Damage
by James Wood

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Half a Life
by V.S. Naipaul
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I.

Reflecting on the struggle of the writer, Balzac writes in *Lost Illusions* that "a great writer is simply a martyr whom the stake cannot kill." Such a formula looks excessive to a modern age; it seems a mixture too thickened by the blood, sweat, and tears of Romanticism. And Balzac sounds antique also because his drift is ultimately triumphal: the great writer must, after all, be stronger than the stake. Yet a modern suggestion can be extracted, perhaps, from an idea of the writer as one who, if never killed, is permanently damaged by the stake, of the writer endlessly showing an unclosable wound: life as a suspended martyrdom.

V.S. Naipaul is the obvious modern example of such a writer. He has written often and powerfully--and even comically--about damage; he has been damaged by frequent attacks from hostile readers; and he has written often about his own literary struggle, without caring to hide the damage that this struggle has done to his temperament. Indeed, he has implicitly and explicitly offered his own hard transit--from Trinidad to London, from obscurity to visibility (and now the Nobel Prize), from the rim of an already disappearing empire to its oddly disappointing center--as an example of a larger postcolonial passage. In a famous sentence in *The Enigma of Arrival*, which appeared in 1987, his autobiographical novel about that journey, he writes: "In 1950 in London I was at the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century--a movement and a cultural mixing greater than the peopling of the United States."

This "damage" comes on the wings of politics, but strikes at all the usual unpolitical places--the heart, the mind, the soul. Nowadays it is sometimes forgotten, amid the complaints about Naipaul’s conservatism or worse, that

Naipaul has written with great tenderness, even with radical anger, about the immigrant's damaged situation. In his work, certainly, the character who leaves the margins of empire for the center is not assured of victory, and may well be vouchsafed only pain. In *The Mimic Men* (1967), Ralph Singh, the disgraced Caribbean politician now in miserable exile in London, weeps for his solitude in an English lavatory. In one of the stories in *In a Free State* (1971), Santosh, a domestic servant, accompanies his master from Bombay to Washington, D.C. In Washington, he is homesick and bereft. He spends all his earnings on useless toys, such as a green suit. Freedom in America, he discovers, is to find that "nobody cares what you do"--in both the positive and the negative sense. The story ends with Santosh telling the reader: "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."

It is also too easily forgotten that Naipaul was once a great comic writer. The Swedish Academy may think that it is bestowing this year's prize on Naipaul's writings about Islam, but it should be rewarding *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). The familiar Naipaul character of the 1950s and 1960s--the anxious, striving, marginalized "little man" found in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), in the early stories, and above all in *A House for Mr. Biswas*--was doubtless based on Naipaul's father, Seepersad Naipaul, a struggling journalist for the Trinidad *Guardian*, and a writer of short stories in his spare time. Seepersad, like Biswas, was a man damaged by the marginality of his status, which nipped the theatrical grandeur of his ambition. He was a fantasist; he lived freely only in his fictional writing and through his brilliant son Vidiadhar, who had done what he could only dream of: Vidiadhar had left Trinidad and gone to Oxford.

Seepersad's role as the model for Biswas was given new shape in *Letters Between a Father and Son*, a recently published collection of letters between Vidiadhar and his father, from 1950 (when Vidiadhar left Trinidad for Oxford) until 1953 (when Seepersad died, at the very early age of forty-seven). What was delightful, and delightfully comic, about the father who emerged from that book was that, unlike most ambitious parents, he did not squeeze his son for guilt. Quite the opposite. He did not even seem to envy his son his experiences, or to reproach him for them. Instead he identified with them so strongly that he warmly shared them, took them over.

Seepersad, it seems, was not really ambitious for his son so much as ambitious for himself; his son was an edition of his own rich fantasy life. It was Seepersad who really felt that he was at Oxford, arranging meetings with prominent people. When Vidiadhar tells him in a letter that he has not succeeded in properly meeting Professor Radhakrishnan, the professor of Eastern religions at Oxford, his father replies with an hilarious bustle of recommendations:

> I do hope you did succeed in meeting Radhakrishnan again. To get the notice of such men a "rebuff" or two is a cheap price for the privilege of an interview. And it is always the best to be quite frank about your position with such people. You could

> have said, in order to make conversation: "My father has always looked upon you as one of the greatest minds of modern India. He has often said he never understood Hinduism so well as when he read your book, *The Heart of Hindustan*." And you would have broken the ice, as they say. Contacts, Vido, contacts all the time. Let me go on. Suppose you had a fairly good chat with this great scholar, you could have described the experience of the incident to me in a letter--in a long letter, if that was necessary. I'd have delighted in the reading of such a letter, and I'd have kept it with other letters of yours. Write me weekly of the men you meet; tell me what you talked; how they talked....

It is hard to imagine that Seepersad could seriously be advising his proud, anxious, and precocious son to "break the ice" in this absurdly voluble manner. But Seepersad is serious, and that is his comedy, his poignancy. Nothing in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is quite as finely comic as this letter. It is as if Seepersad, in dispensing advice so freely and confidently, has already lived, in a previous incarnation, the experiences he so longs to hear about; his son is his avatar! And of course Seepersad has really lived these experiences, because he has imagined them so many times.

There is a nobility in this, a mental triumph. Seepersad emerges as a kind of victor of systems, because his fantasy is an army, running on a thousand legs. Seepersad, like Biswas, may be damaged, but he is also free, because he is most himself when traveling out of himself. Yet at the same time he is lost, for such a man could probably never discover himself, or merge with himself, or "find" himself, as if his singleness were a mislaid object. His self is a traffic of identifications and imaginings. He does not know himself because his intelligence is poured into self-fantasy, not into self-scrutiny; into self-dispersing, not into self-gathering. His identity is identification--the identification with possibility itself.

With great tenderness, Naipaul caught this aspect of his father in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which Biswas daydreams while reading the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli, and tries to use the word "bower" because he found it in Wordsworth (by way of the *Royal Reader*). The sadness clouding this novel is that one is always oneself even when one does not know it; one cannot escape that, and freedom is therefore always qualified. Freedom is a shout between two murmurs. Generous, combustible, nobly hysterical, facetious when he would like to be solemn, stoical in resolve but crumbling in practice, free in spirit but actually tied to the train of his destiny by the modesty of his ticket, Biswas is a very affecting comic creation, one of the few enduring characters in postwar British fiction.

The publication of the letters revealed, interestingly, that Naipaul took the essential flailing comedy of his father's "littleness" and consciously politicized it, thus quietly radicalizing his novel. Repeatedly, the comic encounters in which Biswas finds himself have a political dimension. They involve, in one way or another, Biswas's station at the edge of empire, at the margins of authority. (In his letters Seepersad gives little evidence of political awareness.) There is not only the reading of canonical Wordsworth, there is also Biswas's relationship to the authority of literacy: his first job is as a sign-writer, and his first piece of work is a sign advising "IDLERS KEEP OUT BY ORDER." Only after this does he become a journalist at the Trinidad *Sentinel*. A dreamer, he likes to read fictional descriptions of bad weather in foreign countries. Eager to write his own stories, he corresponds with the "Ideal School of Journalism, Edgware Road, London," which advises him, absurdly, to write about "the Romance of Place-Names (your vicar is likely to prove a mine of colourful information)."

This apparently paradoxical combination of sympathy and pessimism, radicalism and conservatism, is what makes Naipaul such a difficult and contradictory writer. He believes in freedom, but only pessimistically, seeing it as at best a private treasure, to be spent in a world that is too coarse to recognize it. He has written again and again about his own journey from Trinidad to Britain--notably in *Finding the Centre* (1984) and in *The Enigma of Arrival*--and his subtle descriptions of this migration offer grounds both for political rebellion and for political complacency.

It was not easy for a young Trinidadian Indian to make his way in Oxford in the 1950s, and after that in London. While Seepersad was helplessly theatrical, young Vidia felt that he had to learn to perform a role in Britain. About a social occasion, Vidia writes to his father that "I performed (that's the way I usually do things) no blunders." Early on, in his first few weeks at Oxford, he wrote to his father: "The people here accept me." (Already, in a sign of how strange a writer Naipaul would become, this phrase of apparent humility before polished Oxonians sounds instead like the proud satisfaction of a conqueror among savages.) But the ghost of a rather harder assimilation appears four months later, in a letter to his sister Kamla: "my English pronunciation is improving by the humiliating process of error and snigger." Naipaul's pitiless account of the pain involved in such a journey, the "humiliation" of it, contains an implicit cry against it, which constitutes Naipaul's radicalism; but his obvious belief that the journey to the center is the only possible movement encodes a limiting conservatism.

There is, indeed, a sense in which Naipaul *believes in damage*, and it is surely this--with its attendant fatalism and its haughtiness of tone--that enrages his political critics. He believes in damage as the inevitable accompaniment of the inevitable struggle to leave behind one's origins--the rite of passage that he had to suffer in order to become himself; and in this feeling of double inevitability lies Naipaul's conservatism. Of course, it might be said that over the years Naipaul has treated the inevitability of flight from the margin to the center no differently than a Balzacian hero who must make for Paris, or than Henry James treated the inevitability of flight to London. But in postcolonial politics everything is fraught, and it is obviously one thing for James to condescend to his old America and another for Naipaul, the Brahmin Indian, to condescend to his old Trinidad. James was approvingly seen as following a path to the center of literature; Naipaul has sometimes disapprovingly been seen as following a path to the center of imperialism.

It is true that there are times when Naipaul acts as if he wished he had never been born in Trinidad, which is quite a different impulse from wishing merely to have escaped it. But in his defense it should be said, first of all, that he has in fact "spoken for the Caribbean"--in the political sense--in his tender and comic early works, and has offered a picture of the damage done to those unfortunate enough to be born in neglected places. And although in later years Naipaul has exchanged comedy for pessimism, has seemed to exchange Narayan for Conrad, much of his writing--especially about himself--reverses the Conradian journey. He is hardly the European who travels from Europe to the ends of empire, but its very reverse: he is one who has sought the asylum of centrality from those very ends of empire--one who, as he has put it himself, was born in "one of the Conradian dark places of the earth."

He is, in sum, a true postcolonial, where "post" must mean, in one sense, "anti"--opposite, reversed. Moreover, Naipaul sees it as his literary task to dramatize a condition, not to suggest its alternatives. In this regard, he does indeed resemble Conrad, for he is a writer whose eyesight is radical but whose vision is conservative. He knows the damage that empire does, since he has suffered it, and he sees it acutely; but he also accepts its terms, and writes within its grammar. He is a Conradian anti-Conradian.

II.

Naipaul is at his most contradictory, both radical and almost pathologically fatalistic, in his new novel. *Half a Life* starts grippingly. In the simplest possible prose, in sentences sapped of perfume and dried down to pure duty, the book unfolds its strange tale. One day, in India, young Willie Chandran asks his father about his curious middle name, Somerset, which was inspired by the English writer Somerset Maugham. In the course of providing that explanation, his father tells Willie his life story.

Willie’s father was the son of a successful clerk and proud Brahmin. He was always difficult. At school, when his teacher told him to read Wordsworth and Coleridge, Willie’s father decided: "But this is just a pack of lies! No one feels like that." Willie’s father deliberately ruined his chances of betterment by deciding, in the spirit of Gandhi (it was the 1930s), that he should abandon his college degree and submit to a political "sacrifice." The sacrifice involved his choosing a wife from a low caste, a so-called "backward." He decided to "turn my back on our ancestry ... and to do the only noble thing that lay in my power, which was to marry the lowest person I could find."

Willie’s father selected this woman; she was a fellow college student, a scholarship girl. He had no love for her, was indeed disgusted by her "backwardness"--her dark skin, her coarse features, her apparently primitive manners. "Her very dark top lip slipped slowly--with the wetness of a snail, I thought--over the big white teeth....I was repelled, ashamed, moved." But he married her anyway. When their son, Willie, was born, his father anxiously scrutinized him, to see "how much of the backward could be read in his features....Anyone seeing me bend over the infant would have thought I was looking at the little creature with pride." Willie’s father tells him this amazing story over ten years, and inevitably Willie in turn grows up despising his cruel, cold father and eager to leave India. It is 1956, the time of the Suez crisis. Willie leaves India, enrolls at a college of education in London, and begins a new life there as an immigrant.

The novel is only fifty pages old at this point. The story of this "sacrifice," both cruel and masochistic, is tremendously compulsive; it has the compulsion of illogical logic. Like Stavrogin's similarly masochistic marriage to a low-born woman in *The Possessed*, it is a gesture that has the veneer of principle but is in fact pathological; and like Stavrogin's act, it is so abnormal that we read on simply in order to find a solving normality. But there is none, as Willie suspects: this is why he hates his father. Its logic was simply that, having been embarked on, it had to be continued to the end--a logic curiously analogous to the experience of reading (which explains the strange compulsion of Dostoevsky, and in this case, of Naipaul).

Willie's father made his sacrifice because of apparently radical, or at least "progressive," impulses. He was inspired by Gandhi. But the vileness of his act, its unredeemed quality, lies in the paradox that he is not remotely progressive in his treatment of his low-caste wife. He is, if anything, more disdainful of his wife's disadvantage, more obsessed by caste distinctions, than he would have been if he had never married her. It is a paradox that runs like a fault line through the entire novel, and it provides its special richness of political complexity. For behind the arras of the apparently political, Naipaul suggests, lies the messy corpse of our actual motives; and our actual motives, often unknowable, may have nothing at all to do with the political.

The best example of this is found in Willie's somewhat doomed life. As an Indian student in 1950s London, he suffers the usual "humiliations" of the Indian immigrant. He goes to see an editor at a large newspaper, and is treated indifferently. He begins to think that he has misjudged his father. "I used to think that the world was easy for him as a brahmin and that he became a fraud out of idleness. Now I begin to understand how hard the world must have been for him." In London, he cannot help noticing how much of late-imperial Britain is actually the invention of the merely recent past, and he begins to feel that the old rules of India--the caste traditions, and so on--no longer hold him: "the old rules were themselves a kind of make-believe, self-imposed. And one day ... he saw with great clarity that the old rules no longer bound him ... he was free to present himself as he wished. He could, as it were, write his own revolution....He could, within reason, remake himself and his past and his ancestry."

And so he does, "within reason." Willie tells his new friends that his mother is a Christian, belonging to an ancient community of Christians. His father, of course, remains a Brahmin. Up to a point, Willie remakes himself. He gets on in the immigrant-bohemian society of Notting Hill; he writes radio pieces for the BBC; he has a brief affair with an Englishwoman who works at the perfume counter at Debenhams, a big department store; he has sex with a prostitute who tells him to "fuck like an Englishman." Emboldened by his success at the BBC, he writes a book of stories set in India. The book is rather condescendingly accepted and published; when it appears in the publisher's catalogue, Willie is presented as "a subversive new voice from the subcontinent." The reviews are foolish, and Willie thinks bitterly to himself: "Let the book die. Let it fade away. Let me not be reminded of it. I will write no more. This book was not something I should have done, anyway. It was artificial and false."

Here Naipaul revisits, yet again, the primal scene of his own "humiliation." Many of the elements in his memoir *Finding the Centre* are repeated in his novel *Half a Life*: the grim bedsit world of North London, with its watchful and prejudiced landladies; the confident Englishmen at the BBC; the thoughtlessly patronizing publisher; and the nervous, uncertain world of the immigrants. But Naipaul seems to be writing a very dark variation on his own circumstances. Naipaul's father, while he was alive, bountifully supported his son's early literary efforts at Oxford. Their relations were not uncomplicated, but they were warm. And Naipaul, despite ignorant early reviews, did not abandon literature, as Willie does; indeed, for many years the standard biographical account of Naipaul, in the front of his Penguin paperbacks, proudly announced that he began to write in London in 1954 and "has followed no other profession."

But Willie, despite his freedoms in London, is finally unable to escape his father's negative obsession with caste. He has inherited it. And in imperial or colonial societies, where Willie now lives, an obsession with caste must become an obsession with race. In London, he befriends Percy Cato, a Jamaican of "mixed parentage," "more brown than black." Willie likes Percy, but he cannot help feeling, because of Percy's blackness, that "he stood a rung or two or many rungs above Percy." And then he meets Ana, a Portuguese-African from Mozambique (she had a white Portuguese grandfather), marries her, and goes to live with her on her family estate in Mozambique.

Willie at first dislikes Mozambique, and swears to himself that he will leave as soon as possible. "I must never behave as though I am staying," he tells himself. But he ends up spending eighteen years there, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. In Mozambique, Willie and his wife's friends form a society within a society: estate-owners and farmers who are higher up the ladder than the Africans, of course, but who are not pure Portuguese either. They are "second-rank Portuguese," distantly mixed-race, since most of them have an African grandparent. Slowly Willie realizes "that the world I had entered was only a half-and-half world, that many of the people who were our friends considered themselves, deep down, people of the second rank." Willie realizes that he has been helped in this understanding "by my own background."

So the son of a Brahmin father and a "backward" mother has made it all the way to "the second rank"! Willie knows perfectly well that a mere accident has turned him from being a patronized immigrant in London into a semi-colonial landowner in Mozambique: "By a strange chance I was on the other side here." In the last third of the novel, with terse economy and unsparing acuteness, Naipaul uncovers this second-rank world, this "half-and-half world" of braggarts and reactionaries and fakers, people who are very big in a wilderness but would be very small in an oasis, and who secretly know it.

Many of these people are incapable of conversation: "it was as though the solitude of their lives had taken away that faculty." Naipaul paints superb portraits. There is the mixed-race estate manager Alvaro, who overdoes his "educated" colonial speech, and says absurd things such as "He isn't, by the remotest stretch of the imagination, what you would call a gentleman." There are the Noronhas, to whom everyone looks up, because they are "blue-bloods," pure unadulterated Portuguese. Nothing in the book is finer than the depiction of the local "big-shots," Jacinto and Carla Correia. Jacinto, of mixed Portuguese-African descent, has money, and has educated his children in Lisbon--where he anxiously tells them "always to use taxis. People must never think of them as colonial nobodies." And behind and around this jumped-up and mediocre world, like a Conradian miasma, are the Africans themselves, who are vaguely seen from cars, endlessly walking along the sides of roads, with packs on their heads.

This little world--which was not worth preserving anyway--is doomed. Civil war threatens. Already some of the estate-owners are leaving the country. As if it were not clear enough to Willie that his world is built on false foundations, one day, visiting a restaurant with his friends, he sees the pure-Portuguese restaurant owner abusing a black worker, "a half-African tiler," "a big light-eyed mulatto man." Willie says nothing at the time, but tells us that whenever he remembered "the big sweating man with the abused light eyes, carrying the shame of his birth on his face like a brand," he would think: "Who will rescue that man? Who will avenge him?"

Half a Life ends at the moment of Willie's decision to leave Mozambique. He is in his early forties: thus "half a life." But Naipaul means his title more blackly, too. Willie has lived only half a life because, of mixed parentage himself, he is only "half-and-half." And Willie chose to spend most of his life in colonial Mozambique, a "half-and-half" society. More deeply, Willie is half a man because his father's baleful shadow has cut across his life, scything it in two. Notionally free to make himself anew, Willie finds that in truth he is doomed to repeat the sacrificial frigidity of his father's life. Notionally free of the artifice of caste and race, he is in fact as imprisoned by it as his father, with the difference that at least his father chose to imprison himself when he married his "backward" wife, whereas Willie never asked for his imprisonment.

The repellent "sacrifice" of Willie's father had the peculiar effect of both undermining caste and simultaneously inscribing it more deeply in the fabric of life. By turning caste into a decision, a choice, Willie's father exposed its basis as artificial; but by making it a curse, to be handed on from father to son, it has been fatalized, turned into a pathology. Similarly, Willie has seen through all the old "rules" of race and caste, and has divined their artificiality; he has freely re-invented himself--but only to re-insert himself into a world of frozen class and racial distinctions. So Willie has had the freedom only to imprison himself. He has, in a small way, managed to "write his own revolution," but only at the cost of living conservatively.

And this is how Naipaul's intelligent, pessimistic novel works, too--intentionally, I think, but also perhaps in ways that Naipaul does not fully know. It remorselessly exposes distinctions of caste and race as nothing more than accidents, choices, and horridly fake rules; but its relentless attention to those very distinctions makes them seem pathologically immovable. It is this paradoxical movement between a potentially radical awareness of the disease of race and an apparently more conservative determination to insist on the permanence of that disease--it is this movement that produces the novel's powerful, shifting complexity.

This is a book that ruthlessly analyzes damage, but never breathes an undamaged air--and thus seems itself damaged. It seems at once a depiction, and a document, of damage. Its undeniable power arises from its evocation of a sense of waste--waste in Willie's father's life, waste in Willie's life. And behind it we glimpse the possibility of waste in its author's life: for sure, it seems a book not merely about, but written out of, suffering. Those who are suspicious of Naipaul's politics will trace the book's ambivalence to its author, and accuse him of the familiar political fatalism; they will see again a writer imprisoned by categories. Those more disposed to Naipaul will find a power in that pessimism, an ambivalence that contains the seeds of a cold compassion, even a political radicalism. For what Willie thinks about the abused restaurant worker might also be said, in angry pity, of poor trapped Willie, and even of poor trapped Naipaul: "Who will avenge that man? Who will rescue him?"

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