

Authority and Misquotation in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

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On a “ruined monument near the dock gates” (62) of the town in *A Bend in the River*, the operators of the steamer have carved a Latin inscription which serves as the municipal motto. The narrator Salim leaves the words untranslated—“Misericorie probat populos et foedera jungi” (62).

Later, Salim learns from the Belgian missionary, Huismans, the formula's provenance in Virgil. The source in the *Aeneid* addresses Jupiter's attitude to the Trojan refugees in Carthage (Bk. IV., l.112). Jupiter wishes the Trojans to continue to Italy where, in Virgil's invention of a heroic past for Octavian's new empire, the descendants of Aeneas will found the city of Rome. In the Virgilian original—“si Iuppiter unam/ esse velit Tyriis urbem Troiaque profectis/ *miscerive* probet populos, aut foedera jungi”—Venus warns that Jupiter may not approve of the “mingling of peoples and their bonds of union” (emphasis added).¹ For if

¹ Olli—sensit enim simulata mente locutam,
quo regnum Italiae Libycas averteret oras—
sic contra est ingressa Venus: ‘Quis talia demens
abnuat, aut tecum malit contendere bello,
si modo, quod memoras, factum fortuna sequatur.
Sed fatis incerta feror, si Iuppiter unam
esse velit Tyriis urbem Troiaque profectis,
miscerive probet populos, aut foedera iungi.’
(*Aeneid*, Bk.4, ll. 105-112)

Then Venus, who her hidden fraud descried,
Which would the scepter of the world misguide
To Libyan shores, thus artfully replied:
“Who, but a fool, would wars with Juno choose,
And such alliance and such gifts refuse,
If Fortune with our joint desires comply?
The doubt is all from Jove and destiny;
Lest he forbid, with absolute command,
To mix the people in one common land-
Or will the Trojan and the Tyrian line
In lasting leagues and sure succession join?
But you, the partner of his bed and throne,
May move his mind; my wishes are your own.”
(*Aeneid*, Bk. 4, trans. John Dryden)

Trojans mix with Carthaginians they will never arrive in Italy, derailing the imperial destiny ultimately expressed in Virgil's patron Octavian.

In Naipaul's colony, Virgil's revised formula celebrates the linking of the town to the capital by steamship. Classical prestige has been misappropriated, Salim contends, by the misquotation which, by amending "or" ("ve") to "and" ("que") and removing the first part of the sentence, overturns the prohibition: "God approves of the mingling of peoples, and their bonds of union." Salim's reaction to such colonial over-reaching, and perhaps to the suggestion of miscegenation, sounds a note out of Naipaul's contemporaneous travel writing. "I was staggered," Salim exclaims. "Twisting two-thousand-year-old words to celebrate sixty years of the steamer service from the capital! Rome was Rome. What was this place?" (63).

Naipaul's ventriloquism is disingenuous. Virgil's "two-thousand-year-old words" have been carefully insinuated into the post-colonial context of *A Bend in the River*. The "movement" or "mingling of peoples" is a stock phrase in Naipaul's prose, used in place of "imperialism" to denote modern and early modern empire.

Virgil's language naturalizes empire by decentralizing its territorial expansion. Instead of an imperial state there are merely "peoples" who "move" or "mingle" in "bonds of union" which may be sexual as well as political. Virgil shows one such relationship in the couple of Dido and Aeneas who represent, in miniature, the aborted union between Troy and Carthage.

The argument of Virgil's poem about the "mingling of peoples" varies considerably from Naipaul's novel. The phrase is accurate in the *Aeneid* because Aeneas and his followers are refugees amongst the Carthaginians. Yet there is no fear of contamination or pollution through "mingling" in the *Aeneid* as in *A Bend in the River*. Indeed Virgil's *romanitas* expressed confidence in Rome's ability to govern and transform foreign societies. The *Aeneid* affirms Roman political ideals in a pre-imperial setting whereas *A Bend in the River* is psychological in its concerns and post-imperial in its setting.

Naipaul's interest in Virgil dates to his schooldays although only in *A Bend in the River* does he select Virgil as a fellow theorist of empire. However, the Virgilian formula was not simply a curiosity of his schoolboy learning. It would have been visible to him, in the updated version, every time the young Naipaul saw the joint flag of Trinidad and Tobago which incorporated the very words Salim reads on the "ruined monument." This fact, along with the long history of the phrase, is, of course, withheld from the reader of *A Bend in the River*.

In this paper, I argue that Naipaul's literary authority in *A Bend in the River* and elsewhere is established in a contest with the reader, by means of concealed information, cold jokes, satire, and political provocation. The novel parallels the construction of political and literary authority, and returns obsessively to the scene of authority's collapse. I suggest that, in *A*

Bend in the River, Naipaul reads the conditions of his own career into the unstable circumstances of post-colonial government.

Naipaul's use of Virgil, and especially his concealed relationship to Virgil's language, is a key to his concerns in *A Bend in the River*. Salim is contemptuous of the steamer company "twisting two-thousand-year-old words" (63) but, in fact, the modification of the Virgilian instruction from "miscerive" to "miscerique" was first enacted in Naipaul's native West Indies as a British response to the universalism of revolutionary France.

The adjusted formula is credited to Sir Ralph Abercromby, Scottish author of the revival of British power after the disastrous Flanders campaign, who was appointed commander of British forces in the West Indies in 1795. When Abercromby conquered Trinidad from Napoleon's Spanish allies, he provided the island with a badge which was subsequently included in the flag of united Trinidad and Tobago. The top section shows a British trading ship arriving in harbour. At the bottom is printed the revised Virgilian motto which, by force of misquotation, confers classical prestige on what is publicised as benevolent British rule.



Figure 1: Colonial-era badge of Trinidad and Tobago.

In revising Virgil, Abercromby meant to reassure Spanish settlers on the islands of the good faith of their new British rulers. His concern, even more than Virgil's, was political, and his attention would have fallen on the second item of Virgil's pair—"foedera jungi"—that is, a political framework to unite British and Spanish residents. For Abercromby, as for Virgil, there is no explicit fear of "mingling" construed as miscegenation or contamination.

At the time of Trinidad's independence, Abercromby's motto was felt to be inappropriate for a country establishing its own sovereignty and was removed in June 1962, an event that would have been present in Naipaul's mind when he began writing *A Bend in the River* in July of 1977.

Thus a cycle of falsification and misquotation, in the service of projecting authority, is completed with Naipaul's use of Abercromby's imperial gesture to discredit post-colonial pretensions, a cycle begun with Virgil's retrospective construction of a heroic Roman past, and continued in Abercromby's application of Roman prestige to Britain's new Caribbean hegemony. Yet, in the critical literature only Regelind Farn notes, and only in passing, the connection between the "Old Motto" of Trinidad and Naipaul's steamer service; nor has there been discussion of the significance of Virgil's formula in Naipaul's prose.²

I argue that Naipaul adds his own misrepresentation to the series, concealing his source in Abercromby, because the assertion and collapse of authority—whether political or literary, Virgilian or Naipaulian—is his core concern in *A Bend in the River*, his first successful novel after the triumph of *A House for Mr. Biswas* in 1961.

The Virgilian tag is one of a number of the novel's references to the classical past. Naipaul's characters, as well as their author, exploit classical authority. The use of Latin inside *A Bend in the River* simultaneously obscures and empowers. It obscures because it is not available to those without some classical education. Yet Latin empowers for precisely the same reason, advertising a costly investment in non-technical education. The language is also, for Naipaul as for Abercromby, associated with Roman ideals of government and dominion. Its prestige is enjoyed by Zabeth's son Ferdinand, one of the country's up and coming men. Ferdinand proudly wears his school "blazer with the *Semper Aliquid Novi* motto" (47).

The quotation from Pliny the Elder (who was himself quoting a Greek commonplace) is truncated, and would read in full "*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*": "there is always something new from Africa."³ The significance is, to a large degree, in the absent words. To understand the suitability of the school's motto to its situation ("*ex africa*"), one must recall the entire proverb and fill in the first two words for oneself. As we shall, this is a characteristic device of Naipaulian style.

Pliny's observation is taken straight by Ferdinand who identifies himself as this "*novi*," or new man in a new and emerging continent. Yet for Naipaul, who insists on the circularity of African history, the motto is ironic, an irony shared by author and reader (although not by Huismans, a believer in African progress as well as a reader of Virgil, who suffers the fate of Naipaul's true believers by having "his head cut off and spiked" in

² In *Colonial And Postcolonial Rewritings of Heart of Darkness*, Regelind Farn points out that Naipaul uses "the 'Old Motto' of his birthplace Trinidad as the motto of Kisangani" (51). The point has usually been neglected in the critical literature. See, for example, Han Ulrich Seeber's "Salim's Truth about the 'Mingling of Peoples' in Africa: A Comment on Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*." Despite focusing on the Virgilian phrase, Seeber makes no mention of the colonial context in which Naipaul would have first encountered it, that is, on the Trinidadian flag.

³ On the Greek antecedents of Pliny's remark, see Harvey Feinberg and Joseph Solodow, "Out of Africa."

the Naipaulian bush [82]). In the case of the Virgilian quotation, however, the irony is Naipaul's alone and represents, as an insider's joke, a cache of hidden authority.

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul ascribes elements of his own situation—as a post-colonial writer almost without a society and a literature to call his own—to three of the novel's personages. Salim, the narrator, inherits the author's well-known anxieties about racial difference and erotic experience. Indar, the foreign-educated intellectual who is recruited by Western governments for his impartiality, benefits from his claim, like Naipaul's own, of being “a man without a side” (154).

Finally, the court historian, Raymond, rehearses the author's anxieties about writing. Salim's description of Raymond summarizes the conditions of Naipaulian authority, the remarkable capacity of the West Indian writer to assert his control of materials far beyond his apparent competence, and the equally remarkable exposure of each such assertion. As Salim puts it,

His [Raymond's] position in the Domain required him to display authority. But at any moment he might be stripped of this authority, reduced to nothing, with nothing to fall back on. In his place I don't think I would have been able to pretend to have any authority—that would have been the hardest thing for me. (190)

In his mixed strength and vulnerability, Raymond, and even the novel's Mobutu-like Big Man, resembles the author. Given Naipaul's controversial pronouncements on post-colonial societies, questions about his right to make these judgments arise naturally.⁴ Yet similar debates—think of the charged discussions of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* or, in an earlier decade, Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*—have been equally heated without the question of authorial competence emerging with equal urgency.

I argue that the assertion of Naipaulian authority is an effect of the author's literary style and, indeed, that authority is the principal effect to which his style aspires. Authority is exerted forcefully in Naipaul's work, from book to book and sentence to sentence, and to the exact degree to which it is asserted, courts forceful rejection. In *Bend in the River*, as in his travel writings and public pronouncements, Naipaul deliberately polarizes his readership. The serious divisions in the reception of his work are, therefore, not only political and ideological. These disagreements derive directly from the author's strategy of assertion.

⁴ The case against Naipaul, as framed by post-colonial critics, has been most thoroughly articulated by Rob Nixon in his study of the travel writings, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*. The most influential recent investigations of Naipaul's fiction, Sara Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India* and “Naipaul's Arrival” and Fawzia Mustafa's *V.S. Naipaul* modulate and reverse Nixon's arguments. In *Yale Journal of Criticism* Suleri argues that Naipaul does not exempt himself from his own critique. Naipaul's “graphic indictment of the postcolonial world . . . cannot be read literally” (30), for novels like *Bend in the River*, demonstrate and rehearse the postcolonial condition. Naipaul, Suleri argues in *Rhetoric of English India*, is in fact engaged in a “highly sophisticated ironizing of imperial mythmaking” (154-55).

The picture is clearest in *A Bend in the River*, because it is, I argue, the first successful extension of Naipaul's fiction to subject matter beyond the Caribbean.⁵ The negative emotions of fear, contempt, disgust, and self-hatred are redirected from Naipaul's Trinidad to environments distant from the author's childhood. The effect is to create a sharp boundary between Naipaul, as an observer, and the post-colonial situations he represents. Yet this very boundary calls into question the adequacy of Naipaul's understanding of the new cultures and countries which enter his writing.

In her book-length study, Fawzia Mustafa puts the paradox succinctly: "if Naipaul's disconnection from 'belonging' to the 'world' is indeed a sign of his 'objectivity,' then what is to be the basis for the *proprietary* nature of his claim to 'authority' about the greater Third World?" (121). Mustafa argues that Naipaul establishes his authority over his subject matter by privileging the written text and the writer's profession. It is the prestige, style, and portability of a writer which allows Naipaul to move from one country and one culture to the next.

Naipaul, Mustafa shows, constructs a hierarchy of written enterprises in *Biswas*. It ranges from Mohun's attempt at a love letter to Shama, and his months spent as a sign painter, to his years as a journalist. *A Bend in the River* reproduces the motif. Salim records Mahesh's idea to supply name plates to the town (89) as well as the Liberation Army pamphlet composed by guerrillas who have some knowledge of Clausewitz: "The ANCESTORS shriek . . . The cult of the woman of Africa kills all our mothers, and since war is an extension of politics we have decided to face the ENEMY with armed confrontation" (211).

At one point Ferdinand conveys a letter of thanks to his benefactor: "Salim! You took me in that time and treated me as a member of your own family. F." (83). Salim complains that "everything in the letter was deliberately crude—no envelope, the lined paper torn down one side, the very big and careless handwriting, the absence of the direct word of thanks, the 'Salim!' and not 'Dear Salim,' the 'F.' and not 'Ferdinand.'" Despite these defects Salim concludes that "I found [the letter] funny and moving" (83).

Salim does not object to Ferdinand's command of English so much as to his style, manners, and attitude. Although Salim's criticisms of Ferdinand may reveal the measure of his own insecurity, he nonetheless insinuates Naipaul's own criteria of literary style: deliberate elegance where Ferdinand is "deliberately crude," care and precision where Ferdinand is "careless," straightforwardness where Ferdinand refuses to provide "the direct word of thanks."

Such acts of condescension assert the superiority of literary language and of literary qualities of irony, precision, and realism. At the top of

⁵ To make this claim, of course, I must exclude *In a Free State*, published in 1971; the one work of Naipaul's to be awarded the Booker Prize. Here the weight of critical opinion, and the decision of the Booker judges, diverge.

Naipaul's hierarchy of written forms, as Mustafa argues, stands the modern novel. The gesture—which belongs more to the author than to the character of Salim—is an imperial and authoritative one; the world is the writer's empire. In prestige terms, as conceived by colonial education, the classical equivalent of Naipaul's novel is Virgil's Latin poem.

A Bend in the River initiates the assertion of Naipaulian authority in its title. Whether or not Naipaul adapted the name of his book from Anthony Mann's 1952 Western *Bend of the River*, starring Jimmy Stewart and Rock Hudson, the title at once specifies a location and decontextualizes it (“*a bend in the river*”).

While Naipaul fuses aspects of Uganda, Rwanda, and Zaire, the fact that the country is unnamed bolsters his imaginative rights over the terrain, as so many nameless African countries have served other writers. The picture of the circuitous river, on its way to nowhere in particular, differs from Conrad's mighty river in *Heart of Darkness*. Instead of joining the currents of Roman, British, and African history as in Marlowe's famous meditation, the river images the circular and ahistorical time of his anonymous country. It is an emblem of what he diagnoses as a “half-made” society, one which perpetually meanders back to its starting point.

The bend in the river also situates the town at the intersection of Arab and European authority where “the Arabian energy that had pushed [the Arabs] into Africa had died down at its source, and their power was like the light of a star that travels on after the star itself has become dead” (21). Here the decline of authority takes a quite different cast. (Naipaul reuses the image in *Beyond Belief* to criticize subcontinental Islam for “its devastation of India proper, turning the religious-cultural light of the subcontinent...into the light of a dead star” [25].) Because the place marks the limit of Arab expansion, “at *the bend in the river* there had grown up a European, and not an Arab, town” (21; emphasis added).

The change from the indefinite pronoun (“*a bend*”) to the definite is one of the fine transformations typical of Naipaulian style. In place of the despecified location of the title we are positioned at the terminus of a centuries-long contest. Naipaul's slow-motion metaphor of starlight is grand and gracefully phrased, inducting the reader into the Khaldunian scheme of civilizational rise and fall which underpins the narrative.⁶

The opening lines of *A Bend in the River* have been much noticed: “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to

⁶ The precision of Naipaul's style is such that he runs through the variations of his title on several further occasions. Father Huismans, the sympathetic Belgian missionary, offers a more sanguine description of the place, observing that there “would always have been a settlement at *that bend in the river* . . . It was a natural meeting place. The tribes would have changed, power would have shifted, but men would always have returned there to meet and trade” (64; emphasis added). Later Salim reflects on “[t]his piece of earth—how many changes had come to it! Forest at a bend in the river, a meeting place, an Arab settlement, a European outpost, a European suburb, a ruin like the ruin of a dead civilization, the glittering Domain of new Africa, and now this” (260).

become nothing, have no place in it” (3). The reader comes to this free-floating line without preparation and is invited by its form to treat it as a syllogism or deduction. There is no obvious speaker. The language expresses an impatient desire to be done with the illusions and euphemisms of liberal opinion. The declaration of world weariness (“the world is what it is”) is also a statement of identity (of the form “a=a” or “Rome was Rome”) signalling a logical mood. Naipaul usually employs the semi-colon for rhythm, but here the mark conceals the function of logical implication.

If we fill in the implied connectors the statement reads “the world is what it is *therefore* men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.” Yet the second statement by no means follows from the first without some further unstated assumption.⁷ The reader is challenged to accept the presupposition, if provisionally, or to reject the argument altogether.

The polarization of the reader’s response here is deliberate, an instance, at the microscopic level, of the means by which Naipaulian authority is exerted. It is not that the reader is allowed to participate imaginatively in the text but that he, or she, in the process of following the text, is forced to fill in the missing connector (as we saw with the phrase “*semper aliquid novi*”).

Because it is free floating, the opening declaration inaugurates *A Bend in the River* as a piece of writing rather than as the record of an unreliable first-person consciousness. Salim exerts only fitful control over his own narrative. The book is held together less by plot, scene, and character development and more by a flow of observation and generalization alongside Naipaul’s typically extensive use of indirect discourse and verbal repetition. Imitating the cycle of progress and reversion it diagnoses in postcolonial Africa, *A Bend in the River* refuses to move to a point of crisis or recognition.⁸

Naipaul concedes the narrative’s static character through Raymond. Raymond observes that “the most difficult thing in prose narrative is linking one thing with the other. The link might be just a sentence, or even a word. It sums up what has gone before and prepares one for what is to come” (136). This emphasis on “linking one thing with the other” affirms that the novel is not organized by a narrative but is closer to Naipaulian travel writing, which combines historical judgment with a string of character portraits.

Thus lines provided to Salim have the hysterical ring of Naipaul’s travel writing—“too many of the places on the way have closed down or are full of blood” (3)—or the exact sense of remarks Naipaul has offered

⁷ This missing assumption is provided in *Beyond Belief*, where Naipaul argues that “[w]ithout that idea [of honor in a postcolonial state] men who have no voice or representation in the world can become nothing” (322).

⁸ This point has been made by a graduate student at the University of Cape Town, Anna Neal-Shute.

about his own Trinidadian community—“When we had come no one could tell me. We were not that kind of people. We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had seen the previous generation do. We never asked why; we never recorded” (11).

Through Salim, Naipaul studs *A Bend in the River* with provocations, which either intensify the reader’s alienation or claim a kind of melancholy wisdom. Naipaul frequently presents the paradoxical sentiments of the most powerless because these sentiments challenge enlightened orthodoxy.

Such Naipaulian snares are a key aspect of his style.⁹ Salim’s diagnosis of African society’s attitude towards outsiders perhaps captures Naipaul’s attitude to his readers: “You don’t feel malice towards your prey. You set a trap for him. It fails ten times; but it is always the same trap you set” (55).

The psychology of the slave is one principal subject Naipaul studies in *A Bend in the River*. Like *Biswas’s* Tulsis, Salim’s ethnically Indian family has constructed a housing compound to keep out the surrounding society. In the compound, there lives two slave families who resist emancipation. The “last thing they wanted to hear was that they had to go.” While they are officially servants, they

wanted it known—to other Africans, and to poor Arabs and Indians—that they were really slaves. It wasn’t that they were proud of slavery as a condition; what they were fierce about was their special connection with a family of repute. They could be very rough with people they considered smaller fry than the family. (13)

The semi-colon joins the concession—“it wasn’t that they were proud of slavery”—to the contention that the slaves “were fierce about...their special connection with a family of repute.” The concession strengthens the point about slaves taking pride in their masters; the semi-colon signals the making of a judicious distinction (“it wasn’t *x*, it was actually *y*”) which underwrites the second assertion.

The passage, unlike its parallels in a slave narrative like Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is farcical rather than humanizing. The reader is forced to alienate himself from the narrative or, alternatively, to smile at a society of proud slaves who condescend to “poor Arabs and Indians.” The comedy of these lines, like much of *A Bend in the River* and the related travel writing, goes a long way to extinguishing a reader’s enlightened impulses. The reader is enrolled in a Naipaulian condescension toward the slaves and even more toward “smaller fry” who refuse to accept the standing of slave holders “of repute.”

⁹ Perhaps the most important of these snares is the fact that Salim is Muslim. Salim’s self-hatred, and self-exposure, plays a crucial role in Naipaul’s repudiation of alterity. (“I spat on her. She made me spit on her,” Salim tells us about Yvonne, Raymond’s wife [221]). Yet because Naipaul has parcelled out his experiences to figures such as Salim and Raymond, the rejection is not quite as total, and dehumanizing, as the portraits of the Africans.

Salim emphasizes the slaves' surprising suspicions. There is "no one like the slave for spotting the slave," he tells us, "or knowing how to deal with the slave" (104). Ferdinand, Zabeth's son and one of Africa's new men, is, according to Salim, "possessed by all the African terror of strange Africans" (71).¹⁰

The novel repeats this motif of "African terror of strange Africans." Salim's version of slavery posits captives who

the further away they got from the centre and their tribal area . . . the more nervous they became of the strange Africans they saw about them, until at the end, on the coast, they were no trouble at all, and were positively anxious to step into the boats and be taken to safe homes across the sea. (4)

The crossing to "safe homes" delivers the captives from "strange Africans." They are "positively anxious" to complete their reduction into slavery. In this example, of one of his coldest jokes, Naipaul presents the slaves as ridiculous, slavery as benign. It is only on inspection that a reader becomes uncertain whether to laugh or cry at the promise of "safe homes across the sea."

The key difference between the comedy of *Biswas* and that of *A Bend in the River* is, as I have suggested, that Naipaul enforces the negative emotions of fear, disgust, and contempt more rigorously in the later work. The fear of pollution or contamination ("mingling"), which is absent in Virgil, is an emphatic presence in *A Bend in the River*. Disgust, as in *Biswas*, is expressed primarily through meals because it is by eating, that the observer becomes part of his new environment. By resisting the need to eat, on the other hand, he keeps himself apart and strengthens his objectivity.

Thus Salim catalogs what is for sale on the steamer plying the river: "Sometimes there was a smoked snake or a smoked small crocodile, a black hunk barely recognizable for what it had been—but with white or pale pink flesh below the charred crust" (7). The delicate description of the trailing clause ("but with white or pale pink flesh. . .") aestheticizes the "black hunk" of an unfamiliar African reality while affirming the power of Naipaulian observation.

To the young, unnamed Belgian who works alongside Huismans, Naipaul ascribes a disgust which the reader is permitted to feel at second-hand. Huismans's school serves "caterpillars and spinach in tomato sauce. Or what looked like tomato sauce . . . Of course, it was only for the boys, but the sight of it turned my stomach. I couldn't stay in the hall and watch them chew" (60). The tomato sauce is denatured along with the schoolboys. Even in his offhand descriptions of meals, Naipaul makes a point. Yvette makes Salim "some scrambled *South African* eggs" (172; emphasis added). In 1977, to insist the only productive chickens on the continent flourish under white rule, is an astonishing provocation.

¹⁰ Cf. *A Turn in the South*, 82.

Fear is just as important a register as disgust. There is a current of sudden, atavistic violence in the novel which Salim refuses to localize. "More than once," he remembers, "I saw what looked like a drunken pushing and shoving, a brawl with slaps, turn to methodical murder, as though the first wound and the first spurt of blood had made the victim less than a man, and compelled the wounder to take the act of destruction to the end" (56).

The scene is recapitulated during the rebellion when an officer "invited the first blow [against himself] with one of the concrete blocks; and the sight of blood . . . then encouraged a sudden, frenzied act of murder by dozens of small hands" (207). It is significant that violence breaks out when the authority of the officer collapses at the "sight of [his] blood." This is an instant when prestige is punctured and collapses. Moreover the "brawl with slaps" and the "dozens of small hands" indicate a postcolonial violence which is intimate, collective, feminized, and infantilized. At any moment, order can disintegrate into collective murder. The effect on the reader is to emphasize his feeling of physical vulnerability and sense of separation from these "strange Africans."

Naipaul implicitly ties authority to physical safety. When authority is violated, so is bodily integrity. In *Beyond Belief*, his second excursion to the Muslim world, he hears "about people who had been shot by the Shah's police during the demonstrations before the revolution [in 1979]. Even a slight wound could be fatal, because when a man fell his fellow demonstrators ran to him to force their hands in the wound in order to stain them with the warm blood of a martyr" (193).

In Naipaul's descriptions of dismemberment, there is a hint of the death of Orpheus. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is one principal account of Orpheus, but the other is to be found in *Georgics IV* where Virgil paints Orpheus "lost Eurydice/ Lamenting."

Scorned by which tribute the Ciconian dames,
Amid their awful Bacchanalian rites
And midnight revellings, tore him limb from limb,
And strewed his fragments over the wide fields. (*Georgics* Bk. IV, ll.xx)

In *Georgics*, Virgil associates mob violence and dismemberment with the fate of the classical world's representative poet. Virgil's verse is an early point in a tradition of identifying the ungovernable mob as the adversary of the literary artist, and dismemberment as his characteristic end.

Naipaul may have recalled the passage from *Georgics* because it concentrates his own situation as a literary intellectual observing an empire's disintegration. In his own writing, Virgil's text is at once remembered and dismembered, misquoted and truncated, as is Pliny's remark on Ferdinand's school blazer.

It is characteristic that Naipaul treats dismemberment as a brutally physical end, a kind of ultimate unmasking of the body in the harsh conditions of Third World societies. Yet, with only the lightest interpretative pressure, one might see in the passage from *Georgics*

Virgil's own account of the logic of literary history: that it is a writer's fate to be dismembered—to be quoted and misquoted, to be translated and mistranslated, to be revised and corrected and cut short—by his readers.

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