

V.S. Naipaul, *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* (Picador, 2010)

It is many years since we have had a major work of non-fiction from Naipaul. Since *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* was published in 1998, there have been some collections of letters and essays, the desolate novels *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2003), and two rather introspective memoirs, *Reading and Writing* (2000) and *A Writer's People* (2007). I was beginning to think that, in his eighth decade, he had given up travelling with a view to writing the major works which had become the principal channel for his creative energies. But I was wrong: *The Masque of Africa* is a big, idiosyncratic travel book in the tradition which began with *The Middle Passage* (1962) and continued through his career with such books as *Among the Believers* (1981), *A Turn in the South* (1989) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), gradually displacing fiction (or at any rate the conventional novel) as his most significant contribution to letters.

Naipaul's theme in *The Masque of Africa* is African belief. He visits six countries: Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Gabon and South Africa. As his subtitle implies, it is not intended as a comprehensive survey of African religion. Islam features occasionally; Christianity a little more often, sometimes because it is found coexisting in an uneasy relationship with indigenous African beliefs. It is an unapologetically personal view, and, as always with Naipaul, the process of seeking information is part of the story, as well as the way his ideas are challenged by what he discovers:

I had a romantic idea of the earth religions. I felt they took us back to the beginning, a philosophical Big Bang, and I cherished them for that reason. I thought they had a kind of beauty. But the past here still lived. ... The fear was real, not affected, and I felt it was this, rather than ideas of beauty and history and culture (as some people said), that was keeping the past and all the old gods close. (95)

That was Nigeria: earlier, in Uganda, he had discovered that 'to live in a world ruled by witchcraft, a world liable to irrational dissolution in its details, is to be on edge, to be on a constant lookout' (56). He realises that his view can never be complete: visiting the royal town of Kumasi in Ghana, he found himself reminded of

a British colonial settlement at the time of the conquest. ... The treasures of the museum were small-scale, the little pieces of furniture unpolished. Ashanti was not a literate kingdom, in spite of its gold and glory. To see it as more it was necessary to be Ashanti oneself and (with the absence of spectacular remains) to consult the stirrings of one's heart. (171)

In Gabon, he was intrigued by the recurrence of the idea 'that the forest, spiritual healer though it might be, good for the soul, was always felt in folk imagination to be at the same time a place of illness, a place in constant need of medical or magical attention' (246).

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Several times his visits to priests and other religious leaders go wrong for one reason or another. In Ghana he has misgivings about visiting a Gaa high priest, but arrangements had been made and he couldn't withdraw. 'I was irritated with myself for being where I was. ... Beyond a certain stage there was no place for simple inquirers; local magicians didn't understand. And it wasn't fair to them. Their faith mattered to them. They didn't like to think it might be mocked' (184-5). In Nigeria he was taken to visit a *babalawo* or soothsayer. He asked the man whether his daughter would get married. The answer was, 'The girl is not going to get married. You have many enemies. To break their spells we will have to do many rituals. They will cost money, but the girl will get married' (122). Naipaul then appalls the soothsayer by announcing that he is pleased, he doesn't want the daughter to marry. He is in a mischievous mood, likening the small cell to 'ship's cabin in *Room Service* with the Marx Brothers, endlessly receiving new people' (124), and depriving his companion of the chance of a 'serious personal reading ... because of my frivolity' (125).

But his frivolity vanishes when faced with the suffering of animals, which he constantly encounters. In Ivory Coast, he observes:

The land is full of cruelty which is hard for the visitor to bear. From the desert countries to the north long-horned cattle are sent for slaughter here in big ramshackle trucks, cargoes of misery, that bump along the patched and at times defective autoroute to Abidjan, to the extensive abattoir area near the docks. And there in trampled and vile black earth these noble creatures, still with dignity, await their destiny in the smell of death, with sometimes a calf, all alone, without a mother, finding comfort of a sort in sleep, a little brown circle on the dirty ground, together with the beautiful goats and sheep assembled for killing. The ground round the abattoir goes on and on. When sights like this meet the eyes of simple people every day there can be no idea of humanity, no idea of grandeur. (212-3)

This distress at the suffering of cattle could be dismissed as Hindu fastidiousness, but again and again he notices the suffering of animals, especially cats and kittens. 'Cats here are considered familiars of spirits, usually bad ones, and have a rough time' (14). He witnesses kittens being kicked and neglected, and hears casual discussions of the best way to kill a cat for cooking: 'You put them in a sack of some sort, and then you dropped the sack in a pot of boiling water. The thought of this everyday kitchen cruelty made everything else in the Ivory Coast seem unimportant' (214). Visiting a former president of Ghana, he sees, 'remarkably, ... a grey and white kitten, self-possessed, of great beauty. It was the first happy kitten I had seen in Ghana. Mrs Rawlings said it was a pet; they also had many dogs. I began to be prejudiced in favour of the house' (190). This is a side to Naipaul which hasn't been so evident before. (The first inkling I had that he was animal-lover was when he appeared in a photograph with his cat Augustus for the *Literary Review* in 2006.¹) He makes no comment, but is clearly unimpressed when a self-styled South African Zulu traditionalist 'was fierce about the need to sacrifice cows and goats in the traditional way; the animal rights people had to stay away' (311).

¹ Farrukh Dhondy talks to V.S. Naipaul. *Literary Review* April 2006, 20-25.

Naipaul is sure to be accused of arrogance in *The Masque of Africa*. Nothing new about that, but there's always something to undercut his superiority. In Ghana he sees, by the side of the road, 'local men holding up smoked animals, offering them for sale, the surrounding bush combed and combed for these survivors ... that just weren't fast enough to get away from these idle fellows' (173-4). But then, in a *muti* market, for 'witchdoctors' goods', in Johannesburg, he comes upon

the realm of awfulness: animal body parts laid out neatly on a kind of platform. ... I would have liked to get a price for the horse head, but I was nervous of asking. I had asked many questions already and had exhausted my credit with the hawker. He was beginning to look cantankerous. He was proud of his stock and the way he laid it out. Every day he would have had idlers like me, visitors, tourists, coming and asking about the purpose of this and that. (282-3)

There is also an undercurrent of self-satire in his horror of the 'fees' charged for audiences with local dignitaries of various kinds, and for the privilege of being present at traditional ceremonies. He often comes unprovided with cash and has to rely on his companions to pay, even well into the journey when he should know better. His age and state of health is referred to only once, and that obliquely, when he is unable to continue walking in the bush: 'After a while my nervy, frail legs began to give out' (262).

Finally he is faced with South Africa, where he finds, 'with its many groups, its many passions, its abiding tensions, the visitor, seeking a necessary point of rest, moves from group to group, saying, rather like a Zen student: "Not this, not this"' (320). He turns to a writer, Rian Malan, for enlightenment. He describes the resolution of Malan's 'marvellous book', *My Traitor's Heart*, which (like J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which he doesn't mention) ends with a white woman staying alone on her farm. She says, 'If you're really going to live in Africa, you have to be able to look at it and say, "This is the way of love, down this road. ... I think you will know what I mean if I tell you love is worth nothing until it has been tested by its own defeat"' (325). Naipaul closes his book by giving his own interpretation of this 'parable': 'after apartheid a resolution is not really possible until the people who wish to impose themselves on Africa violate some essential part of their being' (325).

Reading *The Masque of Africa* one of course is learning as much about Naipaul as about Africa. His distress at Africa's culture of animal sacrifice and enthusiastic meat-eating are grounded as much in his Hindu vegetarianism as in a western liberal idea of animal rights. His own discomfort and inconvenience, irritation and stinginess, are all part of the story, as are his prejudices. But without these, he wouldn't achieve the compassion and empathy which set his writings apart from the common run of travel writing.

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