VIDIA NAIPaul - ARTIST OF THE ABSURD

by

ELAINE JOAN ZINKHAN

B.A., University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus, 1970

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department

of:

English

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August, 1972
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Department of English
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver 8, Canada

Date August 6, 1972
ABSTRACT

This thesis acknowledges that the philosophical basis of the novels and short stories of Vidia Naipaul bears a significant resemblance to the tenets of Absurdity set out in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and witnessed in various other Absurdist writings. At the same time it attempts to demonstrate that Naipaul's Absurdist vision reflects a Zeitgeist fundamental to the West Indies. It in no way suggests, however, that Naipaul consciously imitated the thoughts of Camus or others, or that he deliberately set out to circumscribe West Indian feelings.

Chapter One attempts to demonstrate that Naipaul's most crucial perceptions of life have been those of disorientation and futility. It then shows where awareness of an inharmonious existence has been especially prevalent in the twentieth century, and it goes on to examine in some detail the discovery of the Absurd Conjunction between the world and individual consciousness articulated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In addition it describes the alternatives which Camus and other Absurdist writers advance to counter-act the anguish of Absurd Discovery.

The second chapter begins by revealing the relationship between the absurd as "ridiculous" and the Absurd as "anguish", demonstrating that while Naipaul's perception of the irreducibility of the world is more central to his later works, it begins already in his earlier ones. It then goes on to discuss various aspects of Absurd Discovery which appear in Naipaul's fiction: discovery of the isolation of man; discovery of the hostility of the world to the desires of man; and discovery of the disparity between the possible and the actual.
Chapter Three shows how Naipaul's characters respond to the challenge of meaninglessness with both negation and affirmation. Although his characters frequently submit to despondency, this is in most cases only an initial reaction. In a vein similar to that of Camus, Naipaul implies that the Absurd would best be confronted by rebellion, creativity, personal involvement or, barring all else, ironic assessment.

The final chapter demonstrates that the world of Vidia Naipaul - the disorder to which he attests and the alternatives he offers - while exhibiting sentiments essential to the European Absurdists, also mirrors experiences general to the West Indies. Rather than dissecting with dispassionate superiority a background from which he has had occasion to feel alienated, Naipaul has sensitively illuminated a geographical region which, both historically and sociologically, has come to encompass its own especial Sisyphean sphere.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I  VIDIA NAIPAUL AND THE TRADITION OF THE ABSURD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II ABSURD DISCOVERY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III ABSURD CONSEQUENCE</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV VIDIA NAIPAUL AND ABSURDITY IN THE WEST INDIES</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

Vidia Naipaul and the Tradition of the Absurd

To be Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is to be laureled and left. It is to be one of the United Kingdom’s most prize-laden novelists and one of her least read. And it is to be misunderstood. It is to be told on one occasion that one’s "whole purpose is to show how funny Trinidad Indians are," and, on another, that one’s characters are described with detached contempt, that in one’s utilization of "castrated satire" one has let one’s region down, has come to treat one’s roots with diabolical scorn.

In point of fact—and central to any understanding of his work—Naipaul has no well-defined "roots." Presently domiciled in Britain he is the quintessential alien: in England he is an immigrant; in Trinidad, as he describes in The Middle Passage, while on the one hand he had been an Indian, an exotic Asian who remained outside the frenzied vitality of Carnival and calypso, on the other he had become an intellectual misfit within the East Indian community—a community itself vacillating insecurely between tradition-without-philosophy and American-based modernity. And these Trinidadian experiences were not the only ones in the West Indies which determined his alienation: on a return visit he found himself an "islander" in Guyana and an "Englishman" in Martinique. Nor could he, ethnically speaking, empathize with the Jamaican Rastafarian movement. And in any event there seemed little with which to happily identify in an area which had known only dereliction, where nothing had been "created":

1
Nothing was created in the British West Indies, no civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in Haiti or the American colonies. There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, neglect: the size of the islands called for nothing else. (MP, 27)

But if his experiences in the West Indies had left him feeling alienated, Naipaul's subsequent attempt, recorded in An Area of Darkness, to trace his heritage back to India proved equally disappointing. Although for the first time in his life he was undistinguishable by appearance, he still remained an outsider: he was, after all, not from India. At best, his slight British accent set him apart as being an Indian student returning from studies in Europe. The incredible inefficiency of India, the spectacle made of religion, the caste system which so ridiculed the street sweeper, the sociality of defecation, the tender attitude taken toward poverty, and, finally, the visit to the village of his ancestors which offered horror and embarrassment—in all this India seemed irremediably foreign: "somewhere something had snapped." (Area, 207). Later still, when Naipaul deliberately set out in The Loss of El Dorado to determine the beginnings of West Indian history, he confronted greater disorder than ever. Of the Trinidad which had been the centre for the El Dorado expeditions into the Guiana interior, nothing remained. (El Dor, 10). The present inhabitants of the island were all "immigrants," the majority for whom it might be wisest, after all, if the past were left forgotten. In this piece of research Naipaul only confirmed his own "placelessness" and his knowledge of the lack of pattern and possibility in the world he had known. And it is this vision of nowhereness, of futility, that is reflected in his eight works of fiction.

Awareness of an inharmonious universe is by no means, of course, a unique perception. Feelings of isolation and uncertainty as to one's identity
are as old as man, as old as death. From Socrates' nostalgia for self-knowledge to Samuel Beckett's "they give birth astride of a grave,"\(^8\) the strangeness and hostility of the world have come to be felt alike by all who have recourse to thought. As Geoffrey Clive has noted, all men are at some time offended by virtue of envisaging possibilities incompatible with reality;\(^9\) all men fear death. But it would appear that these feelings have become even more endemic to man since the latter half of the eighteenth century when, guided by the disparities between the idealism engendered by the ambience of the French Revolution and the horror of the Reign of Terror, and guided even more by Marx and Darwin, man became extraordinarily sensitive to the possibilities and disappointments of history and nature. Thus arose Manfred's "we are the fools of time and terror";\(^10\) so too, William James' allowance of a "dissatisfaction with one's self and irritation at others and anger at circumstances";\(^11\) and hence Dostoevsky's expression of worldwide uncertainty and spiritual dereliction:

> There lives not one single man, after all, who is not to some extent in despair, in whose inmost parts there does not dwell a disquietude, a perturbation, a discord, an anxious dread of an unknown something.\(^12\)

In the twentieth century these feelings have become increasingly widespread, two world wars having helped to engender a sensibility of anxiety and fragmentation. The dadaists, with their nihilistic wish of destroying the world as it stands and creating a substitute world in which nothing exists showed where such anxiety could lead in the extreme; and the surrealists, too, were "faithful to most of the principles of nihilism."\(^13\) But this was only a fraction of the reflection of upheaval by writers and intellectuals: Franz Kafka wove into his work a menace devoid of explanation; the philosophers of "existentialism" denied all traditional philosophies; and Albert Camus, making
no attempt to solve or explain, set forth in The Myth of Sisyphus what has remained one of the most brilliant descriptions of metaphysical morass.

The "divorce" between the world and individual consciousness, the conjunction of man's nostalgia for unity with the fragmentation of the universe—this is what Camus defines as the Absurd. Central to Camus' study is the question of suicide. Must the shock of disillusion be followed by a premature stoppage of life—or ought an effort be made to see what can be salvaged? The Myth of Sisyphus, unlike the tracts of the dadaists and surrealists, suggests that metaphysical anguish need not lead to nihilism, but should become, instead, a point of departure for further awareness and activity.

Camus begins his study with an inquiry into the nature of existence. The feeling of the impossibility of constituting the world as a unity is not discriminatory: it can strike any man at any time. Camus cites four circumstances which give it currency: it arrives when man becomes conscious of the mechanical, weary nature of his life, when he begins to question the "chain of daily gestures"; it arrives with a sudden consciousness of the meaning of time, that time is man's enemy, that man belongs to the moment and the moment culminates in death; it arrives with man's sense of being an alien in the world, a world in which illusions have been shattered, a world in which objects become strangely "foreign and irreducible"; and it arrives, finally, when man senses his alienation not only from the world in general, but also from other men. (Sis, 10-11).

The world itself is not Absurd for Camus; nor is man. It is in the "confrontation of [the] irrational and the wild longing for clarity" (Sis, 16), in the confrontation itself, that lies Absurdity. Man wishes to understand,
to reduce the world to human terms; yet despite knowledge, despite science, he cannot finally apprehend. For Camus there are thus three characters in the Absurd drama: the irrational, human nostalgia, and the Absurd that is born of their encounter (Sis,21). The Absurd does not exist in what one confronts, it exists in the act of confrontation:

There are absurd marriages, challenges, rancors, silences, wars, and even peace treaties. For each of them the absurdity springs from a comparison. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation. (Sis,22-23)

But Camus is interested less in Absurd recognition than in its consequences, in the fundamental philosophical question of whether or not to continue:

If one is assured of these facts, what is one to conclude, how far is one to go to elude nothing? Is one to die voluntarily, or to hope in spite of everything? (Sis,12)

For Camus the consequence fundamental to all else is lucidity. The chief condition of man's metaphysical inquiry becomes the preservation of that which crushes him, respect for the Absurd Equilibrium and the unceasing struggle it involves (Sis,23). Lucidity implies an absence of hope: the world is one in which "thoughts, like lives, are devoid of future" (Sis,51). Thus Camus saw the "existentialists" committing philosophical suicide in their finding reason to hope, or, in the case of the Christian existentialists, in the deification of the impoverisher. Karl Jaspers, for example, through a blind leap of faith, beyond any possible explanation and interpretation, out of a confession of impotence, asserts a superhuman significance to life (Sis,24). The Absurd for Jaspers is transformed into God. By sacrificing the rational for this leap into faith the Absurd Equilibrium is destroyed:
If there is an absurd, it is in man's universe. The moment the notion transforms itself into eternity's springboard, it ceases to be linked to human lucidity. The absurd is no longer that evidence that man ascertains without consenting to it. The struggle is eluded. Man integrates the absurd and in that communion causes to disappear its essential character, which is opposition, laceration, and divorce. This leap is an escape. (Sis,26)

Soren Kierkegaard and Edmund Husserl equally fail to philosophically comply with the importance Camus attaches to lucidity; they too, evade the evidence. While Kierkegaard deifies the Absurd, for Husserl the world becomes clear, thus negating the one nostalgia which Camus finds central to the interpretation of existence—the nostalgia for unity. (Sis,36).

Camus' Absurd Man conducts himself in the light of consciousness, does not wish to do that which he cannot understand; he will be tempted neither into deification nor into hope; he is innocent of feeling the loss of immortal life; and life does not need a meaning to be lived. Thus suicide is not a consideration. Suicide, like the leap into faith, is acceptance in the extreme; man sees his future and rushes toward it. (Sis,40). As William Oliver comments, the only value man can affirm with certainty is life. If suicide is contemplated, man sacrifices this concrete value for "a dream of power and permanence that no man on this earth has ever experienced."¹⁵ In a world ruled by contradiction and impotence. (Sis,18), the Absurd must be kept alive; and it can only be kept so by living, by contemplation. The Absurd Man lives without appeal, but lives with what he has. Absurd Discovery itself becomes "a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert." (Sis,v). Honour lies in enduring, not in escaping. And the Absurd Man attempts neither to solve nor to explain: experience—and hence quantity, rather than quality, of experience—is what becomes important. For Camus Don Juan admirably exemplifies the Absurd Man in his requiring a number of affairs, in his disinterest
in the perfection of any one woman. The actor, too, is the consummate Absurd Man, touching, as he does, the lives and history of so many:

Conscious men have been seen to fulfill their task amid the most stupid of wars without considering themselves in contradiction. This is because it was essential to elude nothing. There is thus a metaphysical honor in enduring the world's absurdity. Conquest or play-acting, multiple loves ... are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance. (Sis, 69)

Affirmation can thus be found in honorable endurance alone: "even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism." (Sis, v).

Camus' example of the quintessential Absurd Man is the mythical Sisyphus, a figure for whom conscious and honorable confrontation with the world's irrationality is paramount. In condemning Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence it just as ceaselessly falls back again, the gods imposed the punishment of futile labour. Yet Sisyphus is heroic in more than the initial passion for life that won him his punishment: he is also heroic in that he sustains his lucidity. Camus interprets Sisyphus as reaffirming this lucidity each time he returns to the bottom of the hill. Though consciousness of his fate is in essence tragic, it also engenders victory: in understanding the circumstances of one's condition, and in enduring, lies nobility. Camus imagines the scorn of Sisyphus, the contemplation of his torment, this knowing of the night, as being enough to "fill a man's heart." (Sis, 90-91).

But if the ironic consciousness created by the experience of the Absurd lends itself to what Camus has called "joy." (Sis, 90), the supreme Absurd joy is creation. If, to remain conscious of Absurdity, man must
breathe with it, recognize its lessons and recover its flesh" (Sis, 69), art is the best means of doing so: "in this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures. Creating is living doubly." (Sis, 69-70). But in a work of art in which the temptation to explain remains strong, and in which conclusion seems inevitable—such as in fictional creation—there must be a "precise estimate of the limits of truth." (Sis, 85). The "thesis-novel" is for Camus a most despicable form of creation. (Sis, 85).

If "of all the schools of patience and lucidity, creation is the most effective." (Sis, 85), creation is also an extension of these schools, and is linked very closely with that other side of Camus, revolt. In *The Rebel*, published ten years after *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus articulated a further alternative to nihilism. As Herbert Hochberg has noted, while in the earlier work Camus sought to establish the Absurdity of the human condition, in *The Rebel* he set out to derive an ethic from that condition.

And yet the concept of revolt is not absent from his earlier discussion of Absurdity. Revolt, after all, exists in the very act of lucidity:

> Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity.
> It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. (Sis, 40)

But revolt also supersedes lucidity. Camus already indicated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that a time comes when man must choose between contemplation and action. (Sis, 64). The metaphysical rebel, frustrated by the universe, refuses to approve the condition in which he finds himself (Rebel, 23). He will not remain paralyzed by simple acceptance of Absurd estrangement. The
rebel is active and aggressive, even though he knows all action is ultimately useless:

Metaphysical rebellion is a claim, motivated by the concept of a complete unity, against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil. (Rebel, 24)

In the rebel's shattering of the silence of Absurdist contemplation, anguish becomes a point of departure, an experience to be lived through (Rebel, 8).

The metaphysical rebel is transformed into the historical rebel when he adds to his protest against the incomprehensibility of life a rejection of an intrusion upon his sense of justice:

In every act of rebellion, the rebel simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself... up to this point he has at least remained silent and has abandoned himself to the form of despair in which a condition is accepted even though it is considered unjust... but from the moment that the rebel finds his voice... he begins to desire and to judge. The rebel, in the etymological sense, does a complete turnabout. He acted under the lash of his master's whip. Suddenly he turns and faces him. (Rebel, 13-14)

The rebel is in fact an extension of the Absurd Man, despite Camus' use of the word "turnabout" here. For while the rebel does move on from the initial Absurdist position of contemplation, the Absurd Man too, through scorn, had won a victory. In both one finds affirmation—although affirmation is admittedly relative, since any victory achieved for the Absurd Man can only be relative (Rebel, 290). In both, value exists in embracing life, rather than in renouncing it, and in the persistence for truth in a universe that seems to suggest that truth is unlikely.

The rebel, as the Absurd Man, finds transcendent value in creation.
If in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus had already found creativity the most effective of the schools of patience and lucidity, in *The Rebel* art is again seen not only as a demand for unity and a rejection of nihilism, but as, in fact, the consummate rebellion. The demands of the rebel are also the demands of the aesthete. Both rebellion and creation are "fabricators of universes," fabrication itself negating despair:

> Real despair means death, the grave, or the abyss. If despair prompts speech or reasoning, and above all if it results in writing, fraternity is established, natural objects are justified, love is born. A literature of despair is a contradiction in terms.

In both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and in *The Rebel* the confrontation of man's nostalgia for order with the irrationality of the world presents a challenge. Rather than seeking suicide or a leap into a "tailor-made world of hope," the Absurd Man chooses to cling to lucidity and to remain in continual revolt against his condition. Though death is the inescapable finality, he can adjust his life and actions to that finality, and be fascinated in the process. But this simultaneous awareness of an irremediable destiny and a fascination for life are most brilliantly captured in Camus in a cameo passage from *The Outsider*, a passage worth quoting at length:

> Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. He, the prison chaplain, too, knew why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come... what difference could they make to me, the death of others, or a mother's love, or his God, or the way one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to "choose" not only one but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers... it was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the
universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, 
made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was 
happy still.

Meursault's ironic assessment, like that of Sisyphus, enables him to under­ 
stand mankind and laugh at its illusions.

The Absurd Man of Albert Camus does not seek escape. He is conscious 
of his plight, but will neither hope nor deify his impoverisher. Nor does he 
submit to nihilism. He lives himself to death aware of his condition of 
Absurdity, aware, too, of his own culpability. He will find solace in his 
lucidity, in his scorn, in his attempt to live toward an impossible ideal, 
in his concern for others, and in creation. Camus cannot accept the emphasis 
that the existentialists place on total liberty within man's provision, 
although Jean Paul Sartre comes close to his concept of the Absurd Man in 
his character Roquentin. Roquentin recognizes his "nausea" as being contingent 
upon the collapse of the illusion of familiarity in the world, endures it, 
rather than seeking escape, and goes on to a consideration of the supreme 
Absurd joy of creation:

A book. Naturally, at first it would only be a troublesome, 
tiring work, it wouldn't stop me from existing or feeling 
that I exist. But a time would come when the book would be 
written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a 
little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps 
because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance.

Apart from Camus the phenomenon of Absurdity has been most self­ 
consciously described by the dramatists of the "Theatre of the Absurd"--and, 
of course, by Martin Esslin. Ionesco, for example, sees in the irrationality 
of the world and in man's need for order the same Absurd Equilibrium that 
Camus delineates. In an essay on Kafka Ionesco defines his understanding of 
the Absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose . . . cut off from his reli­
gious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions
become senseless, absurd, useless." Speaking very generally, however, the Theatre of the Absurd would appear more expressive of the dark, irrational forces of man. Estragon and Vladimir in Waiting for Godot consider suicide, while Hamm and Clov of Endgame participate in a quintessential death masque. Yet even here an affirmation-of-sorts takes place through scorn. Estragon's ironic awareness of the Absurdity of his condition ("we always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist") is a surmounting of that condition, the importance of which Ionesco too, was well aware:

Humor is the only possibility we possess of detaching ourselves—yet only after we have surmounted, assimilated, taken cognizance of it—from our tragicomic human condition, the malaise of being. To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying. 

In both Camus and in the Theatre of the Absurd darkness is almost always tempered with light; and in both great value is placed upon sustaining the Absurd Equilibrium:

Today, when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and comforting baby talk, and life is threatened with being smothered in the mass consumption of hypnotic mechanized vulgarity, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions—and to laugh at it.

In a world which can provide no ultimate answers, which with its reminder of death renders all activity impotent, revealing human isolation irremediable, one must nevertheless endure. Victory can still be achieved in facing up to the void, and, like Sisyphus, in laughing at it.

But for Naipaul too, the very fact that pen has been put to paper demonstrates a challenging of the condition of Absurdity. For all the depth of
despondency generated by Trinidadian history and possibility, and for all his feelings of rootlessness, in the end Naipaul, like Camus and other Absurdist writers, is content neither with passive acceptance nor with renunciation. The Absurd Hero confronts as well as discovers; and it is a combination of Consciousness and Consequence that Naipaul sets forth in his eight works of fiction.
FOOTNOTES

1 V.S. Naipaul was born of a Hindu Brahmin family in Chaguanas, Trinidad, in 1932. In 1950 he left for Britain to attend Oxford University. Except for a visit to the West Indies in 1960-1961, and to India in 1962-1964, he has since resided in London.

2 John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize, 1957, for The Mystic Masseur; Somerset Maugham Award, 1959, for Miguel Street; Phoenix Trust Award, 1962, for An Area of Darkness; Hawthorndon Prize, 1963, for Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion; W.H. Smith Award, 1967, for The Mimic Men; Booker Prize, 1971, for In a Free State. One cannot but find it interesting that his most critically lauded work, A House for Mr. Biswas, has apparently received no award.


4 George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), p. 225. This comment, however, was made after only Naipaul's first three books were written, and Lamming apparently recanted even this, according to an article in the Jamaican Sunday Gleaner, 17 February 1963, p. not available.


11 The Romantic Enlightenment, p. 77.

12 Ibid., p. 107.


There are many variants of the tale of Sisyphus. One of these, cited by Camus, is that when Pluto granted Sisyphus permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife, he became so infatuated once again with the beauty of the world that he refused to go back to the eternal darkness. Recalls, anger, warnings were to no avail. Finally Mercury had to lead him forcibly back to the underworld. (Sis, 88-89)


Waiting for Godot, p. 44.

In The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 158.

Ibid., p. 377.
For Naipaul, as for other writers in Absurdist "tradition," discovery of the placelessness and unimportance of man, and of the separation of one man from another, is not the abbreviated accidental anguish of a post-adolescent first novel; it provides a nucleus for all of his writing, existing (though admittedly in more subterranean fashion) already in the early works and swelling into resolute conviction in the later ones. But at the same time it would be impossible to escape perception of that other absurdity (to be distinguished from the former by the use of a small "a") commonly defined as the "unreasonable," the "ridiculous," the "foolish." A preliminary reading of Naipaul's earlier works often provides, in fact, a greater awareness of the absurd as "ridiculous" than as "anguish" It cannot be denied that the eccentricities of Ganesh Ramsumair, Trinidad's "mystic masseur,‖ are often downright hilarious: Ganesh's buying books by the inch (mm,15) and for the sake of their smell (mm,82), the farcical content of his 101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion, of which he sends a copy to M.K. Gandhi ("Question Number One. What is Hinduism? Answer: Hinduism is the religion of the Hindus. Question Number Two. Why am I a Hindu? Answer: Because my parents and grandparents were Hindus" mm, 108), the dinner at Government House (mm, 206-209), and even the predictable walk-outs in legislature (mm, 213) are more revealing of what A.C. Derrick calls a "sheer sense of fun" than of the primitive hostility of the world.
The absurd-as-ridiculous is paramount too, at least on the most manifest level, in the various sketches which make up Miguel Street. Comic exaggeration creates near-caricatures of many of the people in this back street in Port of Spain. The pose, indeed, is not un-Chaucerian: Naipaul's species of humanity are as delicately drawn, as deftly distinguished as those early pilgrims. Laura, with her eight children by seven different men is a Trinidadian Wife of Bath; Man-Man, with his pretense of sacredness (until the people take up his plea and stone him) is not unlike the bombastic Pardoner—though, to do the former justice, he is nowhere as vile. The ridiculous would at first appear the very essence of this street, however, from the awe of the boys for "litritcher and poultry" (MSt,41) and Elias' statement of intention of impressing his overseas examiners ("I going to be so good that this Mr. Cambridge go bawl when he read what I write for him." MSt,41), to Hat's taking thirteen boys to the local cricket game and pretending they are all his (MSt,200).

Absurdity (with a small "a") also occurs in the early stories of A Flag on the Island. The narrator's aunt in "My Aunt Gold Teeth" (1954), for example, is a person of the most eccentric temperament: not only does she exchange all of her good teeth for gold ones, but in her religious mania she collects both Hindu and Christian images and prays to the deities of both. The "ridiculous" exists too, in the story of Mr. Hinds and the ram which neither he nor anyone else wants; and certainly the mirth of "The Night Watchman's Occurrence Book" (1962) and "The Baker's Story" (1962) is untempered by metaphysical anguish. The picaroon nature of society displayed in the campaign of Pat Harbans in The Suffrage of Elvira and many of the antics of Mr. Biswas himself (one
thinks of the highly appropriate but also amusing names by which Biswas refers to the various members of the Tulsi family, and of the circumstances of his expulsion, as a youth, from Pundit Jairam's) also generate happy laughter. Behind the "comic exaggeration," the "sense of fun," the absurdity of even these early writings of Naipaul, however, there already looms that other Absurdity. Certainly after The Suffrage of Elvira merriment, as William Walsh has noted, is virtually "bleached away." But "Absurdity" in the sense in which Camus used it and "absurdity" as "ridiculous" are not unrelated. Where the one is the conjunction of man against the world, the desire for unity as opposed to an irrational Order, the other results from this very conjunction, is a heightening of one of the elements involved in the conjunction. The world of Ganesh Ramsumair, for example, is "ridiculous" because it is perceived by some-one outside Ganesh, by a narrator who is aware of the discrepancy between potential and existence. The desire of Ganesh to achieve greatness and the mode by which this ambition is attained could easily become a theme for tragedy, a situation for Sisyphean anguish; by the addition of the element of exaggeration it is converted into the grotesque. To claim, as did Anthony Quinton, that The Mystic Masseur is "yet another piece of intuitive or slap-happy West Indian fiction as pleasant, muddled and inconsequent as the Trinidadian Hindus it describes" is to display the worst kind of critical negligence. Buffoonery and burlesque do exist in Ganesh Ramsumair and many of the other characters—but as often as not they are merely a masking, a colouring of an essentially serious subject. Despite Naipaul's admitting to being more aware of society as a unity in the early novels than he was later to be, undertones already exist of the deeply serious, of metaphysical anguish. As Francis Wyndham has observed, frivolity and gaiety in Naipaul are almost always mixed with pathos:
They [Naipaul's first three novels] are certainly very funny indeed, but like the best comedy they are also deeply serious. Mr. Naipaul's air of detachment and gaiety of manner seem to have blinded many to the relevant and unwelcome message that they in fact convey.

Caprice in Naipaul, even in the more frivolous early works, exists not in the overall conception but in the occasional incident, the occasional phrase. Certainly there are elements of fun; but this is not the nucleus of Naipaul. Beyond the "absurd" lies an abyss.

The abyss is one both of isolation and of the conflict between the possible and the actual. Discovery of the world as "foreign and irreducible!" (Sis,11), as separate from man—discovery of the isolation of man in conjunction both with the world and with other men—comes already to the buffoon Ganesh Ramsuamir. This author of a work on constipation, the inspiration for which was the musical toilet-roll rack (mm,165) has not always been the contented and confident masseur of the days just preceding his M.B.E. Much of his early life—which the narrator sees (tongue in cheek) as presaging his later distinction—has been one of isolation. Not only is Ganesh cut off at an early age from close family ties (he has apparently neither mother nor siblings), but he is set apart too, from society. His Indian country background and his Indian name isolate him at the city College, where most of the boys are from African or "mixed" descent; and at the same time his College education sets him apart from his Hindu background. He chooses, for example, to consider himself as an orphan rather than agree to his father's wishes to marry early. Having close ties neither to family and background, nor to new schoolmates (except to another Indian boy, Indarsingh, whom he will meet again in the political arena), Ganesh's isolation is not to be shortly alleviated. The "denseness" (Sis,11), the mechanical irrationality of the world
are further manifested during his short career as a school-teacher, a career in which his sensitivity is tried by the headmaster's "the purpose of this school is to form, not to inform" (mm, 24), and in which he is abused by the other teachers. Ganesh quits his teaching post and returns to Fourways, but still he finds no relief:

For more than two months he loafed. He didn't know what he wanted to do or what he could do, and he was beginning to doubt the value of doing anything at all. He ate at the houses of people he knew and, for the rest, merely wandered around. He bought a second-hand bicycle and went for long rides in the hilly lanes near Fourways.

People said, 'He doing a lot of thinking, that boy Ganesh. He full with worries, but still he thinking thinking all the time.'

Ganesh would have liked his thoughts to be deep and it disturbed him that they were simple things, concerned with passing trifles. He began to feel a little strange and feared he was going mad. He knew the Fourways people, and they knew him and liked him, but now he felt cut off from them. (mm, 32)

This is not simply the ploy of indolence. Though one cannot deny that much of Ganesh's story is farcical, is grotesque, he nevertheless experiences something of the metaphysical anxiety of the Absurd Man.

Meanwhile another level of Absurdity enters the story of Ganesh, that of the disparity between potential and actual in the realm of justice—this time perceived by the narrator. For while Ganesh, through the worst kind of charlatanism and political hypocrisy, becomes an M.B.E., Indarsingh, the man of honourable brilliance who fights a recognizably "clean" political campaign, receives desserts of much less sweetness: he is merely elected in Ganesh's old ward. Trinidad, the narrator implies, cannot sustain legitimacy, cannot sustain justice. We are reminded of Naipaul's later comment in The Middle Passage: "For talent, a futility, the Trinidadian substituted intrigue" (MP, 44).

This is not to deny Ganesh brilliance, but his brilliance is of a particularly
corrupt variety. In his reflection at the very beginning of the book, and through a display of subtle irony, the narrator suggests the truth behind the outwardly illustrious life of Ganesh, the disparity between what deserves and what gains reward ("... when Ganesh had won the fame and fortune he deserved so well" mm,18); and it is suggested as well that Ganesh's story may be peculiar neither to himself nor to Trinidad ("the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times." mm,18), and that through suppression of his "autobiography" Ganesh himself may have become ashamed of his own unscrupulousness:

Nineteen forty-six was the turning-point of Ganesh's career; and, as if to underline the fact, in that year he published his autobiography, The Years of Guilt (Ganesh Publishing Co. Ltd., Port of Spain. $2.40). The book, variously described as a spiritual thriller and a metaphysical whodunit, had a considerable success of esteem in Central America and the Caribbean. Ganesh, however, confessed that the autobiography was a mistake. So, in the very year of publication it was suppressed and the Ganesh Publishing Company itself wound up. (mm,18)

In recognizing the autobiography to be a mistake it would seem that G. Ramsay Muir, Esq., M.B.E., might be rather anxious to forget Ganesh Ramsumair in more than name.

Evidence of society being otherwise than it ought, of man feeling apart from the rest of the world, finds further instance in Naipaul's other early works, in the career of Pat Harbans in The Suffrage of Elvira, in the experiences of various of the characters in Miguel Street and in most of even the earliest stories of A Flag on the Island. In virtually all of these "wild high spirits" are tempered by the serious. In A Flag on the Island, though one would agree that some of the stories appear to have been written in the purest frivolity ("The Night Watchman's Occurrence Book" and "The Perfect Tenants" numbering among these), they are in a minority. Gold Teeth's
religious commodiousness, for example, is not as arbitrary as it would first appear: she prays to every available deity in the desire to alter her childless condition, and, later, to impede the death of her husband. In "The Raffle" too, behind the burlesque of the useless goat lurk tyranny and cruelty. Mr. Hinds not only forces the boys to pay for their obligatory "private lessons", but, taking advantage of a prerogative of Trinidad schoolteachers, mercilessly beats them. And in "A Christmas Story" the sanctimonious schoolmaster lives a life of perpetual adversity: his decision to adopt the Presbyterian faith (he was born a Hindu) has cut him off from the comfort of his family; his decision to teach has bestowed upon him harshly straitened circumstances, made all the more difficult to bear because of the success of his Hindu cousin and rival; when he is at last happily married and has a son to raise he is forced into early retirement; and, until the very end, it appears that his special project of the managing of a new school will bring lasting shame and disgrace. The world is a foreign and a trying place for Randolph:

It seemed then that like those pilgrims, whose enthusiasm I admire but cannot share, I was advancing towards my goal by taking two steps forward and one step back, though in my case a likelier simile might be that I was taking one step forward and one step back. (Flag, 43-44)

Worst of all is the desertion of Randolph's wife and son in the midst of his troubles. Not wishing to share his impending dishonour, they are unaware that it has resulted from his very wish to please them.

But trying as the world is to Randolph it is equally hostile, equally foreign to the needs of the various inhabitants of a fictional back-street in Port of Spain. Behind the Rabelaisian fun of the sketches of Miguel Street (written before The Mystic Masseur, though not published until later) one again finds instance of the Absurd as "anguish!" The inhabitants of this
Port of Spain "skid row" are almost all of them "failures." Sometimes freedom is denied: Bogart and Eddoes, for example, men-about-town, find themselves tied to marital responsibility. Sometimes public recognition is thwarted: Elias, hopeful of becoming a doctor, ends up driving a scavenging cart; and Morgan, wishing his fireworks to achieve renown, receives fame not as a "pyrotechnicist" but as a "pyromaniac." Others suffer the shame of failing to achieve status in the street, or of having the fraudulence of their status exposed, the latter being the fate of Big Foot, the reputed bully, who is discovered to be afraid of a small dog and actually gives way to tears upon defeat in the boxing ring. Still others in Miguel Street have their illusions of sentiment destroyed for them. Edward, who marries a white woman from the American base, finds that before long she leaves him—and though she was apparently unable to have a child by him, she nevertheless bears a child for the man with whom she has run away. Hat, who also devotes himself to a woman, finds that she too deserts him; and when he beats her (a by-no-means-unusual circumstance in the Trinidadian society Naipaul portrays) he is rewarded with a three-year prison term. Mrs. Herreira, who leaves her doctor-husband for alcoholic Toni, supposing herself to be in love with the latter, decides to return to her husband when she is nearly killed by beatings. And the ambience of romance is also responsible for the tragic consciousness of Laura. For although Laura is apparently unperturbed by having eight children by seven different men ("This thing happening again, but you get used to it after the first three, four times. Is a damn nuisance, though." MSt, 107), and by supporting them, as it is implied, by prostitution, yet when her eldest daughter Lorna comes home to announce that she too, is pregnant, the "void" suddenly becomes eloquent:
I heard the shriek that Laura gave. And for the first time I heard Laura crying. It wasn't ordinary crying. She seemed to be crying all the cry she had saved up since she was born; all the cry she had tried to cover up with her laughter. I have heard people cry at funerals, but there is a lot of showing-off in their crying. Laura's crying that night was the most terrible thing I had heard. It made me feel that the world was a stupid, sad place, and I almost began crying with Laura. (MSt, 115-116)

Laura's cry is not only for the recognition of the difficulty of her own life; it is also for the knowledge that her daughter's life shall be equally unhappy. Thus when Lorna drowns (perhaps not by accident) Laura's response is that it is "better that way" (MSt, 117).

Unhappiness also arises in Miguel Street in the realm of human isolation. B. Wordsworth, for example—"B" for "Black," as he tells us, "White" Wordsworth being his "brother" (MSt, 57-58)—is a man truly set apart. Alone anywhere, the artist is even more alone on an island like Trinidad. Port of Spain is scarcely ready to honour, or even to understand, a man who, rather than drinking, gambling, or whoring, spends his most happy hours in the study of nature and in creating "one line a month" (MSt, 62). He is unable to sell his poetry ("on this paper is the greatest poem about mothers and I'm going to sell it to you at a bargain price. For four cents"MSt, 58), and is forced to make a living by singing calypsos in carnival season. His will be the tragedy, even more poignant for the poet, of feeling he has failed to leave a mark of his presence in the world. Walking down the poet's street, one year after his death, the narrator finds no sign of his house. It has been pulled down, and the trees cut, to be replaced by brick and concrete. "It was," comments the narrator, "just as though B. Wordsworth had never existed." (MSt, 65). And Absurd Discovery of the unimportance of man, of the disparity between the nostalgia to be necessary and man's actual insignificance, is further revealed by
the narrator's forgetting Hat during the latter's three years in jail (MSt, 213), and by the unhappy discovery of his own unimportance. At a party given for him on the eve of his departure for England the narrator finds that "people came in looking sad and telling me how much they were going to miss me, and then they forgot about me and attended to the serious business of eating and drinking" (MSt, 219). When his plane is late, allowing him to return to the street for a few hours, he is again aware of his insignificance:

Back in Miguel Street the first person I saw was Hat. He was strolling flat-footedly back from the Cafe, with a paper under his arm. I waved and shouted at him. All he said was, 'I thought you was in the air by this time.'

I was disappointed. Not only by Hat's cool reception. Disappointed because although I had been away, destined to be gone for good, everything was going on just as before, with nothing to indicate my absence. (MSt, 222)

If the high spirits of Miguel Street find themselves strongly tempered by the serious, if indeed the grotesque is only an exaggeration of one of the elements of Absurd Confrontation, one finds that after Miguel Street there is even less of this "heightening" for purposes of laughter. The Suffrage of Elvira already contains less levity than The Mystic Masseur and Miguel Street—nor does it lack the "serious realistic indictment of a colonial society" of which it has at times been accused. The exercising of "democracy" in Elvira is more than amusing; in indicating the success of ignorance, superstition and opportunism, it is a telling account of the disparity between the desirable and the actual; buffoonery has already become difficult to laugh at.

When Pat Harbans begins his election campaign he is a fairly honest individual. Yet at the same time he realizes that this election will not be like the last one (which was also the first general election in Trinidad), for
already people have begun "to see the possibilities." (Elvira, 12) The influential men of the town must be approached, bribed. In order to win the Muslim votes, Harbans buys Baksh (the Muslim leader) a loudspeaker-van and sets up his son Foam as his campaign manager; in order to win the Hindu section, Harbans half-promises that his son shall marry the daughter of Chittaranjan, the Hindu leader; and to win the Spanish element, superstition is allowed to be put into play. From the early slogans of Foam ("Vote Harbans or die!" Elvira, 43) to Harbans' angry "Elvira! You is a bitch!" (Elvira, 168) the reader agrees that democracy—or shall we say democracy in Elvira—is a "stupid thing!" (Elvira, 161).

But the election in Elvira is more than stupid. It serves both to reveal the disparity between democratic ideal and practise and to comment upon the isolation of man. Harbans is anything but a "hero" in the ordinary sense. As Hena Maes-Jelinek has noted, although he is a privileged man according to Trinidadian standards, he is nevertheless afraid "of everything and everybody." When we first see him he is already shy about his election posters (Elvira, 7); he is apologetic to the two Jehovah's Witnesses whom he nearly runs down, though the fault was theirs. (Elvira, 8); his voice itself is an ingratiating "coo" (Elvira, 9); he is embarrassed and fawning with the Bakshes (Elvira, 15-17); and he is shy with Chittaranjan. (Elvira, 30). In fact there seems to be no-one of whom Harbans is not afraid and resentful:

'What happen, Mr. Harbans?' Foam asked.
Harbans locked his fingers. 'Can't understand it, Foam. Can't understand it. I is a old old man. Why everybody down against me?' (Elvira, 49)

Why everyone is "down against" Harbans is pitifully obvious. There is no better time for opportunism in Elvira than during this election. If Harbans is to win he must, like Roderigo, put money in his purse. His is the unhappiness of
knowing that he has no true friends, no truly faithful support. He does win the election, however, far outdistancing the other candidate, "Preacher," who had conducted an honest campaign. And in the end he has further triumph: after his success he returns to Elvira only once, haughty and in a new Jaguar. He no longer "coos" (was his modesty, after all, a pretense?), and he need no longer accept Chittaranjan's daughter for his son. Though Naipaul ends The Suffrage of Elvira on a note of frivolity ("So, Harbans won the election, and the insurance company lost a Jaguar. Chittaranjan lost a son-in-law" etc. Elvira, 240), such levity is rather out of place. The election has been grotesque from beginning to end, but there has been little to amuse. The destruction of possibility, the corruption both of a society as a whole and of one man within it who seemed, at the beginning, to possess something of honesty and concern suggests a world hostile both to justice and to political integrity.

A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul's best known and generally most highly thought of work, again reveals a world in which "ought oughts are ought" (House, 41) is characteristic of more than arithmetic, a world in which the chief character is nothing if not the quintessential misfit—the latter being nicely underlined by the narrator's reference to him, even as a child, as "Mr. Biswas." Already as a baby, Mr. Biswas is the Outsider, born inauspiciously six-fingered and "in the wrong way" (House, 15), suggesting that he will be a lecher, a spendthrift, and a liar, that he will have an unlucky sneeze, and that, figuratively speaking, he will "eat up his mother and father" (House, 16-17). The worst of these portents soon proves correct when Biswas indirectly causes the drowning of his father. Because of subsequent unneighbourly threats his mother, Bipti, sells their property and moves to
the town of Pagotes, where the family lives on the bounty of a relative in a small back lane. It is from this time that we become aware of Biswas' sensibility of apartness:

And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti [a sister] as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti who, broken, became increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone. (House, 37-38)

When Biswas later ineffectually attempts to re-locate his first home, his Absurd Discovery of the unimportance of man reminds us of the earlier unhappy discovery of the narrator of Miguel Street: like the young boy looking in vain for the home of B. Wordsworth, Biswas too, can never afterwards ascertain where his father's hut had stood.

Biswas' moving away from his first home at a very young age is a major cause for his subsequent feelings of isolation, and is also—significantly—germane to his compulsion to secure his own permanent domicile. But this is shared by another important factor: the lack of affection of Bipti for her children. The years in the "trace," the back lane, were years of physical squalor and emotional void:

It would have pained Mr. Biswas if anyone from the school saw where he lived, in one room of a mud hut in the back trace. He was not happy there and even after five years considered it a temporary arrangement. Most of the people in the hut remained strangers, and his relations with Bipti were unsatisfying because she was shy of showing him affection in a house of strangers. More and more, too, she bewailed her Fate; when she did this he felt useless and dispirited and, instead of
comforting her, went to look for Alec. Occasionally she had ineffectual fits of temper, quarrelled with Tara and muttered for days, threatening, whenever there was anyone to hear, that she would leave and get a job with the road-gang, where women were needed to carry stones in baskets on their heads. Continually, when he was with her, Mr. Biswas had to struggle against anger and depression. (House, 44-45)

Biswas' being sent away as a child to study to be a pandit, and later to work in a rum-shop, also made it impossible for the ideal of "home" to be otherwise than foreign. And when he returns to Bipti after mishaps with these occupations, instead of being pleased to see him again, she is only alarmed and reproves him for being "ungrateful." (House, 52) Later, after he is married and visits her at Christmas, he finds her equally gloomy, still lacking in demonstrations of affection. Indeed, it is not until the latter days of his life that Biswas sees anything to care for in his mother.

Absurd Discovery, recognition both of man's apartness from man and of the difficulty of actualizing nostalgia in the face of an irrational world, reaches its zenith after Biswas is married. Though Biswas as a young man dreams of freedom and does in fact enjoy freedom for a time (that time during which he refuses to marry, conducts a bus, paints signs and tries debauchery, House, 71-72), freedom is short-lived. He is still very young when he goes to paint signs for the Tulsis, writes a note of admiration to one of the daughters, and is immediately pressured into marriage with her. Life, henceforth, becomes a form of confinement: anything which manifests individuality or difference creates hostility. Among the children individuality is rewarded with a beating; and strict fealty must be paid by all to the heads of the family, Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. New members, such as Biswas, are chosen to fulfill a useful function. Hanuman House, as Gordon Rohlehr has noted, operates like a system of slavery:
On closer examination, Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to help rebuild their tottering empire. They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow-Hindus, and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of a slave system. Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of a "high-caste" minority. Men are necessary here only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estates. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce in one's slavery.

The Tulsis have not done Biswas a favour by "adopting" him: he now finds himself "pitted against a whole way of life," Mrs. Tulsi's heavily-braceleted arms themselves being indicative of oppressive restraint and impediment to movement.

Because Biswas is an idealistic individual, a paddler of his own canoe (House, 96), because he has had dreams of a world about to yield "sweetness and romance" (House, 73), he is bitterly resentful of the Tulsi regime and of his veritable imprisonment. Feelings of being trapped come as early as the day of his marriage when, with mention neither of dowry, house or job, and with the expectation that he will become a Tulsi, he takes on caution:

Now he thought of escape. To leave the way clear for that he thought it important to avoid the final commitment. He didn't embrace or touch her [his wife Shama]. He wouldn't have known, besides, how to begin, with someone who had not spoken a word to him, and whom he still saw with the mocking smile she had given that morning in the store. Not wishing to be tempted, he didn't look at her, and was relieved when she left the room. He spent the rest of the day imprisoned where he was, listening to the noises of the house. (House, 87)

Yet married he remains: "nothing now, except death, could change that." (House, 90). He will blame the Tulsis throughout his life for "imprisoning"
him; and his wife's pregnancies will cause further anxiety:

   At Easter he learned that Shama was pregnant for
   the fourth time.
   One child claimed; one still hostile; one unknown.
   And now another.

   Trap!
   The future he feared was upon him. He was falling into
   the void, and that terror, known only in dreams, was with
   him as he lay awake at nights. (House, 204)

Except for the very end of his life Biswas' feelings of confinement will re-
main with him; nor are these feelings lessoned with his various moves. The
years in The Chase bring boredom and futility (House, 163) and little actual
freedom. As A.C. Derrick points out, the roads from The Chase go to villages
which are just like The Chase, or to ramshackle towns. Still in the shop in
The Chase are reminders of the past owner's futile efforts, and the entire
shop has an atmosphere of decay and darkness. The subsequent move to the
barracks, when Biswas becomes a "driver" on one of the Tulsi estates, becomes
a move for the worse, for the barracks permit only one room to a family,
and shelter twelve families in one long room divided by partitions into
twelve.

And so Mr. Biswas decides that he must build himself a house— but
the house (the first house) that he builds is demolished by the wind and
the rain even before it is finished. A move to one of Mrs. Tulsi's houses in
Port of Spain in which Biswas and his family are given two rooms works out
well until a Tulsi son returns home from studies abroad and exercises his
authority over the home; and a stay in a house in the country brings little
more promise, the family now being reduced to one room. Even in the end,
when Biswas does have his own home at last, he finds he has escaped his
wife's family only to enslave himself to his own, his house being deeply
mortgaged to his uncle. Nor could Biswas enjoy his home in the full sense
of the word were it not mortgaged: for he is shortly to die.

The failure to achieve an independent life style until it is too late is only one of the disappointments in the history of Mohun Biswas. Personal relationships, too, seem doomed. His relationship with his mother was damagingly unfulfilling; and his marriage too—at least at first—only furthers his sense of isolation. Now he can expect neither sympathy nor understanding from his family ("there was no one in Pagotes he could talk to, for pure shame had kept him from telling Tara or Bipti or Alec." House, 86), and he suddenly finds himself in a new household of formidable foreignness ("at Hanuman House, in the press of daughters, sons-in-law, and children, he began to feel lost, unimportant, and even frightened. No one particularly noticed him." House, 86-87), married to a girl who is a veritable stranger. And Biswas has not been without dreams of love: for although "love was something he was embarrassed to think about" and although he mocked with his peers, "secretly he believed." (House, 72). It was in this mood of expectation, of believing, that he wrote his note to Shama. But there "could be no romance at Hanuman House," (House, 84). Among the Tulsis one's very name is forgotten, one's children conceived amid squalor, possibly in an absence of privacy (one thinks of the long room in which several families are stationed) and without affection:

They spent their last two years at The Chase in this state of mutual hostility; at peace only in Hanuman House.

She became pregnant for the third time.

'Another one for the monkey house,' he said, passing his hands over her belly. (House, 173)

It will be many years before Biswas will feel any deep attachment for his wife, and his relationship with his children remains for the most a cool one. Savi and Anand are the only children of the four he really knows—and while
he develops a deep fondness for the latter, he can never be sure of him. While he has Anand stay with him in The Chase his most oppressive fear comes to be that he will leave; and at the last, when he is dying and Anand's sympathy and anger would have meant so much to him Anand not only fails to return home, but actually neglects to reply to his father's letter.

Biswas' life is wrought with every other sort of frustration, every other imaginable contradiction between what might have been and what is: oil is discovered on his father's property after it has been sold; his escape stories of the "fresh, tender, un­kissed and barren" girl—and which he is never able to finish—are completely unlike his own experiences with womanhood; even Christmases turn out to be "only a series of anticipations."

(House, 193). Though Biswas "never ceased to feel that some nobler purpose awaited him." (House, 164), he comes to suspect that although his philosophical books (notably Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus) give him solace, they are nonetheless irrelevant to his situation. A House for Mr. Biswas, one agrees, is a modern account of the El Dorado quest, in which adventure is largely consummated in solitude, failure. 2b

Absurd Discovery will ultimately be responsible for the breakdown which occurs to Biswas when, serving as a driver on a Tulsi estate, he is living alone in a barrack room. Temporarily abandoned by Sharaa and their children, he is suddenly aware, like Camus' Absurd Man, of the Otherness of objects. The "stage set" suddenly collapses:

He was rocking hard on the creaking board on night when he thought of the power of the rockers to grind and crush and inflict pain, on his hands and toes and the tenderer parts of his body. He rose at once in agony, covering his groin with his hands, sucking hard on his teeth, listening to the chair as, rocking, it moved sideways along the cambered plank. The chair fell silent. He looked away from
On the wall he saw a nail that could puncture his eye. The window could trap and mangle. So could the door. Every leg of the green table could press and crush. The castors of the dressing table. The drawers. He lay face down on the bed, not wanting to see. (House, 206)

For Biswas, as for the Absurd Man, the void becomes eloquent. The mechanical, the every-day is questioned. Like Sartre's Roquentin in Nausea ("I have no taste for work any longer, I can do nothing more except wait for the night")

Biswa appraises his existence as meaningless:

Every morning the period of lucidity lessoned. The bed-sheet, examined every morning, always testified to a tormented night. Between the beginning of a routine action and the questioning the time of calm grew less. Between the meeting of a familiar person and the questioning there was less and less of ease. Until there was no lucidity at all, and all action was irrelevant and futile. (House, 243)

When word arrives that Shama is coming with the children to visit (she had temporarily gone back to Hanuman House, this being one of their periods of estrangement) Biswas spends his time envisioning how he shall kill them, or shall at least kill himself and the children. When they actually arrive these designs are transformed to resignation and fatigue, but he cannot bear to be touched by any of them, and finds Shama's latest pregnancy grotesque.

A subsequent long rest at Hanuman House relieves him from his inability to function (incidentally engendering a grudging appreciation for the warmth of activity of the swarming household) but can do nothing to alleviate a fundamental uneasiness:

He had controlled his disgust and fear when the men had come for him. He was glad he had. Surrender had removed the world of damp walls and paper covered walls, of hot sun and driving rain, and had brought him this: this worldless room, this nothingness. As the hours passed he found he could piece together recent happenings, and he marvelled that he had survived the horror. More and more frequently he forgot fear and questioning; sometimes, for
as much as a minute or so, he was unable, even when he tried, to re-enter fully the state of mind he had lived through. There remained an unease, which did not seem real or actual and was more like an indistinct, chilling memory of horror. (House, 269-270)

Indistinct though horror may seem, feelings of uselessness, frustration, apartness, plague Biswas throughout his life. Even when he has the house on Sikkim Street, he has his mortgage. A House for Mr. Biswas remains the story of a sensitive creature in an insensitive world, of man caught by circumstance.

Feelings of uselessness, frustration, apartness plague all of Naipaul's characters, but Absurd Discovery of inevitable doom is particularly rife to Richard Stone of Mr. Stone and the Knights' Companion. "A day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty," says Camus. "Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to the end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy." (Sis, 11). Man is never so alone as in the knowledge of death.

When we first meet Stone, however, he is not yet aware of time as an enemy. His is a life of quiet contentment—of, like his name itself, imper­turbability. He is aware that he is growing old (it seems to Stone that both he and his friend Tomlinson are "past the time for useful contacts." Stone, 11) but his life is so ordered, so serene, that he finds Time to be more a friend than otherwise:

He was in the habit in odd moments of solitude of writing out neatly tabulated accounts of his career such as might have been submitted to a prospective employer; and it was always a marvel to him that the years had gone on, had rolled
by so smoothly, that in spite of setbacks and alarms
his life had arranged itself with a neatness and order
of which the boy of seventeen had never dreamed. (Stone, 19)

When the book opens Stone is living in the past rather than the present
("the present was flavorless." Stone,20), and the past brings "solidity,
continuity and flow." (Stone,20). The number of his assistant's outfits,
the years Miss Millington has been with him, the age of his briefcase, his
memories of his visits to his sister Olive—all of these reflections Stone
stacks away as neatly as he does Olive's fruit-cake bowls.

Yet beneath even this placidity steal shades of unease. Already in
the first paragraph of the book "hostile strangeness" is suggested when Stone
is unable to prevent the "radiation of fine pain" spreading throughout his
body at the feel or sight of cats. (Stone,5). His fantasies of moving pave-
ments and of flying also suggest an inability to cope with, or at least a
distaste for, the realities of the world. Then at a dinner party among
friends Stone comes to consider that life should be more than "something
to be moved through." (Stone,18). He leaves the party "overcome" by feelings
of waste. The next day, standing "at the edge of the boisterous, beery
crowd" (Stone,25) as he has his usual lunchtime glass of Guinness, Stone
begins to suspect that he is standing at the edge of life itself—\at the edge,
not only of true happiness, but also at the edge of the years which have
been allotted to him. His uneasiness is brought into focus by a new London
Transport poster which urges those "who doubt the coming of Spring" to make
a trip into England's countryside. Suddenly there is a "collapse of the stage
set." The world to Stone, as to Camus' Absurd Man, becomes abruptly unfamiliar
and frightening, carrying with it a suggestion of the final abyss:
Those who doubt the coming of Spring: the words magnified and gave a focus to his uneasiness. They recalled a moment --then, memory and fear quickening, he saw that they recalled several moments, which had multiplied during the last year --of unease, unsettlement: a fleeting scene in a film, a remark in the office, an item in the newspaper, one of his stray thoughts: moments he had thought buried, for they formed no part of the pattern of his life, but which now, through all the mechanical actions and unseen sights of the familiar journey home, rose revivified one after the other, to be examined, discarded, taken up again. (Stone,25)

Feelings of doubt, awareness of decay, consciousness of man's inevitable isolation, become even stronger after Stone's marriage to Mrs. Springer--ironically, since the marriage would have been formed partially to thwart the void, her name itself being significant. Stone cannot be deluded into believing he is still in the green of his days even on his wedding night, for the sight of Margaret's teeth (and of his own) in the bathroom stabs to stab him with a "prick of the sharpest fear." (Stone,35). Nor does their honeymoon, a few weeks later, do anything but increase the gloom. Not only does Stone experience a hallucinatory moment in the wastes of Cornwall which is to him "an experience of nothingness, an experience of death," (Stone,64), but, only eighteen months from retirement himself, he witnesses the retirement of another man being transformed into a death-in-life that he realizes could easily happen to himself.

Awareness of impending doom by the experiences in Cornwall, coupled with the realization that his own life stands to be smothered by the dominance --however kindly--of women, inspires Stone to conceive the idea of the Knights Companion, a society that is to perpetuate the fellowship of retired members of the firm Stone works for, by having members visit one another, and by holding various social functions. But even the Knights' Companion fails to finally stifle recurring thoughts of mutability. Indeed, it is an ever-present reminder. And death and decay make their appearance in increasingly numerous other forms:
the seedlings which Stone and Margaret plant are sold to them by "very old and despairing" men (Stone, L44); the Midgeleys next door decide to put away their cat because, although the children liked him when he was a kitten, they no longer care for him now (Stone, L41); the employment of Miss Millington, Stone's aged servant, has to be terminated; and Toni Tomlinson dies, Stone's oldest and apparently only male friend. Stone, as some of the characters in the earlier stories of *A Flag on the Island* (Sheila and her husband in "The Mourners," Mrs. Cooksey in "Greenie and Yellow," and Hari in "The Heart": who, with their respective losses of a child, a bird and a dog all confront the suddenness and finality of death) discovers that the order of the universe to which he had sought to ally himself, had once felt so comfortable with, is alien. (Stone, 159).

But feelings of alienation are engendered by more than awareness of the process of ageing. They also grow out of the sensibility of disparity between nostalgia and existence in the realm of personal contact. Personal relationships in Stone's world—as in the worlds of virtually all of Naipaul's characters—are often less than satisfactory. Stone's marriage itself causes him not a little anxiety. On his wedding night, when he discovers that he will henceforth be required to assume the roles attached to a man and husband he feels, like Biswas, imprisoned. He wishes that an imagined prowler "would come in and batter them both to death and release." (Stone, 37); and he feels forever surrounded by women, being afraid that Margaret's own kindness will stifle. In the end, however, Stone's relationship with Margaret remains the happiest one of the lot: the man in Cornwall, "kept" by his women, fares much worse; Whymper's relationships with his actress-mistress, and later with Stone's niece, are equally shabby; and after Tomlinson's death his wife Grace seems to succeed all too well in her efforts to forget.
But Absurd Discovery of the disparity between ideal and actual is most brilliantly illuminated in the life of Stone through his involvement with the Knights Companion. Though the scheme was conceived by Stone simply in order to protect the old, to the young P.R.O. assigned to him it must be "licked into shape"—meaning that it must benefit the firm, spread the glory of the firm. Eventually it is not the idea behind the scheme that achieves distinction, but the public relations aspect of it. In the end Stone finds that other people have made his idea their property, are "riding to success on his back." (Stone,108). Both the true creator and the pain out of which the plan was conceived are ignored:

Mr. Stone could no longer hide from himself his displeasure at finding their names, Whymper and Stone, coupled so frequently. Always in such items in the house magazine it was Whymper who was quoted, so that over the months it had begun to appear that Whymper was the Unit. His own contribution, his passion and anguish had gone for nothing, had gone to magnify Whymper. Out of his life had come the one idea; for this single creation his life had been changed for good, perhaps destroyed. And it had gone to magnify Whymper, young Whymper, whose boast was that he made nothing. (Stone,108)

Soon in fact Whymper has come to be known as the instigator of the entire program, the "man behind the energetic and resourceful promotion." (Stone,155). Stone is left feeling that "all action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth," that "nothing that came out of the heart, nothing that was pure ought to be exposed." (Stone,149). Success, when it comes, is short-lived, destruction appearing more the order of things than creation:

All that mattered was man's own frailty and corruptibility...so much he had seen before. But now he saw, too, that it was not by creation that man demonstrated his power and defied this hostile order, but by destruction. By damming the river, by destroying the mountain, by so scarring the face of the earth that Nature's attempt to reassert herself became a mockery. (Stone,158-159)
Stone's discovery is that of the Absurd Man: much of life is accidental and outside man's control; things will exist without him; success, however glittering, is chequered with shade.

In the experiences of Stone one realizes that the author sees Absurdity not as a condition exclusive to the West Indies, but as a phenomenon having universal implication. In his next work chronologically, the title-story of *A Flag on the Island*, Absurdity is described largely through the eyes of another non-West Indian, though the story does occur in the West Indies. Personal relationships in this work, perhaps because the requirements were for "much sex and dialogue" (it was written for a film company) are particularly grotesque. Much of Frank's motivation for return to the island (he is an American formerly attached to a military base there) seems to be a search for clandestine sex: immediately upon embarkation he asks the tourist guide for directions to the best whorehouse in town; persistent undertones of homosexuality occur in his conversations with two of the other visitors; he breaks up a British Council lecture when, in a drunken stupor, he mistakes the lecturer for a male stripper; and much of his time is spent in whorehouses, or with his old friend Selma, with whom he has unsatisfactory sexual relations. "Sex," he concludes, "is a hideous thing." (Flag, 230).

Unsatisfactory (or should one say "appalling") personal relationships have not come to Frank late in life, however. When he had first come to the island, one American among many on the base, he was already "looking for fun" by such methods as asking an innocent schoolboy if his sister indulged in sexual intercourse. (Flag, 170). And when he does come to care for someone he resents her refusal to exercise any rights of possession over him. The pleasures Frank seeks "quickly turn to a distressing-satisfying endurance test, would end by being pain." (Flag, 153).
But conflict between nostalgia and reality in *A Flag on the Island* is by no means limited to Frank's relationships. The story is also one of the contradictions between hopeful possibility of a newly independent country and grotesque reliance on approbation from abroad, as illustrated in the activities of the writer with the significant appellation "Blackwhite." Though native to the island, Blackwhite writes highly romanticized (and financially successful) accounts of a "Lady Theresa Phillips of Shropshire." When he does wish to write about a black man falling in love with a black woman, he is roundly scorned. In seeking to comply with demands (largely foreign) for a "native" culture, he hangs a sign in front of his house proclaiming: "Patois taught here" (*Flag*,205)---yet within that same house are walls hung with coloured drawings of the English countryside, with photographs of Churchill and Roosevelt.

Awareness of an unkind, irrational world seems central to most of those who have anything to do with this island. For Blackwhite the island "doesn't exist" (*Flag*,157); for Henry, the brothel-keeper, "the damn world don't end. And we don't dead at the right time" (*Flag*,213); for Selma, as for Frank, sex is "hideous"; and even the millionaire tourist finds it impossible to exercise wise philanthropy. For Frank himself disillusionment has set in with more than sex: he discovers the "washing away of the world by time." (*Flag*,158), that life is merely an "accomodation to one's fate." (*Flag*, 235). The question Frank asks of the island is the question asked by Eliot, the question of Beckett:

> 'What do you people do?'  
> 'What do you mean, do?'  
> 'What do you people do when you are doing nothing? Why do you keep on?' (*Flag*,171)

For Frank, but not for Frank alone, life on the island consists of the "courage of futility, the futility of courage, the empty total response." (*Flag*,233).
Hardly a story of *joie de vivre*, *A Flag on the Island*. Nor are Naipaul's two most recent works of fiction any more so: *The Mimic Men* again stresses the divorce between the possibilities consequent upon political independence and the actual myopia of the island community, this time within the perspective of the politician; and the latest work, *In a Free State*, appears the most desolate of all, spreading its despair no longer within the confines of the West Indies or London, but throughout, now, half the world.

Ranjit Kripalsingh (alias Ralph Singh) of *The Mimic Men*, is a man who has come to see the island of Isabella as a land of the grotesque, a land in which mimicry is substituted for creativity, in which industrialization means the filling of imported tins with imported products and then protecting the final product since it is now more expensive than if it had been imported whole in the first place. (*NM*, 258). It is a land where possibility of achieving national stature carries within it the same futility as it had in *A Flag on the Island*:

> We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world [the Western world], and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new. (*NM*, 175)

And in Isabella, as in the Trinidad of *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, there can be little actualizing of political idealism. Here political negotiation can only be carried out through a round of barbecue parties, political issues invariably becoming racial issues. Although his later re-negotiating of the island's bauxite contracts will permit Singh to triumph, even this is abbreviated: coinciding with the success of the new contract comes the disturbance of the Stockwell sugar estates. When Singh and his delegation visit Lord Stockwell in London, proposing that the estates be nationalized,
they are only humiliated. Political failure is imminent, Singh's final
impotence in the political arena being nicely underlined by his sexual im-
potence with Stockwell's daughter.

Failure for the colonial politician means extinction, however grand
the trappings of power. Singh shall not long enjoy his Roman house with its
swimming pool as impluvium. Like the denouement of the wife of the "political
firebrand" whom Singh had previously met at a conference of non-aligned nations
in a "glittering blur of parties and dinners" and later is seen as a shop-
assistant in a London basement. (MM, 11-12), Singh's own political career is
over at the age of forty. As we see him writing his memoirs he is living in
an uninteresting London hotel hiding his face lest he be recognized by his
former mistress, Lady Stella. The abbreviation of glory, the dereliction of
possibility, has become the substance of Singh's life:

A sombre beginning [of the memoirs]. It could not be
otherwise. These are not the political memoirs which, at
times during my political life, I saw myself composedly
writing in the evening of my days. A more than autobo-
graphical work, the exposition of the malaise of our times
pointed out and illuminated by personal experience and
that knowledge of the possible which can come only from
a closeness to power. This, though, is scarcely the book
to which I can now address myself. True, I write with
composure. But it is not the composure I would have
chosen ... I know that return to my island and to my
political life is impossible. The pace of colonial events
is quick, the turnover of leaders rapid. I have already
been forgotten; and I know that the people who supplanted
me are themselves about to be supplanted. My career is by
no means unusual. It falls into the pattern. The career of
the colonial politician is short and ends brutally ... there are no universities or City houses to refresh us
and absorb us after the heat of battle. (MM, 10-11)

As when Singh was a child and, in a heavy-down-pour of rain, was disappointed
that his house had not been washed away, allowing him "the chance of making
a fresh start" (MM, 183), now too, opportunity for a fresh beginning is denied.
Only this time the discomfort and ridicule of disaster have not been spared: Singh's escape to London is largely on behalf of his life, his return, empty-handed, from Lord Stockwell having helped to create a massive case against him. His every private gesture has been misinterpreted, his very concern ("believing in the virtue of the smell of sweat" MM, 250) distorted. His making of money, the racial exclusiveness of his "Crippleville" development, his marriage to an English girl, his relationships with two other white women, his advocacy of nationalization (of benefit mostly to Asians) have been taken as suggestive of public imposture, as a selling out of the racial unity stressed by the leadership of his party. But if Singh is disappointed by his inglorious end, he is nevertheless not especially surprised. Politics, he admits, remains little more than a game—a game in which the politician learns, like Richard Stone, that one must shield all which one knows to be good from the corruption of causes.

Lack of success in Singh's political career is paralleled by "shipwreck" in his personal life. Posturing as a dandy and a rake, Singh is in fact anything but these: when he is not actually impotent his sexual encounters are still undignified, grotesque, or contain elements of cruelty. Even as a child the word "wife" held for him hidden terror, terror which, except for an early incestuous relationship with his cousin Sally, anticipates his later sexual experiences of triumph or humiliation; Singh is rarely to know mutual acceptance in his acquaintance with sexuality. As a student in London, he lives in a seedy boarding house in which the attic is occupied by the owner and his young mistress, the basement by an unmarried mother and her collection of friends of various stages of sexual degeneracy, who herself plays grotesque sexual games. As for Singh, a sexual diary grows from his experiences with women, but these experiences still become a question of "violation and self-
violation": he is capable of becoming enraged at bumps and scratches and the smell of skin, and actually shouts at the possessors of these. His encounters become "less with individual bodies than with anonymous flesh." (MM, 34). Isolation is heightened rather than relieved. It is hardly surprising, then, that Singh's marriage should also be wrought with the grotesque, should appear, in the end, not only an example of the "ill-advised" mixed marriage, but also as a "period in parentheses." (MM, 301). Formed during a time of "breakdown and mental distress" (MM, 49) for both Sandra and himself, the marriage provides little more in the line of fulfillment than previous sexual escapades. The ceremony, held in a registry office, and from which Singh virtually flees, is only the beginning of the grotesque: from the ritual offering of the painted breasts to later exhibitionism at parties on the island and realization of mutual infidelity, theirs is a relationship speaking mostly of "flesh and futility and our own imminent extinction." (MM, 84) Nor will other sexual encounters offer relief. With Lady Stella, or with a tortuously fat prostitute, the alike result is distaste, impotence. Sex, like political power, proves false:

How right our Aryan ancestors were to create gods. We seek sex, and are left with two private bodies on a stained bed. The larger erotic dream, the god, has eluded us. (MM, 22)

But Absurdity is not exclusive to Singh in The Mimic Men. The naming of slaves after Anglo-Saxon kings, the disparity between the boy Hok's pretense to brilliance and his common, waddling mother, the son of the English clergyman refusing to acknowledge black boys in the street, people drowning in the middle of a beach party—all of this is part of the Absurd metaphysic of the book. The achieving of harmony, it would seem, is difficult indeed in
a society both racially and politically fragmented. Even Singh's idealistic father, who leaves his family in order to quietly found a religious and political movement on behalf of the people, is murdered. Despair, in this society, is "absolute" (MM, 89). But Singh also suggests that it is the "malaise" of the times (MM, 10).

The sweep of *In a Free State* far supplants this suggestion in *The Mimic Men* that Absurdity is universal. The stage set can collapse for men at any time, in any country of the world. To the protagonists of all the different sections of this work the search for "freedom" alike provides disappointment. Each seeker in turn, from the tramp on the Greek liner to Naipaul himself at Euxor, experiences something of fear or helplessness: there is a "great gulf fixed" between the desire for freedom and the possibility of attaining it, the physical placelessness of the protagonists only serving to underline their spiritual disorientation. For the tramp of the "Prologue" who has been around the world "about a dozen times" (FSt, 11) and seems intent upon the supposed romance and independence of a rootless life, glamour and real freedom are virtually denied. Gnawing at this man who would be self-sufficient is a harrowing contradictory need both to be alone and to relate his experiences: "He looked for company but needed solitude; he looked for attention, and at the same time wanted not to be noticed" (FSt, 13). When his strange behaviour later incites his victimization in a cruel joke, he is reduced to the humiliation of tears. And tension between "freedom" and the denseness of the world is illustrated again in the first story, "One Out of Many." Once respected and happy in Bombay, working for a man of importance there, and having a host of friends, Santosh loses forever this quiet security when he
leaves with his employer for Washington. From a life which he had considered settled he moves to a city where he is unknown, unrespected, where everything from prices to the hubshi (the Negro race) to the revelation of American life on the television screen is unreal and frightening. "O father," Santosh asks, "What was this place I had come to?" (FSt, 30) But when Santosh considers leaving Washington and returning to Bombay he finds this has become impossible. The happiness of the evening chats on the pavement was like the happiness of childhood: one could not return. When Santosh deserts his employer and finds that the latter does not, as was anticipated, ask to have him back, he becomes even more aware of his unimportance. Santosh's "freedom" has not provided unity, understanding; it has, instead, merely awakened him to the hostility of the world, and reduced him to a form of nihilism:

I could run away, hang myself, surrender, confess, hide. It didn't matter what I did, because I was alone. And I didn't know what I wanted to do. It was like the time when I felt my senses revive and I wanted to go out and enjoy and I found there was nothing to enjoy. (FSt, 58)

When Santosh marries the hubshi woman in a sudden desire to put an end to some of the strangeness of his new life, he discovers that this too, fails to alleviate his sense of homelessness. But Santosh furthers his own isolation: he deliberately refuses to open his"mind and heart to the English language, to newspapers and radio and television, to the pictures of hubshi runners and boxers and musicians." (FSt, 61). He has accepted his isolation as irrevocable.

"Tell Me Who to Kill" is another story of exile, a story of a young man who"saw the world change" around him as he grew up. (FSt, 71), who grows even further apart by moving to London. The seeking of a "better" life in a
new country brings again an unhappy awareness of displacement and futility. Instead of enjoying a successful new start, the narrator is merely confused and lost:

Everybody is brisk then upon arrival at the train station, and happy, no time for talk, because they can see where they are going. Since I came to this country that is something I can't do. I can't see where I am going. I can only wait to see what is going to turn up. (FSt, 66)

Unfortunately, nothing does turn up. Even the younger brother whom the narrator came to look after and whom he deeply loves, no longer needs him. And the overbearing patronage of his friend Frank compounds his despair.

In the end he wishes at all cost to destroy the "enemy" which has so set him apart. But the enemy cannot be destroyed: it is the human condition.

In the last section, the title section of In a Free State, the search for fulfillment in a new African country brings additional disappointment. Bobby and Linda have both come to this country, it would appear, to escape: Bobby to evade social attitudes regarding irregular sexual practices, and Linda and her husband to enjoy freedom from social pressure and competition.

Life in Africa, however, fails to provide order; and Bobby and Linda, largely through their own myopia—or will—remain very much apart from the country. The conversation of these two, after spending several years here, is still very much the conversation of the expatriot: of life back home, of other expatriots, of the Otherness of Africans. Linda, with her pretended "flexibility" makes no attempt to understand or like Africans, finds everything "pathetic" and, despite her own reputation among the compound personnel as a "man-eater," fears that the Africans may have "done something" to the compound wives. (FSt, 227). For Bobby apartness from Africa is less of his own desiring. He does not have something of an adherence to liberal attitudes
("people who don't want to serve have no business here" FSt,126) and despises Linda's pretense of flexibility—and consequently it appears a cruel twist of irony when the Africans beat him, except that with his sexual exploitation of African youths he has not been quite the altruist he pretends to be. It is altogether doubtful whether Africa will "save" as he believes it will. Ultimately he is not only the victim of violence, but he also finds he is unable to be close even to his fellow expatriots: after his confessions of homosexuality and breakdown he realizes that Linda too will be "another of those people from whom he would have to hide." (FSt,170). Even the colonial, who has spent the better part of his life in this African country, is rewarded with despair and terror. Yet with his attitudes of African non-entity, his desserts—like those of Bobby and Linda—have not been undeserved:

There's no good and bad here. They're just Africans. They do what they have to do. That's what you have to tell yourself. You can't hate them. You can't even get angry with them. (FSt,193)

The colonial spends the sunset of his days in anticipation of being murdered. For Bobby, who can state with such sublimity, "my life is here," (FSt, 169) there may well be the same destiny. Africa has remained foreign, irreducible.

In a Free State sets forth the message that "freedom" is not to be found for the searching; there can be no real "escape". Whether in Africa, America or England, the seekers of this book find themselves, like the soldiers from Sinai of the Epilogue (who, after being defeated in the desert were spotted trying to walk back home), defeated, lost. The tramp on the Greek liner understands something of Absurd Confrontation in his tears; but his is not the harshest discovery. Santosh, in what was to be a land of salvation comes to recognize the future as "a hole into which I was dropping"
Even when Santosh is made a free man, a citizen, he finds nothing to enjoy. Isolation is inexorable:

Some afternoons I walk to the circle with the fountain. I see the dancers but they are separated from me as by glass. Once, when there were rumours of new burnings, someone scrawled in white paint on the pavement outside my house: Soul Brother. I understand the words; but I feel, brother to what or to whom? I was once a part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free. All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over. (FSt, 61)

And the narrator of "tell Me Who to Kill" alone in a foreign city, similarly recognizes the meaninglessness of life: "if a man could just leave a life that spoil" (FSt, 101); but his is the additional discovery that he himself is culpable:

I see I kill myself. The little courage that still remain with me wash away, and the secret vision I had of buying up London, the foolishness I always really know was foolishness, burst. (FSt, 94)

In the end purity and peace are to be found only at that elusive "beginning," when the "ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it as complete" (FSt, 255). But Naipaul himself begins to doubt even this innocence, travelling as he is through ancient Egypt and witnessing children being whipped for picking up the crumbs the tourists toss aside.

Although In a Free State is the bleakest of all Naipaul's works of fiction, however, it has by no means been alone in portraying men who appear "incapable or reconciling themselves to the world." Already in Ganesh Ramsumair we met the individual who recognized in his society elements
which were less than desirable. Even in the beginning of Naipaul's career as a writer his self-proclaimed awareness of the "oddity" of people held overtones of deeper significance; already the protagonists experienced something of isolation and futility; already the search for a spiritual El Dorado had resulted in Absurd fragmentation.
FOOTNOTES


6 "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist," p. 36.


10 Rev. of *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *The Listener*, 30 May 1957, p. 90.

11 *A Manifold Voice*, p. 79.


13 "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist," p. 36.


16 "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*," *New World*, 4,4 (Cropover, 1968), 68.

18 Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist," p. 39.

19 Ibid., p. 40.


21 Page 18.


24 "What shall I do now? What shall I do"
   "... what shall we do tomorrow?"
   "What shall we ever do?" T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

   Estragon: I can't go on like this.
   Vladimir: That's what you think.
   S. Beckett, Waiting for Godot


27 David Ormerod, "In a Derelict Land: The Novels of V.S. Naipaul," Contemporary Literature, 9 (Winter, 1968), 78.

28 "Without a Place," p. 698.
CHAPTER III

Absurd Consequence

A first reading of all but the earliest fiction of Vidia Naipaul reveals more of Beckett's "nothing to be done"¹ and Caligula's "men die and they are not happy,"² than of Roquentin's joy at a life "given for nothing."³ While it would hardly be correct to say that no character in Naipaul ever achieves anything worthwhile, that nothing counterpoints the "satiric demonstration of the shoddy, the absurd, the ridiculous,"⁴ yet awareness of a disharmonious universe does result at times in resignation and despair, or in the desire to avoid or deny the condition of Absurdity through some avenue of escape. Hena Maes-Jelinek's harsh accusation that Naipaul's characters do not more than submit, while hardly accurate on the whole, thus contains an element of truth:

Naipaul's characters live in a state of passive acceptance, from which they only rouse themselves occasionally; the temporary success they achieve when they are so prompted to action merely stresses the evanescence of the satisfaction and happiness that can be derived from attainment. It seems that things will happen whether they act or not, so that they are mostly overcome by a sense of their own uselessness.⁵

Even in The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira the protagonists often submit to frustration, while the people of Miguel Street (with perhaps a few exceptions, such as that of the narrator) also take it largely for granted that "one part of being human is simply hopelessness."⁶ B. Wordsworth's resignation is probably responsible for his early death, and hopelessness
is even more cardinal to the condition of Bolo, the man who refuses to believe the war is over, and, more unfortunately, refuses to believe as well that he has won three hundred dollars in a sweepstake competition.

Almost all of Naipaul's characters submit to despondency at one time or another. Randolph accepts loneliness, rejection, failure as natural:
"even final expiation, final triumph, it seemed, was denied me. Certain things are not for me" (Flag, 54); Mohun Biswas comes to expect pleasure and fulfillment chiefly through the auspicious futures of the children; and Richard Stone adopts the attitude that nothing can be changed, that destruction is predetermined:

It was not by creation that man demonstrated his power and defied this hostile order, but by destruction. By damming the river, by destroying the mountain, by so scarring the face of the earth that Nature's attempt to reassert herself became a mockery. (Stone, 159)

And in the later works resignation is of course even more pervasive. In A Flag on the Island news of the hurricane is greeted with undisguised joy. Waiting for the end becomes an anticipation of a "final benediction" (Flag, 233). When the hurricane fails to pass over the island the protagonists are bitterly disappointed. Life once again becomes an "accomodation" to one's fate. (Flag, 235). Ralph Singh, meanwhile, with his dream of "riding below a sky threatening snow to the very end of an empty world" (MM, 98) is another man who seems to greet the Absurd Equilibrium with despair. Singh's version of the colonial politician, destined to spend his latter days in obscurity in some London hotel, occasionally arising from lethargic disappointment to contribute an article to The Times, is essentially "paralyzing." Knowledge of being descended from generations of idlers and failures increases the difficulty of thinking positively:
Below the public dandy, the political manoeuvrer and organizer; below that, this negation . . . a man, I suppose, fights only . . . when he feels strongly there is some connection between the earth on which he walks and himself. But there was my vision of a disorder beyond any one man to put right. There was my sense of wrongness. (MM, 248)

Part of Singh's problem is that he never believes he belongs to Isabella. His is a sense of intrusion, a feeling that he, the "picturesque Asiatic" was born for other landscapes (MM, 248).

But despair is most pervasive of all in Naipaul's latest work, each section being "a tour de force exploring the private anguish of: a man 'freed' by emigration from the homely stupor of life in his own place, but forced to pay the cost--detachment, fear, and impotence." In two of the stories in particular, "One Out of Many" and "Tell Me Who to Kill," the characters eagerly await the end. Though Santosh marries the hubshi woman (incidentally committing bigamy, as he already has a wife and children at home in the hills of India), thus becoming an American citizen, he has long ceased to anticipate happiness. Though he has had the experience of "several lives," he does not wish to add to these. (FSt, 61). As for that hapless narrator of "Tell Me Who to Kill," life is faced daily with those feelings which had come to him once in a nightmare: "I only know that inside me mash up . . . and my life finish." (FSt, 102). At Dayo's wedding he is struck by an attack of nausea similar to that which affects Sartre's character Roquentin:

We go in the church and the nice lady makes us sit on the right side. Nobody else there but Frank and me, and then the other people come in and sit on the left side, and the ugly church is so big it is as though nobody is there at all. It is the first time I am in a church and I don't like it. It is as though they are making me eat beef and pork. The flowers and the brass...
and the old smell and the body on the cross make me think of the dead. The funny taste is in my mouth, my old nausea, and I feel I would vomit if I swallow. (FSt, 105-106)

Even following the narrator's discovery that he is in large measure responsible for his own anguish, he is still unable to act; and so his account ends in the unhappy vision of a young man opening his mouth to scream.

Some of the characters in Naipaul, then, actually wish for death. But Naipaul is by no means consistent in this yearning for the end—and except in the case of Laura’s daughter Lorna suicide is never recommended. Indeed, several of his characters actively seek to avert death: during his breakdown Biswas is deeply disturbed by the possibilities of objects to fatally wound; Ralph Singh's final journey to London is largely on behalf of his life; at least three of the characters in the early stories of *A Flag on the Island* bewail their encounters with the death of loved ones; and the entire story of *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* weaves itself around Stone's attempt to soften the process of ageing. The wish for death occurs chiefly in the later works, beginning, in part, with Ralph Singh who, secure at last in his London hotel at one point expresses a desire for the very end that he has fled here to escape:

> I no longer wish to share distress; I do not have the equipment. No more words for me, except these I write, and in them the politician, chapman in causes, will be suppressed as far as possible. It will not be difficult. I have had my fill of political writing. My present urge is, in the inaction imposed on me, to secure the final emptiness. (M&I, 13)

And the desire for nullity is still more prevalent to Santosh and to that nameless narrator in London. For the former, however, the death-wish is left somewhat ambiguous:

> I wanted the fire to spread and spread and I wanted everything in the city, even the apartment block, even
the apartment, even myself, to be destroyed and consumed. I wanted escape to be impossible; I wanted the very idea of escape to become absurd. (FSt,44)

In wishing "escape" to become impossible, Santosh fails to realize that the embodiment of any such wish would itself be the ultimate escape.

Escape—or at least the desire for escape—takes many avenues in Naipaul in addition to that involving physical annihilation. Escape, indeed, had been central both to Naipaul's experience of Trinidad ("the threat of failure, the need to escape: this was the prompting of the society I knew." MP,45) and to his understanding of India ("... the Indian ability to retreat, the ability genuinely not to see what was obvious" Area, 188). Even in the early works of fiction retreat plays its part. It has been said, for example, that the entire political career of Ganesh Ramsumair is a species of escape; and certainly Ganesh's final hauteur and change of name suggest that he is only too happy to be rid of the encumbrance of Trinidad society. The political success of Pat Harbans, meanwhile, suggests something of the same: once successful Harbans also scorns to be involved with the community which he has left.

The desire for escape, for evasion, occurs, in fact, to almost all of Naipaul's characters at one point or another. Many of the people of Miguel Street, for example, refuse to act once they have been confronted with meaninglessness, while for others (one thinks especially of Man-Man) retreat takes form in fanaticism. And not a little of Biswas' protest, his accusation of "imprisonment" is a refusal to meet the challenge of his responsibilities. He deliberately cultivates, too, other forms of retreat, such as spiritual attachment: while the Tulsis consider him a heretic, the placards he designs during his breakdown bear sentiments which are both comforting and devotional.
Another area of retreat for him (although here it might be argued whether this is in fact retreat or affirmative rebellion) lies in reading. Of continual comfort is the stoicism of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, especially the Meditations of the latter. During his breakdown The Hunchback of Notre Dame helps to clear his mind, allows him to momentarily forget his fears (House, 239); and perhaps the best solace of all comes to be Dickens, for in this revelation of a society as grotesque as that he himself knows, he is able to be lifted out of his anxieties:

Then it was that he discovered the solace of Dickens. Without difficulty he transferred characters and settings to people and places he knew. In the grotesques of Dickens everything he feared and suffered from was ridiculed and diminished, so that his own anger, his own contempt became unnecessary, and he was given strength to bear with the most difficult part of his day: dressing in the morning, that daily affirmation of faith in oneself, which at times was for him almost like an act of sacrifice. (House, 337-338)

Later Anand too seeks comfort in the sanctuary of books.

For Ralph Singh and for the people of In a Free State evasion is even more pivotal. The period of Singh's actual participation in life is very brief, a "period in parentheses." (MM, 38). Most of his life is spent in preparation and withdrawal. Education itself has been a means by which to facilitate escape from the drabness of Isabellan life—as it was to be an escape for Sandra from the drabness of London. (MM, 54). Sexual activity too, as evidenced in Singh's keeping of the sexual diary, is an attempt to exchange drabness and despair for drama. In the end, wishing as much for withdrawal as safety, Singh seeks refuge and emotional annihilation in London. And the protagonists of In a Free State also seek salvation in a change of geography. From the tramp of the Prologue with his citizenry of the world (FSt, 11) to Naipaul himself (Why was he taking this voyage?), these people
all wish to withdraw from boredom, futility, social pressure—but they also find, unfortunately, that one such attempt at retreat usually serves to necessitate another.

Resignation, despair, desire for annihilation—these denote the negative consequences of Absurd Discovery in Naipaul; nor can one deny considerable weight to this side, especially in the later works. Yet in the end despair is usually not the victor. For Camus affirmation existed in lucidity alone, and for Naipaul too, Absurd Discovery generates affirmation through wisdom:

Naipaul's attitude is not entirely negative, for he implicitly recognizes that life should be other than it is. The fear of life or of annihilation which paralyzes his characters gives them also some kind of self-knowledge and awareness that self-satisfied people never possess.

Naipaul's protagonists almost always gain an understanding of the idiosyncrasies and injustices of life and of the endless aberrations of human nature.

Already in The Mystic Masseur, with his headmaster's "the purpose of this school is to form, not to inform" (mm, 24) Ganesh Ramsumair gains an insight into the injustices of the educational system in Trinidad. But lucidity here is mostly enjoyed by the narrator who, through the antics of Ganesh, becomes alerted to the hypocrisy which seems to form the basis of his society. Revealed thus to the reader is the Trinidadian preference for the quack, the effectiveness of bribery, the lies which impress, the tragedy which sham can engender (Ganesh's father, also a "masseur" killed a young girl by failing to recognize symptoms of appendicitis), the difficulty of achieving success honestly, and the forgetting of one's friends once one has risen. Ganesh himself, being fortunate in the realm of achievement,
is not as lucid in regard to difficulty and deception (including his own) as he might be, though the suppression of his autobiography leaves this finally ambiguous. Naipaul's other early politician, however—Pat Harbans—is aware all along of the disparity between democratic ideal and practice; and he learns something as well of the deceptions of friendship. And in Miguel Street too, the characters gain in wisdom: Bogart learns something about responsibility, that one cannot continue to indiscriminately engender children without eventually settling down; Elias discovers that life does not always provide what one wishes, but that anguish can be assuaged by settling for less; the narrator discovers the insignificance of man; and several of the characters gain understanding in the realm of love.

Mohun Biswas also gains in self-knowledge. Originally blaming the Tulsiis for all his wrongs, he becomes aware during his breakdown that he nevertheless needs these people, or that he needs at least the warmth of human activity:

There were still the periods of darkness, the spasms of panic; but now he knew they were not real and because he knew this he overcame them. He remained in the Blue Room, feeling secure to be only a part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it. (House, 272)

When Biswas lives in the barracks, we remember, his greatest fear is that Anand will leave him (House, 255); and though he continues "to solace himself with visions of deserted landscapes of sand and snow, his anguish became especially acute on Sunday afternoons, when fields and roads were empty and everything was still." (House, 243). He thus finds that it is "better to be out among real people than to be in his room with the newspapers and his imaginings." (House, 243). He discovers as well that the "starts of appre-
hen & Lon he felt at the sight of every person in the street did not come from fear at all; only from regret, envy, despair." (House, 287). And Biswas gains further insight into the nature of "freedom!" When he decides to leave his family and journey to Port of Spain to begin a new life on his own he finds that this is impossible, that the past cannot be denied, that if he is to have a special "niche" it will be one not of brilliance, but of the things he has known all along:

His freedom was over, and it had been false. The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect, make-shift and cheating. (House, 285)

Biswas' acknowledgement of his real needs, of his true position in life, as G.R. Coulthard has pointed out, helps redeem him as a person: "pero lo que lo redime, hasta cierto punto, es la conciencia de su inutilidad." 12

Richard Stone gains similar insight into personal need—and into man's limitless corruptibility. Through his experience with the Knights' Companion he recognizes that purity can exist only in concept:

Nothing that came out of the heart, nothing that was pure ought to be exposed . . . all action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth. (Stone, 149)

This recognition of an unkind world will not destroy Stone; his gain in wisdom saddens him, but it also permits him to continue:

He was no destroyer. Once before the world had collapsed about him. But he had survived. And he had no doubt that in time calm would come to him again. Now he was only very tired. (Stone, 160)

And even more gods are shattered after Mr. Stone and the Knights' Companion. In both A Flag on the Island and The Mimic Men the protagonists learn that there can be no place for the visionary in the colonial political arena, In
the end the island politician also loses, and with his own loss he pulls others down. His is a realm in which innocence cannot be sustained, in which even the pure are drawn into a vortex of corruption. Sexual contact, too, is discovered to be a forfeiture of dignity and a harbinger of even deeper apartness, sexual "freedom" (such as Selma's refusal to exercise rights of possession over the narrator) offering further torment.

In In a Free State, meanwhile, the protagonists learn that freedom of any sort is an illusion: "Will it be any different where you go?" Priya asks of Santosh when the latter wishes to leave (FSt,57). The nameless narrator in London learns that he himself is largely responsible for his anguish ("I see I kill myself." FSt,94); and Bobby recognizes the truth behind the colonial system, that they, the exploiters, deserve animosity:

I very much feel that Europeans have themselves to blame if there's any prejudice against them. Every day the president travels up and down, telling his people that we are needed. But he's no fool. He knows the old colonial hands are out to get every penny they can before they scuttle South. It makes me laugh. We lecture the Africans about corruption. But there's a lot of anguish and talk about prejudice when they rumble out little rackets. And not so little either. We were spending thousands on overseas baggage allowances for baggage that never went anywhere. (FSt, 132)

Linda is not gifted with so accurate an insight. Thus despite is being Bobby who is cruelly beaten, Linda in the end is the greater loser. The anguish of Bobby, like the anguish of so many of Naipaul's other characters, remains positive: like the sorrow of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's wedding guest in The Ancient Mariner. Bobby's unhappiness cannot finally be negative if it is tempered with wisdom.
Affirmation in Naipaul does not stop with lucidity. Absurd Discovery also engenders the consequence of revolt. The oppressor is now confronted, revolt moving beyond self-knowledge, beyond lucidity, to action. Ganesh Ramsumair himself had practised revolt: he abbreviated his term as a school-master, we will remember, because the philosophy of the school interfered with his own ideals; and by refusing the roles set out for him—roles such as early marriage—he earned for himself the name "radical" (mm, 88).

But rebellion in Naipaul is best exemplified through Mohun Biswas. Sometimes, of course, Biswas is merely weak, given over, as A.C. Derrick has noted, to a "petty cantankerousness"; the instance of the food flung out of the window onto Owad's head is one example. Along with this cantankerousness, however, exists a courageous confrontation:

There is, in some weak people who feel their own weakness and resent it, a certain mechanism which, operating suddenly and without conscious direction, releases them from final humiliation. Mr. Biswas, who had up till then been viewing his blasphemies as acts of the blackest ingratitude, now abruptly lost his temper.

'The whole pack of you could go to hell!' he shouted. 'I not going to apologize to one of the damn lot of you.' Astonishment and even apprehension appeared on their faces. He noted this for a lucid moment, turned and ran up the stairs to the long room, where he began to pack with unnecessary energy. (House, 100)

Biswa tries to persuade Govind too, of the merits to be found in revolt. And in the end refusal to accept a zero status, refusal to perpetuate his shameful living situation (in which the husband, rather than the bride, resides in the home of the in-laws) gains him a form of respect and a surprising license:

Indifference turned to acceptance, and he was pleased and surprised to find that because of his past behaviour he, like the girl contortionist, now being groomed for marriage, had a certain licence. On occasion pungent
remarks were invited from him, and then almost anything he said raised a laugh. (House, 169)

Sustained by the reading of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, Biswas puts into practice the philosophy of paddling his own canoe: he openly disapproves of many of the Tulsi practices and policies; he challenges the Tulsi religious beliefs and associates with Hindus of another sect; he disregards the acceptance of superior and inferior gradings within the Tulsi household; he buys his daughter Savi an expensive doll house when he knows no one child in Hanuman House is to receive special favours; he stands against the pretentiousness of Owad when the latter returns from studies abroad; and he further deepens the cleavage between his own family and the Tulsis with the move into his own house. Biswas realizes too, that rebellion for rebellion's sake is insufficient, that rebellion must coincide with the positive act of constructing something new: thus the construction of his house, and, in lesser part, his jobs with the Sentinel and with the welfare department.

Biswa's desire for a house is also symptomatic of a general wish for beauty and romance. The house, in fact, as David Ormerod comments, is in many ways an artifact, an "attempt to translate into a concrete tangible form the creative impulse whose frustration is one of the major aspects of Biswas' personality." Creative urge for Biswas had begun early in life. Through his friendship with Alec in grade school he discovered his skill in drawing. Later, when Jairam takes him to be trained as a pundit this same skill permits him the privilege of copying out Sanskrit verses. And eventually he decides to take up sign-painting as a profession:
So Mr. Biswas became a sign-writer and wondered why he had never thought of using this gift before. With Alec's help he worked on the café sign and to his delight and amazement it came out well enough to satisfy the proprietor. He had been used to designing letters with pen and pencil and was afraid that he would not be able to control a brush with paint. But he found that the brush, though flattening out disconcertingly at first, could be made to respond to the gentlest pressure; strokes were cleaner, curves truer. 'Just turn the brush slowly in your fingers when you come to the curve,' Alec said; and curves held fewer problems after that. After IDLERS KEEP OUT BY ORDER he did more signs with Alec; his hand became surer, his strokes bolder, his feeling for letters finer. He thought R and S the most beautiful of Roman letters; no letter could express so many moods as R, without losing its beauty; and what could compare with the swing and the rhythm of S? (House,69)

Ironically this very sign-painting will lead Biswas to the Tulsis, for it is when he is painting for their store that he sees and admires Shama and is thus shortly obliged to trade visions of beauty for marriage. But this is not the end of his painting: painting, in fact, is one of the ways he helps avoid boredom during his stay in The Chase:

Religion was one thing. Painting was the other. He brought out his brushes and covered the inside of the shop doors and the front of the counter with landscapes. Not of the abandoned field next to the shop, the intricate bush at the back, the huts and trees across the road, or the low blue mountains of the Central Range in the distance. He painted cool, ordered forest scenes, with gracefully curving grass, cultivated trees ringed with friendly serpents, and floors bright with perfect flowers; not the rotting mosquito-infested jungle he could find within an hour's walk. (House,164)

Although much of his work remains mimicry, nevertheless painting and lettering help him to preserve sanity during his nervous collapse. Afterwards, when his placards are taken to Hanuman House they are considered by all to be beautiful.

Writing, however, soon takes precedence over Biswas' other creative interests—except, of course, for housebuilding. He first begins to write
in The Chase, encouraged by the appearance in a Port of Spain magazine of one of the stories of his friend Misir. But he has difficulty devising his own plots. As a journalist he becomes sensational, but in commenting on his own situation he cannot go beyond the unfinished fantasy story involving a fragile and barren heroine. When ownership of the Sentinel undergoes a change, editorial policy becoming less frivolous, he is requested to cease writing his "scandal" stories and do serious surveys on various Trinidadian institutions. But here he is asked to ignore: to look beyond the facts to official figures; always the institutions are to be praised. Biswas’ writing, formerly pleasurable, thus becomes burdensome:

These features were not easy to write. In the days of Mr. Burnett once he had got a slant, and an opening sentence, paragraph led to paragraph, and his articles had a flow and a unity. Now, writing words he did not feel, he was cramped, and the time came when he was not sure what he did feel. (House, 339)

Aware of the badness of his writing, Biswas begins to live in daily fear of being fired; and in the failing of his truly creative drives his early intuition of a "nobler purpose" awaiting him (House, 164) becomes generated toward the drive for a house. In the end victory is his: for although he has vastly overpaid and is heavily indebted for his badly constructed house in Sikkim Street, he has nonetheless been able to give form to a dream; from the morass he has created order:

But bigger than them all was the house, his house. How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (House, 12-13)
From an effete, despairing young husband has emerged a man who has been able to actualize his urge for independence, his need to achieve, his vision of expectation. Creation for Biswas, as for Camus' Absurd Man, has been an Absurd affirmation *par excellence*.

At least four of the characters of *Miguel Street*, as well as Ralph Singh and Richard Stone also attempt to order the world, to construct a "substitute universe" through creation. Popo, who calls himself a carpenter, spends his time making the "thing without a name." (MSt,17). And Morgan and Hat are also "artists". The former, an ardent believer in harmony and order, expresses this most strongly in his "pyrotechnicism." Though laughed at and vilified, Morgan retains his aesthetic integrity:

- Morgan was the first artist I ever met in my life.
- He spent nearly all his time, even when he was playing the fool, thinking about beauty. Morgan made fireworks. He loved fireworks, and he was full of theories about fireworks. Something about the Cosmic Dance or the Dance of Life. (MSt,80)

Unfortunately, as the narrator adds, "This was the sort of talk that went clean over our heads in Miguel Street." (MSt,80) And yet after Morgan deliberately sets fire to his house the resultant fireworks display forces the street to admit to their astonishing beauty. For Edward, however, the urge toward creativity is expressed in a somewhat lighter vein: his favorite subject—a brown hand clasping a black one—is done completely without shading. But of course it is B. Wordsworth who is the paramount artist of *Miguel Street*: highly sensitive, able to weep at the beauty of a flower, he performs everything in his life with poetic intensity. And though he writes very little, his is the knowledge that his poem will be the "greatest poem in the world".
B. Wordsworth said, 'I hope to distil the experiences of a whole month into that single line of poetry. So, in twenty-two years, I shall have written a poem that will sing to all humanity.' (MSt, 62-63)

While he is able to write, while he retains this confidence—and especially when he shares these experiences with his wife, another "poet"—B. Wordsworth derives infinite joy from life; and with the flagging of his creative ability comes an early death.

The stories of Richard Stone and Ralph Singh are similarly ones in which creativity becomes a major response to a hostile world. But even before his sudden confrontation with the knowledge of mutability Stone displayed something of the artist: he indulged in fantasies of moving pavements, of canopied streets for winter, and of his being able to fly; and his imagination and creative instinct are also exercised in the structures he leaves for Miss Millington—a toy house made from a loaf of bread, a piece of silver paper flattened by every large book in the house. Once Stone finds his imperturbability seriously threatened, however, the Knights' Companion becomes his great creation, his frenzied substitution for the threat of death. In the actual drawing-up of the scheme Stone experiences much of the pleasure of the aesthete:

He wrote, he corrected, he re-wrote; and fatigue never came to him. His handwriting changed. Losing its neatness, becoming cramped and crabbed, some of its loops willfully inelegant, it yet acquired a more pleasing, more authoritative appearance, even a symmetry. The lines were straight; the margins made themselves. The steady patterning of each page was a joy, the scratch of soft pencil on receiving paper, the crossings out, the corrections in balloons in the margin. (Stone, 73)

When his plan is accepted by Excal, Stone's joy is supreme: now, instead of doubting the arrival of spring, he feels at one with it. And even when the charisma of Whymper shatters his own glory we can be sure that Stone
will retain comfort in knowing that the plan itself is successful, exposing, as it has done, the horror of the Muswell Hill imprisonment.

Ralph Singh too, recognizing the world to be irrational, irreducible, decides to create—and in creation experiences the only real satisfaction he has known. Writing the memoirs at last gratifies his desire for order. Initially skeptical of writers, believing them to be "incomplete people to whom writing was a substitute for what it then pleased me to call life" (MM,292), Singh later discovers that the writing of a book could "become an end in itself, that the recording of a life might become an extension of that life" (MM,293). Singh's memoirs, moreover, provide him indirectly with order of another kind. Attached to his room because of his writing, he also becomes attached to the procedure of the hotel:

It never occurred to me that I would have grown to relish the constriction and order of hotel life, which previously had driven me to despair; and that the contrast between my unchanging room and the slow progression of what was being created there would have given me such satisfaction. Order, sequence, regularity: it is there every time the electric meter clicks, accepting one more of my shillings. . . I know every line on the wallpaper above my table. I have seen no deterioration, but there is talk of redecorating. And the table itself: when I first sat at it I thought it rough and too narrow. The dark surface was stained and scratched, the indentations filled with grit and dirt; the drawer didn't pull out, the legs had been cut down. It wasn't part of the standard hotel furniture. It had been provided specially; it was a junkshop article, belonging to no one, without a function. Now it feels rehabilitated and clean; it is familiar and comfortable; even the scratches have acquired a shine. This is the gift of minute observation which has come to me with the writing of this book, one order, of which I form part, answering the other, which I create. (MM, 293-294)

Out of a lifelong feeling of homelessness and despair Singh achieves at last "a continuous, quiet enjoyment" (MM,294), this latest period of residence having turned out, paradoxically, to be the most fruitful of all (MM,297).
The metaphysical demand of the Absurd Man for unity, for order, can seek expression as well in political involvement. Here, as in artistic creation, he has an opportunity to form a "substitute universe." Three of Naipaul's characters do become politically attached, although this interest at times appears to arise more for the sake of personal aggrandizement than out of metaphysical (or sociological) unrest. No reason, for example, is suggested for Pat Harbans' decision to enter politics, while the political career of Ganesh is explained chiefly in terms of dishonour. The Hindu League, with Ganesh as president, is formed primarily with the thirty thousand dollars in mind that a Hindu industrialist in India has offered to a body which shall work towards "the cultural uplift" of Trinidad Hindus. And Ganesh enters politics largely by chance, being flattered into accepting the suggestion of a relative that he is more politically able than Indarsingh, who has only just returned from Oxford. Ganesh wins, of course, and his subsequent meteoric rise from M.L.C. to M.B.E. occurs just as fortuitously. Knowing nothing of the bribery and corruption underlying a local strike, he naively decides to mediate. Barely escaping from the dissatisfied rioters with his life he thereafter decides to take the stand of those in power: he speaks against the labour movement as being communistic, supports British colonial rule in Trinidad, and is thus shortly made an "M.B.E." Nowhere in this ascent has there been evidence of the need to achieve order—although it might be imagined that Ganesh's entry into politics has unconsciously evolved from the same suggestion of apartness, the same wish for meaning that earlier found expression in his reading and in his "masseur-ism."

Ralph Singh's entry into the political "game" (he himself uses the
word MM,45) also occurs somewhat by accident, through his support for the Socialist magazine edited by his friend Browne:

So, pettily and absurdly, with the publication of the anniversary issue of the new-look Socialist, our political movement started . . . we found ourselves at the centre less of a political awakening than a political anxiety, to which it was left to us merely to give direction. (MM,226)

Browne and Singh initiate a political movement "simply by coming together." (MM,226). In the end they are uncertain whether they themselves have created the movement, or whether the movement has created them (MM,237). And they are uncertain too, of goals. Though they "zestfully abolished an order" they have difficulty in defining a purpose:

What did we talk about? We were, of course, of the left. We were socialist. We stood for the dignity of the working man. We stood for the dignity of distress. We stood for the dignity of our island, the dignity of our indignity. (MM,237)

Once power is gained, however, concrete needs do arise: the need to expel the English expatriots who monopolize the administrative section of the civil service, and the need to nationalize. And beneath all the arbitrariness of this movement indication remains that Singh's entry into the political arena has not been entirely divorced from metaphysical unrest:

I used to feel they [his marriage and political career] were aberrations, whimsical, arbitrary acts which in some way got out of control. But now, with a feeling of waste and regret for opportunities missed, I begin to question this. I doubt whether any action, above a certain level, is ever wholly arbitrary or whimsical or dishonest. (MM,219)

In the end one suspects it has been Singh's sense of wrongness, his sense of Asiatic intrusion which has unconsciously generated this urge toward order.
But if Naipaul's Absurd Man had been disappointed in the arenas both of creative and political endeavour (which he not infrequently is), he might yet seek affirmation in personal relationships, in, as Camus' Caligula had said, "the love one inspires in others." Thus while one cannot deny that Naipaul chronicles the isolation of man, sometimes relationships are formed where none previously exist.

In Naipaul human relationships are most disappointing in their sphere of sexuality. Not one of his characters, in fact, visibly achieves sexual gratification. Sex is either hideous, or a cause for cruelty. It is friendship in the end which saves, friendship such as that experienced in Miguel Street. In this earliest-written of Naipaul's works the protagonists enjoy a sense of fellowship, a sharing of sympathy and understanding, and a preserving of intimacy and good will in the midst of the worst frustration: Bogart and Hat inquire after the welfare of one another immediately upon arising each morning; the narrator keeps the secret of Big Foot's cowardice; the street expresses sympathy both for George's young daughter Dolly who is forced to scrub for her father's prostitutes, and for Elias when he consistently fails his exams; the narrator's mother looks after Mrs. Herreira when she is beaten by Toni; and when Hat proudly brings home a baby girl who is clearly not his, she is nonetheless praised and cared for by the women of the street. B. Wordsworth too, need not fear obscurity, for his praises shall forever be sung by the narrator. For all their idling, drinking, whoring and charlatanry—and allowing the narrator's forgetting Hat and his own seeming insignificance to the people at the end—these people are generally good to one another; and it is largely for this reason that regardless of frustration and futility the pervading tone of the book
is of considerable joie de vivre.

Despite Ganesh's early isolation, The Mystic Masseur ultimately portrays something of the same comradeship. The people of Fourways and Fuente Grove, despite knavery and pettiness, are again, not without kindness. The death of Ganesh's father generates the sympathy of the entire village, and after Ganesh's marriage and move to Fuente Grove a warm friendship grows with the Beharrys. It is Beharry, in fact, who chiefly encourages Ganesh to write, who gives him a notebook in which to record his readings, and who suggests the maintenance of a schedule. And Ganesh and Leela, despite (or perhaps because of) their inability to have children, also grow close to one another:

There was another disappointment in his life. After a year it was clear that Leela couldn't have children. He lost interest in her as a wife and stopped beating her. Leela took it well, but he expected no less of a good Hindu wife. She still looked after the house and in time became an efficient housekeeper. She cared for the garden at the back of the house and minded the cow. She never complained. Soon she was ruler in the house. She could order Ganesh about and he didn't object. She gave him advice and he listened. He began to consult her on nearly everything. In time, though they would never had admitted it, they had grown to love each other. (mm,74)

When Ganesh later allows his father-in-law to be received into his home (they had been quarrelling for several years) Leela is so touched that she neglects her in-bred restraint and openly embraces her husband—and Ganesh makes no attempt to "push her away." (mm,202).

Even the quintessential isolato Mohun Biswas ultimately experiences something of familial closeness. Already in his childhood, and despite Bipti's lack of affection and his father's harshness, his family was not altogether indifferent. Raghu drowns, after all, in what he believes is
an attempt to save his son. But most important, despite his feelings of being trapped in an enemy stronghold, and despite frequent quarrels, Biswas gradually grows aware that emotional contact has been established between himself, Shama and the children. The first evidence of this comes when he and Shama live alone together in the shop in The Chase: here Shama is generally devoted to his needs, helps his shopkeep by devising an ingenious method of keeping account of credit, and, upon returning to Hanuman House to give birth to their first child, kindly prepares for her absence:

His clothes had been washed and darned; and he was moved though not surprised, to find on the kitchen shelf little squares of shop paper on which, in her mission-school script that always deteriorated after the first two or three lines, Shama had pencilled recipes for the simplest meals, writing with a disregard for grammar and punctuation which he thought touching. (House,144)

While Shama is gone Biswas greatly misses her, finding the shop increasingly disordered and cold; when she returns he is overjoyed at having meals once again prepared especially with him in mind. And even further human attachment comes with the birth of the children: initially frightened of these births and remaining aloof from them for the most, yet when they are staying at Hanuman House with Shama he does express concern about their welfare; and he remains unusually interested in their education, gladly supplying them with extra lessons and the legendary "milk and prunes." (House,324). By the time he is living in the Tulsi house in Port of Spain, then, Biswas knows at last the security of familial warmth: "relationships had been created where none existed; he stood at their centre." (House,479). Relationships, moreover, have been created with more than Biswas' immediate family. After his nervous collapse, we will recall, he also recognizes the
warmth contained in Hanuman House. And eventually Biswas even forms a friendship with Govind, who provides support when he courageously opposes Owad's arrogance. Reconciliation also takes place between Biswas and Bipti. Failing to provide much-needed affection while he was young, Biswas' mother is nevertheless endeared to him when she visits at their temporary residence in Green Vale. Thus when the doctor who signs Bipti's death certificate shows bad temper and disrespect, with the support of Shama and the children, Biswas writes a letter of brilliant reproof. All of this emotional closeness has developed gradually, even before Biswas has achieved the dignity of having his own home. Afterwards there is even further affection, Shama for once ceasing to reproach him for what has been, financially, a disastrous mistake. Rather than agreeing they sell their beloved Prefect car to meet payments, she declares that she will try to sell potatoes. But no more was heard of the potatoes, and Mr. Biswas never threatened again to sell the car. He didn't now care to do anything against his wife's wishes. He had grown to accept her judgment and to respect her optimism. He trusted her. Since they had moved to the house Shama had learned a new loyalty, to him and to their children; away from her mother and sisters, she was able to express this without shame, and to Mr. Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house. (House, 7-8)

When Savi returns from her scholarship abroad, receiving a job at a salary larger than Biswas himself could ever have made, it looks as if he need no longer fear even the debt of the house.

For Richard Stone, meanwhile, affection helps soften the expectancy of death. Initially skeptical about the sagacity of marriage—and while aware of the power of kindness to smother—Stone nevertheless comes to feel that Margaret is a "part of him," that he would not know what to do without
her, (Stone, 59). And Margaret indeed has been very good for him: she shows no surprise at his being slightly less well-off financially than he had made out; she sees him off in the mornings and greets him in the evenings; she humours and encourages him; she brings him a new circle of friends; and she is very proud of his success with the Knights Companion. When everything else seems to fail the thought of Margaret helps provide the comfort needed to maintain lucidity: "he took his briefcase up to the study, to wait there and perhaps to do a little work until Margaret arrived." (Stone, 159). Stone and his sister Olga also maintain a special closeness, at least until Stone is married; Stone enjoys the devoted service of Miss Millington for the astonishing number of twenty-eight years; and Stone has enjoyed a very long friendship with the Tomlinsons.

Even amid the inauspiciousness of The Mimic Men and In a Free State one encounters the occasional example of humanism, of affection—and where personal relationships fail entirely one is only made more aware of their importance. The happiest periods of Ralph Singh's life, except for the end, when he finds unity and purpose in creation, are those in which he is close to his fellows. In his youth he becomes the friend of a boy of mixed Chinese ancestry, Hbk, with whom he competes intellectually; and with Deschampsneuf's, a descendant of French slave owners and breeders, he has belching matches. And in London while Singh is a student playing the role of the "extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship," (MM, 24), he finds warmth-of-sorts in the attentions, however sordid, of Lieni and her group. It is during this period that Singh also comes to know Sandra, finding considerable solace, at least in the beginning, in their relationship.
In those days in London, when a decision had to be made every morning to dress, to go through the day, when on numberless nights I could go to sleep only with the consoling thought of the Luger at my head or the thought of retreat on the following day, the degree and the School abandoned, in those days at the darkest moments I was strengthened by the thought of Sandra. I would say, 'I am seeing her tomorrow. Let me delay decision and last until then.' And the day would come; and we would both create, out of the drabness that surrounded us both, an occasion. (MM, 54)

In *In a Free State*, meanwhile, the affirmation to be found in human warmth is mostly revealed by its absence. The tramp at Piraeus finds the glamour of travel insufficient; like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, he must relate his travels to someone. And the narrator of "Tell Me Who to Kill" knows joy only in those days when his brother lived with him: "It is true. This was the happy time, when Dayo live in my basement and I work like a man in blinkers." (FSt, 91). But affirmative human concern does finally exist in this book in the Epilogue, where Naipaul himself, outraged by the treatment of the Egyptian children, decides to act:

> I saw that my hand was trembling. I put down the sandwich I was eating on the metal table; it was my last decision. Lucidity, and anxiety, came to me only when I was almost on the man with the camel-whip. I was shouting. I took the whip away, threw it on the sand. He was astonished, relieved. I said, 'I will report this to Cairo.' He was frightened; he began to plead in Arabic. The children were puzzled; they ran off a little way and stood up to watch. The two Italians, fingering cameras, looked quite calm behind their sunglasses. The women in the party leaned back in their chairs to consider me. (FSt, 253)

Were there less "considering" and more "concern" this account suggests, then perhaps purity might have existed elsewhere than at the "beginning."

Purity and peace are found in their most unadulterated forms in the Absurd World of Naipaul in the realm of nature. Though Naipaul rather sparingly touches upon luxuriant natural bounty, and although an occasional
protagonist (one thinks of Blackwhite with his English countryside scenes and Biswas' painting of "cool, ordered forests") seems more embarrassed by his landscape than anything else, yet for several of the characters nature offers consolation and joy. Even Ganesh Ramsumair at one point describes man as part of a vast Chain of Being:

At other times he said that happiness was only possible if you cleared your mind of desire and looked upon yourself as part of Life, just a tiny link in the vast chain of Creation. 'Lie down on the dry grass and feel Life growing out from the rocks and earth beneath you, through you, and upwards. Look at the clouds and sky when it isn't hot and feel that you are part of all that. Feel that everything else is an extension of you. Therefore you, who are all this, can never die.' (mm,162)

But Ganesh's philosophy seems much more in keeping with the actions of B. Wordsworth. Wordsworth lives in a yard which, in its greenness, its growth, its wildness, seems not a part of the city at all. He spends hours watching nature (he first meets the narrator when he watches his bees) or gazing at the stars, and, under his tutelage, the narrator is able to forget all the frustrations of home:

B. Wordsworth said, 'Now, let us lie on the grass and look up at the sky, and I want you to think how far those stars are from us.'
I did as he told me, and I saw what he meant. I felt like nothing, and at the same time I had never felt so big and great in all my life. I forgot all my anger and all my tears and all the blows. (MSt,60)

Even in a story as dreary as A Flag on the Island, relief may be found in the outdoors. After the hurricane fails to provide desired annihilation, Selma suggests release in a very different medium: "The old driftwood calls. Lovely things can be found in Nature" (Flag,234). And Mohun Biswas (despite his paintings) and Ralph Singh too, realize the affirmative succour of wildness. For Mohun Biswas appreciation comes at an early age. As he takes
a neighbour's calf to graze he discovers a stream which, though forbidden (water is considered to be an unlucky element for Biswas, and it is here that Raghu will drown), is an object of fascination and beauty, an object which promises that the world consists of more than the gloom of his home:

He continued to go to the forbidden stream. Its delights seemed endless. In a small eddy, dark in the shadow of the bank, he came upon a school of small black fish matching their background so well that they might easily have been mistaken for weeds. He lay down on the bamboo leaves and stretched out a hand slowly, but as soon as his fingers touched the water, the fish, with a wriggle and flick, were away. After that, when he saw the fish, he did not try to catch them. He would watch them and then drop things on the water. A dry bamboo leaf might cause a slight tremor among the fish; a bamboo twig might frighten them more; but if he remained still after that and dropped nothing the fish would become calm again. (House, 24)

Biswas is to experience this pleasure again at Shorthills ("the silence, the solitude, the fruitful bush in a broken landscape: it was an enchantment" House, 360) and during the seaside holiday with Miss Logie.

The despondent Ralph Singh, meanwhile, learns that the city can provide only disorder. His has been the dream of retiring not in an anonymous London hotel, but on a derelict cocoa plantation, where literary labour might "interdigitate" (MM, 40) with agriculture:

Cocoa: it is my favourite crop. It grows in the valleys of our mountain ranges, where it is cool and where on certain mornings your breath turns to vapour. There are freshwater springs that make miniature waterfalls over mossy rocks and then run clear and cold and shallow in their own channels of white sand. The floor of the cocoa woods is covered with broad brown-and-gold cocoa leaves; and between the cocoa trees, stunted, black-barked, as nervously branched as the oak, there are bright green coffee bushes with red berries; the whole sheltered by giant immortelle trees which at their due season lose all their leaves and set every hillside ablaze with bird-shaped flowers of yellow and orange which then, for days, float down on the woods. You hear the murmur and gurgle of streams everywhere, mountain streams which after rain turn to torrents that occasionally flood the depressions. (MM, 39)
Very different from Singh's actual denouement would this retirement have been, and ample consolation for the sterile metropolis which is all he has really known. Aestheticism and agriculture—so would Singh have sought solace for all that had gone before.

But if he experiences defeat in every area of endeavour, if he lives in the city and is unable to taste the tonic of wildness, Naipaul's Absurd Man can still gain reprieve from torment and futility through cognitive laughter. Naipaul's most successful defense of all against the irreducibility of the world remains the defense of irony. In *The Middle Passage* he has written that the West Indies have an "insecure wish to be heroically portrayed in their literature," whereas "irony and satire, which might help more, are not acceptable." (MP, 74). In his own writing, Naipaul's laughter is not the "castrated satire" with which Lamming condemned him, but the final challenge to a nightmare, the ultimate defense against despair.

In *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, where the characters are less aware of the Absurd nature of existence than are, generally speaking, most of the characters of the other works, irony is largely the response of a narrator. Ganesh is initially isolated, opposed to a world in which a school-master can admit that the imparting of wisdom is not his aim, but this Absurd Discovery becomes for the most a prologue to fraudulence. Ganesh makes his way quite nicely out of the Stygian dungeon, and so it is left for the narrator to expose through irony, to confront through scorn. The narrator's attitude toward "massaging" ("masseurs were ten a penny in Trinidad." mm, 11), and his exposition of ignorance ( in, for
example, Leela's indiscriminate use of punctuation and in Ganesh's writing a letter to Street and Smith, publishers, telling them he was thinking of writing books and wondering if "either of them was interested" (mm, 75) reveal a not insignificant concern with social predicament. Ironic laughter is the narrator's weapon against futility, against a society which has a preference for deception. And the same can be said for the narrator's laughter in *The Suffrage of Elvira*. His is the perception, along with that of Ramlogan and Chittaranjan, that democracy in Elvira is a "stupid thing." (Elvira, 161), the flippancy at the end serving to throw in bas-relief the disastrous outcome of possibility.

In *Miguel Street* and in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, however, irony provides a lance for more than a narrator: B. Wordsworth scorns his love both for his wife and for his writing in a last attempt to regain repose; Morgan, the pyrotechnicist, laughs both at himself and at his family; and Hat becomes a librarian in the jail, thus mocking the severity of his prison term. Irony for Biswas too, becomes a foil, a means by which to retain dignity in a society of seemingly insurmountable frustration. When the *Sentinel* sets up its "Deserving Destitutes Fund" and appoints Biswas as investigator, he comments to Shama: "'Deserving Destitute number one . . . M. Biswas. Occupation: investigator of Deserving Destitutes.'" (House, 398) Biswas' scorn also helps him to survive the Tulsis. Giving the various members his own not inappropriate "calling names" is more than cantankerousness: it is a refusal to be unjustly intimidated. Thus the two spoiled Tulsi sons become "the gods," Mrs. Tulsi "the old Queen," or "the old Hen," and Seth "the Big Boss." (House, 94) And when Biswas attempts to write "tragic" stories like those of his friend Misir he finds that
Irony has enabled him to transcend tragedy:

But Mr. Biswas could never devise a story, and he lacked Misir's tragic vision; whatever his mood and however painful his subject, he became irreverent and facetious as soon as he began to write, and all he could manage were distorted and scurrilous descriptions. (House, 165)

For Anand, following much in his father's footsteps, scorn will similarly rescue, will similarly help to soften the taunts of Hanuman House.

Though no one recognized his strength, Anand was among the strong. His satirical sense kept him aloof. At first this was only a pose, an imitation of his father. But satire led to contempt, and at Shorthills contempt, quick, deep, inclusive, became part of his nature. It led to inadequacies, to self-awareness and a lasting loneliness. But it made him unassailable. (House, 372)

It is this same dianoetic laughter which has helped the Baker in A Flag on the Island to outwit in a profession rich in prejudice. When the baker realizes that people in Trinidad simply do not buy bread from a black man, he sets himself up as a Chinese baker, hires Chinese front-desk attendants, and quietly grows rich: "As I say, I only going in the shops from the back. But every Monday morning I walking brave brave to Marine Square and going in the bank, from the front." (Flag, 146). And the upright Richard Stone, discovering to his horror that his unmarried niece has been made pregnant by the very fellow who has usurped his own glory, is able to mask his hurt by a show of contempt: "the welfare state hasn't yet run short of milk and orange juice and cod-liver oil." (Stone, 154).

Even the bleaker later works find transcendence in irony. Ralph Singh's reflections on his life both before and during political involvement are made more bearable through ironic distance. His interpretation of the active part of his life as a "period in parentheses," his awareness of the indignity of his retirement, are made endurable through his facility for
ironic self-assessment—and it is this which allows him to begin afresh with the writing of the memoirs, to carry on, indeed, to Sisyphean triumph.

It does not worry me now, as it worried me when I began this book, that at the age of forty I should find myself at the end of my active life. I do not now think this is even true. I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city. This does not strike me as loss. I feel, instead, I have lived through attachment and freed myself from one cycle of events. It gives me joy to find that in so doing I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse. (MM,300)

Scorn, in fact, provides relief for those even more desolate than Singh, for even that most desolate of all Naipaul's characters, the narrator of "Tell Me Who to Kill." After discovery of the fraudulence of his brother Dayo's studies, and after realizing that a roti shop in the heart of London has been a highly unwise business venture, for all his wish "to leave a life that spoil" there is yet strength in the man—strength, that is, as long as he is able to look at his life and mock:

All afternoon as I walk I feel like a free man. I scorn everything I see, and when I tire myself out with walking, and the afternoon gone, I still scorn. I scorn the bus, the conductor, the street.

I scorn the white boys who come in the shop in the evening. They come to make trouble. But it is different tonight. I am fighting for nothing here. They are provoking me. But they give me strength. Samson get back his hair, he is strong. Nothing can touch him. He is going back on the ship, and no matter how black the water is at night, in the morning it will be blue. (FSt,101-102)

When the narrator is no longer able to sustain this ironic lucidity, his strength too, falters.

For Bobby ironic consciousness lasts somewhat longer. And it is this which allows him to become as close as he does to Africa. While
Linda worries about what the Africans might have done to the compound wives and finds Africans on the whole "pathetic." Bobby has a much more realistic sense of expatriot purpose: seeing his own role as one of service, he also sympathizes with the hatred of the blacks for the whites. In a fit of temper with Linda's "you should either stay away, or you should go among them with the whip in your hand" (FSt, 226), Bobby lashes out:

'I don't know who you think you are. I don't know why you think it matters what you think about anything... there are millions like you. And millions like Martin. You are nothing.' (FSt, 227)

Bobby's scorn is wasted on Linda, however. Africa for her remains escape into the compound, escape, finally, from Africa itself. And Santosh, despite his lucidity, is similarly doomed: because he is unable to laugh he is unable as well to find final affirmation. While much of his story has been tempered with irony, this results from authorial perception, rather than from his own understanding. Santosh himself takes all too seriously his airplane ride, his contact with the hubshi, his being "dishonoured" (FSt, 38) by the woman who is later to become his wife. In failing to perceive the ludicrousness of his new life, in perceiving only that he has made a great mistake, Santosh remains defeated.

But for those characters in Naipaul who, when all else fails, are unable to view life through the Sisyphean lenses of scorn, there can be no affirmative dénouement. For Naipaul, in order to truly "fill a man's heart" (Sis, 91), contemplation of one's torment must take place at some remove. Because laughter retains the power of joining commitment to withdrawal,18 because it alone among the various forms of Absurd Affirmation need depend on nothing outside itself for survival, it is cognitive laughter in the end, which is best able to assuage ontological anguish.
11 Waiting For Godot, p. 7.


3 Jean Paul Sartre, Nausea, p. 151.

4 A. C. Derrick, "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist," p. 33.


6 William Walsh, A Manifold Voice, p. 67.


9 "Then the Nausea seized me, I dropped to a seat, I no longer know where I was; I saw the colours spin slowly around me, I wanted to vomit. And since that time, the Nausea has not left me, it holds me." Nausea, pp. 18-19.

10 David Ormerod, "In a Derelict Land: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul," p. 80.


13 He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the Morrow morn.
   - from The Ancient Mariner

14 "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist," p. 33.


86
16 *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, p. 10.

17 *The Pleasures of Exile*, p. 225.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vidia Naipaul and Absurdity in the West Indies

It is hardly surprising that the West Indies should have produced a writer whose Weltansicht reflects disorder. The feelings of isolation, fragmentation and futility experienced by Mohun Biswas and Naipaul's other characters find ample foundation in historical and sociological fact, and are variously mirrored by other writers and intellectuals in the area. From the very beginning of European contact the West Indies experienced plunder. Already with their landing upon Haiti Columbus' sailors repaid the courtesy of the natives (who helped rescue the remains of a slave ship) with ravage and annexation; they claimed the island, introduced Christianity, forced labour, committed murder and rape, and initiated European disease and famine—all of which reduced the native population to about one tenth within fifteen years.¹ And the "el dorado" episode centering in Trinidad bred equal unhappiness. As Naipaul relates in The Loss of El Dorado, Antonio de Berrio's dream of discovering the fabled city of gold and creating from it a Third Marquisate to rival those of Lima and Mexico ended in disgrace and ruin: not only did Raleigh destroy his few small huts in St. Joseph, leaving him to die half-crazed in the Venezuelan jungle, but the city of gold itself was never discovered. Domingo de Vera fared little better. Though he claimed to have found El Dorado, bringing back with him seventeen golden eagles and jackals, it is doubtful whether his story can be believed, the eagles and jackals probably being artifacts from Peru. (El Dor

88
In a subsequent expedition Vera's men met with starvation, slaughter (a relief party having run into a fleet of man-eating Caribs) and death by storm. (El Dor, 59-60). And Raleigh's experiences also came to grief: though he was released from the Tower of London only on condition that he would find the El Dorado mines and crystal mountain without disturbing the Spaniards, he failed. The penalty was death. As Naipaul comments, this was the end of the quest: "it had begun as a dream as large as the New World itself; it had ended in this search for a mine no one had seen, in an action of amateurs, in which all the great ones, and few of the lesser, perished." (El Dor, 87)

Philip II began to show interest only when it was too late, and Spanish Trinidad remained a forgotten outpost, a "ghost province," until it was captured in 1797 (two hundred years later) by the British. Governor Picton, however, only furthered disorder: instead of establishing Trinidad as a base for a "revolution of high principles" in Spanish America ("equality for the mulattoes, liberty for the Negroes, property for the merchants, security for all" El Dor, 136), the Port of Spain goal was used as a center for the torture of undisciplined slaves.

Although the Spanish invasions had badly decimated the native Indian population (between Columbus' discovery of Jamaica in 1494 and the British capture of it in 1655, for example, the entire population had been wiped out, with only seventy-four remaining in 1611) a stain at least equal in wretchedness was the introduction of the slave system. Although Indians had also been used as slaves, for reasons of physical strength, economy and the possibility of enforcing thorough mental and moral subjugation, the Negro soon proved to be the choice investment. "Melioration Acts" did exist, but they were never seriously enforced. In order to prevent rebellion, for
example, one captain of a slave ship was allowed to cut the inner organs of a slave into 300 pieces, forcing the rest of the slaves to each eat a piece; and on the plantation itself it was not unknown for the slaves to be whipped, mutilated by the removal of limbs, ears or private parts, have hot wax or hot sugar poured over them, made to eat their own excreta, roasted on slow fires, or filled with gunpowder and blown up.⁴ Intellectual and moral ill-treatment too, prevailed: the institution of marriage was condemned; education was considered a waste of time and a danger; the legal system became a distant relative of anything nearing justice; and refinements existed neither in the realm of social activity nor in the arts, conversation itself being discouraged, lest it breed unrest.⁵ Even the Church supported the slave trade, the Spanish clergy seeing in it an opportunity for converting the "heathen," while Jesuits, Franciscans and Dominicans were all heavily involved in sugar cultivation, which meant slave holding. The Baptists, meanwhile, would not allow their earlier missionaries to speak against slavery, and the Bishop of Exeter himself retained 655 slaves, for whom he received £12,700 compensation in 1833.⁶

But even after slavery had been abolished, the plantation system consisted of two very separate worlds: the world of the exploiter and the world of the exploited, the one being for the most white, the other non-white, the one a world of Europeans in splendid mansions, the other a world of the "niggeryard" and, later, the "bound-coolie" yard. Though treated less badly than the slaves, the East Indians and others who came to the West Indies by no means escaped squalor or cruelty. They were provided with inadequate food, lodged in the old slave quarters, severely fined for failure to turn up for work, and were subject to "licks."⁷ Often unaware of the true
conditions for which they had indentured themselves ("We are not aware that any [great] difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies, the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they go to or the length of the voyage they are undertaking," stated a Calcutta firm), many of the labourers could only think of returning.

And those visitors from abroad who failed to recognize the disorder of the society added a new element of perversity. In 1877 James Anthony Froude commented that "seeing always the boundless happiness of the black race" one could only warn that "the powers which envy human beings too perfect felicity may find ways one day of disturbing the West Indian Negro." Compounding this simplicity, Froude further observed that "the Anglo West Indians, like the English gentry in Ireland, were a fine race of men in their day, and perhaps the improving them off the earth has been a less beneficial process in either case than we are in the habit of supposing." The old naval men too, were lauded as the greatest of heroes, the only misfortune being that their descendents would suffer "crowding out" by the blacks from Jamaica and the Antilles. Charles Kingsley, meanwhile, glibly concluded that the Trinidad Negro lived better than the working man in England, although the behaviour of the "negress" did disturb him: "their masculine figures, their ungainly gestures, their loud and sudden laughter, even when walking alone, and their general coarseness, shocks, and must shock . . . it is a painful subject. I shall touch it in these pages as seldom and as lightly as I can."

But by the time Kingsley and Froude made their journeys little was left of what might have served as a comprehensive reminder of the past. A few derelict "great houses" from which Froude had constructed the grandeur of
the Anglo West Indians, a few scattered sugar-mills—these were the remains of an era already half-forgotten. Obscured alike were magnificence and horror. Today, Naipaul notes, there is one other relic—an anchor outside the Royal Victoria Institute in Port of Spain may be the same anchor Columbus lost during his rough passage into the Gulf of Paria. (MP, 55).

The absence of reminders of the past, the wretchedness of what can be remembered, these have been responsible for the West Indian difficulty in distinguishing a separate identity, the substitution of European values for native needs, and the almost ineradicable urge toward self-denigration. The society in *The Mimic Men* which bases its industries upon foreign products shows not the worst of these consequences: probably the greatest misfortune of West Indian self-censure remains the frenzy toward "whiteness." In a society in which the administrators have been traditionally European, in which everything worthwhile has been associated with white, the non-white majority is condemned to feelings of inadequacy. George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* sensitively portrays both this slow-to-change subservience paid to the white minority and the separateness of the worlds of the European administrator and the people:

The world of authority existed somewhere along the fringe of the villagers' consciousness. Direct contact with the landlord might have helped towards some understanding of what the others, meaning the white, were like, but the overseer who nominally was a mediator had functioned like a bridge which might be used, but not for crossing from one end to the other. The world ended somewhere along the bridge, and beyond was another plane of reality; beyond was the Great, which the landlord and the large brick house on the hill represented... a custom had been established, and later a value which through continual application and a hardened habit of feeling became an absolute standard of feeling. I don't feel the landlord would like this. If the overseer see, the landlord is
bound to know. It operated in every activity. The obedient lived in the hope that the Great might not be offended, the uncertain in the fear it might have been."

During the course of the book, however, a change in attitude does occur. From "let the white gen'l'man pass" (Castle, 26) of the earlier days grows the feeling that "white people who come out from England was a sort of scum who sort of din't know how to live at home." (Castle, 146). And toward the end of the book a riot takes place in which landlord Creighton is nearly killed. But while Naipaul and Lamming recognize the disease of the mimic society, this recognition does not always take place, even among would-be intellectuals. Mayotte Capécia, for example, writes in _Je suis Martiniquaise_: "I should have liked to be married, but to a white man. But a woman of colour is never altogether respectable in a white man's eyes. Even when he loves her." Later, questioning whether her man is handsome, she adds: "All I know is that he had blue eyes, blond hair, and a light skin, and that I loved him." 

Raised in a society in which the privileged are few, in which the pre-requisites for success can still be those from which the masses are excluded by birth, it would be difficult indeed for the West Indian to interpret his surroundings as other than foreign, hostile; and because escape is for the most impossible, the West Indian also feels, like Mohun Biswas, imprisoned. To be a colonial, as Naipaul commented in an interview, is to know a kind of perverse security: it is to have all decisions about major issues taken out of one's hands, and to feel one's political status so firmly settled that there is little one can do in the world. Even the intellectual cannot escape the void he sees around him. The frustration of Ralph Singh seems the frustration of the West Indian visionary: in general.
Between the few who succeed and the masses who fail, between the possible and the actual, is a great divide. In Orlando Patterson's *An Absence of Ruins*, for example (Patterson's titles suggest much in themselves), Alexander Blackman sees the choice offered by West Indian society as a choice between self-imposed ignorance and confrontation with barrenness, hope itself being rooted in despair: "these desires of mine, these sudden trite obsessions, I knew them for what they were--little dead-ends, mirages in the desert, pauses and commas in the endless statement of my underlying hunger, itself a vacancy." (Abs of R, 22) Alex had once known good omen--he has received the doctoral degree for a thesis concerning, appropriately, "The Contribution of the Negro to Western Civilization"--but for others possibility never even suggests itself. For the garbage collectors of *The Children of Sisyphus* life is "worthless, lousy, dirty":

They [the garbage men] were like men possessed, up there above the city, wretched and lost. Abandoned to a fate which seemed to terrify them, partly because they were perpetually plagued with doubts of its existence, partly because they felt that if indeed it did exist, then in some bizarre way they already knew what it was . . . just them, the garbage-men, them and the empty turn of the uneventful, everlasting now.

In *The Children of Sisyphus* people live atop dung-hills, argue over rotten garbage, and, in the midst of the Rastafarian "Peace and Love," claw a woman to death.

Closely interwoven in the works of Derek Walcott too, are the themes of abandonment and irreducibility: "To find the true self is still arduous,/ And for us especially, the elation can be useless and empty/ As this pale, blue ewer of the sky/ Loveliest in drought." And George Lamming, in *The Emigrants*, portrays, in terms of symbolic "nausea" an even uglier sociological
reality:

Hist'ry tell me that dese same West Indies people is a sort of vomit you vomit up. Was a long time back England an' France and Spain an' all the great nations make a raid on whoever live in them islands. England, France and Spain, all o' them, them vomit up what they din't want, an' the vomit settle there in that dim Caribbean sea. It mix up with the vomit them make Africa vomit, an' the vomit them make India vomit, an' China an' nearly every race under de sun. An' just as vomit never get back in yuh stomach, these people, most o' them, never get back where they vomit them from.

Unable to return to their origins (Haile Selassie, though doubtlessly flattered, has shown no real interest in the Rastafarian movement, the East Indians, too, if one is to draw conclusions from An Area of Darkness, being irremediably sundered from India), and hindered from "achievement" by ignorance and poverty, the West Indian experience is one, all too often, of hopelessness:

After a while, this whole,
Slow grinding circus doesn't give a fuck,
There is nowhere to go. You'd better go.

Historical abandonment and present day neglect engendered deep feelings of isolation. As Gerald Moore notes, for example, Walcott's volume The Castaway portrays a solitary figure "who must learn to know this island upon which chance and history have stranded him"; his eyes fixed upon the sea "which vomited him up," Walcott's Castaway is both a "spokesman for a generation endeavouring to throw off racial and colonial inhibitions in the search for a distinctly West Indian existence, and the great reminder of the loneliness imposed upon them by space and time." Though feelings of isolation are natural to peoples everywhere, they are especially endemic to a society where virtually everyone is an immigrant.

Close upon the heels of this discovery of apartness, of belonging to
a world which seems to deny purpose and warmth, follows a pervasive attitude of resignation. When formerly slaves were given a holiday they would often sit for hours at a time in front of their huts, offering no sign of life; and separated from "family" at the will of the master, a father and son could meet after many years of being apart and offer no greeting or sign of emotion. Initiative was abandoned, lethargy set in, and many of the slaves could never be urged to stir at all unless they were whipped. Today the sense of impotence experienced in Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (in which, significantly, it is largely impossible to distinguish the characters by race) is only too pervasive in the West Indies. In Mais' *Black Lightning* (1955) the statue into which Jake carves the thoughts of a lifetime reflects chiefly suffering:

"Look, Amos, if you could gather up all the suffering there is in the world . . . of all the folks who have lost their way in some kind of darkness, and of all who have known any kind of lack that human flesh and spirit can know . . . take all that suffering, and add it up . . . you would get something like that—that hopeless, uneven slump of the shoulders, that face." 25

It is out of a similar sense of despair that Alexander Blackman in *An Absence of Ruins* decides it would be wisest to remain uninvolved: "I want to persist in being unattached. Simply looking on. That way I can expect to be everything. I can anticipate everything, yet never experience the shock of realizing anything." (Abs of R,42).

But despair in the West Indies seeks release in avenues in addition to that of non-attachment. Carnival, for example, has been called a "noise which fears everything"; 26 and emigration statistics constantly rise, writers and intellectuals being prominent among those who find it necessary to leave the islands either for a short time or to emigrate permanently. Yet relief is
rarely to be found in "escape": further despair, further imprisonment often follow. Mohun Biswas' exchanging the shackles of the Tulsi for indebtedness to his own relatives is one example among many. In Patterson Dinah escapes the "dungle" only to find herself in an area of equal, if not worse, destitution:

She soon discovered that the area was considered by outsiders just as much a part of the slums of Kingston. And in one sense it was decidedly the worst part to live in. For the people were all trying so desperately hard to deny that it was. Blast them! The stupid, pushing, hypocritical fools. Striving, striving, striving. But getting nowhere, going down if anything, a horse in quicksand. Sensitive like mad too, she realized. Always ready to curse you and tell you of the gutter you were coming from. And they were so good at describing the gutter.

And for the émigré the required "roots" the required "identity" are hardly to be found in a ghetto in London or New York. There is no satisfactory "escape" anywhere for the West Indian—to extend Edward Brathwaite's interpretation of the wanderings of the Negro—it would seem:

Where then is the nigger's home?

In Paris Brixton Kingston Rome?

Here?
Or in Heaven?

What crime his dark dividing skin is hiding?

What guilt now drives him on?

Will exile never end?
"Escape" being ultimately impossible, only by embracing his restlessness can the West Indian conceive it as positive, as the pathway to possible affirmation. The noblest, says Derek Walcott, are those who have accepted the twilight. In Earl Lovelace's *While Gods are Falling*, as Helen Pyne Timothy has noted, this means that the individual is to seek involvement, participation in the problems of his home, his neighborhood, and his society. For Walcott himself it means confrontation with history and searching within:

If I see these [those who accept the "twilight"] as heroes it is because they have kept the sacred urge of actors everywhere: to record the anguish of the race. To do this, they must return through a darkness whose terminus is amnesia. The darkness which yawns before them is terrifying. It is the journey back from man to ape. Every actor should make this journey to articulate his origins, but for those who have been called not men but mimics, the darkness must be total, and the caje should not contain a single man-made mnemonic object.

In Orlando Patterson, meanwhile, confrontation occurs—in Ralph Singh fashion—as a coming to terms with the ruins of a life:

I come from nowhere worth mentioning. I have no past, except the haunting recollection of each passing moment which comes to me always as something having lost... if I appear to be like you [an Englishman in London], please understand that it is out of no vain wish to be identified with you, but out of the simple desire not to draw attention to myself. I cannot say whether I am civilized or savage, standing as I do outside of race, outside of culture, outside of history, outside of any value that could make your question meaningful. I am busy going nowhere, but I must keep up the appearance of going in order to forget that I am not. So if you'll excuse me, I will be on my way. (Abs of R, 160)

For Patterson, as for Naipaul and other Absurdists, the condition of Absurdity must be sustained if affirmation is to be achieved; truth must be confronted for there to be Sisyphean "joy."

But as with Naipaul's Mohun Biswas and Richard Stone, the West Indian need not always choose preservation of the Absurd condition as the final affirm-
ative step. In the midst of the worst thralldom man is often still capable of revolt. In The Castle of my Skin, for example, the early semblance of permanence, the early feelings that nothing would change (Castle, 193) suddenly give way to the riots in which the landlord Creighton almost loses his life, and resulting from which he is forced to sell the property which has been in the family for generations. Caribbean history itself has not been without a revolutionary fervour (though admittedly this occurred less in the British West Indies than elsewhere), having fostered such men as Cudjoë and Cuffy and Toussaint L’Ouverture. Already in the "middle passage" the slaves had given trouble, being a constant threat to the lives of the sailors; and a variety of avenues for rebellion arose on the plantations: refusal to work, general inefficiency and laziness or evasion; satire; running away; suicide; and individual or collective violence. It was under Toussaint L’Ouverture, however, that the slaves achieved their pre-eminent revolutionary victory. During a period of twelve years the slaves of San Domingo defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 600,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size, all of which resulted in the creation of the Negro state of Haiti.

Resistance to oppression can generally flow along two channels: passive or active. Toussaint L’Ouverture was of the opinion that violence would best be met with reciprocal violence, an attitude which Franz Fanon presently shares. Recognizing the indignity of the colonial mimicry of European values and traditions, Fanon believes that liberation can only be achieved through force: "at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect."
For others, however, notably for the Jamaican-based Rastafarian cult, resistance has been largely passive: a neglecting of the body, a refusal to work or to vote; and a consoling of one's troubles with ganja. Yet even here episodes of violence break out, Marcus Garvey himself having suggested that one must make known one's needs by whatever avenue possible:

Power is the only argument that satisfies man. Except the individual, the race or the nation has POWER that is exclusive, it means that that individual race or nation will be bound by the will of the other who possesses this great qualification... hence it is advisable for the Negro to get power of every kind. Power in education, science, industry, politics and higher government. That kind of power that will stand out signally, so that other races and nations can see and if they will not see, feel.

Garvey's advice to the Negro to obtain "power of any kind" proved to influence more than the Rastafarians: in the last decade the "Black Power movement has also adopted his vision.

Aside from puissance to be gained in education, science, industry and so on, the West Indian has discovered—as, of course, do Naipaul's characters—that the irreducibility of his world might also be challenged in the realm of creativity. Even when lack of education among the slaves impeded the fruition of serious art, refuge was still to be found in the imaginative: the negroes on the slave ships and plantations often wove into song the loss of their country and friends and the harsh treatment meted out to them by their cruel slave masters; and stories were told of "Anancy," the mischievous spider-man, a bald-headed hero derived from the Ananse of the Akan peoples of West Africa. But while the Anancy stories continue to be told today, the "protest" songs having helped to create the calypso, in the twentieth century the West Indian writer and intellectual has also begun to take a more self-conscious attitude toward art as a means by which to confront the irrational:
The blighted puppetry of the novel and the theatre, which invests in the absurdity of sacrifice, becomes—in spite of itself at times, in spite of the reactionary echoes of the past—the protest of feeling against that unfeeling acceptance of destiny which is promulgated in the name of service or tradition. It is an unconscious protest against tradition when a tradition hardens into the very premature convulsion all tradition should instinctively seek to overthrow in the name of an act of fulfillment, however obscure.

As B. Wordsworth and Ralph Singh both turn to art forms in an attempt to understand the irreducible and to add pattern and order where none exist, so too the sudden mushrooming of the number of writers within the Caribbean since education has become more universally accessible—and the treatment within their works of the various sociological problems of the region—attests to the therapeutic solace of art. Within these writings themselves the keeping of "memoirs" becomes almost a commonplace. Derek Walcott, meanwhile, suggests a further creative means through which lucidity might be maintained: the forging of a new language which would go beyond mimicry, the creation of a dialect which would have the "force of revelation as it invented names for things."

But identity and pride of place can be most easily found in the West Indies in the natural world. As Selma suggests in "A Flag on the Island," an appreciation of tropical beauty can actually negate the need for escape. (Flag, 234). For Frank Collymore, meanwhile, healing magnificence is to be found in the sea:

Life came from the sea, and once a goddess arose
Fullgrown from the saltdeep; love
Flows from the sea, a flood; and the food
Of islanders is reaped from the sea's harvest,
And not only life and sustenance; visions, too,
Are born of the sea; the patterning of her rhythm
Finds echoes within the musing mind.
I must always be remembering the sea.
Even within the squalor of Roger Mais nature possesses "beauty and pattern." Tropical trees continue to bear fruit in the most desolate of yards, the sun and moon themselves creating a cosmic beauty: "the sun had rolled up high and hot in the cloudless sky that was the colour of new corrugated iron roofing; the light seemed to split up into a thousand flashy fragments as it flowed over the oily leaves of the lime tree; past that, and the shadow of the shacks, it lay like a starched white sheet across the rectangular yard." But Wilson Harris has the greatest confidence of all in the affirmative succour to be found in the natural world. Guyana possesses the additional challenge and promise of an unexplored interior; therefore, as Gerald Moore observes, where the island writer so often presents a movement beyond the seas, the Guyanese writer from the time of Mittelholzer has been able to turn to the "great, brooding land before him." Harris thus indicates that the only hope for survival lies in more deeply scientific knowledge of nature and its processes and in the renewal of man's creative power:

He [Fenwick] liked to think of all the rivers of Guiana as the curious rungs in a ladder on which one sets one's musing foot again and again, to climb into both the past and the future of the continent of mystery ... it was one of those inward flowering truths that kept him spiritually alive, making him able, as it were, to create an image out of hardship. He had known men who pretended they were attacking an enormous worth-while devil as they chopped and cut their lines through the thickest marabunta jungle. It nerved them to go on, it steel'd them to stand on their feet and to burn and stay alive.

For some of the West Indian writers—but differing this time from Naipaul—among the facets of "nature and its processes" which helps assuage the blows dealt by history is the facet of "nature" in man. Jean Paul Sartre comments of Negro poets in the French Caribbean that the "profound unity of
natural and sexual symbols is surely the major originality of the poetry of the Negro, especially at an epoch when . . . the images of white poets tend toward a mineralization of the human." Derek Walcott, too, reflects that "belly-centeredness," however regrettable at times, has nevertheless formed a highly pervasive "alternative tradition": it is the centre of the art of the calypso, the source of vitality of folk singers such as Louise Bennett, and the "blood-beat" of the rhythms and dances. All of this has provided an identity of sorts for the inhabitants of the West Indies—though it includes predominately the Negro and creole peoples. Sex in the West Indies, then, is not always the "hideous" "violation" that it becomes for Naipaul (and for Naipaul's brother Shiva), even among the "whites" and East Indians. The writings of Edgar Mittelholzer, Samuel Selvon, Andrew Salkey and John Hearne all portray, to one extent or another, a sexual prodigality that would have fulfilled the wildest fantasies of even the early pirating sailors:

She was pressed against him, and the perfume of her began to permeate his senses. He found himself responding, but he only held her arms tight; he would not kiss her. They were in a quiet spot, and could hear ants ticking amidst the leaves of a croton clump near some manocole palms. In the near-distance, around them, goatsuckers uttered their yoo-yoo cry. The dusk had grown very deep, and the fire-flies now glowed bright, swift arcs that oft-times moved right before their faces.

"She thinks me flighty, does she? A mad woman. But you like mad women, Hubertus, don't you? You think you like respectable people, but you only fool yourself, my love. It's people like me you really like. Bad, bold women who will not mind shedding their clothes on damp grass."48

Sex can be Janus-faced, however, even for Edgar Mittelholzer. For all the variety and abundance of willing women, Acadian romps, like the one above,
can produce deep feelings of guilt, metaphysical questioning. And other
writers often find themselves looking outside the West Indies for the
sweetest sexual experiences: to Africa, for V.S. Reid (The Leopard); and to
London for Samuel Selvon (The Housing Lark) and Andrew Salkey (The Adventures
of Catullus Kelly).

But in the end in a society in which pleasure is well-tempered with
pain, in which neither sexual intrigue nor rebellion nor art can offer
permanent relief, that relief, as Naipaul has shown, might yet be found in
erony. Andrew Salkey too, makes use of Sisyphean scorn. In The Adventures
of Catullus Kelly the man at the "White Defense League" finds he is no
match for Catullus, who wields the weapon of irony in order to maintain
his dignity:

'Anglo-Saxon skulls.' Catullus tasted the phrase.
Then he looked at the title at the top of the spine
of the dust-jacket and said, 'The shape of Anglo-Saxon
skulls to come. Will they shrink as a result of the in­
vasions [of coloured immigrants into Britain] or will they
become larger or will they ossify and become unprogressive?

The man leered disgustedly and gripped The Shape of
Skulls to Come in his right hand and brought it close to
his chin. 'Now, you listen to me,' he began earnestly.

'Personally I have no preference,' Catullus leapt
in fearlessly, his conversational politeness intact,
'but which would you rather: smaller Anglo-Saxon skulls
or bigger and better ones?'

The taboo-destroying raillery of the calypsos has much the same effect:
tourists, colonial administrators, the "yankee dollah," political issues—
all of these can be fearlessly attacked:

I must be very frank and say
I was very glad when Sir Hollis went away
He cared only for his own enjoyment
And did nothing to help us find employment.
While for many of the West Indian writers laughter occurs in the form of situation comedy or sexual burlesque (one thinks of much of Selvon and Ismith Khan), in others, as in Naipaul, the smiles are philosophical. Patterson, too, provides his characters (or at least some of them) with the gift of ironic self-assessment:

No longer can I play about with meaning, for it is clear that I can never take such probing seriously. It is not that like the person about to commit suicide meaning has lost all relevance for me. This may be so, but to the person who commits suicide this irrelevance is a deathly serious business. I, on the other hand, approach the irrelevance of meaning from the very opposite pole; from the shadows of the woodpile, so to speak, with the comic clamour of excited fowls and the indignant rage of fascists in the background. It is not just meaning in its irrelevance which isn't taken seriously, but the approach itself, the approach of the thief who is never quite taken seriously, whether caught or not. (Abs of R, 155)

Irony for the West Indian is both a refuge (one agrees this much with George Lamming) and much more than a refuge: it is a means, accessible to all, by which to simultaneously protest and preserve.

In general, then, and although our examination must remain at best a cursory one, Naipaul's treatment of the condition of Absurdity—confrontation of irreducibility with the longing for clarity—would appear to speak for much more than an East Indian-Caribbean Zeitgeist. Yet at the same time there do exist those in the Caribbean who place greater natural weight upon the affirmative. As William Walsh records, some of the West Indians support the belief that if they have created nothing else, they have nevertheless created a people, "second Adams" who are the "inheritors and possessors" of the Caribbean world, people who might yet make the region a worthy place in which to live. Guyana, once again, especially lends itself to this
theme: for while meaninglessness and irreducibility—themes central to Naipaul and other island writers—have largely been the offspring of feelings of restriction and nonentity, Guyana's empty interior, along with her comparatively large number of aboriginal peoples, suggests future promise and historical place, both of which are repeatedly attested to by Wilson Harris. In both Heartland (1964) and The Secret Ladder (1963) a confrontation occurs with an ancestral figure—Petra, an Amerindian, in the former, and Poseidon, an ancient African in the latter, both of whom assist the protagonists to experience self-discovery and eternal endurance: 53

"Maybe that is why Poseidon is a god, after all." He was instantly glad he had not spoken this aloud. In his mind, however, he continued to cry—"He teaches us the terrifying depth of our human allegiance, our guilt in the face of humanity, our subservience to the human condition. 54

More than any other West Indian writer, Harris sees man as belonging to a great chain of being; in his richly sensuous awareness of the natural world, and in his vision of a noble "ancestry" still inhabiting that world, strong ties are formed not only between human beings but between man and environment—and between life and death, death being a "mere passage from one mode of being into another": 55

Fenwick was dreaming a very strange dream: it seemed that an inquisition of dead gods and heroes had ended, an inquiry into the dramatic role of conscience in time and being, the dangers of mortal ascent and immortal descent. The one chosen from amongst them to descend was crying something Fenwick was unable to fathom but the echoes of annunciation grew on every hand and became resonant with life . . . In our end . . . our end . . . our end is our beginning . . . beginning . . . beginning. Fenwick awoke. It was the dawn of the seventh day. 56
Wilson Harris stands rather alone in his vision of possibility, however, and one notes that much of his presentation of fulfillment takes place in the interior of the country. Away from the dissatisfaction and despair of the Guyanese coastal area it is easier to conceive of unity and hope, easier to forget the atrocities perpetrated by colonial history.

For the island writers there can be no such promise of history and hinterland. Examination of the past involves Orphean anguish or, at best, a crisis of confusion:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how chose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  

Naipaul's own attempt to trace a Trinidadian history, we will remember, led to further feelings of outrage, his endeavour to re-locate his East Indian ancestry making more permanent his sense of rootlessness:

India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into a land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate.  
In a year I had not learned acceptance. I had learned my separateness from India, and was content, to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors. (Area, 252)

India, like the Caribbean, possessed a fundamental disharmony. If there had been anything in India to which Naipaul felt akin it was the attitude of withdrawal. But even here dwelt an important distinction: for while the East Indian appeared incapable of rebellion (Area, 208-209), withdrawal in Naipaul, though occasionally an initial response, is rarely a final one. Even amid the hopelessness of In a Free State the book closes with
affirmative anger.

Bewilderment as to roots and loyalties, absence of settled values, societal ills—these are the heritage of the West Indian in general. There can be little escaping "that denseness and that strangeness of the world" which is the Absurd (Sis,11) unless one perceives the possibilities latent in an uncharted interior, or unless one has been born into a privileged minority; and even then the "stage set" can collapse, Jean Rhys, of European-West Indian stock, for example, portraying a disorientation as severe as any. The frustrations of the predominantly East Indian community which Naipaul depicts thus remain very much characteristic of the society as a whole.

But the Absurd Confrontation of Mohun Biswas, Ralph Singh, Ganesh Ramsumair and the others reveals more than the anxieties and impotence of the West Indian, of course. Even in the novels with a West Indian setting Naipaul is not simply a "regional" novelist, as critics as skilled as Hena Maes-Jelinek58 or as well-intentioned as Ivan Van Sertima59 have implied. In casting his Absurd net deep Naipaul has also cast it wide. The discovery of isolation, the perception of the hostility of the world, the recognition of a mechanical, meaningless life—these are burdens shared by twentieth-century man everywhere. To create a coherent environment from an irreducible world, to find meaning in the foreign, to confront futility with continuance, these are tasks alike of Biswas, of Stone, of "Bobby," of Patterson's Alexander Blackman, of Mais' Brother Man, of Malcolm Lowry's Hugh Firmin, of Sartre's Roquentin, of Camus' Meursault. Even in Naipaul's most carefully constricted of "East Indian" writings something always suggests the cosmic; even in the bizarre antics of "My Aunt Gold Teeth," for example,
familiarity is to be found in Gold Teeth's frenzy to thwart death. But while Naipaul's writings reflect much that is universal, his presentation of disorder remains particularly akin to Camus and to those other writers in Absurdist "tradition" who challenge their despair. Naipaul advocates no easy optimism; neither does he attempt to solve or explain. Lucidity is embraced, hope and nihilism rejected. Though his vision grows increasingly bleak, indication remains in the end, in the author's own courageous outburst in In a Free State, that where negation appears to triumph it would be better replaced by action.

Naipaul's vision thus remains both an honest and an important one. His world is neither fatuously amusing nor irreparably tormented. If in the end his philosophical stance leans toward "ironic detachment" this results only at the expense of continued confrontation; and if he sees less of the auspiciousness of, for example, Wilson Harris, it is because promise and fulfillment have been less a part of his experience. Smiles do appear on the countenances of most of his characters, but they are smiles of Sisyphean wisdom. And his vision is especially important since, as for any artist worthy of the name, while describing the universal he has also explored something new. In the anguish of Mohun Biswas, in the disorientation of the failed politician Ralph Singh, in the suffering of the dislocated Santosh—to mention only a few—Naipaul has sensitively and brilliantly illuminated the peculiar restless rootlessness of those who have been flung out of history into worlds which remain alien.
FOOTNOTES


5 The Sociology of Slavery, pp. 9-10.

6 Capitalism and Slavery, pp. 42-43.


8 Ibid., p. 38.


10 Cited in The Middle Passage, p. 57.


12 Ibid., p. 362.


16 Ibid.

17 "Without a Place: V.S. Naipaul in Conversation with Ian Hamilton," p. 697.


24 The Black Jacobins, p. 15.


27 The Children of Sisyphus, p. 93.


29 Dream on Monkey Mountain, p. 5.


31 Dream on Monkey Mountain, p. 5.

32 Dates unknown. Best known of the maroon leaders of the Jamaican uprising. With his brothers Accompong and Johnny, and sub-chiefs Quao and Guffy, Gudjoe fought the first Maroon war. By the treaty of 1783 he had won recognition of Maroon freedom and independence.

33 See footnote above.

34 The Sociology of Slavery, p. 260.

35 The Black Jacobins, p. ix.


40 Dream on Monkey Mountain, p. 17.


43 The Chosen Tongue, p. 62.


47 L.Edward Brathwaite, "Jazz and the West Indian Novel II," *Bim* 12, 45 (July-December, 1967), 40.


50 Calypso by "Atilla the Hun" cited in *The Islands in Between*, p. 13.

51 *The Pleasures of Exile*, p. 225.

52 The Chosen Tongue, p. 20.


54 The Secret Ladder, p. 51.


56 The Secret Ladder, p. 51.


59 In *Caribbean Writers; Critical Essays* (London: New Beacon Books, 1968), p. 40. Van Sertima asserts of *A House for Mr. Biswas*: "A documentary it remains... entertaining and instructive but, in spite of its challenging breadth of life, unable to strike the deeper resonances that could lift it from its regional context, throwing up no figure or pattern of events out of the superficial plethora of detail that can grow and expand into universal myth."
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