Rob Nixon

With the passing of each decade, Naipaul has invested more and more of his energy in travel writing, producing less and less fiction. During the ten years that followed the appearance of his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), he published nine titles, seven of them novels or collections of short stories. Between 1968 and 1975, his industry was split equally between fiction and nonfiction, generating two books of each. But in the fifteen years since *Guerillas* (1975), he has produced only one full novel (*A Bend in the River*, 1979), while his travel and autobiographical writings have grown ever more prolific. In addition to *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), a hybrid work of autobiography and fiction, the period since 1975 has seen seven works of nonfiction: *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980), *A Congo Diary* (1980), *Among the Believers* (1981), *Finding the Center* (1984), *A Turn in the South* (1989), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990).

While it is crucial to observe Naipaul’s increasing commitment to travel writing, it is, paradoxically, equally important to recognize his impassioned efforts during the late 1980s to terminate his travels. His writing during the early part of the decade (*Among the Believers* and the Grenadian essay, “An Island Betrayed”) was cast in Naipaul’s standard, brittle categories—mimicry, barbarism, world civilization, parasitism, and simple societies. But the split title of *Finding the Center: Two Narratives* indicated a threshold text: the long travel essay on the Ivory Coast was vintage, predictable Naipaulia, while the book’s other half, “A Prologue to an Autobiography,” pulled in a contrary direction, anticipating the new developments that would ensue in *The Enigma of Arrival*, *A Turn in the South*, and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.

Each of his three latest books marks an attempt to make his peace with one of the three cultures that have contributed most to his identity—England, Trinidad, and India. In the process, each includes an element of muted self-criticism. *The Enigma of Arrival*, as the title intimates, is suffused
with a sense of an ending. In the central section of the book, Naipaul reviews his life and ponders, among other things, the distortions of his identity that prompted him to ignore the rich lode of immigrant experience in London during the 1950s and 1960s. Naipaul’s condensed, revisionist rewriting of his collective travels in *Enigma* was meant to be a kind of terminus. He would, he insisted, write travel no more.

Yet he went on to produce *A Turn in the South*. His first American travel book, it brought him unexpectedly face-to-face with his Trinidadian ancestry and childhood. The bonds he discovered between the South and Trinidad—bonds of slavery, racial conflict, and plantation society—stirred in him a mixture of anguish and serendipity. A powerful strand of the book contains an attempt to review, from the paradoxical distance and proximity of the South, the roots of his old rage at Trinidad. As in *Enigma*, we observe a cautious homecoming, this time as he becomes (at least in spirit) more accommodating of the society that he fled in bitter shame and toward which he has been so vindictive ever since. His newfound conciliatory mood toward Trinidad does not prevent him, however, from reanimating his bigotries toward the black cultures of the New World.

*A Turn in the South*, too, was announced as his last travel book. But, having faced first England, then Trinidad, he returned to India to resolve his differences there. The prevailing restraint, even tenderness, of *India: A Million Mutinies Now* makes for an astonishing contrast with his earlier writings about the subcontinent. Significantly, Naipaul closes *A Million Mutinies* by reviewing his first Indian travelogue, *An Area of Darkness*, anatomizing, in the process, the youthful rawness that contributed to its limitations.

For three decades, Britain and the United States, the sites of Naipaul’s residence and his principal audiences, had been constitutively absent from his travel writing. So

... Or itinerant handkerchief-head?
when, in quick succession during the late 1980s, he finally swung round to face these two societies, the decision marked a major departure. *Enigma* and *A Turn in the South* abut postcolonial travel writing somewhat tangentially: the British book because it is a lightly fictionalized autobiography in which arrival serves more as metaphor than event, the American book because it admits only ambiguous continuities with Naipaul’s postcolonial preoccupations. But significantly, these experiments with a change in locale (from Third World to First) have produced sharp shifts in temper and focus. Naipaul admits a less curbed range of emotions, breaking away from his customary disdain and irritability into tolerance, empathy, tearfulness, deferential curiosity, even naked delight.

The new tack really began with *Finding the Center*, the 1984 volume that fell into two parts: “Prologue to an Autobiography” and the travel essay on the Ivory Coast. The latter piece, as well as his especially cynical article on Grenada (which surfaced that year in *Harpers* and the *London Sunday Times*) displayed Naipaul in his familiar, hatchet-jobbing self. But “Prologue to an Autobiography” introduced a different impulse. It returned him, in memory, to the Trinidad from which he had retreated with the intent of becoming a writer, after having watched his father’s creative talents get dashed by that unsupportive environment. In pursuit of his own literary origins, Naipaul embarks on a quest for Bogart, the man who once inspired his first callow, literary sentence. Despite being marketed as fiction, *The Enigma of Arrival*, which appeared three years later, comes closer to the autobiography forecast by that prologue. The book mulls over journeying as metaphor and event. Naipaul revisits and reconceives his 1950 passage to England while musing, in addition, on the unstable sensation of having “arrived” as a writer, of possessing a career to survey. As, in close succession, his brother, his sister, and Indira Gandhi (whom he deeply esteemed) all pass away, the writing becomes shadowed by an alertness to death as the terminal arrival. Above all, *Enigma* depicts a homecoming of sorts to the Wilshire estate of Waldenshaw, where Naipaul takes up residence.

In composing *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul invents postcolonial pastoral. There is decidedly no other British writer of Caribbean or South Asian ancestry who would have chosen a tucked-away Wiltshire perspective from which to reflect on the themes of immigration and postcolonial decay. No other British writer of Caribbean or South Asian ancestry would have chosen a tucked-away Wiltshire perspective from which to reflect on the themes of immigration and postcolonial decay.
terms, his own presence in England, the version of England Naipaul ultimately faces is a garden county suffused by an ambiance of Constable, Ruskin, Goldsmith, Gray’s *Elegy*, and Hardy; of chalk downs, brookside strolls, footbridges, bridle paths, Stonehenge, and delicate beds of peonies. Naipaul stations himself in a cottage on the fringe of an estate from where he observes, with a half-respectful, half-erotic voyeurism, the withering of his aristocratic landlord’s hold on his property and health alike.

*Enigma* stages Naipaul’s transformation into an English writer, in the old and new senses of the phrase. He elects himself to the great pastoral tradition of English literature, but his postcolonial presence there ensures that he both continues and disrupts the lineage. A temperamental fascination with decay

had been given me as a child in Trinidad partly by our family circumstances: the half-ruined or broken-down houses we lived in, our many moves, our general uncertainty. Possibly, too, this mode of feeling went deeper and was an ancestral inheritance, something that came with the history that had made me; not only India, with its ideas of a world outside men’s control, but also the colonial plantations or estates of Trinidad, to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century—estates of which this Wiltshire estate, where I now lived, had been the apotheosis. Fifty years ago there would have been no room for me on the estate; even now my presence was a little unlikely.

Naipaul savors the irony of his liminal, postcolonial presence between the two estates—the colonial plantation that was his grandparents’ destiny and the English manorial grounds long sustained by the wealth drawn from such foreign properties. He detects a hint of historical justice that the waning of Waldenshaw should satisfy his enduring fascination with “a sense of glory dead,” a fascination instilled in him by empire in the first place. The effect is profoundly ambivalent. By inserting himself into a diorama of faded grandeur, Naipaul is able to disturb a certain notion of Englishness while warming his hands over the embers of the “real” England he inhabited in childhood fantasy, the England that never was but nonetheless existed, as we have seen, as a lifelong rebuke to Trinidad and the Third World for all they could never be.

In mulling over the construction of Naipaul’s authorial identity, *Enigma*, more generously than any of his previous work, accommodates self-criticism. And the stylistic amplitude that pervades Naipaul’s work begins to be matched by a munificence of spirit. Yet contradictions remain, for this self-interrogation repeats a late romantic ideology of the isolated, self-made author who dwells apart from the corrupting ideologies of the world. To achieve that elevated solitude—to survey his own presence in that pastoral scene—requires that he compose his isolation, not least through the textual extinction of his wife, Patricia, whose sustaining companionship in the manorial cottage is held from view. Her acknowledged presence would have jeopardized the uninterrupted “I” who is wedded to the Wiltshire landscape and, through it, gains entry into the lineage of romantic English pastoral.
Naipaul’s focus on the crumbling of a select England allows him to rein in his anger. (Although even here a viciousness may break loose to reveal the pleasure he gains from the vicarious class fantasy of admission to the gentry. On certain employees of the manor: “They were servants, all four. Within that condition

Ruin, in its unpopulated, bucolic English mode, becomes a ruminative, poetic affair, where in the Third World it made him irascible and accusatory.

(which should have neutered them) all their passions were played out.”) The absent England becomes as thematic as the one he chooses to represent. Behind the tender elegy to the manageable decline of Wiltshire stand the unmentioned circumstances of Brixton, Notting Hill, Tottenham, Southall, Bristol, Bradford, and Handsworth, communities of displaced minorities rife with the forms of racial and religious tensions and social dereliction Naipaul would have hounded down in the societies to which he ordinarily travels. Naipaul’s angle, ingenious yet perverse, screens out the violent decrepitude of London and Birmingham’s inner cities as well as the monumental industrial collapse of the rusting north, all regions where he could not have nurtured the sensation of his “oddity” or mused with delicate melancholy on the England of Roman conquerors and Camelot. Ruin, in its unpopulated, bucolic English mode, becomes a ruminative, poetic affair where in the Third World it made him irascible and accusatory.

A Turn in the South

Just two years after Enigma, Naipaul emerged with his first American book, the record of a journey through seven southeastern states undertaken over a period of four months. In his ventures through the South, we see the flowering of a whole new approach toward the sensation of travel:

Driving back one stormy afternoon in Mississippi from the Delta to Jackson, and excited by the dark sky, the rain, the lightning, the lights of cars and trucks, the spray that rose window-high from heavy wheels, I began to be aware of the great pleasure I had taken in traveling in the South. Romance, a glow of hopefulness and freedom, had already begun to touch the earlier stages of the journey: my arrival at Atlanta, the drive from there to Charleston.

In every Third World country he visited, traveling had been a necessary burden so that he might write; for the first time, outside Jackson, this gets reversed, and Naipaul wishes he could simply savor the delights of the trip itself, liberated from the anxiety of working it into words.

But more than that has changed. Remarkably, more than half of A Turn in the South falls between quotation marks. The implications are clear: Southerners deserve to be heard and Naipaul is quick to listen,
tardy in judgment. This approach rewards him richly. Had he adopted his customary intrusive, spiky manner, a man called Campbell would never have waxed lyrical about redneck culture, revealing to Naipaul (at a distance) a style of life that would emerge as the obsession and chief delight of the trip. Nor would Naipaul have come around to admiring civil rights leader Hosea Williams, after initially dismissing him as a glib performer on the protest circuit. And through steady listening and restrained questioning he draws on poet Jim Applewhite’s considerable insight into tobacco-curing, the wellsprings of his art, and what Naipaul calls—in a perfect phrase—“the religion of the past.”

Naipaul’s newfound tolerance and his almost reverential curiosity give A Turn in the South a novelistic edge. He clears sufficient space for his white characters to expand in rather than populating his narrative with ciphers of the particular national or cultural essence he is committed to indicting. For the kind of characterization absent from the southern book, one has only to turn back to his meeting with Sadeq, which, on the first page, sets the tone for Among the Believers. Sadeq gets expeditiously dismissed as simpleminded and sneering only to be replaced by a slew of figures (Pakistani, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Iranian) embodying Islamic resentment.

The Naipaul of A Turn of the South finds himself once more an atheist among the believers. Indeed, some of his finest insights reveal the versatility of religion in the South and the improbable alliances it sustains. But his stance toward both religious fundamentalism and racial tension becomes indulgent to a degree quite unlike his attitude to related phenomena in, say, Trinidad, Pakistan, and Malaysia. This discrepancy becomes especially stark in his writing about southern evangelists and racists, of both the genteel and redneck varieties.

Among these fundamentalists, Naipaul exercises remarkable self-government, coming to accept southern Christianity as a necessary irrational compensation for the anguish and fractured order of the past. His preferred tone is generous and reflective rather than snappish, pusillanimous, and unforgiving. The contrast with his earlier Indian and Islamic writings—where he condemns all forms of religion as stifling, sentimentally seduced by the past, irrational, and antiquated—could scarcely be more pointed. Naipaul’s lopsided secularism calls to mind the furor, stirred up by the Rushdie affair, over the British decrees that define blasphemy as an offense, not against religion, but against Christianity.

A Turn in the South is the only one of Naipaul’s travel books to be principally about white culture. It is also the only one of which any reviewer could say, as did Thomas D’Evelyn in the Christian Science Monitor, that “Naipaul tries so hard not to offend that it’s hard not to be offended.” Yet that statement is only selectively accurate as Naipaul’s newfound tact retains a racial slant. As Arnold Rampersad first observed in an acute essay on A Turn in the South, the book betrays an imbalance in the distribution of Naipaul’s sympathies and attention to the point of bigotry.
Transfixed by country-and-western music’s inventiveness, he remains silent about blues and jazz. White writers get a full billing as artists, black writers are scaled down to representatives of racial frenzy or despair. In encounters with southern churchfolk and political leaders, too, Naipaul manages to uncover the noble pathos of a vanishing past amidst white southern communities, but among black communities, he unearths self-violation and back-to-back dereliction. Predictably, Naipaul finds himself drawn to Booker T. Washington while recoiling in irritation from the more radical W. E. B. Du Bois. Naipaul’s general disdain toward southern black culture contains dim echoes of his more violent dismissals of Caribbean culture, like his scoffing account of Trinidadian Carnival “as a version of the lunacy that kept the slave alive.”

Naipaul’s writing about Wiltshire admitted, for the first time, a note of wistful reverence into his prose, a tone so evidently tied to his newfound capacity for dwelling—in the deep, affirmative sense of that word—in a cordial landscape. That harmoniousness is matched by the sensation, during his southern turn, that he has completed the most congenial journey of his life. By the end one feels that it was a voyage he had always half-knowingly sought while unable to anticipate its shape or location. Especially in the final third of the book, a sustained meditation on the pathos of redneck culture, the elegiac tone of The Enigma of Arrival returns. Again, the normally disputatious Naipaul is reduced to whispered devotion by his immersion in a beleaguered culture of white, agrarian ruin. If he views both black and redneck worlds as tragic, pained by the knowledge of “the past as a wound,” only the rednecks get embraced with all the emotion of a cause. Here Naipaul’s enchantment with country-and-western music becomes symptomatic of the turn to elegy: it is the cultural form that expresses, most consummately, white melancholy and loss.

For the first time in his lifelong travels, Naipaul agrees to recognize a culture’s transcendental, mythologized past as a viable consolation rather simply than a debilitating prop:

The past transformed, lifted above the actual history, and given an almost religious symbolism: political faith and religious faith running into one. I had been told that the conservatives of North Carolina spoke in code. The code could sometimes be transparent: “Tobacco Is a Way of Life” being the small farmer’s plea for government money. But in this flat land of small fields and small ruins there were also certain emotions that were too deep for words.

This passage paves the way for the book’s resolution, not the enervated, exasperated departure scene that recurs across Naipaul’s Third World travelogues, but a scene of a quite contrary emotional inten-
sity that has Naipaul and the Southern poet, James Applewhite, bonding in an almost sacramental moment. As Applewhite cradles memories of his rich yet depleted past, Naipaul enters a condition of quasi-religious transport and recovers, rapturously, a childhood rendered dormant by denial.

In Applewhite’s phrase, the South is apt to “cherish the unreasonable, the unreasoning.” Yet these irrational strains in the culture—religious fervor, overzealous community loyalties, and ritual attachments to myths of the past—are exactly what Naipaul finds most moving about the South, even when they manifest themselves in a hidebound disciple of Jesse Helms. He finds, stirring in himself, a special affinity for an ethos that melds fierce frontier individualism with fidelity to a close-knit community. Above all, he identifies with the South’s obsessive toying with history. This version of the South helps him salvage affecting memories from his own Trinidadian childhood, a past he once so forcibly rejected. Time and again, as he stumbles on an unimagined bridge between the southern and the West Indian past, serendipity breaks through and his reflections acquire an edge of self-affirmation.

A Turn in the South should ultimately be read, not just as Naipaul’s solitary experiment in First World travel writing, but as the consummation of his New World ventures. As such it can be recognized—despite the new tone—as the final volume of his slave society trilogy, a book that strikes a truce with the Trinidadian past he had written off, with such bewildered ran-

cor, in The Middle Passage and The Loss of El Dorado.

Applewhite, in a memoir about his encounter with Naipaul, speaks of their shared desire to cherish

the illusion of being co-originators of a narrative that solaced both our hurts from early ignorance and cultural dispossession, creating out of the harsh sun and weedlike leaf and sight of its harvesting a culture-story with both a before and an after, antecedent and consciousness: a story out of an ignorance and a folly which explained.

One may read in Applewhite’s words more than simply a recollection of a moment of high union. For they convey something larger about the shift in Naipaul’s perspective begun by “Prologue to an Autobiography” and carried forward by The Enigma of Arrival, A Turn in the South, and India: A Million Mutinies. His determined disowning of a past that had injured him resulted in a lifelong sensation of severance, which he dubiously portrayed as “homelessness.” It is only in these later works that he finds the forms of forgiveness—both literary and emotional—that would allow him to reintegrate the perpetual present of elected abandonment into unbroken narrative. This restitution of the past lies at the very heart of his late middle-aged inquiry into the enigma of arrival.

One feels gratified to see Naipaul’s writing recover a generosity not seen since A House for Mr. Biswas. He seems, once more, capable of an emotion that borders, at times, on something like hope. Several factors lie behind this altered mood: his
growing awareness of death, his reac-
quaintance with family grief, his return
(and that is surely part of age) with fresh
passion to the painful tensions of his
youth. All of these seem to me crucial, yet
on their own insufficient, explanations. It
remains too grim an irony that this new
self should first emerge from under its car-
pace when England and the United States

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shift from being merely his audiences to
becoming the subjects of his prose. One
observes an insidious correspondence be-
tween a change of heart and a change of
location. By Naipaul’s standards of af-
front, even his diminution of the achieve-
ments of black American culture falls short
of his customary abuse. To say as much is
not to detract from the force of the injus-
tice, but merely to suggest that in writing
about America for Americans he comes
under pressure to curb some of his more
splenetic prejudices. He evidently felt no
such pressure in “The Crocodiles of
Yamoussoukro,” for instance, when giv-
ing credence to expatriate rumors that can-
nibalism exists in the Ivory Coast.

Naipaul remarks how, in writing up his
American travels, he had to adjust his ap-
proach to the genre because the United
States is “not open to casual inspection,
unlike Africa.” That vague “Africa,” he
intimates, has the transparency of a simple
society. Yet his altered approach to travel
ought to be seen less as a response to the
differences between an opaque complex
society and a transparent “simple” one
than as a consequence of a different kind of
answerability. Had he inspected the
United States with the casualness with
which he skimmed the Ivory Coast and
Zaïre, the American reviewers and readers
on whom he depends would have dragged
A Turn in the South to the slaughterhouse.

How are we now to read the harsh po-
lemics in his Third World travel writings,
where much of his energy went into ex-
coriating precisely those tendencies
which, in The Enigma of Arrival and A
Turn in the South, receive sympathetic,
even heroic treatment? For the first time,
fixations with the past—his own and
others’—are not dismissed as self-
destructive or escapist but found to be
brimming with poetic pathos. In The Mid-
dle Passage, Afro-Caribbean efforts to re-
connect themselves with Africa—imagin-
atively and emotionally—got brushed
aside as nostalgic, as the “sentimental ca-
maraderie of skin.” And in the Argentina
of The Return of Eva Peron, Naipaul dis-
cerned “legend and antiquarian romance,
but no real history.” Yet what finer def-
inition could one imagine of the white
plantation tales that so engage Naipaul
than “antiquarian romance?”

Naipaul might feasibly have called his
American book The South: A Wounded
Civilization. But that would have defeated the redemptive dimension best suggested by the chapter titles—“The Truce with Irrationality,” “The Religion of the Past,” “Sanctities.” Yet in India: A Wounded Civilization, his stance toward any show of devotion to the past was scoured of fascination and indulgence. His admonition to India was categorical: “the past has to be seen as dead, or the past will kill.”

India: A Million Mutinies Now

A Turn in the South had been billed as Naipaul’s final venture in travel. But he found, in writing it, such revived spirits and such a fresh conception of the form’s possibilities that, far from heralding his retirement, the American book spurred him to embark on the journey that would produce his most ambitious and epic work. Made in 1969, the trip took him to Bombay, Goa, Chandigarh, Bangalore, and Madras, then up to Calcutta, Lucknow, and Punjab, and ending in Kashmir at the Hotel Liward for a rendezvous with the former self who resided and wrote there at the close of his first Indian voyage in 1962.

India: A Million Mutinies Now marks the most decisive new departure in Naipaul’s career since he exchanged the profound social commentary of A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) for the uncontrolled, skidding invective of The Middle Passage a year later. To get a measure of his latest shift in orientation and tone, one has only to contrast his lacerating indictment of Gandhi in India: A Wounded Civilization (the section is entitled “Not Ideas, But Obsessions”) with his positive buoyancy when asked, in 1990, his opinion of the mahatma: “I adore him. . . . He’s a fabulous man. . . . He is a man whose life, when I contemplate it, makes me cry; I am moved to tears.”

The Indian edition of A Million Mutinies Now carries, on the back cover, a delightfully uncharacteristic photo of the newly animated Naipaul in action. It departs radically from the standard dustjacket shot of him gazing at the camera year after year, book after book, with marmoreal impassivity. Normally, so little does his posture change that the gradual aging of his portraits seems virtually computer simulated. Hence the shock of the new photo: it catches him in profile outdoors, complete with sunglasses and a colored handkerchief draped over his head, while making jottings on a little pad. The snap has a positively jaunty, unbuttoned feel to it. Above all, that hanky, which seems to signal “I’m in thick with the locals.”

The photo conveys with instinctive precision the difference in approach between this and every other work in which Naipaul has faced an Asian, African, Caribbean, Latin American, or Middle Eastern society. The least polemical of his travel books, it is also the one where he breaks loose from the straightjacketing idiom of his paradigm—primitivism, barbarism, mimicry, parasitism, and self-violation—that had given the bulk of his work such a reiterative character. He had,
of course, first moved beyond such terms in *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Turn in the South*, but as those departures had coincided with his arrival as a literary voyager on British and American soil, they confirmed rather than erased one’s sense of his resolute prejudices.

The change in tenor is inseparable from a change in form. One can perhaps best depict *A Million Mutinies Now* as a halfway house between oral history and travel writing. Long swathes of the book, particularly during the first half, have the texture of a work like *Blood of Spain*, Ronald Fraser’s oral history of the Spanish Civil War. The analogy is partial, but conveys the sense of a roving, literary-minded professional listener, someone restrained in his interference and whose restraint becomes a measure of his enthusiastic investment.

In an interview, Naipaul explains the lure of this altered approach:

> The idea of letting people talk in the book on the South was really quite new to me. And so in this book I thought it was better to let India be defined by the experience of the people, rather than writing one’s personal reaction to one’s feeling about being an Indian and going back—as in the first book [*An Area of Darkness*]—or trying to be analytical, as in the second book [*India: A Wounded Civilization*].

Even the most generous interviewing is never disinterested, and Naipaul’s remark that he holds “no views, no philosophy—just a bundle of reactions,” is as silly as it ever was. Just as in *A Turn in the South*, black southerners were more apt than white to be spoken for, in *A Million Mutinies Now*, even when women’s experience is the subject Naipaul’s interlocutors are unremittingly male. They also emerge as mostly urban, middle aged, and middle class.

Nonetheless, the scores of life stories, all told in the first person, make for such an utterly different effect from what one

*In the realm of the senses, his ear has dethroned his imperious eye*

has come to expect from Naipaul. How unlike his method in *Among the Believers*, where his slash-and-burn orientalism laid interviews waste in advance. And how unlike *An Area of Darkness* where, as Naipaul himself intimates in the closing moments of *A Million Mutinies*, he was, fresh off the boat from England, too nervous, too introverted to intuit what questions to ask. Indeed, although he still defends *An Area of Darkness* as belonging to its moment, we can read *A Million Mutinies Now* as a compensatory sequel twenty-seven years deferred.

Naipaul’s oft-reiterated claim that he looks and sees where others blindly obsess has, over the course of his oeuvre, accrued the force of a controlling metaphor. Now finally, in the realm of the senses, his ear has dethroned his imperious eye. Naipaul’s decision to give the locals more air time is a gesture of great formal cunning. For the centrifugal scattering of voices
voices stages his overriding concern with the dispersion of India, the dismembering of the nation's body politic under pressure from a myriad mutinies.

Like the term “Mau Mau” in Kenya, “mutiny” in India is a colonial word that implies a colonial vantage point. Naipaul polemically dismisses the 1857 uprising as warranting the alternative appellation, “First War of Indian Independence”; he finds it too aggrandizing. Instead, he stays with “mutiny” and finds in that historically charged word the presiding trope for his book.

In tracking a myriad mutineers across India, Naipaul may ultimately overtax the term: it covers everything from regional secessionist movements to religious and caste chauvinisms—ex-Naxalite, Dalit, Shiv Sena, Dravidians Aryan, Muslim, and Sikh—to middle-class individuals (stockbrokers, film makers) tinkering with the edges of caste rituals in order, say, to make a commuter life in Bombay more manageable. Naipaul’s perception of all these as mutinies becomes crucial for the book’s central paradox: India has entered a state of regenerative disintegration. As Naipaul remarks: “strange irony—the mutinies were not to be wished away. They were part of the beginning of a new way for many millions, part of India’s growth, part of its restoration.” An even stranger irony: Naipaul has been charged—surely for the first time—with gratuitous, irresponsible, wilful optimism.

So once more, Naipaul stirs controversy, though of an unfamiliar kind. In the book’s most contentious formulation, he writes of

A million mutinies supported by twenty kinds of group excess, sectarian excess, religious excess, regional excess; beginnings of self-awareness, a central will, a central intellect, a national idea. The Indian Union as greater than the sum of its parts.

This is probably a minority view, although not a unique one. Amitav Ghosh, for instance, has recently seen some glimmerings of possibility in the emergence of new Indian coalitions and new conceptions of identity. Amidst the spiralling violence, he argues that

What is really at issue is the question of finding a political structure in which diverse groups of people can voice their grievances through democratic means. It seems to me that India is indeed lurching in fits and starts toward finding such a structure. . . . In many ways, the turmoil is a sign of the astonishing energy that India has generated over the last couple of decades.

But there remains a distinctively autobiographical dimension to Naipaul’s political conclusions. The book could not have been written at any other point in his career. It is as if, in projecting mutiny as a prelude to healing, he envisages Indian history as mirroring and thereby ratifying his personal passage from a sensibility of ruin toward late restoration. Amidst his swirling interviewees, many of them bewildered or panicked, the lasting image of Naipaul is of a man becalmed in the eye of a storm. Newly whole, in the sense of having made peace with the places of his past, he no longer cultivates and wields against others his wounded sense of having inherited—to invoke a keenly subconti-
nental word—a partitioned life. Where once he would have clasped Rashid, a Lucknow Muslim, with the dead hand of cynicism, now he responds with an empathy reminiscent of the intense fellow feeling he achieved with Jim Applewhite. Nowhere more so than when Rashid laments:

_I also know that I can never be a complete person now. I can't ignore partition. It's a part of me. I feel rudderless... The creation and existence of Pakistan has damaged a part of my psyche. I simply cannot pretend it doesn't exist._

Despite its startling freshness, *India: A Million Mutinies* is far from being a tabula rasa. The book bears the traces of many of Naipaul's lasting themes, such as his vision of extended family life as an analog for the corruption of collective political endeavor. Listening to Kala, a woman of Tamil brahmin origins, articulate her experience of familiar confinement, Naipaul is suddenly thrust back on his own memories:

_The clan that gave protection and identity, and saved people from the void, was itself a little state, and it could be a hard place, full of politics, full of hatreds and changing alliances and moral denunciations. It was the kind of family life I had known for much of my childhood: an early introduction to the ways of the world, and to the nature of cruelty. It had given me, as I suspected it had given Kala, a taste for the other kind of life, the solitary or less crowded life, where one had space around oneself._

Naipaul has stressed this analogy so frequently over his forty-year career for it to be central to any account of his suspicion of joint endeavors organized for political change. He invariably perceives a collective circle less as a community responsive to needs than as a noose, strangling the possibilities for solitude. And so prior to the recent emergence of his understated, forgiving (if still intermittently bigoted) self, his standard impulse was to demonstrate that in Third World societies, to engage in political resistance or cultural self-assertion was to become implicated in pointless, compromised, misguided, ignoble endeavors. Naipaul thus ended up—at times openly, at times by default—sanctioning the status quo. Such trademarked Naipaul phrases as the “congruent corruptions of colonizer and colonized,” “the negative colonial politics of protest,” and his skepticism about the “healing power” of “political and racial assertion” convey, in capsule form, his tenacious preference for inertia over resistance.

In an interview, Naipaul once came to reflect self-critically on this personal and political predilection, characterizing himself as “unable to take decisive action on behalf of anything: it is very hard to be against. I am aware that I have probably been rather feeble and non-involved.” Yet strictly speaking, only the latter part of the statement is accurate, for he has long found it easy to be against againstness—in Eugene Goodheart’s words, “if Naipaul moralizes against anything, it is against resentment.” Goodheart’s phrasing is precisely Naipaulian in reducing political action to an expression of temperament. The image of Naipaul lecturing against “resentment” is also in accord with his loathing for “causes.” Yet collective action requires binding causes, requires what Naipaul would call obsessions and what others might call commitments. Without
causes to galvanize them, without grievances, the struggles for decolonization could never have been launched nor could formal independence (however inadequate the achievements) have been attained. Indeed, the colonizers frequently dismissed such struggles as irruptions of “native resentment”—the ingratitude of the disempowered.

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul surveys the trajectory of his career and concludes that “to see the possibility, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament.” One would be hard-pressed to word more succinctly what, prior to his latest work, became one of the great continuities of his sensibility. That same eye for ruin prompted him to embrace Conrad’s assertion that “something inherent in the necessities of successful action . . . carried with it the moral degradation of the idea,” and to deem the shortfall between idea and act so severe in Third World societies as to render action self-defeating.

Naipaul’s fascination with ruin—he once described himself as an ironist rather than a satirist, as satire presumes a modicum of optimism—long rendered him an incompetent observer of regeneration and resistance. His attitude to imperialism has, moreover, been contradictory: disliking the effects of imperialism, he tends to find imperial ideas more compelling than those which have braced anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles. His affection for the high style of that “sense of glory lost” only sharpens this tendency. His position is further complicated in that his criticisms of the effects of imperialism are readily metamorphosed into anger at those who bear the scars of that legacy. What, for instance, is one to make of his remark that “my sympathy for the defeated, the futile, the abject, the idle and the parasitic gets less and less as I grow older”? The cluster of nominal epithets illustrates his incorrigible weakness for that imperial tradition of thought which brackets subjugation with idleness.

Naipaul’s obsession with ruin has long been yoked to his indifference to action, just as his moralizing about “resentment” has been coupled to a lack of moralizing about domination. His vision is critical but scarcely ever remedial. It has no need to be. Scathing of the bad faith of metropolitan tourists who take their return-ticket security for granted, Naipaul himself has not always been candid about the privileges which cocoon his critical license. Counseling despair is the traveler’s prerogative, a luxury item available to all for whom withdrawal by boat or air provides a personal solution, relieving them of the pressure to act. Others who remain have to live with the gap between the idea and its implementation. If they seek wider control over the circumstances of their survival, they will persist in acting, with the conviction that, while the rift may never be closed, it may, however, be profitably narrowed.