The Garden Trampled: or, The Liquidation of African Culture in V.S. Naipaul’s A Bend in the River

CHRISTOPHER WISE

Wise is assistant professor of global literatures at Western Washington University in Bellingham. Currently, he is at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso on a Fulbright award.

“Works of art can fully embody the promesse du bonheur only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction. Proust recognized this. This procedure which today relegates every work of art to the museum, even Picasso’s most recent sculpture, is irreversible. It is not solely reprehensible, however, for it presages a situation in which art, having completed its estrangement from human ends, returns to life.”

Adorno, Prisms

“In the beginning it is like trampling on a garden. In the end you are just walking on ground. That is the way we have to learn to live now.”

Indar in Naipaul’s A Bend in the River

INTRODUCTION

The extent of Joseph Conrad’s impact on both Chinua Achebe and V.S. Naipaul has been copiously documented by both literary critics and scholars, and even by the authors themselves in numerous occasional writings, interviews, and literary essays. But if Achebe’s Things Fall Apart contests and negates Conrad’s previous negation and distortion of Africa and Africans in Heart of Darkness, Naipaul’s more recent A Bend in the River not only reaffirms Conrad’s
more pessimistic—if not overtly racialist—perspective on Africans and their history, it also serves as the historical and determinate negation of Achebe's now widely influential (but not conclusive) negation of Conrad's novel. Like the history of the novel in Europe then (or anywhere, for that matter), the history of the novel in Africa involves a basic process of determinate negation in which one literary work often criticizes and complicates another. In other words, as competing ideologemes or discursive formations that seek (however unsuccessfully) to resolve the contradictions and crises of material necessity within their very formal or generic structures, novels such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* tend to demonstrate not the appropriateness or finality of any one structural variant or "cultural dominant" over another (Achebe's politically engaged realism versus, say, Naipaul's cynical or epic modernism), rather they tend to demonstrate the bewildering complexity of recent history itself within the postcolonial African context.

For this reason among others, the contemporary caricature of Naipaul as postcolonial "mandarin" (i.e., pariah) does not really do justice to his complexity and importance as a writer of the Third World, especially in Rob Nixon's *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Post-colonial Mandarin*. Many of the remarks that follow are therefore intended as a dialogical response to critics like Nixon (but also Peter Nazareth, Edward Said, and others), who see only bad faith, cynicism, and "hatchet-jobbing" in the writings of Naipaul. To contest the by-now familiar stigmatization of Naipaul as postcolonial mandarin, I will seek instead to excavate the historical truth-content within Naipaul's controversial novel *A Bend in the River*, thereby dialectically preserving it as a crippled monad of historical truth. More specifically, I will argue that in diametrical opposition to Achebe's appropriation of traditional Igbo folk-culture in *Things Fall Apart*, Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* proposes a wholly different but no less significant situational response to the predicament of modern African history and culture: whereas Achebe advocates the reinvestment of semantic richness into the traditional cultures of Africa's past, adopting a hermeneutic position that avoids European and essentializing forms of ethnocentrism, Naipaul paradoxically seeks the regeneration of African society through the systematic destruction or liquidation of its traditional cultures, a strategy that is a hallmark of European modernist aesthetics. Though problematic at best, Naipaul's suggestion that Africans today must deliberately "trample" upon the gardens of their past, eschewing all that is not absolutely modern, is not merely reactionary; it also belies Naipaul's utopian hope for the future redemption of African culture and history.

**NAIPUL AS "DISINTERESTED" TRUTH-SEEKER**

In the published results of a round table discussion between Edward Said, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and John Lukacs, Said fueled recent debates on Naipaul by attacking Naipaul as a racist and self-hating flatterer of Western white liberals. "[Naipaul] is a third worlder denouncing his own people," Said...
stated, "not because they are victims of imperialism, but because they seem to have an innate flaw, which is that they are not whites" (Lukács 79). Much of the disagreement between Said and other discussion participants centered on John Lukács's attempts to defend Naipaul as a disinterested "truth-seeker" who impartially criticizes nearly everyone he writes about (68). In countering Lukacs's argument, Said argued that Naipaul does not impartially "tell the truth," rather he flatters the prejudices of "ignorant" Western audiences that have of late grown weary of the problems of the Third World and of the decolonization process itself (79-80).

Taking his cue from Said, Rob Nixon has argued in London Calling that "Lukács's style of reasoning [in describing Naipaul as a "truth-seeker"] is characteristic of the way attention is diverted from any admission of Naipaul's strong, well-established position in England and the effect that might have on his 'neutrality'" (181 ft 37). In fact, Nixon even catalogues contemporary critical response to Naipaul into two separate camps: those neo-colonial critics (like Lukács) who tend to legitimate Naipaul's claims to objectivity and those more responsible critics (like Said) who "resist the recurrent style of reasoning about Naipaul's disinterestedness" (33). Nixon further argues that, while the former camp is made up of British and American critics, the latter camp tends to consist of South Asians, Indians, West Indians, Latin Americans, Arabs, and Africans—those Third World intellectuals who are fully aware of the "naked bias" in Naipaul's writings.

Though both Said and Nixon raise many important issues in their respective discussions of Naipaul, neither critic adequately addresses the historical and political complexities which make novels like The Mimic Men, Guerrillas, and A Bend in the River seem both satisfying and "truthful" to many writers, critics, and readers of Third World literature. In his Aesthetic Theory, for example, Theodor W. Adorno has taught us that modernist art works, among which we may include Naipaul's A Bend in the River, may be historically meaningful as "damaged vehicles of historical truth." Regardless of the professed politics or class affiliation of the author, modernist novels may therefore contain within them an artistic "truth value" (or "truth content"), which Adorno characterizes in terms of their "unconscious historiography" (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 274), or the "crystallization of history" that occurs within them (193). Hence, while remaining committed to a Lukácsian theory of reification, Adorno rightly rejects Lukács's overly dogmatic views on the importance of the subjective consciousness (or even political orientation) of the individual artist. When criticizing the writings of Naipaul, perhaps we would do well to remember Adorno's reminder that "suffering, not positivity, is the human content of art" (Aesthetic Theory 369), or that "art becomes human only when it gives notice that it will not play a serving role" (281).

In other words, so long as we are content simply to unmask Naipaul's ideological bad faith, or merely criticize him, any number of important questions will remain unanswered. In London Calling, for example, Nixon might have examined the historical sedimentation of the "disinterested" in Naipaul,
or he might have sought to appreciate Naipaul's writings as "damaged vehicles of historical truth," to quote Adorno. Despite the rigor of his approach, Nixon therefore neglects to historicize the form of subjective consciousness that gives Naipaul's literary works their distinctive qualities of detachment, alienation, psychological suffering, and "truthfulness." Consequently, he can tell us little about the cognitive character of the "disinterested" in Naipaul. Nor can he teach us anything about "the negative embodiment of utopian hope" in Naipaul, or the "broken promise of happiness" which, according to Salman Rushdie, in any case, is the defining characteristic of Naipaul's writings.9

In opposition to both Said and Nixon, it must first be emphasized that the perceiving subject in Naipaul is a form of "objectified consciousness" [sedimentierter Geist], not merely a self-serving or anarchistic subjectivity. Any number of specific sociohistorical factors related to the contemporary neo-colonial context therefore make inevitable the various continuities, repetitions, contradictions, and restrictions that determine the asocial and hostile attributes of the narrative voices in Naipaul's literary works like The Mystic Masseur, A Bend in the River, and Among the Believers. The dialectical movement between the subjective voice and its prior objects is not then determined at random or by mere chance but is rather the result of a complicated process of social labor, a process that belies the historical form of human consciousness that is recurrent in Naipaul's writings. Hence, Naipaul does not so much offer us the unmediated observations of an irresponsible free-agent as he presents us with the "objectively" determined insights or even "truths" of a deeply disenfranchised subject of the Third World in the era of multinational capitalism—which is to say, neocolonialism.

More specifically, if the spontaneity or autonomy of the modernist subject is in reality a highly mediated form of immediacy, as Adorno shows, there are obvious and important epistemological implications that most recent ideological dismissals of writers like Naipaul and Soyinka have failed to address. First, according to Adorno, it is important to remember that an illusory if not self-deluding autonomy is both prior and necessary if truth claims are to be advanced at all. Repeatedly, Adorno argues that it is exceedingly difficult for the modernist subject of late capitalism to be both spontaneous and aware of the need for systemic or deontological social change.10 Secondly, Adorno points out that for any significant social transformation to occur within the modernist context, society will necessarily depend upon a self-conscious and autonomous subject [Gesamtsubjekt], who is able to perceive society's needs and then act accordingly.

Adorno's views in this regard are not far from the views of Chinua Achebe, who has also insisted upon the importance of an autonomous post-colonial subject in his numerous occasional essays collected in Hopes and Impediments. Nor is Adorno far from the concerns of both C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon, who famously chastised Jean-Paul Sartre for robbing nègritude of its vitality and spontaneity. "[C]onsciousness has to lose itself in the night
of the absolute," Fanon wrote in response to Sartre's anti-essentialist critique of négritude. "There is no other way to attain consciousness of the self" (Fanon 133-134). It is also for this reason that Wole Soyinka has bitterly complained of "leftocratic" theory in Africa and how it has, in his opinion, sapped the creative energy of an entire generation of young writers. The past failings of Marxist literary criticism of Third World writing, of which Sartre's "Preface To Orphée Noir" may be emblematic, should at least give us pause before rushing to prescribe—rather than understand—the "correct" aesthetic responses to the current neocolonial situation.

NAIPaul AND THE INEVITABILITY OF REIFICATION

Throughout A Bend In The River, Naipaul seems to share Adorno's belief in the importance of a self-conscious and autonomous subject [Gesamtssubjekt], fully capable of decisive and effective action in an increasingly modernized (and often disorienting) world. For Naipaul, sentimentalizing the past inevitably impedes meaningful praxis in the present. By dwelling upon the lost comforts of pre-colonial, religio-community existence, as the early Achebe does in Things Fall Apart, we are rendered impotent when confronted with the harsher realities of secularized and modernized society. Hence, while Achebe advocates the preservation and dissemination of traditional folk-wisdom as a cultural remedy for the many problems caused by the modernization of Africa, Naipaul insists that only by forgetting and "trampling upon" the past may the social problems of the present be confronted and effectively resolved. Like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who has stated her "absolute scorn" for those who seek cultural roots, Naipaul often ridicules as misguided those who attempt to recuperate the lost splendors of the pre-colonial past: "It isn't easy to turn your back on the past," the character Indar states in A Bend In The River. "It is something you have to arm yourself for, or grief will ambush and destroy you. That is why I hold onto the image of the garden trampled to the ground—it is a small thing, but it helps" (141).

The views of Indar, which are later adopted by the narrator, Salim, form the principal theme of A Bend In The River. Given the cataclysmic changes ushered in by the colonization and industrialization of Africa, the past must be utterly annihilated if a new and better African culture is to emerge. Whereas Achebe seeks in Things Fall Apart to synthesize traditional and modern culture, Naipaul is much more pessimistic about the value of pre-colonial religious and community life in the modern context, specifically tribal and Indo-Muslim lifestyles in Central and East Africa. Though breathtakingly cynical, and far from adequately developed, Naipaul's neo-modernist prescriptions for the ills of postcolonial Africa may actually be more realistic than the pre-revolutionary prescriptions once offered by Achebe in Things Fall Apart. This is in part because Naipaul's pessimism regarding the future of pre-colonial African culture is connected to his intuitive cynicism regarding the historical inevitability of reification itself, or of the extent of the commodity form's penetration into the daily lives of modern Africans.
For Naipaul, the reification or "objectification" of material reality in modern Africa concurs with the advent of both alienated and historical consciousness, a process aptly illustrated in the early pages of *A Bend in the River* when the narrator Salim muses over how an ordinary British postage stamp enabled him to detach himself from his local surroundings and consider them "as from a distance":

Small things can start us off in new ways of thinking, and I was started off by the postage stamps of our area. The British administration gave us beautiful stamps. These stamps depicted local scenes and local things; there was one called "Arab Dhow." It was as though, in those stamps, a foreigner had said, "This is what is most striking about this place." Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them (15).

The reification of Salim's material culture is in this sense prior to his own development as alienated or modernist monad, or even the homeless Hegelian-Lukácsian hero of the novel of realism, and it is also prior to his feelings of cultural inferiority as colonialist or manichean subject. In the following paragraph, Salim also tells us that "from an early age [he] developed the habit of looking, detaching [himself] from a familiar scene and trying to consider it from a distance" (15). Even more to the point, Salim adds, "It was from this habit of looking that the idea came to me that as a community we had fallen behind. And that was the beginning of my insecurity" (15-16).

For Salim, then, the British colonization of East Africa indirectly (but also irrevocably) alters the very coordinates or basic structures of his psychic perception. First, physical objects like the Arab dhow are weirdly estranged from their immediate surroundings: they are experienced as reified things that are interpellated into a Cartesian, spatial, and grid-like universe, utterly inconsistent with previous or traditional systems of reference and understanding. The immediate consequence for Salim is that the path is now cleared for the estrangement of the self as well: he now experiences his own lived body as an estranged object or material thing. In other words, Naipaul implies that, for Salim, alienated monadic consciousness is a direct result of reification's encroachment into the realm of the ontological.

Another way of saying this might be that Salim is hopelessly "contaminated" with historical consciousness: he has become, as Baudelaire once put it, a frightened child wandering lost in a "forest of symbols" (Kundera 63). However, as Fredric Jameson has also argued in another context, once the techniques of ostranenie, or "strange-making" in the Russian Formalist sense, are applied to the phenomena of social life, the positive result is the "dawning of historical consciousness in general" (Prison-House 57). Perhaps as a deliberate response to Achebe's critique of European history in *Things Fall Apart*, especially in the last paragraph of Achebe's novel, Salim bluntly states...
that “[a]ll I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have
got from books written by Europeans” (11). While Salim tells us that the his-
tory of the Europeans is filled with lies and hypocrisy (16-17), the more
crucial fact remains that it is Europeans who first introduce into Africa the “white
mythology” of historical consciousness. In this sense, Salim does not really
deliberately reject his native culture, customs, and religious beliefs as much
as he is like a man afflicted with a debilitating, if not fatal, foreign illness.

Finally Naipaul suggests that people like Salim cannot hope to escape
reification but must instead “submit to it” in order to become effective and
autonomous agents in the modernized and historical world. The theme of the
necessity of submitting to reification is, in fact, the literal meaning of the
opening sentence of Naipaul’s novel as well, a seemingly innocuous and
contradictory tautology with far-reaching implications: “The world is what it
is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no
place in it” (3). While the first independent clause of this compound-com-
plex sentence seems to suggest a static and anti-historical world-view (“the
world is what it is”), one must carefully analyze the entire sentence, espe-
cially the second independent clause and its relation to the novel’s greater
theme regarding the necessity of the reification (or the “thingification”) of the
individual self (“men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become noth-
ing, have no place in it”). The deliberate “thingification” of the self, or the
effort to become “some-thing” rather than allowing oneself to become “no-
thing” is for Naipaul a crucial step in leaving behind the often stultifying tra-
ditions of the past and entering into the modern world. In opposition to
Achebe, Naipaul urges his readers to flee from any nostalgic or misplaced
longing for onto-communal social existence. We must rather make “things”
of ourselves so that we can effectively act within a world of preexistent
things—the world that “is what it is,” not necessarily because of its static,
eternal, or immutable attributes but because it has become “what it is” in the
modern era.

THE MAGICAL AND THE SUBLIME IN A BEND IN THE RIVER

Besides the mandate to make “some-thing” of one’s self, Naipaul’s
response to the situation of modern African history mandates the liquidation
of traditional or tribal African art, mostly through stigmatizing the magical
and the sublime as irrevocably waning concepts within the African context;
this is not to say, however, that historically-dated Eurocentric concepts like
the magical or the sublime have ever been appropriate as a means of con-
ceptualizing pre-colonial African art, but that Naipaul’s narrator in A Bend In
The River exhibits an entirely Western orientation to aesthetic matters. More
specifically, throughout A Bend In The River, Salim consistently denigrates
African art on the basis of its “religious,” “primitive,” and “magical” prop-
erties. Naipaul deliberately juxtaposes conflicting aesthetic values of Africans
and Europeans by contrasting the “beautiful” paintings of a Belgian woman,
which are ironically described as “junk” by Salim, over and against “magical”
African art such as sculpture, masks, and tribal fetishes. In the first half of the novel, Salim praises European painting but condemns African art by stating to a black African character: “Look at those paintings [of the Belgian woman]. She wanted to make something beautiful to hang in her house. She didn't hang it there because it was a piece of magic” (42-43). While the magical and primitive art of Africans is belittled by Salim, he nevertheless fears its emotive, repressive, and religious power (84). Salim's fears seem confirmed when another main character, Father Huismans, a Belgian missionary-priest, collects African art and is subsequently killed for the sacrilege of gathering African art works to form a European-style museum.

The magical tribal art of Africa is rejected by Salim primarily because of its irrational character, or because it invokes “the religious dread of simple men” (65). Salim tells us that looking at Father Huismans' museum is “like being on the river at night” (65), or being deep in the “spirit-filled bush” where one is “prey” to the “malin” natives lurking about (55). Because Salim has no magical fetish, he feels vulnerable and “unprotected” outside the town (56); however, he also ridicules those Africans who possess and believe in magical fetishes as protection against modern warfare (80). Above all, Salim rejects the simplicity of African art (51). When Father Huismans is killed, for example, we are told that he errs not in collecting African masks and sculptures for a European-style museum, but because he “reads too much” into African art in the first place (82). For Salim, Father Huismans makes the fatal error of finding “human richness” in African artifacts where everyone else more realistically “sees only bush” (82). In effect, the priest is scapegoated by Naipaul because he cultivates the primordial garden of a dying past instead of “trampling upon it” like Indar and Salim.

Adorno also accepts the Hegelian argument that contemporary art “can no longer afford to be naive” (Aesthetic Theory 2), chiefly because of the political dangers inherent in the modern era. Primitive music, for example, is described by Adorno in his Aesthetic Theory as “repetitive, dreadful, and menacing” (77). In A Bend In The River, Naipaul illustrates this prejudice in the character of the Big Man, a caricature of Zairean dictator Mobutu Seko Sese, who wants to teach modern Africans to be “monkey-smart” (207-208). Because the magical art of archaic societies is largely the result of “an immensely repressive collective consciousness” (Aesthetic Theory 247). Adorno argues that efforts to resuscitate it within the modern context can only lead to cultural disaster and oppression, not unlike the reign of the Big Man in Naipaul's A Bend in the River. Similarly, Naipaul shows us how the bogus black madonna cult which the Big Man initiates, much like his false leopard-skin fez and snake-staff, is the inevitable consequence of efforts to reinvest the naive art of the past with semantic richness.

Not only does Salim reject magical African art, he also recoils from the sublime or ecstatic aspects of African art and nature. Naipaul, in fact, relies heavily on Conrad's description of the African bush as elementally dark and horrific. If Adorno rejects the sublime as inappropriate in the modern era,
Salim’s helplessness in the face of the natural immensity of Africa leads not to ecstasy but simple revulsion and irritation. For Adorno, who relies principally on Kant’s definition of the sublime, the sublime historically signifies “the outright occupation of the work of art by theology” (Aesthetic Theory 283). Accepting Nietzsche’s critique of theology’s historical demise, Adorno argues that Kant’s aesthetics of the sublime is largely irrelevant to the concerns of the modern era, and that the sublime itself has “no place in modern art” (283). In place of a now-dated aesthetics of the sublime, which in the modern context can only be comical or ridiculous, Adorno argues that “radical negativity” has become the proper heir of the sublime, or he suggests that modernist writers like Naipaul seek an illusion “as bare and non-illusory as the illusion [once] promised by the sublime” (284). Utopian hope is therefore negatively embodied in Naipaul’s novel in at least two significant ways: first, if the utopian aim of the Kantian sublime is the political and psychological “emancipation of the human subject” (280), as Adorno claims, radical negativity as logical inheritor of the sublime similarly seeks to free the human subject from social oppression. Secondly, Adorno argues that radical modernists like Naipaul, who scorn the traditional art of the past, paradoxically seek not only the liquidation of traditional art but also its redemption through its estrangement from “native soil” or from its original conditions of emergence, specifically through its relocation in a Western-style museum.

Naipaul’s Father Huismans, who is responsible for starting the first European-style museum in the little town at “the bend in the river,” tells Salim that European-style civilization is itself inevitable in Africa despite temporary setbacks like revolutions, dictatorships, and economic disasters (85). Though put-off by the priest’s over-confidence, Salim tells us that he generally accepts Father Huismans’ views on the inevitability of the spread of European civilization in Africa. However, unlike the priest, Salim is not ecstatic about the “inevitable” coming of Euro-American civilization to Africa, a culture that is symbolized for him by the local Big-Burger, a fast-food restaurant which resides “at the center of things in town” (99). Salim’s views in this regard sharply contrast with those of his friend Indar, who naively denies the imperializing mission of the United States (152), telling Salim that Americans are not a tribe; rather they’re just “individuals fighting to make their way, trying hard like you and me not to sink” (152). While Indar fails to understand the homogeneity of Western culture, eliding its ideological or cultural sameness, this insight does not escape Salim, who compares the Euro-American colonizers of Africa to a steady “column of ants on the march” (85-86). In other words, Salim does not fail to grasp that even random and dissimilar individuals may share in the collective experience of alienation. Moreover, by setting a McDonald’s style Bigburger restaurant at the very site of Conrad’s inner station, Naipaul grotesquely estranges colonialist representations of Africa as “the heart of darkness,” in fact lending a very different (and comical) meaning to Kurtz’s garbled utterances about “the horror...the horror” of life in the African bush. This comic edge is undercut, however, by
Salim's descriptions of Bigburger sandwiches as “smooth white lips of bread over mangled black tongues of meat” (97). Finally, Naipaul's ambivalence about the virtues and advantages of Western culture is clearly illustrated in his derogative account of contemporary Western art, particularly modernist painting. While Salim states his preference for European art over “primitive” and “magical” African art, he is privately critical of European art and of Father Huisman's museum as well. The paintings of the Belgian lady, for example, are described by Salim as mostly worthless:

On the white wall at the end of the room was a large oil painting of a European port, done in reds and yellows and blues. It was in slapdash modern style; the lady had painted it herself and signed it. She had given it pride of place in her main room. Yet she hadn't thought it worth the trouble of taking away. On the floor, leaning against the walls, were other paintings I had inherited from the lady. It was as if the lady had lost faith in her own junk, and when the independence crisis came, had been glad to go (41).

Salim directly identifies himself with the Belgian lady by telling us that they both have a “high idea” of themselves when in reality their lives, and the work of their lives, amount to very little (42). If the Belgian lady paints “junk” (41), Salim, as a merchant, deals exclusively in “antiquated junk made for shops like [his own]” (40). Like the unmarried Belgian lady, Salim is also a “spinster” who leads a solitary and uneventful existence. Even Salim's vision of the African bush outside his window, which is described as “blurred through the white-painted window panes” of his home and shop (42), parallels the “slapdash modern style” of the departed lady.

When Salim considers the pitiful situation of the Belgian lady, which he cannot help but acknowledge as parallel to his own, he grows desperate because he senses the utter falsity of his own way of life and the pettiness of his second-rate, Kantian individualism. The situation of the departed Belgian lady reveals to him how unsatisfactory his life is, and it forces him to realize that he has been lying to himself all along about how “special” or “different” he is from the “primitive” black Africans (like Ferdinand, a young man from a local tribe) who surround him. “I knew there was something that separated me from Ferdinand and the bush about me,” Salim tells us. “And it was because I had no means of asserting this difference, or exhibiting my true self, that I fell into the stupidity of exhibiting my things” (42). In desperation, Salim thrusts the paintings of the Belgian lady upon Ferdinand—though he has already informed the reader that the paintings are worthless—primarily as a means of asserting his uniqueness as an individual, a gesture which he privately acknowledges as both “stupid” and false.

While Salim knows that the paintings are junk, he claims them and identifies with them because he feels that, even if they are bad art, they are nevertheless the products of rational rather than mystical labor. In other words, the paintings are not beautiful in actuality, but they attempt to be beautiful for the jaundiced eye of the disinterested viewer. Like the “worthless” popular science magazines that litter Salim's shop (43), the paintings aspire to the virtues
of the "disinterested" and are therefore distinct from "simple" tribal African artworks that always "serve a specific [and malignant] religious purpose" (61).

CONCLUSION

Naipaul's double-edged critique of both traditional African and modern Euro-American culture results primarily from specific economic conditions that are far more urgent than the question of Naipaul's individual (i.e., subjective) orientation or his largely anarchistic political beliefs. At the level of "human history as a whole,"24 A Bend in the River seeks to resolve the historical conflict between a waning tribal mode of production in Africa and an increasingly dominant form of Western-style capitalism, which Naipaul characterizes as an inevitable, if not salvific, historical phenomenon. Naipaul suggests then that the only possible solution to the modern crisis of African history is the wholesale liquidation of its traditional cultures, so that a new or "absolutely modern" African culture may come into being. If Naipaul's "solution" is extreme, it nevertheless negatively embodies his utopian hope for the ultimate liberation of Africa from political terror, civil-war, debilitating cynicism, and underdevelopment.

The chief problem with Naipaul's approach is that he too quickly dismisses the cultural products of Africa as dying or hopelessly reified objects rather than, as in Achebe's use of folklore in Things Fall Apart, cultural artifacts that may contain within them the architectural blueprints for a better or more hopeful future. While African art objects for Naipaul may possess a "magical feeling of power" (61), these aesthetic properties must be eradicated to enable the cultural logic of the Euro-American marketplace to prevail within the so-called "heart of darkness" (96). Quite frankly, Naipaul suggests that African magic and mystery must die for Euro-American capitalism to succeed, a negative truth that also suggests a positive agenda for enemies of neo-colonialism.25

NOTES

1See, for example, Blakemore 15-23; Theime; Nixon 177-190; Achebe, Image 782-794; Watt 196-209; Kinkead-Weeks 31-49; and Fleming 90-99.

2See Fredric Jameson's theorization of the term "cultural dominant" as well as his periodization of the three "fundamental moments" of capitalism—market, monopoly, and mercantile capitalism—and their relation to the respective "cultural dominants" of realism, modernism, and postmodernism (Postmodernism 35-36). Also, see Jameson's discussion of the "second phase" interpretation, or the social level or interpretive horizon, in which "the very object of [theoretical] analysis [is] dialectically transformed, and...[not] as an individual "text" or work in the narrow sense, but...in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than an individual parole or utterance" (The Political Unconscious 76).

3In any case, I do not seek to "save" Naipaul, who hardly needs saving, except, perhaps, from the intolerance, rigidity, and dogmatism of much contemporary political criticism. Naipaul himself is reported to have once commented about Marxist criticism as follows: "Once he [Naipaul] showed me an article written about his books..."
by a Marxist. He said, 'It's like a Christian writing about Buddhism saying, “If they
could only accept Christ, then they'd be saved.” He wants to save me [Eyre's empha-
sis]” (Eyre 46).

4See Achebe's “What Has Literature Got to Do with It” in which he argues that
there is no better preparation for survival within the modern world than the study
and preservation of the traditional literatures of the past (Hopes 170).

5While Naipaul’s “solution” may seem disturbing, we might remember that
Walter Benjamin's now widely-celebrated auratic theory, in which he advocated the
liquidation of high European culture in favor of its redemption through mechanically
reproduced art for the masses, also fastened upon a similar “modernist” resolution
to the crises of Western Europe in the late 1930s, much to the dismay of Adorno,
Horkheimer, and others of the Frankfurt Institute. As Adorno has already sufficiently
demonstrated, Benjamin's position was problematic at best, a mistake at worst. See
Wise 195-214.

6In a review of Rob Nixon's London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial
Mandarin, Bruce King has described Nixon's deliberately politicized critique of
Naipaul as a kind of “neo-Stalinism” (133). With considerable irritation, King states his
belief that Nixon's book “illustrates what happens when a method of literary criticism
becomes institutionalized, unself-questioning, and predictable" (132). Though King
may overstate his case, there is no question that much of the recent critical hostility
towards Naipaul uncannily parallels the Lukácsian (and Zhandovian) disdain for mod-
ermism itself throughout the 30s, 40s, and 50s, construed by Soviet critics at that time
as a merely reflective and regressive form of literature. More recently, Richard Wolff,
one of the founders of AESA (the Association for Economic and Social Analysis), has
stated that the task of Marxism in the 1990s must be defined precisely in its opposi-
tion to modernism. Wolff states unequivocally that the “project [at AESA and the jour-
nal Rethinking Marxism] entails the presumption that modernist modes of thinking in
Marxism have generated all sorts of problems that we wish to resolve, failures we
wish to avoid repeating, and missed opportunities" (“Interview” 5-6). But if mod-
ernism itself is once again suspect among Marxist critics and theoreticians, it would
seem that Naipaul's epic modernism may be calculated to invite the censure of neo-
Marxist critics like Rob Nixon, a prospect that would no doubt delight Naipaul, who
has no love for Marxist theory or its critics. However, King's own book, V.S. Naipaul,
is no more satisfying than Nixon's—mostly because King attempts to skirt politics
altogether in the interests of a neutral, anti-theoretical, and “apolitical” critique. For
more on the relevance of Marxist literary theory in the African context, see Georg M.
Gugelberger's seminal essay (1-20).

7See Zuïdevaart 43.

8This is not to say, however, that Adorno's position is equivalent to the American
and “pragmatic” position that the spheres of the public and private are somehow dist-
inct. For Adorno, as for Mao Tse Tung, the personal is still political, but the mod-
ernist and alienated artist nevertheless does not experience the personal as political
(or the “subjective” realm as objectively constituted).

9In a review of The Enigma of Arrival, for example, Salman Rushdie has remarked
that Naipaul's novel of English country-life seems marred by a strange exhaustion, a
sadness of spirit, even an absence of love. Rather than simply dismiss Naipaul as racist

10See Zuïdevaart 108.

11See Soyinka 27-57.
Gayatri Spivak comments as follows: “If there’s one thing I totally distrust, in fact, more than distrust, despise and have contempt for, it is people looking for roots. Because anyone one can conceive of looking for roots, should, already, you know, be growing rutabagas” (93). Also, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome” 3-25.

Though Naipaul may seem dangerously anti-African and anti-Islamic, he is actually pessimistic about the value of preserving traditional culture within any modern context. Indar, for example, states his view that “there may be some parts of the world—dead countries or secure and by-passed ones—where men can cherish the past and think of passing on furniture and china to their heirs. Men can do that perhaps in Sweden or Canada. Some pleasant part of France full of half-wits in chateaux; some crumbling Indian palace-city, or some dead colonial town in a hopeless South American country. Elsewhere men are in movement, the world is in movement, and the past can only cause pain [my emphasis] (141).

Ironically, Indar’s point is perhaps best illustrated in Achebe’s later (and less optimistic) novel, Anthills of the Savannas, when attempts to reintegrate a pre-colonial form of public corporal punishment end up heartily sickening those who had once advocated it for its non-European origin.

For example, in regards to O. Mannoni’s Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization, Fanon observes in Black Skin, White Masks, “The arrival of the white man in Madagascar shattered not only its horizons but its psychological mechanisms. . . .An island like Madagascar, invaded overnight by ‘pioneers of civilization,’ even if those pioneers conducted themselves as well as they knew how, suffered the loss of its basic structures. . . .The landing of the white man on Madagascar inflicted injury without measure” (97).

See Jameson, Postmodernism 410.

Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, Fanon also speaks at length of this process as the “slow composition of [one’s] self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world...a real dialectic between body and world” (111).

See Rober Young’s White Mythologies for a more extensive critique of the mythical nature of European historiography, particularly Marxist history writing

In other words, Salim never approaches anything like an “African” understanding of art; or, as Mary Louise Pratt has put it, Salim sees African art entirely through colonial eyes. Additionally, because Salim supposedly comes from a traditional Muslim family in East Africa—which historically would be a cultural setting that would encourage suspicion toward Western, representational or “mimetic” art, in the first place—his reliability in aesthetic matters is suspect at best and implausible at worst. For these reasons, in discussing Salim’s comments on African art, it must be emphasized that for Salim African art is already interpreted for him by Western thinkers. The point here is not that an “authentic” African perspective would be a non-ideological one, as Christopher Miller suggests in Theories of Africans, but simply that it would be a different ideological response.

Regarding the Kantian sublime and its dependence on the subject, Adorno states that “Kant was already aware that it is not quantitative magnitude by itself that is sublime. He rightly defined the sublime in terms of the resistance that the spirit marshals against the prepotence of nature. The feeling of sublimity is not aroused by phenomena in their immediacy. Mountains are sublime not when they crush the human being, but when they evoke images of a space that does not fetter or hem in its occupants and when they invite the viewer to become part of this space” (Aesthetic
Theory 284). More pointedly, Adorno states, "the sublime, which Kant had considered to be an aspect of nature, or the unleashing of elemental forces...[is] identical with the emancipation of the subject" (280).

Additionally, Adorno complains that the term the sublime has been so hopelessly corrupted by "the mumbo-jumbo of the high priests of art religion [that] it might be better to stop talking about the sublime completely" (Aesthetic Theory 283).

Adorno states, "[i]n the end the sublime turns into its opposite anyway... History has caught up with the dictum about the sublime being only a step away from the ridiculous" (Aesthetic Theory 283).

For example, Adorno argues that "[t]he museums will not be shut, nor would it even be desirable to shut them. The natural-history collections of the spirit have actually transformed works of art into the hieroglyphics of history and brought them a new content while the old one shriveled up" (Prisms 185).

See Jameson, Political 76-77.

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WORKS CITED


Christopher Wise


