

‘What trouble I have with Jane Austen!’ V.S. Naipaul’s blind spot.

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Jane Austen and V.S. Naipaul: two novelists of the first order, two humourists whose sharp-eyed perceptions of their societies have a way of mercilessly exposing human frailties. We cannot know what Jane Austen would have thought of Naipaul and his work. To her, any Indian would have been impossibly exotic, let alone an educated one who wrote novels. In her time, the historic forces which shaped Naipaul’s life were still to develop: the Caribbean islands, including Trinidad, where Naipaul, grandson of an indentured labourer, was born in 1932, were still worked by slave labour during Austen’s lifetime, as she was well aware. The development of Indian indentured labour to replace slavery after the abolition was not yet thought of.

His world was unimaginable to her, and it seems that, as a child at least, the converse was also true. In a 1964 essay, Naipaul wrote about his childhood reactions to English literature:

Trinidad was small, remote and unimportant, and we knew we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us. Books came from afar; they could offer only fantasy.

To open a book was to make an instant adjustment. ... The process of adaptation was automatic and continuous. Dickens's rain and drizzle I turned into tropical downpours; the snow and fog I accepted as conventions of books. ... I never read to find out about foreign countries. Everything in books was foreign; everything had to be subjected to adaptation; and everything in, say, an English novel which worked and was of value to me at once ceased to be specifically English. Mr Murdstone worked; Mr Pickwick and his club didn't. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* worked; *Pride and Prejudice* didn't.<sup>1</sup>

This was not, he makes clear, a political view, the standard post-colonial rejection of Wordsworth's daffodils and other such things: 'The superficial prompting of this argument, which would have confined all literatures to the countries of their origin, was political; but it was really an expression of dissatisfaction at the emptiness of our own formless, unmade society.'<sup>2</sup> It is a child's reaction he is describing, not an intellectual position.

However, the inability to connect with Jane Austen seems to have stayed with him, as an interview published in the *Literary Review* in 2006 reveals:

English writing is very much of England, for the people of England, and is not meant to travel too far. ... What trouble I have with Jane Austen! Jane Austen

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<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipaul, Jasmine, *Literary Occasions: Essays*, introduced and edited by Pankaj Mishra (New York: Knopf, 2003): 46-7.

<sup>2</sup> Naipaul, Jasmine 45.

is for those people who wish to be educated in English manners. If that isn't part of your mission, you don't know what to do with this material.<sup>3</sup>

It cannot be denied that Jane Austen wrote principally, even exclusively perhaps, for the people of England; after all, what other audience could she envisage? However, her enduring world-wide success surely attests to the fact that an education in English manners is only a small part of what she has to offer, and that her success is based on more than the success of England on the world stage during the nineteenth century, as Naipaul claims: 'If the country had failed in the nineteenth century, no one would have been reading Jane Austen. The books would have been about failure. They would have demonstrated the reasons for failure.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is partly true: without England's power, the culture of which she was part would have gained less influence. However, that doesn't explain why Austen, in particular, is read and loved while other equally English authors of the time, Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth for example, are largely forgotten.

Naipaul is very careful to distinguish his criticism of Austen from post-colonial academic attacks on her by those he biting terms the 'Wise Ones':

I don't want to be confused, in what I am saying about Jane Austen, with people from the Wise places [that is, universities], the Very Wise People who say that she represents a great hypocrisy, writing in this way about affairs of the heart and young people while there are slaves toiling in the plantations of the Caribbean.

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<sup>3</sup> Farrukh Dhondy, Farrukh Dhondy talks to V.S. Naipaul, *Literary Review* April 2006, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Dhondy 22.

... It's very foolish, because if they knew a bit more, beyond their little disciplines, they would know that the slave trade, the British slave trade, was abolished in 1807 and this wish to talk about sensibility, etc., was part of the climate that made this abolition of the trade possible and later, very quickly, in 1834, made the abolition of slavery itself possible. ... England was the first country to abolish slavery. We must bear that in mind. We don't have to read Jane Austen's novels, but we must recognise that those manners and that sensibility which she writes about were part of the enlightenment that brought about the end of slavery.<sup>5</sup>

So he excludes her from blame, but still he cannot appreciate her novels. He says he tried *Pride and Prejudice* as a child and it 'didn't work', and he read *Emma* at the age of 17 and found it boring.<sup>6</sup> Naipaul is quite capable of making judgements based on fairly limited experience, and the only other book of hers he has, to my knowledge, ever mentioned specifically is *Northanger Abbey*, which he found himself reading recently. His reaction is astounding:

I thought halfway through the book, Here am I, a grown man reading about this terrible vapid woman and her so-called love life – she calls it 'love', having seen this fellow once. I said to myself, What am I doing with this material? This is for somebody else, really.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dhondy 22.

<sup>6</sup> V.S. Naipaul, To Kamla Naipaul, 21 September 1949, *Letters Between a Father and Son* with introduction and notes by Gillon Aitken, (London: Little, Brown, 1999), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Farrukh Dhondy 21.

The most extraordinary thing about this is that he seems to have entirely missed Austen's satire. It is as if one were to reject Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* by saying that Ganesh was ignorant and not an intellectual or a writer at all. It is simply beside the point.

Then there is the fact that Catherine, an innocent seventeen-year-old, is described as a 'terrible vapid woman.' Catherine is inexperienced and ignorant, but it seems rather harsh to call someone so young 'vapid.' Mrs Allen is vapid, and Isabella, at twenty-one, could be tarred with a similar brush. Catherine, on the other hand, is learning, haltingly, not to be vapid, and to make her own judgements of right and wrong, based on what Fay Weldon calls 'the *real* not the religious morality, of the way people talk to each other, behave to each other, love or don't love each other, and so on,' which, as Weldon points out, Austen had formulated herself, 'out of no authority other than that invested in her by the worldly judgments of the Austen family, and the power of her own thought, her own moral courage and, simply, her opinion.'<sup>8</sup> This goes far beyond English manners. What is wrong with the way Catherine is treated by the Thorpes, and by General Tilney, has nothing to do with etiquette and everything to do with carelessness, selfishness and unkindness.

And love: 'she calls it "love", having seen this fellow once,' Naipaul says.

Actually, she doesn't. Catherine is better brought up than that, and wiser. She herself says to Isabella, 'But you should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr

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<sup>8</sup> Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984): 36-7.

Tilney, for perhaps I may never see him again.’<sup>9</sup> Love is first mentioned by the narrator, and highly ironised, on page 30, with a reference to Samuel Richardson’s claim that ‘no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman’s love is declared.’<sup>10</sup> The arch voice of the narrator again talks of ‘the pangs of disappointed love’<sup>11</sup> a few pages later, and the ultra-unreliable Isabella exclaims that ‘I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature.’<sup>12</sup> Catherine, despite the undeniable fact that she has indeed fallen in love with Henry Tilney, uses the word only of her feelings for her female friends, Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney, and her brother James. In her world, it would not only be a breach of etiquette to admit to such a love, it would be more unwise than even Catherine is in her weakest moments.

*Northanger Abbey* was presented to Naipaul at a conference in Bath. One wonders how different his reaction would have been if the organisers had happened to choose *Persuasion* instead. Would he have found Anne Elliot’s more mature point of view congenial, or would he have found her romantic attachment to Frederick Wentworth as ridiculous as Catherine’s to Henry Tilney? Perhaps he would: to Naipaul, from the evidence of his fiction, romantic love hardly exists. Robert Hemenway writes that ‘there are no successful love affairs, no successful marriages, in all his work.’<sup>13</sup> There are a few successful marriages, but he is right about the love affairs. In *Miguel Street*, the narrator’s mother gives a love-struck neighbour some advice: ‘I really wish you

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (The Novels of Jane Austen, ed. R.W. Chapman, Vol. 5, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.)(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933): 41.

<sup>10</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 33.

<sup>12</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 40.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Hemenway, Sex and Politics in V. S. Naipaul, *Studies in the Novel* 14.2 (1982): 193.

was like me. If somebody did marry you off when you was fifteen, we wouldnta been hearing all this nonsense, you hear. Making all this damn fuss about your heart and love and all that rubbish.’<sup>14</sup> Falling in love in a Naipaul novel is usually a dead end. In *Miguel Street*, several men are brought down by an infatuation with a faithless woman. There are several examples in the novels of affairs with married women which begin passionately but eventually sour, like the relationship between Salim and Yvette in *A Bend in the River*, or Willie and Graça in *Half a Life*. Other affairs begin almost with indifference, mainly to fulfil sexual urges, without any thoughts of emotional fulfilment or long-term companionship, like the liaison between Roger and the woman from the council estate in *Magic Seeds*, or Roche and Jane in *Guerrillas*, with predictably bad results. Even Willie Chandran, who innocently fancies himself ‘in love’ with his friend’s girlfriend Perdita in *Half a Life*, years later in *Magic Seeds* conducts an adulterous affair with her which is characterised by coldness and disgust on his part, and passivity on hers.<sup>15</sup>

In Naipaul’s novels, men and women marry for reasons of convenience or family pressure, or to escape a dead-end life. They are sometimes able to come to a respectful if unsentimental accommodation with each other, like Mr Biswas and his wife Shama in *A House for Mr Biswas* and Mr Stone and Margaret in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*. More often, the marriages finally fail, as in *The Mimic Men* and *Half a Life*.

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<sup>14</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street* (London: Penguin, 1971), 111.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of Naipaul’s attitude to women and sex, see the author’s Naipaul’s Women, *South Asian Review* 26.1 (November 2005) 88-103.

Examples of relationships like these, of course, also occur in Austen's novels. Charlotte Lucas's choice of Mr Collins as a husband is based solely on her wish to escape her spinster existence and have a household of her own. Maria Bertram marries a man she despises purely for money and social status, and then ruins herself with an impulsive but loveless affair with Henry Crawford. Lydia Bennett's 'love' for Wickham is based more on vanity and lust than true affection, and her parents hardly present an example of marriage at its best. And, of course Marianne's passion for Willoughby misleads her terribly and nearly ruins her life. But to balance these failures, there are many happy marriages in the novels, and not only at the end, between the hero and heroine. Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Westons in *Emma*, and the Crofts in *Persuasion*, all have happy, apparently uncomplicated, companionate marriages.

So perhaps it might be said that Naipaul has a blind spot where harmonious, loving relationships between the sexes is concerned, while Austen, although hardly uncritical of the institution of marriage and many of its examples in her novels, was prepared to allow that happy marriages between people in love were possible. The connections one might draw between their respective experiences of matrimony, the one unmarried all her life, the other married for more than forty years to his first wife, with a second marriage contracted within months of her death, I prefer to leave unexplored.

Part of Naipaul's reluctance to admit the possibility of a love affair with a happy outcome may spring from his view of the world in which he is writing. In 1973, he said,

I don't think it is possible any longer for people to write those novels where you could say, 'they lived happily ever afterwards,' because we no longer have this assurance of the world going on. Societies everywhere have been fractured by all kinds of change: technological, social, political. We can no longer regard the action of a novel as covering a little crisis, a little curve on the graph which will then revert to the nice, flat, straight, ordered life: and I think this is one reason why ... the traditional novel is just no longer possible.<sup>16</sup>

I believe it would be quite possible to argue that Jane Austen's world was in many ways as insecure and marginalised as Naipaul's has been. She never enjoyed the financial security Naipaul has been able to establish from his earnings as a writer: although in his early days in England as a student and then a struggling novelist he was very poor, he has now for a long time been comparatively wealthy, able to travel and buy property in a way Jane Austen could never have dreamed possible. Austen, of course, as an unmarried woman with little money of her own, was totally dependent on her family. As she knew herself from personal experience, and as she often showed in her novels, such a dependence was precarious and lives could be shattered by the unexpected death or marriage of a relative. The £700 she earned from her writing during her whole life was a great deal less than the £3000 which was Catherine Morland's modest portion on her marriage to Henry Tilney, and pales into insignificance compared with Naipaul's 2001 Nobel prize award of 10,000,000 Swedish kroner, equivalent to about US\$1,000,000.

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<sup>16</sup> Ronald Bryden, *The Novelist V.S. Naipaul Talks about His Work to Ronald Bryden*, *Listener* 89 (22 March 1973) 368.

It is true, however, that despite a continual subtext of insecurity, poverty and dependence in Austen's novels, they all end on a decidedly 'happy-ever-after' note. This optimism, I would argue, has as much to do with form as with the nature of the world during Austen's lifetime. Her genre was comedy, and even in a work as comparatively sombre as *Mansfield Park* she had no time for the tragic side of art: 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.'<sup>17</sup> Let poetic justice be done: Maria assigned to the penitential purgatory of existence under Aunt Norris' wing, Mary Crawford to life without the man she loves, and Fanny eventually rewarded for her steadfast love with a chastened and perhaps less than passionate Edmund. But with what irony:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people. – I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire.<sup>18</sup>

Jane Austen knew perfectly well that life was not so neat, and that it was only in her fictional world that she could assign the worthy 'to tolerable comfort, and to have

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, The Novels of Jane Austen, ed. R.W. Chapman, Vol. 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 461.

<sup>18</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park* 470.

done with all the rest'. We know little about her philosophy of fiction, but comparing her own life with the plots of her novels is instructive enough. Novels were entertainment, 'afford[ing] more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world,'<sup>19</sup> with an admixture of easily-digested instruction. Although they might convey 'the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, [and] the liveliest effusions of wit and humour,'<sup>20</sup> they are not intended as a mirror of life. Realism is there in the settings, in the loveless marriages of the Middletons in *Sense and Sensibility* and the Bennett parents in *Pride and Prejudice*, the single women in reduced circumstances, like the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* and the Bates in *Emma*, and the constant threat of 'the governess trade', life in a cramped cottage with uncongenial relations, or the entail depriving families of their homes and incomes. But a comedy has to end in a happy marriage, even though marriage was a fairy tale Austen had abandoned for herself before any of her novels were published.

Austen's world was bound by the home counties of England. She never aspired to leave them. When Tom Lefroy left for Ireland 1796 it was as if he was going halfway across the world. She had no thought of being able to visit him and their mutual interest, as she says, was left to 'decline away in a very reasonable manner.'<sup>21</sup> Her heroines are similarly circumscribed: Emma has never even seen the sea. There was, of course, plenty of travelling going on in those days. It was a great era of worldwide exploration, and the Napoleonic wars were fought all over the world, but most of the

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<sup>19</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 37.

<sup>20</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 38.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Austen, To Cassandra Austen, Saturday 17-Sunday 18 November 1798, *Jane Austen's Letters* collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

travelers were men, and in Austen's novels we naturally see the female point of view. Mrs Croft was able to sail with her husband sometimes, although it was against Navy regulations, but she is an exception, in real life as well as in the novels. Usually, even a short journey for a single woman was a complicated matter of being escorted by a respectable relative or chaperone: witness the difficulty Marianne and Elinor Dashwood had in getting home from London. By contrast, the world in which Naipaul lives is a global one. He can travel anywhere he chooses. His world – our world – as he says, is unpredictable and in a state of flux, though accompanying the loss of stability are opportunities for a great many more people, including women and non-Europeans. He has had the opportunity to see immeasurably more of the world than Austen could have. Even so, he often chooses as his characters people whose lives are more limited than his own, and he often writes about small, insular societies, probably because he knows, as Austen knew, that there is much comedy inherent in such societies. They also both use the impact of major events on a small society in their novels, often very different from the major outlines of history. In *Pride and Prejudice* the quartering of the Regiment in Meryton causes chaos in the Bennett family, a sign of wars going on in the background, seemingly invisible to the women of the family; while the American base on Trinidad brings great social change to the island in many of Naipaul's novels and stories.

Naipaul started his career in the 1950s with four comic novels set in Trinidad.

Naipaul's comedy, like Austen's, is based on dialogue and characters rather than incident. Their humour is dry and understated, consisting not of jokes so much as the gradual building of a picture of a situation or a character. His early novel *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) has, on close examination, some elements in common with

*Northanger Abbey*. The main character, Ganesh, is, like Catherine, introduced to the reader in a mock-heroic vein:

Later he was to be famous and honoured throughout the South Caribbean; he was to be a hero of the people and, after that, a British representative at Lake Success. But when I first met him he was still a struggling masseur, at a time when masseurs were ten a penny in Trinidad.<sup>22</sup>

It seems strange that the man who could write these words could fail to see the humour in the opening sentences of *Northanger Abbey*:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard – and he had never been handsome.<sup>23</sup>

It is not exactly the same joke, but both authors are playing ironically with the notion of heroism. Further, Ganesh is bewitched by literature, though in his case it is not ‘horrid’ novels but anything in print. His future father-in-law lends him a series of booklets on salesmanship, and ‘the very covers, shining yellow and black, interested him; and what he read enthralled him. The writer had a strong feeling for colour and beauty and order. He spoke with relish about new paint, dazzling displays, and

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<sup>22</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur* (London: Penguin, 1964), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 13.

gleaming shelves.’<sup>24</sup> He develops an ambition to be a literary man himself. He buys large numbers of books and starts copying extracts, and eventually writes his own book, *101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion*. In his own way, Ganesh, like Catherine, is misled by literature – by writing it as well as reading it. After his first book is printed, at his own expense, he begins to believe that he is more highly educated than he really is:

Everybody start thinking is the little piece of paper that matter. It ain’t that does make a man a BA. Is how he does learn, how much he want to learn, and why he want to learn, is these things that does make a man a BA. I really can’t see how I isn’t a BA.<sup>25</sup>

However, although Naipaul’s satire is not savage, in *The Mystic Masseur* there is no Henry Tilney to bring Ganesh down to earth and he persists with his self-delusion. Perhaps it is here where we might see a crucial difference between Austen and Naipaul’s moral worlds. Naipaul says, ‘I much prefer writers who can carry in their writing some sense of what is, wasn’t always, has been made, and is about to change again and become something else.’<sup>26</sup> This is the uncertain world of Naipaul’s novels, in which a genial shyster like Ganesh can become ‘famous and honoured throughout the South Caribbean,’<sup>27</sup> with no prospect of a benevolent authority figure who will correct his misperceptions. The genre of the comic novel which Austen so triumphantly mastered, where her heroines, in James Wood’s words, are ‘heroic

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<sup>24</sup> Naipaul, *Mystic Masseur* 44.

<sup>25</sup> Naipaul, *Mystic Masseur* 101.

<sup>26</sup> Bharati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers, *A Conversation with V.S. Naipaul, Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 81-82.

<sup>27</sup> Naipaul, *Mystic Masseur* 11.

because they exercise their consciousness ... and who are not mocked but gradually comprehended and finally forgiven,<sup>28</sup> is different from Naipaul's comedy not in its sympathy and access to consciousness, but in the style of conclusion. 'Happily ever after' is undercut in Austen, but not destroyed. In Naipaul it is never allowed as a possibility. In *A House for Mr Biswas* the measure of success for the hero is his hold on one of the most basic requirements for a decent life, and this is never more than tenuous. Mr Biswas' house is ramshackle and mortgaged to the hilt, and he dies young without the slightest prospect of paying for it. This could be the fate, in an Austen novel, of a minor character, but never of the heroine. Even bleaker are later novels like *A Bend in the River* and *Half a Life*, where uncertainty is the inescapable condition of everyone's lives and the endings do not bring closure.

So is Naipaul's attitude to Austen a matter of literary history, or temperament? 'The great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked,'<sup>29</sup> Naipaul wrote in 1974. Later, in 1995, he said, 'There was a time when fiction provided ... discoveries about the nature of society, about states, so those works of fiction had a validity over and above the narrative element.'<sup>30</sup> Austen's works had their place in these discoveries, about the world in which women lived. This is no doubt part of Naipaul's dislike. He has dismissed Austen as 'essentially a writer for women'<sup>31</sup> and though I do not believe he is absolutely a misogynist he has never shown a great interest in the world of women. The trappings of the female world of the early

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<sup>28</sup> James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 14.

<sup>29</sup> V.S. Naipaul, 'Conrad's Darkness and Mine,' *Literary Occasions: Essays* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 180.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed Rashid, 'The Last Lion,' *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 167.

<sup>31</sup> Naipaul to Kamla Naipaul.

nineteenth century – accomplishments, sprigged muslin and marriage – seem irretrievably trivial to him and blind him to Austen’s wit and penetration, despite the satire, irony and comedy which they so patently and consummately share.

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