow is invested with picturesqueness by the stamps bearing its likeness issued by the British administration. Thus, too, Father Huismans, in the hope of preserving the "true Africa" which "is about to die," [p. 64] invests his collection of masks with a European significance merely by collecting and displaying them. "It's a thing of Europeans, a museum," remarks the African "new man," Ferdinand. [p. 83] And just as the Europeans decide just what among African objects is picturesque or "artistic" or representative of the "true Africa," so do they decide who among the African peoples are most interesting or worthiest--for example the idealization of the tall warrior men of the forest.

Naipaul makes it clear that for him, this European construct is artificial and has no claim to the "truth": "Was there a truth outside men?"

Didn't men make the truth for themselves?" [p. 124] Before the novel begins, Salim has realized that European historicizing is false and hypocritical:

If it was Europe that gave us on the coast some idea of our history, it was Europe, I feel, that also introduced us to the lie. [We] had never lied about ourselves . . . because we never assessed ourselves and didn't think there was anything for us to lie about. . . . But the Europeans could do one thing and say something quite different; and they could act in this way because they had an idea of what they owed to their civilization. It was their great advantage over us. The Europeans wanted gold and slaves like everybody else; but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves. Being an intelligent and energetic people, and at the peak of their powers, they could express both sides of their civilization; and they got both the slaves and the statues. [pp. 16-17]

The Europeans' construct of history and their place in it is, then, at once both grandiose and false, like their administration: "There had been order once, but that order had had its own dishonesties and cruelties--that was why the town had been wrecked." [p. 58] Like the lycée and the steamer line with their Latin mottoes, like the "ruined cathedral, beautifully overgrown and looking antique, like something in Europe. . . ," [p. 115] the tangible signs of colonialist Europe's sense of history have their grandeur; but it is the essential falseness behind the grandeur which predominates in the end.

Father Huismans is the embodiment of this European, colonialist construct of history. To him the Latin phrase, *misericordie probat populos et foedera jungi*

. . . were words that helped him to see himself in Africa. He didn't simply see himself in a place in the bush; he saw himself as part of an immense flow of history. He was of Europe; he took the Latin words to refer to himself. . . . He had his own idea of Europe, his own idea of his civilization. . . .

He wasn't resentful, as some of his countrymen were, of what had happened to the European town. He wasn't wounded by the insults that had been offered to the monuments and the statues. It wasn't because he was more ready to forgive, or had a better understanding of what had been done to the Africans. For him, the destruction of the European town, the town that his countrymen had built, was only a temporary setback. Such things happened when something big and new was being set up, when the course of history was being altered. [p. 63]

Huismans, then, represents the "manifest destiny" historical sense of European imperialism. Thus, in his belief, "The Arabs had only prepared the way for the mighty civilization of Europe." [p. 64] Even Huismans' "love" for Africa is simply the love of the imperialist historiographer for his "subject"--the subject which exists only to serve a preordained destiny, to "prove" the truth of a predetermined construct.

Naipaul, I think, sees Father Huismans as suffering from a delusion of cultural grandeur, but it may be no more than the same foolish grandeur as he sees in the ruined cathedral or the ruined faubourg. Huismans may appear to be a better representative of western culture than the others we see in the early pages of the book--the Belgian lady whose identity is established only by the "junk" she has left behind in Salim's apartment, and the young Belgian teacher who gets sick and goes home because he cannot eat the local food--but, in fact, Huismans suffers from the same deficiency as they do: like the other Europeans, he is completely out of touch with the reality of Africa.

Consider, for example, what we know of the Belgian lady who left at the time of independence. She has left behind her a painting of a European port and similar paintings which brought "a touch of Europe and home and art, another kind of life, to this land of rain and heat and big-leaved trees--always visible, if blurred, through the white-painted window panes." [p. 42] This, I think, is Naipaul's indictment of the whole European colonialist mental construct: they tried to shut out the reality of Africa, to hide it behind white-painted window panes. The blurred vision of Africa caused by the imperialist mental construct persists in post-colonial Africa in men like Huismans and in places like the Hellenic Club where, ". . . though there was no rule about it, we never talked of local politics." [p. 185]

Blurred vision persists even among those who were its victims--the Africans themselves. Thus, ". . . for Zabeth, as for many Africans of her generation, education was something only foreigners could give," [p. 36] and Ferdinand is trained at the revived lycée, run by Father Huismans, and at the "Domain" on the site of the ruined faubourg, staffed by Europeans and Americans like Raymond. A similar kind of mentality causes Indar, at India House in London, to fall into "a colonial rage":--"a rage with the people who had allowed themselves to be coralled into a foreign fantasy." [p. 146]

The colonized peoples may have destroyed the most visible symbols of the imperialist fantasy, they may have toppled the statues, burnt the cathedral, and overthrown the administration; they may even destroy Father Huismans, ironically dead at the hands of the "true" Africa he professed to "know" and "love." But they cannot so easily get rid of the historical construct itself:

Europe no longer ruled. But it still fed us in a hundred ways with its language and sent us its increasingly wonderful goods, things which, in the bush of Africa, added year by year to our idea of who we were, gave us that idea of our modernity and development, and made us aware of another Europe--the Europe of great cities, great stores, great buildings, great universities. To that Europe only the privileged or the gifted among us journeyed. . . . [p. 229]

Throughout the novel, there is an apparent appreciation of western technology and goods. Salim, for example, sells "Not essentials, not luxuries; but things that made ordinary life easier . . . to people looking for a large vessel that wouldn't taint water and food, and wouldn't leak, imagine what a blessing an enamel basin was!" [p. 3] Later, he remarks:

When we wanted to speak of the doers and makers and the inventors, we all--whatever our race--said 'they'. . . . 'They're making cars that will run on water.' 'They're making television sets as small as a matchbox.' The 'they' we spoke of in this way were very far away, so far away as to be hardly white. They were impartial, up in the clouds, like good gods. We waited for their blessings, and showed off those blessings--as I had shown off my cheap

binoculars and my fancy camera to Ferdinand--as though we had been responsible for them. [pp. 44-45]

But, notice that here, unlike the reference to the enamel basin, Naipaul chooses to list things which are essentially useless luxuries, like the swimming pools that they all like to have but which, even before they become overgrown, nobody really ever used. Isn't he suggesting that here is simply another version of the imperialist construct, the historical fantasy of "Europe," the source of "increasingly wonderful goods," "of great cities, great stores, great buildings, great universities?" Couldn't Salim's description of "the doers and makers and inventors" have applied equally to the doers, makers, and administrators of colonial imperialism? "They were impartial, up in the clouds, like good gods."

In other words, although the novel begins at the end of the colonial period, Africa, like most of the world, is seen by Naipaul still to be bearing the weight of the colonial idea of history--an idea centered upon imperialist Europe and its manifest destiny. Father Huismans' unceremonious demise signals a possible change, and in the figure of Raymond, the American historian, we see what appears, at least, to be a new historical construct. Perhaps, the novel suggests, an American construct of Western civilization can redeem Europe's colonial mistakes.

When we first meet Raymond, his historical sense seems a far cry from that of Father Huismans: He, Raymond, complains that he often wonders "whether the truth ever gets known. . . ." To which someone replies that "New discoveries are constantly making us revise our ideas about the past. The truth is always there. It can be got at." And Raymond answers,

Time, the discoverer of truth. I know. It's the classical idea, the religious idea. But there are times when you begin to wonder. Do we really know the history of the Roman Empire? Do we really know what went on during the conquest of Gaul? I was sitting in my room and thinking with sadness about all the things that have gone unrecorded. Do you think we will ever get to know the truth about what has happened in Africa in the last hundred or even fifty years? All the wars, all the rebellions, all the defeats? [p. 130]

Raymond seems intent on deconstructing the imperialist construct of history. It is not for nothing that he says he considers the 19th-century German historian Theodor Mommsen to be "the giant of modern historical writing." [p. 137] Nor is it without significance for an understanding of Naipaul's own historical view that the author invokes the name of Mommsen, for it was Mommsen, in his massive study of the Roman Republic, who began the process of demythologizing the self-image the Romans had created. Like the modern colonial powers, the Romans too had wanted both slaves and statues and had gotten them both by creating the historical construct by which they would be judged and imposing it both upon their subjects and upon posterity. Mommsen was the first historian who refused to take the Romans at their own assessment. And he, along with Ranke, founded the "scientific" school of history which has predominated in academia increasingly in the twentieth century.

Mommsen's pertinence to Raymond is more than historiographical. Like Raymond, Mommsen was an historian who was actively engaged in liberal politics; and, paradoxically, he wrote in appreciation of the tyrant, Caesar. Raymond's preeminence in the Domain is, you will remember, dependent upon his relationship with the Big Man, the unnamed country's President. As we first see Raymond, he is introduced to us as a strong supporter of the Big Man, his chief apologist. What must have attracted the Big Man, while he was still a boy, to Raymond, was Raymond's detachment, perhaps because he was an American and not a European, from the colonialist mythology, from the Huismanesque interpretation of history. He has advised the boy to avoid being sucked into the foreign fantasy: "What you mustn't do then is to become involved in politics as they exist. Those clubs and associations are talking shops, debating societies, where Africans posture for Europeans and hope to pass as evolved. They will eat up your passion and destroy your gifts. . . ." [pp. 132-133] And he tells his guests: "It takes an African to rule Africa--the colonial powers never truly understood that. However much the rest of us study Africa, however deep our sympathy, we will remain outsiders." [p.135]

The problem for Raymond, however, is that he is impotent, impotent as a husband, apparently, and impotent as a politician and as an historian. Lacking Father Huisman's notion of grandeur, his historiographical construct lacks the conviction of the imperial idea of history: "of course," he says, "Theodor Mommsen had the comfort of knowing that his subject was a great one. Those of us who work in our particular field

have no such assurance. We have no idea of the value posterity will place on the events we attempt to chronicle. We have no idea where the continent is going. We can only carry on." [p. 137]

What Naipaul invites us to see, very early on, is that Raymond and the new representatives of western culture, the Americans, are no better than the old. The first American whom we see is typical: "Who more African than the young American who appeared among us, who more ready to put on African clothes and dance African dances?" When this young man leaves, suddenly, he steals the bulk of Father Huismans' mask collection and takes it with him to the States, "no doubt to be the nucleus of the gallery of primitive art he often spoke of starting." [p. 84] As in the old colonial days, the first act of the new colonialism is pillage.

Nor are the Americans any more in touch with the "real" Africa than were the colonialists. Granted, they do not cover their walls with paintings of European ports, but they do, in a typical colonial intellectual construct, decide, just like Father Huismans, what is important, beautiful, meaningful about "true" Africa. Here is the description of Raymond and Yvette's bungalow in the Domain, where the guests are listening to a Joan Baez record:

It was make-believe--I never doubted that. You couldn't listen to sweet songs about injustice unless you expected justice and received it much of the time. You couldn't sing songs about the end of the world unless--like the other people in that room, so beautiful with such simple things: African mats on the floor and African hangings on the wall and spears and masks--you felt that the world was going on and you were safe in it. How easy it was, in that room, to make those assumptions! (pp. 128-29)

Here the window panes are not painted white, but the vision of the place, this land of rain and heat and big-leaved trees, is blurred in a more fundamental way.

One can hardly avoid the conclusion that Naipaul feels a special contempt for these westerners who appropriate to themselves what they feel is the "true" Africa, who impose upon it their own standards and own judgments, who manipulate facts to fit their own historical construct--like Muller, whose article, which gets him an offer "to Texas to teach for a

term," succeeds in proving its thesis only by suppressing one whole side of the event in question. As Indar remarks, "It's just the kind of thing that happens when people turn to Africa to make the fast academic buck." [p. 131] And it is these people who applaud the Big Man as long as he seems to fit the image of liberal democracy as celebrated in Joan Baez' music, but who, when he deviates from the "true" path, imagine that they have the right, these "people who were just passing through, people we weren't going to see again, people who were safe in their own countries," [p. 194] to impose their satirical judgments not only on the Big Man but on his entire country. This satire, too, is an imperialistic historical construct.

Thus, in the final analysis, the second, Mommsenian historical construct is also rejected. We see in Raymond the weaknesses of the approach as applied to the contemporary world. Raymond, we learn, has written several articles: a review of an American book on African inheritance laws, an analysis--"quite long, with footnotes and tables"--of "the local council elections in the big mining town in the south just before independence; some of the names of the smaller tribes I hadn't even heard of"; "Riot at a Football Match" based entirely upon newspaper accounts ["from my experience on the coast I knew that newspapers in small colonial places told a special kind of truth"] and government decrees--"His subject was an event in Africa, but he might have been writing about Europe or a place he had never been." [pp. 180-181] Finally, there is an article on "liberty villages," mostly based upon missionary archives:

The subject wasn't new to me. At school on the coast we were taught about European expansion in our area as though it had been no more than a defeat of the Arabs and their slave-trading ways. We thought of that as English-school stuff; we didn't mind. History was something dead and gone, part of the world of our grandfathers, and we didn't pay too much attention to it. . . . [p. 181]

Writing about these liberty villages, Raymond

. . . just quoted from the missionary reports. He didn't seem to have gone to any of the places he wrote about; he hadn't tried to talk to anybody. . . .

He knew so much, had researched so much. He must have spent weeks on each article. But he had less true knowledge of Africa, less feel for it, than Indar or Nazruddin or even Mahesh; he had nothing like Father Huisman's instinct for the strangeness and wonder of the place. Yet he had devoted years to those boxes of documents in his study. . . . Perhaps he had made Africa his subject because he had come to Africa and because he was a scholar, used to working with papers, and had found this place full of new papers. [p. 182]

Mommsen based his history upon inscriptions and public records, and his unrivalled collection of epigraphy may be seen as reflected, imperfectly, in Raymond's collection of newspapers. Naipaul is suggesting, I believe, that this "scientific" kind of historiography loses sight of the real world, that it, too, is a kind of mythmaking, more dangerous perhaps than the imperialistic school of history because it pretends to be impartial and detached. J.B. Bury, one of the earliest English exponents of the scientific school of history founded by Mommsen and Ranke, said that history must be "a powerful force for stripping the bandages of error from the eyes of men." When applied to a foreign culture, however, this attitude becomes imperialistic at the point that "we" decide which of "their" errors need to be stripped away. Thus, Muller, in his article on the Bapende Rebellion, ignores the religious element because it does not fit his liberal definition of the "true" Africa.

On the other hand, Raymond, holed up in his study with his papers, too busy to come out into the real world, deserted by the Big Man, deserted now also by the American academic establishment which has moved on to new enthusiasms, betrayed by his wife--Raymond is the perfect figure of the impotence of the western construct of history as a "science." The only function he can imagine now is to "carry on."

The Big Man, for all his possible faults, has clearly rejected Raymond's notion of history in favor of a new mythology. The white historian is reduced to the figure who goes ahead of the President and diverts evil spirits. Western iconography is expropriated. Western economic imperialism is attacked when the President tells his people to stop "running like children after things in imported tins and bottles. . . ." [p. 206] The Big Man has recognized, however imperfectly, that those

who define history, those who make history, those who write history are those who control history.

And as for Salim, he is at last able, once and for all, to reject the myths of Europe. Halfway through the novel, Indar says of the Domain, "To people like us it's very seductive. Europe in Africa, post-colonial Africa. But it isn't Europe or Africa. It looks different from the inside, I can tell you."

Salim, too, had found the idea of Europe in Africa very seductive: hence his disenchantment with Raymond's articles. Hence also his disenchantment with Yvette, who represented to him the attraction of European glamour and romance: "My wish for an adventure with Yvette was a wish to be taken up to the skies, to be removed from the life I had--the dullness, the pointless tension, 'the situation of the country.' It wasn't a wish to be involved with people as trapped as myself." [p. 183]

His experiences with Raymond and Yvette enable Salim, then, finally to reject the European construct of history:

. . . the Europe I had come to--and knew from the outset I was coming to--was neither the old Europe nor the new. It was something shrunken and mean and forbidding. It was the Europe where Indar . . . had suffered and tried to come to some resolution about his place in the world; where Nazruddin and his family had taken refuge; where hundreds of thousands of people like myself, from parts of the world like mine, had forced themselves in, to work and live." [p. 229]

For Salim, and, I would guess, for Naipaul as well, Europe in losing sight of its historical concept of itself, has lost control of history and is on its way to becoming subject to colonization and exploitation. For example, the Arabs are "pumping the oil in and sucking the money out. Pumping the oil in to keep the system going, sucking the money out to send it crashing down." [p. 234] "The world is what it is," and those "who allow themselves to become nothing have no place in it." For Naipaul, are not these words the death knell of western civilization?

The world is what it is, and the old historical constructs are dead. Here at this particular bend in the river we may, as Nazruddin says, have

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come at the wrong time. But "It's the wrong time everywhere else too."
[p. 239]

REFERENCE

Naipaul, V.S. *A Bend in the River* (New York: Vintage, 1980; first published 1979).