Post-Imperium: The Rhetoric of Liberation and the Return of Sacrifice in the Work of V. S. Naipaul

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> Speaking about political religions and construing the movements of our times not only as political but also, and primarily, as religious movements is not accepted as a matter of course yet, even though the factual situation would force the attentive observer to take this stand.

– Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions* (1938)

I

The work of Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul, a Trinidadian of Hindu origin long resident in Great Britain, tries the patience of the prevailing liberal sentiment. Quite apart from his work, the man himself (born 1932) tests liberalism's limit of tolerance, as he refuses to acquiesce in, let alone endorse, its postures and vocabularies. He is strongly allergic to ideology in any form and is unembarrassed to refer to his novelistic profession as a search for *truth*. At an academic conference in New Delhi in 2002 shortly after he had received the acknowledgment of the Nobel Committee, he made headlines by interrupting another speaker from his panel. According to an account by Fiachra Gibbons writing in the British newspaper *Guardian*:

Sir Vidia, in the land of his ancestors to celebrate his Nobel prize for literature, cut loose after listening to Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sehgal–a niece of Nehru, India's first prime minister–debate how gender oppression had affected their work.

As the pair moved on to talk about the harmful influence of English on Indian literature, Naipaul's famously short fuse exploded: "Banality irritates me. My life is short. I can't listen to banality. This thing about colonialism, this thing about gender oppression, the very word oppression wearies me." (22 February 2002 [online])

To describe Sir Vidia as having a “short fuse” is, of course, a prejudicial way of stating it, for Naipaul might well be studiously reticent and the provocation of him annoyingly inveterate and personal. Equally *parti pris* was writer and film-maker Ruchir Joshi’s admonition to the Nobel laureate: “You’re being obnoxious!” In fact, Naipaul was being critical. As he himself said: “If writers talk about oppression, they don’t do much writing.” He amplified the idea in his Nobel acceptance speech: “Where jargon turns living issues into abstractions, and where jargon ends by competing with jargon, people don’t have causes”; but rather, “they only have enemies” (*Guardian* 7 December 2001 [online]). A half-century had passed, Naipaul added, pressing to Deshpande and Sehgal: “What colonialism are you talking about?” Naipaul’s *fame* as a publicly prominent intellectual given to *explosions*–the choice of words belongs to Gibbons–is really about his refusal to submit to what has become a ritual requirement of belletristic and departmental discourse. Victim status, to which Deshpande and Sehgal have both staked a claim, functions to guarantee authority and therefore also truth in the modern *milieu* and so sets the claimant out of reach of candid (or of any) interrogation. One could even impute to Gibbons a subtle invocation of *caste*. Sehgal, she inserts, is “a niece of Nehru, India’s first prime minister,” the implication being that, as she is such, it constitutes *lèse majesté* to impugn her. That the Nobel Committee had acclaimed Naipaul perhaps rankled his two rivals in the imbroglio, who could aspire neither to his audience nor to his now officially vetted artistic achievement. Deshpande’s frosty codicil, after Vikram Seth had calmed the waters, suggests an attempt to retaliate rhetorically against Naipaul’s unfettered judgment: “When I was listening to [Sir Vidia’s] talk about the anguish of the exile, I was really cool about it.” *Sir Vidia*, in other words, *is just as banal as I.* In her round-about way Deshpande was insisting on her equivalence in status with Naipaul while at the same time she underlined her role as the suffering party.

It is not simply Indian feminist novelists, however, who would coldly dismiss Naipaul; he owns the distinction of inciting frigid enmity wherever he goes. Under the title “An Intellectual Catastrophe,” no less a critical lawgiver than Eduard Said has proclaimed the word:

He is a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to an implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths–national liberation movements, revolutionary goals, the evils of colonialism–which in Naipaul’s opinion do nothing to explain the sorry state of African and Asian countries who are sinking under poverty, native impotence, badly learned, unabsorbed Western ideas like industrialisation and modernisation. (*MSA News*, Issue 389, 6-12 August 1998 [online])

Said presumably means that Naipaul sends back dispatches to Western intellectuals who

can never hear enough bad things about the Third World. Said presumably also means *to an audience* rather than "to an implied audience," as hypothetical people neither buy nor read books. What Naipaul says in his "dispatches" would then constitute the *"Third World myths"* to which Said refers. In erecting his Manichaean dichotomy of "the West" and "the Third World," in which a universal mankind ceases to exist, Said casually reduces Naipaul's careful empirical discussion of actual places, in his fiction and nonfiction alike, to the status of so much disposable "opinion." Remarking on two of Naipaul's non-fiction books, *Among Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief*(1998), Said cites his target's real offense: "He recently has said that the worst calamity in India's history was the advent and later presence of Islam which disfigured the country's history. Unlike most writers he makes not one but two journeys to 'Islam' in order to confirm his deep antipathy to the religion, its people, and its ideas." Add to this another infraction, one, as it were, by association: "In Paris . . . Sonia Rykiel's fancy showrooms on windows on the Boulevard St Germain are filled with copies of the French translation of *Beyond Belief*, intermixed with the scarves, belts and handbags." Naipaul participates in and belongs to the market. He succeeds on his own terms, as confirmed by the fact that, despite its difficulty, his work sells–even in the glassy ostentation of *chic* Parisian boutiques. In these gestures even more than in his "obnoxious" behavior, Naipaul defies the prevailing correctitude. Yet Said must himself have knowledge (it would seem first-hand knowledge) of "Sonia Rykiel's fancy showrooms." The allusion suggests snobbism, which one would think would be detrimental to the indictment. This does not enter in the calculation.

Said's dispensation by no means remains confined to him but finds abundant, even eager, confirmation from others. In a review of what at the time were Naipaul's two most recent books, *Between Father and Son: Family Letters* and *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (both 2000), Caryl Phillips echoes Said in branding Sir Vidia a bigot (she refers to "his bigotry") who panders to a Pharisaical readership always ready to have its narrow worldview affirmed. Naipaul suffers, Phillips writes, from an "antipathy towards people and ideas that are not in tune with his own" and an "inability to hold his own prejudices in check" (*The New Republic*, 29 May 2000 [online]). Phillips outdoes Said in her penchant for contumely:

[Naipaul's] chosen theme is himself, his singular struggle, and the necessity of his having to create a subject for himself where none (or so he claims) existed. Naipaul's exacting tone is that of a man mired in certainty, a man afraid of ambiguity and incapable of stooping to the kind of doubt that fuels great imaginative writing. As he seeks to convince us of "the great shadow" that hangs over his life, there can be no room for ambivalence. It is unlikely that Naipaul will produce another novel, for fiction requires curiosity and generosity, and it is many years now since Naipaul has had anything to offer in those departments.

It is perhaps Phillips' excitement that has mixed her metaphors; Said's prose, too, when he addresses the same subject, shows a number of solecisms. Immediately after Phillips' review

appeared, Naipaul defied likelihood by issuing a new novel, *Half a Life.*"Despite the brickbats of many Third World critics and writers," Phillips says, "Naipaul has enjoyed"–just as he continues to enjoy–"a much-acclaimed career." Note what Phillips adds to Said's condemnation of a man of the Third World, so called, who has *betrayed* his origins; in her indictment, Naipaul is also guilty of *subjectivism* in the form of commercial self-promotion and paradoxically of "certainty" rather than "doubt." He is, finally, lacking in "curiosity and generosity." As the Maenads say to Orpheus, in a mood full of certainty rather than doubt, in Book XI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: *"Hic est nostri contemptor!"*

What does one get, essentially, in putting Said's and Phillips' views of Naipaul together? One gets an offensive individual (the *subject* of his alleged *subjectivism*) who has self-servingly dissociated himself from the group to which a mysterious law permanently and involuntarily assigns him, the prescribed attitudes and determinations of which a lawfully inalterable identity then compels him to share. In defying the mandatory assignment of his proper identification, the offender shows himself as both greedy (for this is what the imputed *lack* of "generosity" means) and ambitious. Greed and ambition together have motivated his choice of the market over the minority enclave. Accusing Naipaul of an incapacity for doubt contributes an odd wrinkle to the case. Refusing, after an examination, to accept the intellectual and moral limits of the natal community indeed gives positive evidence of the subject's having resolutely exercised "doubt," rendering the claim of his incapacity for it absurd. Naipaul once told Jonathan Rosen that "people can live very simple lives . . . tucked away without thinking. I think the world is what you enter when you think–when you become educated, when you question–because you can be in the big world and be utterly provincial" (*The Paris Review*, Fall 1998, 47). If *dubito ergo sum*, then emphatically *Naipaul est.*

3

Sir Vidia's real transgression nevertheless lies elsewhere, in the man's questioning what the accuser, either Said or Phillips, invests with absolute certainty: the accident of birth having assigned one to a *milieu*, one is then obliged to stay put and have no truck with anything outside the *milieu*, except if one's native circumstance were majoritarian or especially male and Western, in which case one would be obliged to denounce it; the market is the external force, inseparable from the West, that ceaselessly oppresses the *milieu*, which functions as the center-and-locus of an existential authenticity. Phillips' remark that Naipaul claims *not* originally to have had a "subject" (a self), and that in finding his "subject" he has actually repressed it, articulates the assumption. In Phillips' view, Naipaul has made himself inauthentic. Along with its Marxist categories, post-modern criticism rehashes many such quaint themes from mid-twentieth century existentialism. Said's ascription to Naipaul of a fear of "ambivalence" or of "ambiguity" provides another example: in a sweeping moral and intellectual relativism all answers are postponed, the questions themselves are disrupted, are marked in advance as illegitimate, and what persists is a weird commitment to the new

mystical cloud of vehement unknowing. Having chastised Naipaul for rejecting his minority-within-a-minority origins, Said then chastises him again for asserting of non-Arab Muslims that Islam has separated them "from their traditions, leaving them neither here nor there," a statement whose empirical status is indisputable. Naipaul does, in fact, say this. What Said seems not to notice is that, in saying it, Naipaul makes himself a defender of eradicated origins, of the locality over the imperium, and an advocate of the eradicated against the eradicator. One might say that he makes himself an advocate of the oppressed against their oppressors. Committed to the dogma of a devilish West and a saintly Third World, Said naturally shows no awareness of the contradiction.

The analysis can delve even deeper than this, for the charges tell much more about those who make them than they do about him against whom they are made, who in any case speaks eloquently for himself. In *Signs of Paradox* (1997), in a discussion of "Originary and Victimary Rhetoric," Eric Gans argues that postmodern discourse *transforms* "the unique supernatural status of the sacrificial victim" into a "victimary rhetoric" whose central figure is not individual but "collective" (178). Thus, in Gans's formulation, "the minority collective takes the place of the crucified savior" (178). Of course, the model of postmodern discourse, Marxism, already similarly "binarizes," to use Gans's term, the human world, but so does any myth in its insistence on the basic emissary structure of unanimity-minus-one. That postmodern discourse, whatever particular mode it assumes, has the obfuscating and cause-reversing character of a myth might be connoted when Gans writes that the

> accusation [of victimary rhetoric] is not neglect or even mistreatment but persecution, as such terms as "sexism" and "racism" strongly imply. Neglect or avoidance of the victim only give proof of an unconscious mimetic obsession. This claim is no doubt best exemplified by the term "homophobia," which denotes not merely obsessive fear of homosexuals, but fear of them as bearers of one's own secret homosexuality. The minority's marginalization becomes the equivalent of victimary centralization . . . Once the victimary status of [any] distinction has been confirmed, the role of persecutor is then extended to all those who do not suffer from it. (178)

Victimary "binarism" is explicit in both Said's and Phillips' treatment of Naipaul, in both of which he serves as the spokesman for an aggressive and exploitative–a *persecutorial*–West, all the more despicable and dangerous because he physically resembles, just as he stems from, the victims of the projection. Without coining the term, both Said and Phillips label Naipaul an *Islamophobe*, some such construction being necessary in their all-too-familiar rhetoric for assimilating alleged persecutors under a generic sign. The Said-Phillips postmodern attack on Naipaul illustrates another, important characteristic of contemporary Western-liberal discourse: the neo-Marxist language of persecutors and victims does not move, as have all previous new species of discourse in Gans's Generative Anthropological

dialectic, away from mythic compactness in the direction of ever further analytic differentiation of the idea of humanity; it moves, rather, in retrograde, from intellectual differentiation back into mythic compactness. Whereas, in the Greek philosophic and poetic discourse that superseded myth, a whole range of human phenomena achieve articulation and are therefore made available to analysis; and whereas, in the continuity of Hebrew and Christian revelation, morality becomes ever more individual and ever more a matter of *conscience* rather than ritual obligation, in victimary rhetoric, by contrast, all these achievements dissolve into a murk of rivalry and denunciation. There are those who belong to *"fraternité et égalité"* and there are those who do not. Complexity vanishes. With his critics in mind, Naipaul has this to say: "blaming colonialism is a very safe chant" (*Paris Review* 58). Victimary rhetoric, which defines itself as political, is, in fact, nothing secular or sophisticated at all but rather something *religious* in the primitive sense, a matter of mystique and participation, of the binary and immiscible inside and outside of the sodality. This does not mean that those who espouse it do not do so by invoking *the future*; on the contrary, a postponed utopia belongs to the enthusiasm. When critics like Said or Phillips side with an Islamicized *Tiers monde* against the market and its representatives, as against Naipaul, they act, as one would predict given the preceding analysis, as agents of what the political philosopher Eric Voegelin has called, from as early as 1938, *political religion*.

4

That politics since the eighteenth century at least has been *ersatz religion*, and that the results have been murderous, is perhaps the axial proposition in Voegelin's ample and wide-ranging work. It is necessary to qualify the statement because Voegelin sees the roots of modern political religion–he sees the roots of modernity *as* political religion–as far back as the Twelfth Century in certain *symbols of immanence*, as he calls them. In Joachim of Flora's (1145 – 1202) *Tractatus super quatuor evangelica*, to cite what Voegelin sees as the primary text of the phenomenon, one finds a new image of history in which chronology is for the first time is divided into three ages: that of the Father, that of the Son, and that of the Holy Spirit. Joachim believed himself to be living in the senescence of the second age; the third age, he argued, was about to dawn and would be the *final* age of history, now seen as a closed system. Joachim's tripartite construction reappears monotonously in European speculation, as does his notion of a*dux* and his cadre who will refashion the world according to their inspired vision. There is the Machiavellian "Prince," the Puritanical "Godded Man," the Nietzschean "Superman." All occupy the realm beyond good and evil and are uniquely gifted to see the extra-moral justification of their own acts. Voegelin calls attention to the way that Joachim's doctrine rejects Pauline Christianity's indefinite postponement of the Last Judgment, and of salvation through a transcendental divinity, in favor of the audacious assertion that humanity can reorder existence, making good all the deficiencies, and redeem itself through the actions and worldly grace of its charismatic leaders. A Joachitic vehemence attends the events of 1789 and immediately thereafter. Auguste Comte projected a scheme similar to Flora's, going him one better in ascribing the role of *dux*-and-

redeemer to himself, while introducing coinages like “altruism” and “positivism” that became current in all political schemes styling themselves “progressive,” not least Marxism, that pit an agenda against individual conscience. In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin writes of Comte’s politico-religious projection that:

There were provided [in it] honorific degrees of . . . immortality, and the highest honor would be the reception of the meritorious contributor into the calendar of positivistic saints. But what should in this order of things become of men who would rather follow God than the new Augustus Comte? Such miscreants who were not inclined to make their social contributions according to Comtean standards would simply be committed to the hell of social oblivion. The idea deserves attention. Here is a gnostic paraclete setting himself up as the world-immanent Last Judgment of mankind, deciding on immortality or annihilation of every human being. (Collected Works V. 5 194).

The construction of a *Third World*, an idea indispensable to postmodern discourse *soi disant*, closely resembles prior quasi-religious constructions such as the Joachitic “Third Realm,” the Liberal-Socialist “Third Way,” the Neo-Conservative-Libertarian “Third Wave,” or the National Socialist “Third Reich.” The putative Third World identity is inextricably tied to victimary claims, which sanctify and elect the claimant, whether he stakes the claim himself or has it staked for him by some supervisor. “Just as in the Nineteenth Century,” writes Paul Johnson of what he calls in *Modern Times* (1982) “the Bandung Generation,” “idealists had seen the oppressed proletariat as the repository of moral excellence–and a prospective proletarian state as Utopia–so now the very fact of a colonial past, and a non-white skin, were seen as title-deeds to international esteem” (477). Johnson, whose analysis is consistent with Voegelin’s, points out “the political religiosity” (477) of early “Third World” discourse in the speeches of Nehru, Sukarno, Sihanouk, Nkrumah, and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem at the Afro-Asian Conference in the Indonesian city of Bandung in 1955. Sukarno said on the occasion that “we, the people of Asia and Africa . . . can mobilize . . . the *moral violence of nations* in favor of peace” (Johnson 477), conjoining the ideas of “violence” and “peace” ominously. The novelist Richard Wright, also in attendance, summed up the apocalyptic character of the event, as understood by the participants: “This is the human race speaking” (477). Human and all too human. The term *postmodern* thus itself turns out to be, if not an immediate derivation from the Bandung coinage of “post-colonial,” then thoroughly infused by it. “Post-colonial,” in turn, carried at the time (as it still does) the same charge as the final element in Comte’s *ancient-medieval-modern* division, beyond which, because it reduces to closure what cannot in fact be closed–namely history–there is no real innovation. The users of *postmodern* require their prefix because the cumulus of recent historical evidence undermines the promise of immediate redemption in the Marxist political revelation. The “post” in *postmodern* tactically hedges the bet, defends against questions, and rationalizes in advance the indefinite revolution, or trans-valuation of all

values.

The liberal excoriation of Naipaul thus has a long established context. That Naipaul is keenly aware of this context–that he is sharply conscious of the primitive religiosity of his accusers and of their politics–no doubt exacerbates their determination to consign him, in the style of Comte's positivistic dispensation, to the oblivion of incorrectness. He is a scandal preventing the realization of the multicultural *parousia.* His presence thwarts the necessary unanimity; it irritates. Naipaul knows one more thing: that the sacrament of the political religion consists mainly in the immolation of token betrayers according to the hoary pattern familiar to all readers of René Girard, under the aegis of an inchoate *dieu de lynchage*.

II

5

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) gives the most articulate formulation of his case. All the themes discussed above are present in this novel: the hierarchy of communities and of social development; the intellectual effect of displacement from a less developed to a more developed society, or what *A Bend* calls "a difference in civilization" (153); the workings of *ressentiment* within both the developed societies and the former colonial dependencies of those societies, or what Naipaul names "the wish not to give political satisfaction" (44); *ressentiment*, in the form of ideology, as the final disastrous "export" from the colonizers to the colonized, received eagerly by the latter, and expressed in the idea of "revolution" (29, 164, 206); the persistence of a romantic view, on the part of Westerners, of non-Western peoples, whom they see as uncorrupt, hence as peculiarly authentic, under the slogan, pronounced by one character, that Africa "is where it's at" (110); the religiosity of post-colonial politics, including the specific religiosity of the Bandung Conference's apocalypse of color, translated into a corrosive *lingua franca* of revolutionary insurgency, as in the dictator's "Africanism" (187) and his cult of "the African Madonna" (185); the distinction between religio-political dogmatism and the market, thrown into relief when the dictator *orders* shopkeepers to sell his book of sayings (195); the descent, called liberation, from the structure of law into the structure of mob rivalry ending in sacrifice, as in the large-scale slaughter, all the more terrible for being off-stage, in the novel's fourth and final part.

As for sacrifice, which emerges as the cynosure of this thematic cluster, Naipaul's work has always included it under its different forms. One of his earliest memories, as he reports in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1976), is of "family rituals that lasted into my childhood" (x). Naipaul invokes "the beauty of sacrifice, so important to the Aryans," for "sacrifice turned the cooking of food into a ritual: the first cooked thing–usually a small round of unleavened bread, a miniature, especially made–was always for the fire, the god" (x). This is sacrifice in the purely representational sense, as it appears in all the higher religions–for example, in

the Christian Eucharist. Such rituals preserve the distinctive "sense of the past" (x) of a people, so that Naipaul regrets the passing of custom, as happened among the Hindus in Trinidad. He understands, as well, the substitutive implication of such practices:

Why was it necessary for a male hand to hold the knife with which a pumpkin was cut open? It seemed to me at one time–because of the appearance of the pumpkin halved downward–that there was some sexual element in the rite. The truth is more frightening . . . The pumpkin, in Bengal and adjoining areas, is a vegetable substitute for a living sacrifice: the male hand was therefore necessary. (x-xi).

To make the replacement of pumpkin-substitute for "living sacrifice" defines the minimal ethical achievement of a people and marks off those who achieve it from those who do not. The danger in forgetting the domestic rituals lies also in forgetting the importance of the harmless substitution for the flesh-and-blood victim. In his *Paris Review* colloquy, as in his *A Way in the World* (1998), Naipaul recalls an incident from the Trinidadian *entre-deux-guerres*, during the locally epochal oil workers' strike of 1937. To the strike-leader, Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler, both the workers themselves and the intellectuals who came out to support them attributed "almost miraculous powers," treating him as though he were "some kind of messiah" (*A Way* 82). The same people, Naipaul argues, also understood that Butler "was a crazed and uneducated African preacher" (82), yet this knowledge did not break the spell, which the strikers and their confederates wanted to enter and wished to sustain. Under Butler's agitation (anyone representing authority qualified as the enemy) a police constable from Port of Spain "was burned alive in the oil field area" (81). "Calypso and folk memory," Naipaul writes, immediately and paradoxically transformed the victim, Charlie King, turning him into "a special sacrificial figure, as famous as Uriah Butler himself" (82). The scene of King's immolation gained prestige as "a sanctified place" (82). Naipaul says to his *Paris Review* interviewer: "It's very curious, isn't it–the same people who burned a policeman alive would dance and sing and tell a funny story about it" (*PR* 53). The change in valence nevertheless occurred, King's odiousness to the mob switching to its opposite before hardly a day had passed, the mob's mood likewise having leapt to its antipode.

As for Butler: "He attracted . . . many radicals, people who described themselves as socialists or communists" (*A Way* 80) but later constituted "an embarrassment to the lawyers and others who had drawn strength from him in the great days of 1937" (82). Thus Butler, like King, also undergoes a change in valence for *la foule*. King is first malefactor and Butler benefactor and then *vice versa*. The unified peace of song succeeds the unifying paroxysm of murder. Yet the aura of "insurrection" (81), despite the destructiveness of the strike and its attached phenomena, persisted on the island. The luster of violence seems inexpugnable. Returning home after ten years in Great Britain, Naipaul observed in 1960 a nighttime rally of local radicals in the main square of Port of Spain. He remarks, in recalling

the throng, that what the speeches and agitation had fomented appeared “more like religion” (31) than like politics.

6

Toward the end of Naipaul’s first major novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), the protagonist’s cousin, Owad, returns from medical school in Britain full of Leninist rhetoric. Soon “the whole house had fallen under Owad’s spell” (516) and one or another member of the Biswas and Tulsi families is mimicking Owad’s “great antipathy for Krishna Menon” (516) or his dislike for T. S. Eliot, “a man I simply loathe” (521). The topical flavor of these pronouncements belongs to the pervasive comedy of *A House*, but Naipaul hints at something less savory. Owad is willing to invest in bloody animosity not his own: “They fought for it,” he says of the Bolsheviks and their paradise, “you should hear what they did to the Czar” (521). The violence in the image fascinates him and nothing in the context interferes with the assumption that Owad sees *this* violence as good and *that* as bad. Naipaul’s Nobel acceptance speech (2001) bears on this point. In Argentina during the Perón comeback of the early 1970s, Naipaul met victims of torture and violence from all sides of that nation’s fractured politics:

The country was full of hate. Peronists were waiting to settle old scores. One such man said to me, “There is good torture and bad torture.” Good torture was what you did to the enemies of the people. Bad torture was what the enemies of the people did to you. People on the other side were saying the same thing. There was no true debate about anything. There was only passion and the borrowed political jargon of Europe.

Owad’s all at once thick-skinned and enthusiastic remark about the murders at Yekaterinburg in 1918 shows him investing in the exculpatory notion of a *good violence* justified through its infliction on “enemies” and about which there is, as Naipaul says, “no debate”; with his other remarks, the same casual expression shows his vulnerability to the mimetic phenomenon of invidious rhetoric–of false witness or “jargon.”

It will be instructive to compare Owad’s phraseology or the urgings of the Argentine factions with the Big Man’s radio address about two thirds of the way through *A Bend.*The Big Man is a synthesis of Mobutu, Nkrumah, and Kaunda–the first generation of African leaders after the withdrawal of the colonial powers–and like all of them he runs a one-party police state. The broadcast *pronunciamento* is a good place to begin the discussion of Naipaul’s novel. An analysis of the address, and of the response to it, will provide the framework for understanding the larger construction of the narrative, with its remarkable counterpoint of anthropological and political insights. Naipaul’s narrator, Salim, is aware that a violent spasm is in the offing; he has already seen one of them, shortly after coming to the town ten years earlier to take over the business, really only a shop, that he bought from

a family friend. The fictional events have their model in actual events in Zaire, in the 1970s, under Mobutu. As Naipaul writes in his essay on Zaire, “A New King for the Congo” (1975), whenever Mobutu invoked what he called “radicalization of the revolution,” the whole country “was nervous” (*The Writer and the World* 207). Salim, like Naipaul, knows the signs.

The Big Man has previously favored the region in which the town is situated, endowing it in true “Big Man” fashion with tokens of his largesse, but criticism of his regime emanating from local dissidents has soured his generosity. A Youth-Guard march to display copies of the Big Man’s *maximes*, in the form of a little book in the style of Chairman Mao, exhibited insufficient enthusiasm. “The Youth Guard had never recovered their prestige after the failure of the book march” (207). A statue of the leader’s mother, cradling the leader as *bambino*, has been found toppled from its pedestal in the polytechnic “Domain” just beyond the town limits in reclaimed bush, “as the colonial statues had once been smashed” (211). From *iconoclasis*, popular dissatisfaction in an atmosphere of “crisis” (210) moves to homicide and one of the Youth Guard becomes the chance victim of pervasive tensions:

It had begun as a squabble with some pavement sleepers who had barred off a stretch of pavement in a semi-permanent way with concrete blocks looted from a building site. And it could easily have ended as a shouting match, no more. But the officer had stumbled and fallen. By that fall, that momentary appearance of helplessness, he had invited the first blow with one of the concrete blocks; and the sight of blood had encouraged a sudden, frenzied act of murder by dozens of small hands. (207)

The political disintegration in the town thus assumes the form of a classic sacrificial crisis, as those who feel threatened and dispersed by arbitrary dispensations of power find desperate cohesion in spontaneous deadly concert against embodiments of that power. Ordinarily, such a dispute would have ended in words (“a shouting match”); but the crisis has slipped beyond the mediating reach of locutions and now expresses itself in the imitative blood-deed of the “frenzied act” carried out “by dozens of small hands.” The Big Man’s first counter-blow is to disband the Youth Guard, as, in his indictment, “they had forgotten their duty to the people” (207). For committing this infraction, Salim reports, “they would be banished from the town and sent back to the bush” where “they would learn the wisdom of the monkey” (207). The Big Man’s ire is not confined merely to the Youth Guard, however; he is addressing those who would attack or even criticize (for true-believers there is never a difference) any branch of his regime. Naipaul makes Salim note that, although “the President was talking in the African language that most of the people who lived along the river understood,” the words “*citoyens* and *citoyennes . . .* were used again and again, for musical effect, now run together in a rippling phrase, now called out separately, every syllable spaced, to create the effect of a solemn drumbeat” (205). These

words, which derive from the political *argot* of 1789 and carry a whiff of the Terror, betoken the regime's rhetorically *revolutionary* character. Earlier, Salim has mentioned in passing that "*Monsieur* and *Madame* and *boy* had been officially outlawed" by the President, who "had decreed us all to be *citoyens* and *citoyennes*" (163). The speech touches on "the need to strengthen the revolution" (206), which in the past has meant violent suppression of perceived apostasy from the leader's doctrines. He speaks again of the link between "sacrifice and the bright future" (206).

7

The term "sacrifice," as employed in this context by Naipaul, is deliberately equivocal; it might mean frugality, but it might, with even greater likelihood, mean killing. In an earlier insurgency, known locally as "the time of madness" (66), the Big Man sent his European mercenaries to the town to kill a local Colonel who has conspicuously not exercised the required brutality against the river tribes. The official account refers to this euphemistically as "settling the old army" (112). Many others were shot or banished. It is classic purge of the officers, as in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The Big Man "sent a message to Colonel Yenyi telling him to stay at the barracks and to welcome the commander of the mercenaries" (112); when the Colonel came out of his quarters to greet them, "they shot him as he walked" (112). The Big Man has European advisors and can speak French. He went to school and served in the army, as a non-commissioned officer, under the Belgians. He often in the past has cultivated the presentation of a sophisticated, non-African personality, in suit and tie, with knowledge of economic and development policy. Now, ominously, "the African language that the President [had] chosen for his speeches was a mixed and simple language, and he simplified it further, making it the language of the drinking booth and the street brawl, converting himself, while he spoke, this man who kept everybody dangling and imitated the etiquette of royalty and the graces of de Gaulle, into the lowest of the low" (205).

The Big Man is especially upset "with those black men in the towns who dreamed of waking up one day as white men" and he stresses "the need for Africans to be African, to go back without shame to their democratic and socialist ways, to rediscover the virtues of the diet and medicines of their grandfathers and not go running like children after things in imported tins and bottles" (206). The first part of this complaint resembles–rather startlingly–Said's excoriation of Naipaul himself for being "a man of the Third World" who rejects his origins; but concepts like *négritude* and *Africa for Africans* were part and parcel of the vocabulary of independence in the ex-colonies in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference. Johnson points out, in *Modern Times*, that these and similar coinages resembled nothing so much as the Boer motto of the South African National Party in 1948, *Afrika voor de Afrikaaners.* While "from independence onward, most black African states practiced anti-white discrimination as a matter of policy," Johnson adds, "the commonest, indeed the universal, form of racism in black Africa was inter-tribal" (527) and partook in

the notion of "leadership by charismatic personalities" (512). Naipaul's "President" fits the model. Indeed, it is for the purposes of regenerating lost charisma that he uses the brutal *patois* of the street, wanting to appear as the ultimate street-brawler compatriot of those he would win back to his party, or assimilate again by fear. The Big Man's oration resolves finally into a thinly veiled threat:

"*Citoyens-citoyennes*, monkey smart. Monkey smart like shit. Monkey can talk. You didn't know that? Well, I tell you now. Monkey can talk, but he keep it quiet. Monkey know that if he talk in front of man, man going to catch him and beat him and make him work. Make him carry load in hot sun. Make him paddle boat. *Citoyens! Citoyennes!* We will teach these people to be like monkey. We will send them to the bush and let them work their arse off." (208)

The speech also contains references to "the *petit peuple*, as he liked to call them" and to their "oppressors" (208), whose punishment the parable of the monkey forecasts. The monkey-metaphor is as crudely racist as it seems; it is a vile remark on the stature of the townspeople, who belong to a tribe whose people tend to be smaller than those of the tribes in the South. Under the colonial government, the national project was summed up in the Latin motto, *Miscerique probat populos et foedora jungi*: "He approves of the mingling of the people and of their bonds of union" (62). Since independence, the Big Man has set one group against the other in a strategy of *divide and rule.* In the context, then, the hint of genocidal retribution must be taken seriously. In fact, the dissolution of the Youth Guard appears to constitute the first stage of the Big Man's chastisement of the rebellious region. "We had all thought of the Youth Guard as a menace . . . But it was after the disbanding . . . that things began to get bad in our town" (208). A "crisis" exists in which "peace was something you had to buy afresh every day" (210) by bribing those who would otherwise do harm; Salim reports "any number of violent outbursts" (211). Says Salim: "Stable relationships were not possible" (210). Everything is in a flux of "popular frenzy" (210) like that which ignited spontaneously when the Youth Guard officer slipped and fell before the people he was attempting, heavy-handedly, to police; but this "frenzy" is on a larger scale and is socially pervasive. As the Big Man's retribution increases in its severity, the generalized opposition to it acquires a similar renewed coherence. Salim speculates that "some prophecy, perhaps, had been making the rounds of the *cités* and shanty towns and had found confirmation in the dreams of some people" (211).

Naipaul's insertion of the word "prophecy" is not accidental; it belongs to a conscious and consistent analytical strand in *A Bend.* When Salim comes across a pamphlet issued by "the Liberation Army" under the title "The Ancestors Shriek" (211), Naipaul returns to the problem of political sanctimony. The pamphlet challenges the Big Man by amplifying his own terms and uses a quasi-religious vocabulary mirroring the quasi-religiosity in the cult

that its designated “ENEMY” (211) has constructed around himself. “Many false gods have come to this land,” the pamphlet urges, “but none have been as false as the gods of today” (211). The propagandist concludes by insisting that “OUR PEOPLE must understand the struggle,” which he has defined as a conflict of true and false cults, and adds that the always generalized *people* “must learn to die with us” (212). The call for martyrs–for that is what it is–far from alienating its audience, makes an effect on them and gains partisans for the dissidents.

8

As the Trinidadian mob had gone from lynching Charlie King to celebrating him, in the episode that Naipaul recounts from the history of his native island, so now, in *A Bend*, do the local people sympathize with the same Youth Guard that they had once, “while they had been serving the President” (212), despised. Able, after their banishment, to appeal to their victimary status, the Youth Guard cadre can now offer themselves “as defenders of the people . . . And the people were responding” (212). The motility of allegiance belongs to the ubiquitous flux and uncertainty of the situation. The resentment of the locals gains in strength from the fact of the Big Man’s non-presence. He speaks from the Capital, in the South; his voice comes out of the air, emphasizing his charisma and semi-deity. It is impossible to respond to him directly, and from this arises the necessity to find suitable surrogates for his disembodied authority. The *prophetic* character of the anti-Big Man feeling among the townspeople–an intuition “confirmed,” as Salim speculates, only “in someone’s dream”–indicates again that this is something massively other than procedural politics and that it is inspired by something just as massively other than a transparent political science. We are in the realm of the numinous, of a pervasive anxiety that appears, as in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in the form of phantoms, prodigies, and sayings of sooth: “The ancestors are shrieking . . . The law encourages crime . . . We know only the TRUTH, and we acknowledge this land as the land of the people whose ancestors now shriek over it” (211).

The shared rhetoric of the Big Man and of the organized opposition that he inspires is rich with implication for an understanding of the relation between politics and religion, between liberation so-called and sacrificial violence, in the modern period. In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin summarizes the recurrent rhetorical technique of revolutionary movements since the English Civil War, whose Puritan agitators he takes as prototypical practitioners of politics-as-religion. The man with a “cause,” writes Voegelin, borrowing key terms from Richard Hooker, who ran afoul of Calvinist zealotry, “will . . . indulge in severe criticisms of social evils and in particular the conduct of the upper classes” (198). A successful propagandist will also lay claim to “singular integrity, zeal, and holiness, for only men who are singularly good can be so deeply offended by evil” (198). Next comes the attempt to focus “popular ill-will on the established government” (198), or on the rival establishment, the internal enemy, whose liquidation the “cause” seeks:

This task can be psychologically performed by attributing all fault and corruption, as it exists in the world because of human frailty, to the action or inaction of the government. By such imputation of evil to a specific institution the speakers prove their wisdom to the multitude of men who by themselves would never have thought of such a connection; and at the same time they show the point that must be attacked if evil shall be removed from this world. After such a preparation, the time will be ripe for recommending a new form of government as the "sovereign remedy of all evils." (CW V. 5 198)

Johnson, in commenting on Bandung-Conference rhetoric as it spilled over into Third World politics during the decades after independence, notes the importance that the new national movements placed on the "idea . . . implicit in Leninism, which endowed vanguard élites (and their guiding spirit) with quasi-sacral insights into the historical process" (*Modern Times* 512). Nkrumah, for example, encouraged his followers "to refer to him as *Osagyefo*, 'the Redeemer'" (513) and declared that, as he personally represented and spoke for Africa, "no African can have an opinion that differs from mine" (513). Kenneth Kaunda, in Zambia, declared of "Zambian Humanism," that it "aims at eradicating all evil tendencies in Man," followed by a long list of particulars and the promise that completion of the program would result in "the attainment of human perfection" (531). Voegelin's analysis refers to the revolutionary agenda of those not yet in power who wish to topple an established government, but the revolutionary-totalitarian insurgencies have invariably continued to implement the same agenda once in power as a means of preventing the consolidation of internal rivals. In such a case, what Voegelin calls a new form of government becomes an *intensification of the prevailing form of government.* Girard sees Stalin's "Show Trials" of the mid-1930s this way: "In totalitarian systems, the rulers tend towards this status of incarnation. They write only infallible books and articulate only inspired words" (*Job* 116). Girard refers to "the powerful return of the scapegoating process in both terrorism and totalitarianism" (117).

Naipaul, who lived in Uganda in 1966 and who has spent much time in the Francophone nations of Central Africa, has based much of his fiction on the appearance, in these places, of the most debased elements of *Western* politics, from Marxism-Leninism to *Apartheid* (the brainchild of the "holist" philosopher and military notable, General Jan Smuts); Naipaul also grasps how the withdrawal of what, in an essay, he calls "The Universal Civilization" opens the field to the natural brutality of *human beings*, whatever their stature or color, in their atavistic revolt against the painfully accumulated institutions of civil society. Not coincidentally does Naipaul's Big Man find his inspiration in his own resentment of the market, formulated as his disposition for "socialism." So do the pamphleteers, who share his "socialism" and who judge its antithesis as odious and intolerable: "By the ENEMY we mean the powers of imperialism, the multi-nationals and the puppet-powers that be, the false gods, the capitalists, the priests and teachers who give false interpretations" (211). In rhetoric, this gesture bears the name of *reversal.* The selfsame enemies against whom the

Big Man inveighs the pamphleteers would assimilate *to* the Big Man, trumping *his* socialism by identifying it with "the capitalists." It is not *thinking.* "Blaming colonialism," Naipaul says, "is a very safe chant."

9

Naipaul–like Voegelin, Girard, and Gans–sees all of these murderous deformations of politics and of the spirit as arising from perverse misinterpretations of Christianity, particularly from impoverished versions of the Gospel message that cannot come to terms with its transcendental element. Gans's formulation is lucid: "Victimary rhetoric reaffirms the reciprocity of the Christian moral utopia, not as universal love, but in the resentful mode of 'the last shall be the first,' the 'last' being defined as the collective victims of historic injustice" (*Signs of Paradox* 181). Naipaul is not a Christian. He is secular and skeptical, lately grown nostalgic for the refined Hinduism of his remote ancestors before the Muslim conquests, but hardly a convert to any faith. He grasps, however, on the basis of the painful evidence, that the transcendental concept in the higher religions (the argument need not be confined to Christianity, as it holds as well, in his argument, for Hinduism or even for Islam) is what has insured the morality that in turn, even if imperfectly, has grounded the social order and prevented the disintegration into primitive spontaneity. This was apparent to him forty years ago when he presented the character of Owad, in his Stalinist conversion, in the final chapter-sequence of *A House for Mr. Biswas.* In Salim's account of his life, in *A Bend*, Naipaul allows his readers to see the stages of the disastrous religio-politics of the ex-colonial nations leading to the lapse into colossal mimetic violence, as happened in Uganda in the 1960s, again in Nigeria in the 1970s, and most recently in Rwanda in 1994 during the slaughter of the Tutsis by the Hutu-Power Government. Salim himself is a *naïf* until late in his own story, but others, such as his childhood friend Indar or the academic, Raymond, are men of fierce, if dissimulated, resentments who have adopted *doctrines* and who seek the opportunity in the mess of "independence" to put them into effect. The paradoxical result of dressing a dictatorship in the garb of theory is to inculcate the conviction that all within the realm are, as Salim says, "dependent on the President" so that "whatever job we did and however much we thought we were working for ourselves–we were all serving him" (184).

Gans writes of the classic "Big Man" of the Pacific Northwest that he seeks "a privileged status in ritual distribution comparable to and, no doubt, associated with that of the central sacred being as source of communal appetitive satisfaction" (*The End of Culture* 152). Salim puts it in a way that highlights the difference between the ritual distributor of largesse in a semi-sedentary stone-age society and the socialist-Third World supreme leader of the post-colonial era: he senses the Big Man's *puissance* as "a personal thing, to which we were all attached as with strings, which he might pull or dangle" (185). According to its arguers, "independence" should have propelled the nation into full partnership with the modern market. There was a scheme, for example, to use the country's hardwood to make furniture for the world; the Big Man placed great stock in this idea, but dropped it after enjoying the

discussion of it. Instead, independence has sent the nation reeling backwards into pre-market social conditions–indeed, into an endless round of sacrificial crises–a relentless homicidal mill grinding people into so much blood and bone.

III

Salim stems from the Asians–the Indians, either Muslim or Hindu–of "the coast." This means the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa, where the Arabs had established a Muslim presence as early as the Ninth Century of the Christian Era and where they traded, in goods and slaves. The Asians have long constituted the mercantile class in their adopted country, which, Salim says, "was not truly African" but "an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really a people of the Indian Ocean" (10). Among Muslims, Salim's family "were a special group . . . in our customs and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus of Northwestern India, from which we had originally come" (11). Salim believes that his ancestors might have participated in the Arab slave-trade within the Indian Ocean littoral, down to the grandparental generation: "I remember hearing from my grandfather that he had once shipped a boatful of slaves as a cargo of rubber" (11). Belonging to a minority community, the Asians live in "insecurity" when, after World War Two, the Europeans commence their departure and the era of independence dawns. "Events in this part of Africa began to move fast," Salim remembers: "To the north there was a bloody rebellion of an upcountry tribe which the British seemed unable to put down; and there were explosions of disobedience and rage in other places as well" (16). Neither Naipaul nor his narrator regards the colonizers with nostalgia: "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" (17). But Salim does not make colonial avarice his sole theme: "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" (17).

Salim's people live in a "compound" with a separate house for erstwhile servants who have become partly assimilated to the family. Among Salim's boyhood friends is Indar, who goes away to Great Britain for his schooling, and who reappears later in the novel. Nazruddin, a kind of uncle to Salim, sells Salim the shop that a rebellion, with its attendant chaos, forced him to abandon. He has since been living and trading in Uganda, but still holds the old title, not only to the shop itself but to certain "agencies" (24). "They aren't worth anything now," Nazruddin tells Salim, "but they will be again" (24). Salim, in his early twenties, makes the thousand-mile drive to the nameless town in the nameless region at the eponymous bend in the river:

> When I arrived I found that the town from which Nazruddin had brought back his tales

> had been destroyed, had returned to the bush . . .
>
> It was hard to get the simplest food; and if you wanted vegetables you either had to get them out of an old–and expensive–tin, or you grew them yourself. The Africans who had abandoned the town and gone back to their villages were better off; they at least had gone back to their traditional life and were more or less self-sufficient. But for the rest of us in the town, who needed shops and services–a few Belgians, some Greeks and Italians, a handful of Indians–it was a stripped Robinson Crusoe kind of existence . . . The shops were empty; water was a problem; electricity was erratic; and petrol was often short. (25)

Much in the town is also simply rubble. A spasm of anti-European violence had given expression of an indigenous wish "to get rid of the old, to wipe out the memory of the intruder" (26). The European neighborhood, which might have passed for a Brussels suburb, perished in a wave of systematic arson, after each house had been stripped of its accoutrements: "the ruins, spreading over so many acres, seemed to speak of a final catastrophe" (27). Yet for Salim, "the civilization" betokened by the wrack "wasn't dead" because "it was the civilization I existed in and in fact was still working towards" (27). Salim finds his living quarters and opens his shop (the wares are mostly intact) for business. At this moment, however, disturbing news arrives from the coast: "There was an uprising; and the Arabs–men almost as African as their servants–had been finally laid low" (29). He learns a short time later of the killings. One of the family servants makes his way to Salim and describes "arms and legs bleeding and lying about." (32). People known to Salim died, "as if a pack of dogs had gone into a butcher's stall" (32). For his own family there is now "no place for us on the coast" (29). A revolutionary government has taken over private houses belonging to the hated merchant class. Indar, when he reappears in Salim's life some years on, asks: "You remember our house? They've painted it in the party colours" (112). As in the case of the Trinidadian oil-strike murder, slaughter or expulsion is followed by esthetic commemoration–in the one case Calypso song-and-dance and in the other festive decoration of the house from which the owners have been rudely driven.

Consistently, in *A Bend*, Naipaul attributes to the market the power to sustain peace; people cannot make war and make trade with each other at the same time. The market does not supply *love*, it is true, and it does not make people into moral paragons; but in imposing its minimal rules and its etiquette of the transaction it creates pacific relations among sellers and buyers. Salim's first customer, Zabeth, is a woman from the bush; she buys galvanized basins and other simple implements to resell from her dugout canoe along the river. Salim respects her, despite her primitive characteristics, as "a good and direct business woman" (6). Equally consistently, Naipaul shows the market, in the persons of the merchant class, as the chief object of national political ire when independence arrives. The smashed signs of the Belgian presence suggest an irrational resentment whose direct consequences run

diametrically counter to the interests of the perpetrators. Those who might inherit the boon–the market, the law, a functioning physical infrastructure–cannot distinguish the institutions from those who have implemented and run them; they show little meaningful interest in sustaining wealth-production or the protections of an impartial judiciary once they have chased out the "intruders," in Salim's terminology.

In "A New King for the Congo," Naipaul reports on an actual and extreme manifestation of the phenomenon. Shortly after the Belgians had gone home, hastened on their way by the United Nations under Dag Hammarskjöld, a patchwork of civil wars broke out, with regional leaders vying with Mobutu for national control. One of the regional rebels, Pierre Mulele, "camped at Stanleyville and established a reign of terror" (*The Writer and the World* 221). In its particular details, Mulele's awful wrath forecasts Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime of a decade later:

Everyone who could read and write had been taken out to the little park and shot; everyone who wore a tie had been shot . . . Nine thousand people are said to have died in Mulele's rebellion. What did Mulele want? What was the purpose of the killings? [A] forty-year-old African who had spent some time in the United States laughed and said, "Nobody knows. He was against *everything.* He wanted to start again from the beginning." (221)

In his essay, Naipaul speculates about "resentments, which appear to contradict . . . ambitions" and which "can be converted into a wish to wipe out and undo, an African nihilism" (221). One detail of Mulele's rampage–the deliberate selective murder of those who were literate–suggests that the violence is *metaphysical* in its intent; it is a frustrated try at realizing the Kaunda program of "eradicating all evil tendencies in Man." The irritant is not the physical infrastructure or the functioning management of the nation but, rather, a type of consciousness deemed antithetic to the indigenous and therefore authentic consciousness. Sartre writes in *Existence and Truth* (1948), by no means neutralizing what he observes, that "if Peter points out the table to me, I see it *through* Peter's consciousness" (6). It is the *other*, not in his somatic but in his *noetic* manifestation who makes a scandal for the condemner of the "inauthentic." Mobutu himself did not lag behind Mulele in this form of resentment. He was, as Naipaul records, obsessed by "authenticity." Naipaul quotes Mobutu's words from an official University of Zaire publication: "I no longer have a borrowed conscience" nor "a borrowed soul" (*The Writer and the World* 222).

11

If it were a case of *metaphysical* attributes that must be expelled, then what one was witnessing would be a *religious* manifestation. Like Nkrumah, Mobutu saw himself as a *redeemer* who revealed a creed of salvation to his subjects. A mixture of Marx and Sartre, of communism and existentialism, this creed invoked the ancient spirits of the land and

promised a utopia of milk and honey without work. While traveling in Kinshasa, Naipaul met a spokesman for "Mobutuism." "Our religion," the man said in a speech to teachers, "is based on belief in God the creator and the worship of our ancestors" (222). Henceforth there would be "no need . . . for the Christian saints, or Christianity" because "Christ was the prophet of the Jews and he is dead"; but "Mobutu is the prophet of the Africans . . . and Mobutu's glorious mother, Mama Yemo, should also be honored, as the Holy Virgin was honored" (222). In *A Bend*, Naipaul transforms "Mobutuism" into the Big Man's "Africanism" with its cult of "the African Madonna." He transforms it again into the Big Man's appetite for something that is difficult to name without verbal awkwardness. Perhaps the phrase *Western anti-Westernism* conveys its flavor, for Naipaul's "African nihilism" is nothing other than European nihilism, from Nietzsche forward, dressed up comically in equatorial garb. If a man would be God then he must appear as *creator*, for creation *ex nihilo* is the exclusive and therefore identifying trait of God. But men live in a world that none of them has created; creation is *prior* to any individual. The colonial state, for example, is prior to the independent state. Existence itself becomes a stumbling block. The would-be deity must therefore eradicate the signs of prior creation, replacing them with his own mock creation. He must especially eradicate objectors to his construction of an egophanic pseudo-reality so that his coercion of a mass following suffers no interruption.

Thus, in the moment when they spasmodically, indeed murderously, reject the European presence, the indigenous rebels, those founders of their own "independence," absolutely require an imported *ideological framework.* They require, in other words, a*political religion*, the purpose of which is to annihilate a sense of reality and proportion and to justify the multiplication of victims according to a conviction of insuperable victimization. Thus the Third World's rejection of Europe is only Europe's resentful rejection of itself in the outward form of victimary rhetoric. The Big Man's threat against "those black men in the towns who dreamed of waking up one day as white men" becomes explicable under this hypothesis. The stultifying paradox of requiring the West in order to expel it is summed up in *A Bend* in the Big Man's creation of "the Domain" and in his manipulation of his Western–his European–advisors in his playing-off of one region, or tribe, of his nation against the other. Naipaul offers a thesis bound to earn him the spite of his academic critics. No less than that those responsible for the misery of the post-colonial Third World are the Western academicians: the "anti-imperialist"*intelligentsia*, the professional denouncers of bourgeois morality, and the *deletors* of private production and self-regulating exchange. They, too, so full of high-flown and scientific rhetoric, constitute not a "positive" or an "objective" but *a religious phenomenon of the sacrificial type.*

That none of these characters properly thinks, furthermore, but swims in a low-grade delirium of sparagmatic intoxication, is suggested by words to describe the fascination exercised by the Big Man:

“He is the great African chief, and he is also the man of the people. He is the modernizer and he is also the African who has rediscovered the African soul. He’s conservative, revolutionary, everything. He’s going back to the old ways, and he’s also the man who’s going to make the country a world power by the year 2000.” (138)

In the speaker’s fevered imagination–articulated, so to speak, in the language of one who awaits a fabled millennium–the Big Man becomes a perfect emblem of sacrificial confusion: a mass of contradictory qualities, nonsensical in any pragmatic terms, who fuses opposites in his mythic compactness. In the little encomium, Naipaul makes it evident that the Big Man is the *projection* of the crisis that, in the actual world, the theoreticians and power-worshipers refuse to see. The Big Man’s charismatic effect on the intellectual characters in Naipaul’s novel illustrates Johnson’s remark, in his study of the intelligentsia, that “the association of intellectuals with violence occurs too often to be dismissed as an aberration” and that “often it takes the form of admiring those ‘men of action’ who practice violence” (*Intellectuals* 319). Conquest and repression strike such people as inherently more interesting that the details of voluntary exchange.

The “Domain,” based on Mobutu’s Presidential Domain at Nsele and linked to the Mobutu-inspired cult of “the African Madonna,” represents the antithesis of the market. The construction of the Domain commences with the finishing-up, so to speak, of the pillaging and wreckage of the old European suburb: “The ruins which had seemed permanent were being leveled by bulldozers; new avenues were being laid out. It was the Big Man’s doing” (99). The “little town” (100) that springs up on the site draws its financing from a nationalized copper-mining industry, the nation’s only real source of income. “No one was sure, even after some of the houses were furnished, what the Domain was to be used for” (100), Salim says. He grasps its symbolic purpose, however, no matter what pragmatic aim it might serve. The Big Man “was creating an area where he and his flag were supreme” (100). Foreign magazines, “published in Europe but subsidized by governments like ours” (100), run picture-articles on the Domain explaining how, “under the rule of our new President the miracle had occurred: Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass . . . The President wished to show us a new Africa” (101). Characteristically, a promised enterprise–a farm–languishes and “the six tractors that some foreign government had given remained in a neat line in the open and rusted, and the grass grew high about them” (101-102). The Big Man finally announces that the Domain is to be “a university city and a research center” at which time the parade of “lecturers and professors began to come from the capital, and soon from other countries” (101). Students begin to materialize, too. Ferdinand, the teenaged son of Salim’s customer-*marchande*, Zabeth, has graduated from the local, barely functioning *lycée* and receives a scholarship to attend the Domain’s polytechnic. Many similar boys come out of the bush to become matriculates of the polytechnic. It is at this stage of the narrative that Naipaul brings back Salim’s boyhood friend Indar, through whom Salim meets the professorial celebrity of the Domain, Raymond,

as well as Raymond's (much younger) wife Yvette. Indar is "staying at the State Domain . . . attached to the polytechnic for a term" (113) as a lecturer.

12

Indar expresses a number of alarming ideas. His experience of being an outsider in London has heightened his sense of resentment against the perception that others might regard him as inferior. But this heightened sense of the contempt of others towards him finds its target not in those who might be the perpetrators of it; it seizes, rather, on Indar's own past. It mutates into a peculiar, imitative self-contempt. He tells Salim, "We have to learn to trample on the past" (141). The reason that Indar gives–it is not a particularly explanatory one–is that "everywhere" in the modern world "men are in movement, the world is in movement, and the past can only cause pain" (141). The idea of "movement" corresponds with the notion of "frenzy" elsewhere in *A Bend*.It points to a conception of the world as ceaselessly in crisis; the assertion that to solve the crisis one must "trample" on the source of difficulties has obvious sacrificial connotations in the brutal sense. In London, Indar met a rich American "interested in Africa" (153-54) who agreed to bankroll Indar's think-tank for Third World political–not *economic*–development. He says to Salim: "I became aware of all the organizations that were using the surplus wealth of the Western world" (154), and he has determined to use some of it for himself. His main idea is to shift "refugees, first-generation intellectuals" (154) from one African country, where they are threatened by the regime, to another. "If Africa had a future," Indar reasoned, "it lay with those refugees" who, given the opportunity, would "make a start on the true African revolution" (154).

Indar's conviction that the past must be *trampled* belongs, then, to his *revolutionary* orientation to a postponed future. It also represents an outgrowth of the nihilism already described. In reference to his consultancy, Indar tells Salim:

"To work for an outfit like this is to live in a construct–you don't have to tell me that. But all men live in constructs. Civilization is a construct. And this construct is my own. Within it, I am of value, just as I am. I have to put nothing on. I exploit myself. I allow no one to exploit me." (155)

Indar, the consummate *type* of the intellectual, seeks authenticity, that being "of value, just as I am," and he despises the past or anything else that would interfere with his "construction," as he says, *of himself.* Indar fails to calculate how thoroughly dependent he is on the "tyranny" that he claims to oppose. Of the Big Man phenomenon as an anthropological category, Gans writes that: "the big-man is already a charismatic leader; it only remains for war, famine, or some other disequilibriating pressure to turn him into a tyrant" (*The End of Culture* 152). What Naipaul sees (and the same insight must be credited to Johnson) is that, in the modern period, "charismatic leaders" who have come to believe in

their own charisma have learned how to foment that “disequilibriating pressure.” Their method is the one so superbly summed up by Voegelin in the passage, drawing on Hooker’s observations of England’s Puritan insurgency, already cited. “I’m a lucky man,” Indar says to Salim; “I carry the world within me” (155). Voegelin would recognize in Indar what he calls *the gnostic deformation* of one who has “interpreted the transcendent God as the projection of what is best in man” and who then “draws his projection back into himself” only to become convinced “that he himself is God, when as a consequence man is transfigured into the superman” (in *Modernity without Restraint* 190). The gnostic experience, Voegelin writes, might be “primarily intellectual and assume the form of speculative penetration of the mystery of form and existence . . . or primarily volitional and assume the form of activist redemption of man and society, as in the instance of revolutionary activists like Comte, Marx, or Hitler” (189).

In Indar’s remark that “in this world beggars are the only people who can be choosers” (*A Bend* 155) the connection between Voegelin’s diagnosis of *paracletic sectarianism* as *the* spiritual-political disease of the prevailing age and Gans’s analysis of *victimary rhetoric* as the parlance of that age begins to be evident. In *Signs of Paradox*, Gans writes of how: “Victimary rhetoric is able to blackmail traditional liberalism”–represented in Naipaul’s novel by Indar’s American millionaire–“because it hides its ontology behind an empirical mask” (181). Victimary rhetoric’s real “ontology,” as Gans says, is *anti-universal*, for it “affirms the reciprocity of the Christian moral utopia, not as universal love, but in the resentful mode of ‘the last shall be the first,’ the ‘last’ being defined as the collective victims of historic injustice” (181). Thus, while “the universalist opponent is ostensibly denied his discursive position only until such time as the victimary difference has been abolished,” the real goal is “the denial of the universal as such” (181). As Indar says, “I’m tired of being on the losing side” (*A Bend* 155), so that the aim of his “construct” is to promote him into the position of “first.” He sees himself, in a kind of *egophany*, playing a leading part in the “true revolution” that he foresees and that involves *trampling on the past.* The past is a scandal standing in the way of *authenticity.* Under the Big Man’s regime, however, only *one* “paracletic sectarian” can be *authentic*, can be *first.* One must be constantly cognizant, in reading these and other exchanges–between Salim and those associated either with the Big Man’s regime or with the Domain–that he, Salim, *naïf* though he be, *unlike these others*, engages in an activity that requires the cooperation of second parties and demands for its justification neither theory nor rhetoric. In the exchange of goods, the two parties mutually agree on questions of “value.” The ego does not enter in the transaction. Once again, the market establishes the ethical minimum, and audacious redemptory schemes take on a suspicious glint in the market’s light.

13

Of great interest in Naipaul’s presentation of the *anti-universal* struggle of his *self-constructing* characters is the seminar led by Indar and witnessed by Salim at the

polytechnic, in which Zabeth's son, Ferdinand, takes a role. The Big Man has recruited these young men to be part of his cadre. They belong to the "magic of the Domain" (119), they participate in the "romance of [its] idea" (120), and they have dedicated themselves to the program of creating "the new man" (119) of independence. In the Domain, "everyone became locked in an idea of glory and newness" and "everywhere the President's photograph looked down on us" (120)–not, as formerly, "in army uniform, but in a chief's leopard-skin cap, a short-sleeved jacket and a polka-dotted cravat" (121). Salim at first feels the tug of the carefully arranged *numen* but later suspects that it amounts to little more than "the Africa of words" (123), his common-sense demotion of Indar's jargon-like "construct." Indar's lecture is about Africa as an idea, then about "the coup in Uganda, and about the tribal and religious differences there," and after that "generally about religion in Africa" (121).

After Indar concludes, Ferdinand rises to pose a question: "Would the honorable visitor state whether he feels that Africans have been depersonalized by Christianity" (121). Indar replies somewhat evasively, noting that Islam, for example, is "not African" and posing in return whether Ferdinand would argue "that Africans have been depersonalized" by Islam or by Coptic Christianity (121). Indar modifies the question: "I suppose you are really asking whether Africa can be served by a religion which is not African" (121). Ferdinand protests that "the honorable visitor knows very well that this is a direct question to him about the relevance or otherwise of African religion" (121-22). Ferdinand believes that African religions have suffered demotion under Christianity and he is, in his limited way, staking a *victimary claim* on behalf of repressed cults and creeds. The claim of Christianity, that the willingness of God to forego sacrifice by *undergoing* it guarantees the sanctity of *persons* in an unprecedented and inimitable way, never enters the dialectic. Indar, who is educated, might be acquainted with it, but shows no inkling of such knowledge. What Indar believes can be inferred from his attitude to the past–that custom and inherited faith are impediments to "the true revolution." His subsequent remarks have the goal of mystifying Ferdinand, who drops his inquiry when the terms have grown too "complicated" (122).

Indar, the secular activist, thinks he is paving the way for his own program. In dismissing both revealed religion (Christianity *and* Islam) and the native cults and creeds, however, he is really paving the way for the Big Man's *political religion*, with the Big Man himself as tribal chief and high priest, as the embodiment of "all Africa" (134), or what Ferdinand has earlier called "the god of Africans" (83). The Big Man sees himself as this god. He institutes a piety about his own mother and causes to be erected in the Domain and elsewhere statues showing "a mother and child" (173). If his mother were the Madonna then, clearly, the Big Man would be the redeemer. That this cult "is a parody of Christianity" (194) is evident to the Big Man's European advisors, but even they argue that, "at the heart of this extraordinary cult is an immense idea about the redemption of the woman of Africa" (194), thus justifying it. They, too, invest in *authenticity* conceived under the idea that whatever is non-African, or rather Western, is a priori *inauthentic.*

The man who pronounces frankly on the "African Madonna" but who at the same time excuses it is Raymond, a scholar of the country since at the period before independence, known in the capital as "the Big Man's white man" (125). After the seminar at the polytechnic, Indar invites Salim to a party at Raymond's house in the Domain. Like the seminar, the evening at Raymond's figures importantly in Naipaul's presentation moral and intellectual decay in the Big Man's realm. Raymond's wife, Yvette, a youngish woman in her late twenties, greets them, as Raymond is in his study, working on his comprehensive history of the nation. Indar, with his parochial and vaguely Muslim background, "had never been in a room before where men and women danced for mutual pleasure, and out of pleasure in one another's company" (127) and is immediately entranced by the occasion. The music that Yvette had set playing on the stereo casts a particular spell on him. "Joan Baez," Indar explains to Salim; "she's very famous in the States" (127). Indar will eventually cast off the spell, but it lingers about him for a long time. Naipaul, who has been briefly a university professor in the United States and in Africa, in Uganda in 1966, knows the *milieu* well and has chosen his details tellingly. Salim hears only the attractive voice and the dance rhythms. Baez's lyrics, however, consist of almost nothing but victimary rhetoric and her example shows how this rhetoric had already penetrated Western popular culture by the mid-1960s. Baez is exactly the popular entertainment that one would associate with the faculty *soirée* of the time; she is emblematic of an intellectual mediocrity, a self-righteous parochialism inevitably of the Left, that Naipaul wishes his readers to confront in the narrative of *A Bend*. To the same setting belongs a comment about "Muller's article" (130), just published in a venue that has turned Raymond down. Indar is the speaker:

"I thought it [the article] was a lot of rubbish. Every kind of cliché parading as new wisdom. The Azande, that's a tribal uprising. The Bapende, that's just economic oppression, rubber business. They're to be lumped with the Budja and the Babwa. And you do that by playing down the religious side. Which is just what makes the Bapende dust-up so wonderful. It's just the kind of thing that happens when people turn to Africa to make the fast academic buck." (130)

While denouncing "clichés," Indar employs them: the Marxist-academic locutions of "economic oppression" and of colonialists, even scholarly ones, *exploiting* the underdeveloped world for a "fast buck." Of particular interest is the oblique remark implying that the scandalous Muller has analyzed a violent episode in the country's history by emphasizing its "religious side." Raymond would never do such a thing.

It is unsurprising, then, that despite Raymond's exalted reputation–Indar describes him glowingly as "the only man our President reads" (131)–he turns out to be a nullity. When Salim reads the scholar's articles, his summary makes them appear as what in recent years

has taken the name of the New Historicism, that fussy concern with documentary minutiae out of the archives. One essay is “a review of an American book about African inheritance laws” while another, “quite long, with footnotes and tables, seemed to be a ward-by-ward analysis of tribal voting patterns in the local council elections in the big mining town in the south just before independence” (180). Then there is “Riot at a Football Match” which concerns “a race riot in the capital in the 1930s that had led to the formation of the first African political club” (180); and there is another, longish article on the attempt of Christian missionaries in the Nineteenth to ransom slaves from Arab slavers. Salim hopes, as he reads, that Raymond will “go beyond newspaper stories and editorials and try to get at real events” (181), but concludes that the scholar “wasn’t interested in that side” (181). The writer “didn’t seem to have gone to any of the places he wrote about” and “he hadn’t tried to talk to anybody” (182). For Raymond, as one might say, *il n’y a pas de hors-texte.* The judgment is a harsh:

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 . . . Yet he had made Africa his subject. He had devoted years to those boxes of documents in his study that I had heard about from Indar. 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. (182)

Raymond’s confinement within the “construct,” as Indar might say, of dubious archives is consistent with the way Naipaul portrays him. He is only ever temporarily present as a conversationalist or participant in society. Readers encounter him either emerging from or reentering the darkened room that serves him for a study. He is a casebook dweller in Plato’s cave. Raymond is currently at work on a selection of the President’s speeches: “Such a work,” he says, “if adequately prepared, might well become the handbook for true revolution throughout the continent” (136). So Naipaul reveals Raymond, like Indar, to be a low-grade gnostic desiring and despairing in his project to recreate reality by conjuration, by word-magic. This is the man who has been the Big Man’s advisor and mentor since the time prior to independence. In his study of the Rwandan massacres of 1994, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families* (1998), Philip Gourevitch devotes considerable discussion to Mobutu, who abetted the Hutu Power movement and was eventually undone by a chain-reaction of events stemming from the genocide. Gourevitch notes that “Mobutu liked to appear on television in clips that showed him walking among the clouds in his trade-mark leopard-skin hat and dark glasses, claiming the Adamic power of renaming all of his subjects–or, at least, requiring them to abandon their Christian names and take up African ones” (283). In the name of “authenticity,” Mobutu systematically plundered Zaire. Gourevitch notes that “an alarming number of Westerners took cynical solace in the conviction that this state of affairs was about as authentic as

Africa gets" (284). In *A Bend*, when Naipaul has Raymond comment approvingly on the Big Man's "African Madonna," he makes him say these words in description of his political *patron*, the one who will shortly betray him: "I don't think many people know that earlier this year he and his entire government made a pilgrimage to the village of that woman of Africa . . . This act of piety is something that brings tears to the eyes" (136). For the sentimentalist who lives in words and not in the world, "piety" trumps all. It is an abandonment of criticism, of thinking. This, too, belongs to victimary rhetoric, and, in its deliberate turning from reality, it abets something beyond rhetoric–killing and more killing.

IV

Naipaul's critics–I have drawn on Said and Phillips as exemplars of the category–fault him for peculiar vices. Here is Phillips, from the same review-article cited earlier:

In the 1960s Naipaul began to travel, first to the Caribbean region for *The Middle Passage* (1962), and then to India for *An Area of Darkness* (1964). Alongside his constructed sense of himself as a writer, he was now beginning to construct his subject-matter, his "two spheres of darkness." He "investigated" this darkness, promoting his own vision as the only beacon of light that could penetrate these "half-made societies." And he seemed incapable of confining his often clichéd and ill-informed commentary to the pages of his books; he reveled also in providing sharp copy for Western journalists, all the while insisting on how stupid non-white, non-Western people really are.

Philips finds Naipaul's work uncreative, hence appropriate to dismiss, because his recent fictional works are "autobiographical memoirs masquerading as fiction." In *A Bend in the River*, of course, Naipaul attributes stupidity primarily to infatuated Westerners like Raymond; the Africans he sees as victims will-they or nill-they of Western liberal schemes rooted not in reality but in the "romance" of non-Western people. As for his novels being "autobiographical": what this really means is that they are founded on empirical observation; they are only "autobiographical" in the sense that every novelist must have a point of view and that point of view must be founded in himself, in his own acumen and honesty. *A Bend*, for example, transforms documentary features of Mobutu and Zaire, verifiable by anyone willing to make the effort, in a narrative form. Naipaul's *Guerrillas* (1975) makes similar use of the "Michael X" killings in Trinidad in 1972. Unconsciously implicit in Phillips' remarks (a divulgence in spite of herself) is the complaint that *Naipaul reports on reality* rather than on the "construct" (the word is hers) that Phillips would prefer *in place of reality.* Voegelin offers a precise formula for this type of deferral: "Gnosticism as a counterexistential dream world can perhaps be made intelligible as the extreme expression of an experience that is universally human, that is, of a horror of existence and a

desire to escape from it" (*Modernity without Restraint* 224). In Phillips's case, reality is the condition in which Naipaul enjoys literary success and receives the Nobel Prize, so that his existence scandalizes her and must be rhetorically diminished. It is simple resentment, restricted to the pages of literary criticism where petty egos eternally clash. Yet there is a continuity linking such harmless invidiousness to wounding enormities. Some years ago certain literary critics in the Iranian city of Homs issued a *fatwa* against author Salmon Rushdie for having offended Islam in his fantastic novel *The Satanic Verses.* This death-decree has never been rescinded and Rushdie continues to live a furtive life.

Said, that other exemplary Naipaul-critic, the one who accuses the author of *A Bend in the River* of being a man of the Third World who has insultingly rejected his native identity, was, within three or four years, photographed participating in a lapidation and is one of those who joined the chorus of equivocation in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. The same charge that one has unforgivably betrayed one's ontological status turns up in the lyric of a Rwandan popular song promoted during the massacres under the Hutu Power regime. The song's *objet de scandale* is *not*, oddly enough, the Tutsis, even though they were the overwhelming target of Hutu president Habyaramina's carefully prepared genocide. Let the lyricist, a Hutu quoted by Gourevitch, speak for himself: "I hate these Hutus, these arrogant Hutus, braggarts, who / scorn other Hutus, dear comrades . . . / I hate these Hutus, these de-Hutuized Hutus, who have disowned their identity, dear comrades" (100). The genocide would not be complete until those Hutus who had refused to participate in it were also submitted to what the Hutu Power government called "the final solution" (94). They were, in their way, less tolerable to "true" Hutus than the reviled Tutsis. *Hic est nostri contemptor!* Gourevitch makes a relevant summary observation on the Rwandan slaughter:

Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community building. A vigorous totalitarian order requires that the people be invested in the leaders' scheme, and while genocide may be the most pervasive and ambitious means to this end, it is also the most comprehensive . . . In fact, the genocide was the product of order, authoritarianism, decades of modern political theorizing and indoctrination, and one of the most meticulously administered states in history. And strange as it may sound, the ideology–or what Rwandans call the "logic"–of genocide was promoted as a way not to create suffering but to alleviate it. (95)

The Rwandan catastrophe took place six short years before the millennium, but it had roots in waves of tribally articulated, regime-manipulated violence in Zaire under Mobutu, the apostle of authenticity, in the 1960s and 70s. These waves are the subject of Naipaul's *A Bend.* They reflect what Tutsi refugees in Zaire said of Mobutu when they began to be murdered in the displaced person camps to which they had fled for their lives. "Every time Mobutu has domestic opposition," a refugee told Gourevitch, "he allows a civil conflict, then

puts it down, and says, '*Voilà*, peace'" (282). So, in the final days of his regime, Mobutu tried to regenerate *la sodalité Zaïroise* by turning *le petit peuple* against Tutsi asylum-seekers, exemplary victims of the paradigmatic sacrificial crisis. Naipaul's essayistic conclusion on the decay of Zaire under Mobutu converges with Gourevitch's on Rwanda under Habyaramina: "Borrowed ideas–about colonialism and alienation, the consumer society and the decline of the West–are made to serve the African cult of authenticity; and the dream of an ancestral past restored is allied to a dream of a future of magical power" (*The Writer and the World* 224). A parallel presents itself in Achmad Sukarno's Indonesian regime of *"Nasionalisme, Agame*, and *Komunisme"* (Johnson *Modern Times 479*), the middle term meaning "faith" or "religion." Johnson writes that Sukarno, when "faced with a problem . . . solved it with a phrase" (479). Whether it is Julius Nyerere's *Ujaama* ("familyhood") or Sukarno's ever-changing *konsepsi*, one confronts the identical error: that description is prior to reality. Naipaul, in *A Bend*, is thus discussing what Gans, in *Signs of Paradox*, calls *binarism*:

> So Mobutuism simplifies the world, the concept of responsibility and the state, and simplifies the people. Zaire's accession to power and glory has been made to appear so easy; the plundering of the inherited Belgian state has been so easy, the confiscations and nationalizations, the distribution of big shadow jobs. Creativity itself now begins to appear as something that might be looted, brought into being by decree. (226)

16

In the novel, the "boom" associated with the putting down of the first rebellion and the subsequent lavishing of the Domain turns out to be no real increase in wealth but only a shifting of plundered wealth from South to North temporarily. Indar, at the end of his tenure, departs hastily on the steamer, in a panic to get away, his self-inflating dignity no longer in evidence. Raymond's edition of the President's speeches does not appear; another, simpler book is published in its place and the President abandons Raymond. Just before his own desperate exit, Indar tells Salim: "Raymond is in a bit of a mess" (139); Yvette explains that the Big Man "broke with Raymond when he decided he didn't need him, that in the new direction he was taking the white man was an embarrassment to him in the capital" (187). As civic order in the town breaks down, Salim decides to make a visit to London to visit Nazruddin, who has found a new and settled life there. He also learns that Indar's consultancy "has folded" (241) and that Indar is living in bitter disillusionment. When Salim returns, after a few weeks, to Africa he discovers that his shop has been nationalized and now belongs to *Citoyen* Théotime. Salim learns that: "The President made a speech a fortnight back," in which "he said he was radicalizing and taking everything away from everybody" (254). His friend Mahesh tells him that "the President issued a statement just to let everybody know that what the Big Man gives the Big Man can take away . . . He gives

and he takes back" (257). Salim becomes Théotime's manager under a new arrangement; Théotime presumes increasingly, making Salim his chauffeur, and after that "looking for new ways to assert himself" (262). Salim understands that while Théotime wants to act his role of shopkeeper without Salim's assistance, he knows nothing about commerce and *knows that he knows nothing*. Théotime has not done what Phillips accuses Naipaul of doing. She writes that *Naipaul's* "chosen theme is himself, his singular struggle, and the necessity of his having to create a subject for himself where none (or so he claims) existed." Naipaul's "self" is his *commercial* self, the one who *sells* in the literary market. Salim, who knows how to negotiate happily with people, with Zabeth for instance, also qualifies as a commercial personality. The seller must not presume on the buyer. The sale rests on the fact, not the dissimulation, of their equality as assessors of value. Théotime (the name means something like *Proud in God* and thus invokes once again the novel's *religious* theme) is unable to *sell himself* in this sense. Because Salim is now an unbearable ontological scandal, Théotime must get him out of the way; he reports Salim to the police as a private trader in illegal gold and ivory, and the police arrest Salim and jail him. He is to be kept behind bars until the president has made a visit to the town and returned to the capital.

Ferdinand, now a commissioner in the region (he has long since graduated from the polytechnic), saves Salim, even while he suspects that he himself is on a death-list for killing in a new tide of radicalization to be unleashed by the Big Man. He tells Salim to leave the country. Of himself he says:

> "You mustn't think it's bad for just you. It's bad for everybody. That's the terrible thing . . . We're all going to hell, and every man knows this in his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning . . . It's a nightmare." (272)

Should the Big Man himself not execute Ferdinand, the Liberation Army, the ones who distributed the pamphlet under the title "The Ancestors Shriek," might. The opposition to the President has gained strength: "At first they were going to have people's courts," says Ali, "and shoot people in the square," but "now they say they have to do a lot more killing, and everybody will have to dip their hands in blood" (275). Salim gets aboard the steamer just before the fatal collision of indistinguishable regime and anti-regime in the town. Soldiers–whose it is impossible to say–seize the barge towed behind the steamer but fail in capturing the steamer itself. The barge drifts away, armed men pointing guns at the passengers on deck. The final image is of a searchlight illuminating hosts of night-insects from the bush. Gunshots rattle in the darkness. The worst of all worlds have combined in the Big Man's realm: the future is destroyed and Salim escapes with his life and his story and nothing more. It was Naipaul's judgment in 1975, four years before *A Bend* saw publication, that while "Mobutu's power will inevitably be extinguished . . . there can be no going back on the principles of Mobutuism," which had, he concluded, "established the pattern . . . of

nihilistic assertion" (*The Writer and the World* 228). Phillips finds it intolerable that Naipaul should have said, in an interview with Elisabeth Hardwick, that "Africa has no future," but the prediction of "nihilist assertion" has been proven many times over since 1979, not least in the current slide into bloody chaos in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

It should be stressed that Naipaul does not *want* Africa to fail: when he addresses the subject, the basis of his judgment is empirical and causal. Western political fantasies, introduced into materially and intellectually minimally developed countries inevitably produce calamity. Voegelin's analysis of the rebellion against reality is again useful:

> Gnostic societies and their leaders will recognize dangers to their existence when they develop, but such danger will not be met by appropriate actions in the world of reality. They will be met by magical operations in the dream world, such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intention, resolutions, appeals to the opinion of mankind, branding of enemies as aggressors, outlawing of war, propaganda for world peace and world government, etc. The intellectual and moral corruption that expresses itself in the aggregate of such magic operations may pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum, as we experience it in our time in the Western crisis. (*Modernity without Restraint* 227).

17

It is Ferdinand's "nightmare." The victimary rhetoric under whose aegis not only sacrifice but genocide finds its theoretical justification originates not in the peripheral nations of the increasingly universal Western civilization but in that civilization's central nations. This is the meaning of the depressingly familiar evening at Raymond's house in the Domain, when Yvette entertains the houseguests with the record of Joan Baez. The utopian project to remake an imperfect humanity under the sign of perfection has been a deformation of the Western, Judeo-Christian civilization for centuries and, if Voegelin were right, would be implicit in the gnostic heresies that competed with Christianity in the period of Late Antiquity. In his most recent book, Girard devotes a chapter to Apollonius of Tyana, known in his day as the Pagan Christ, and a case-study of the gnostic type. When the crisis afflicts Tyana, what is Apollonius' solution? He picks out a blind beggar to be the scapegoat and "orders the Ephesians to gather stones" (*I see Satan fall like Lightning* 56). He next "denounces the beggar as an 'enemy of the gods'" so as to "demonize" him (56). Once Apollonius has goaded the Ephesians to cast the proverbial *first stone*, the cajoler can "take a nap or whatever, for now violence and deceit are bound to triumph" (56). In Rwanda, reports Gourevitch, "massacres were invariably preceded by political 'consciousness-raising' meetings at which local leaders, usually with a higher officer of the provincial or national government at their side, described the Tutsis as devils–horns, hoofs, tails, and all–and gave the order to kill them, according to the old revolutionary lingo, as a 'work'

assignment" (94). The pattern is always the same.

On the basis of an analysis of utopian discourse similar to Voegelin's, Gans writes, in *Signs of Paradox*, in a passage on the Holocaust, that the meaning of Hitler's sanguine enormity "is not simply that we must abolish antisemitism or even 'prejudice' in general; what must be abandoned are all variants, including the Marxian-socialist variant, of the utopian model of total reconciliation, of universal harmony" (166). In Gans's opinion, "the socialist and fascist utopias are cut from the same poisoned cloth" (167) in that they equally deny the one-on-one negotiations of the market in favor of a ritual, ultimately sacrificial, idea of the state–or, more likely, its leader–as immanent deity. Naipaul says something similar in a modest essay on "Our Universal Civilization" (1992):

The universal civilization has been a long time in the making. It wasn't always universal; it wasn't always as attractive as it is today. The expansion of Europe gave it for at least three centuries a racial tint, which still causes pain. In Trinidad I grew up in the last days of that kind of racialism. And that, perhaps, has given me a greater appreciation of the immense changes that have taken place since the end of the war, the extraordinary attempt of this civilization to accommodate the rest of the world, and all the currents of the world's thought. (*The Writer and the World* 516)

Naipaul wonders whether "it is sufficient merely to hold a worldview, an ethical view, intensely?" (516) The answer, he says, is "double-edged" (516) because a further question always exist about *what* ethos one has "intensely" espoused. Many a prevailing "worldview" amounts to "philosophical hysteria" (513): "for that reason they can also be seen as a reaching out to a far-off and sometimes hostile system of fixed belief"; but "they can also be seen as an aspect of the universality of our civilization at this period" (517), parodying its tolerance the way the cult of the African Madonna parodies Christianity. Meditating on his Trinidadian-Hindu childhood and his move, as he says, "from the periphery to the center" (517) of civilization, he remarks that he "may have felt certain things more freshly than people to whom those things were everyday" (517). One of these is "the Christian precept, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," which strikes him so poignantly because "there was no such consolation in the Hinduism I grew up with, and–although I have never had any religious faith–the simple idea was, and is, dazzling to me, perfect as a guide to human behavior" (517). Another such dazzling idea is "the pursuit of happiness," as "so much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement" (517). The two ideas together amount to a vaccination against ideology because the pair of them "cannot be reduced to a fixed system" and "it cannot generate fanaticism" (517). V. S. Naipaul is the literary successor in English to Joseph Conrad and an anthropological and political-moral thinker who belongs in company with Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the Twentieth Century.

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