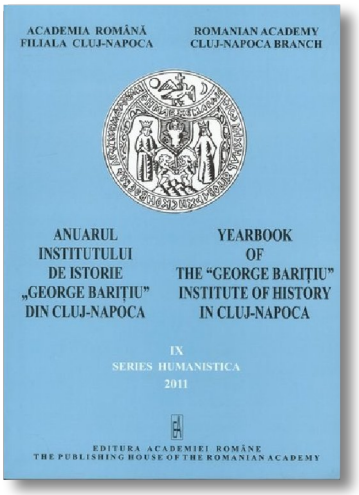

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SELF, WRITING, AND MEMORY: ILLUSORY NATURE OF EXISTENCE IN *THE MIMIC MEN* [1]

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Abstract. *The notions of "self" (which are "imaginary roles") and the notion of "home" (which is made up of "imaginary landscapes") are at the core of Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul's* ***The Mimic Men*** *novel. These notions find themselves in the analyzed novel in a dialectical relationship with each other; but it is a dialectic that does not and cannot reach the point of sublation. Self-objectification and the main character's inability to consider himself whole are also important to the novel, as is writing and its function to try to preserve or create the self. Writing lies at the very center of the exiled subjectivity's malaise, that it is the thing that both authorizes and, ultimately, frustrates the attempt for fullness or completeness. It is no mistake that in describing the frustration of Ralph Singh, the narrator from Naipaul's* ***The Mimic Men****, to find himself, his "homeland", an authentic political position, or to understand his (his)story, the readers are often couched in the terms of literary discourse. The Mimic Men brings the questions of memory and writing into close proximity. The novel's protagonist is not quite sure of some of the facts of his life and explicitly states, "The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have." This, however, is not merely an acceptance of the uncertainties of memory or even of the impossibility of saying specifically what one means. The edited version of his life, his written life, is all he has. There is no notion of his life beyond the writing of it. Even his life – in the same way that the landscapes and history were--is imaginary. Still, in the process of writing, Naipaul's narrator accepts the illusory nature of existence, its lack of completeness.*

Key words: ***existence –*** *including illusory,* ***histor****y,* ***home –*** *and homeland, including imaginary homeland(s),* ***journey****;* ***memory****;* ***self*** *(notion) – and self-objectification,* ***writing.***

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One of the most pressing concerns of *The Mimic Men*'s narrator, Ralph Singh, is with the nature of his writing. Repeatedly, the novel's protagonist returns to a meta-literary consideration of the process of writing, what he is writing and, perhaps more importantly, what he is not writing. Early in the novel, he makes the following statement, summing up for himself and the reader what is at stake in the story he tells for himself, for the land that he has helped to rule and for the state of society that has come through the era of empire and colonial power: "It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfillment only within the security of their own societies and the landscape hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about... But this work will not now by written by me. I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject."[3]

It should be clear from the passage that no matter how great a novel like *The Mimic Men* undoubtedly is, it is also –in the eyes of its fictional narrator – a failure. It is an exercise in incompleteness. Rather than mastering its subject, the "restlessness," the "disorder," and the "great upheaval," such an aim is made futile through the very thing that it sought to describe. Instead, all the author can hope to write about is himself, his life, and his dreams. Unable to engage fully with the project of writing about the motions and fragilities of history, he turns instead to the task of biography: to know the self, to write the self. Nonetheless, he finds even this much more humble ambition is also difficult to achieve. For like the book he would have written, *The Mimic Men*'s narrator is somewhat incomplete. Ralph Singh as a writing subject, as well as the great history he would have written, is a victim of the inability to explain the post-colonial situation.

Self-objectification is at the core of Naipaul's narrator and his inability to consider himself whole. Ralph Singh plays roles: the nervous child in class, the dandified colonial in London, the bourgeois landowner when he returns to the Island of Isabella, and the socialist politico in his career as the leader of the mob. These roles depend on his being seen by people who will, consequently, consider him something he is not. The narrator admits this when he compares himself to a needy fellow student who constantly requires affirmation. In many ways, they are similar: "He was like me: he needed the guidance of other men's eyes."[4] Equally, we are left in no doubt that this assumption of a role, the mimicry and outward show of thoughts and feelings, not authentic, is tied up entirely with the narrator's status as an exile – not just an exile from his home, Isabella, while he is in England, but also as an exile from his "native" Asiatic home, an exile from his father, and an exile from his social class: "We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing for life, we mimic men of the new world."[5]

[3] Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1967, p. 38.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 23.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 175.

The narrator's overseas journey to London performs a much more important function in the novel than simply changing the scenery or the setting. The journey overseas is an attempt to find the "real country" – the country that will confirm the narrator's being, a place where he can be in control of his world and himself. It is precisely for this reason that the novel's protagonist determines to leave Isabella to go to school in London. It is also the reason why he will later leave London to return to Isabella and then, when his political career leaves him in ruins, take the opportunity to return to London under the pretence of leading the bauxite delegation: "[I]t was now that I resolved to abandon the ship-wrecked island and all on it and to seal my chieftainship in that real world from which, like my father, I had been cut off [...] I was consciously holding myself back for the reality which lay elsewhere."[6]

Again, the notions of placing a "seal" on himself, certifying his worth and his certainty, and gaining control of his world through a "chieftainship" are to the fore. However, as in the rest of the novel, this hope is not fulfilled: indeed, it cannot be fulfilled. "Reality" does not simply lie "elsewhere" geographically, and one cannot take a plane or a boat to it. "Reality" is structurally foreign; it is necessarily "elsewhere" because of the systematic nature of identity. A subject's identity is not fixed. It is not a concept that admits to it the possibility of arrival. As Michel Foucault points out, we can no longer arrive at the answer to the question of what the self is, we must instead ask, "Departing from what ground shall I find my identity?"[7]

The notions of "self" (which are "imaginary roles") and the notion of "home" (which is made up of "imaginary landscapes") are in a dialectical relationship with each other; but it is a dialectic that does not and cannot reach the point of sublation. For, when Naipaul's narrator attempts to confirm the veracity of his Asiatic past by the certainty of his subjectivity ("I am a Singh"), it is clearly an illusion. Equally, when he tries to confirm his identity by means of its adherence to a landscape (for example, in London when he plays the "rich colonial, " a role suited to someone from his part of the world), it is nothing more than a role that is plucked from the stereotypes of imperialist discourse. Neither reaches the point of consummating the other; neither reaches fulfillment.

Although the existential "restlessness" that we have seen Naipaul dramatize is not confined to the structure of the post-colonial situation, it is the post-colonial situation that confirms and exacerbates the difficulties in the interplay between subjectivity and landscape. As Alan Lawson has remarked, in his discussion of the movements of Westerners to colonial outposts, the changes caused by the movements of people have very large and wide reaching effects on social and subjective structures: "[...] the sense of distance, both within and without, was so

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 141.

[7] Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. I (*Ethics*), Paul Rainbow (ed.), New York, The New Press, 1997, p. 230.

great that a new definition of self-metaphysical, historical, cultural, linguistic and social – was needed"[8].

What is more, this new "definition of self, "unsure and fragile as it is, must necessarily be guaranteed by the colonial power; the new language, new culture, new metaphysics, are all held in place by the social systems of the invading power. This can be quite clearly seen by the cross-section of Isabella society provided by the narrator's school class at Isabella Imperial (the very name of the school belying its roots in colonial enterprise). The ascendancy of the white aristocracy is represented in the figure of Deschampneuf, black poverty in the shape of Browne. They, and all the strata of society in between, are held together by the school and its mimicry of empire – the teaching of the classical languages, the nicknames, and the master's behaviour.

This fragile concord, this new sense of self in the colonies, is shaken once more with the advent of post-colonialism and the freeing of former colonies. Naipaul's protagonist is centrally involved with the process on Isabella. He leads the political struggle against the oppression of the old colonial masters. But, rather than seeing the nationalistic struggle as an opportunity to forge a new identity, or to unite those who have been oppressed around a common ethical identity – this was certainly so in the cases of political activists and post-colonial thinkers like Fanon and Léopold Sédar Senghor – Naipaul is viewing the loss of colonial power as yet another blow to the possibility of forming any kind of cultural identity. He paints the post-colonial Isabella as a place with no direction or certainty. Just as in colonial times the country had no "[...] internal source of power, and no power was real that did not come from outside"[9]. Equally, the narrator has a certain fear of the mob whose belief in political ideals is "imaginary" and who, like the group that surrounded his father, only takes up the call to arms because they are searching for "drama"[10].

When Ralph Singh becomes a politician at the center of the freedom movement, he does so with little conviction. Indeed, the narrator believes that he and the people around him are once more playing parts in a drama. The things he does and says are mere mimicry. Where once the boys of imperial college mimicked the manners and beliefs of their colonizers, now they go through the mechanical motions of political process: "Borrowing phrases! Left-wing, right-wing: did it matter? […] we used to borrow phrases which were part of the escape from thought."[11] Overall, politics is presented as precisely this, "the escape from thought," one more symptom of the "restlessness" that is created by man's loss of

[8] Alan Lawson, *The Discovery of Nationality in Australian and Canadian Literatures*. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds.), London, Routledge, 1995, p. 169.

[9] V. S. Naipaul, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 153.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 237.

certainty in himself and in his landscape; it is another part he plays, another imaginary landscape he creates.

As such, the narrator leaves his political life and goes to stay in an English hotel, where he begins to write, creating the book that we have before us. By this meta-textual trick of foregrounding the act of reading and placing the artifact, the text, into the story of the life he has created, Naipaul is foregrounding the act of writing, giving it special prominence and demanding we pay attention to it. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the book that the narrator proposed to write never got written. His hope was to give some expression to the complex and multitudinous nature of the times he has lived through and to analyze their effects. In short, he wanted to write a history, "his story." The story or narration is not purely for his reader's information and entertainment; he wishes to satisfy an "urge" in himself and he hopes, by doing so, that he will find some kind of peace. He feels "the shock of the first historian's vision, a religious moment if you will, humbling, a vision of a disorder that was beyond any one man to control yet which, I felt, if I could pin down, might bring me calm"[12]. Ralph Singh hopes that by elucidating, and thus by taking control of the events of his history, he could quell the malaise, the dissatisfaction that he feels at his inability to be whole or find his "real homeland," that is ultimately to construct the real, authentic self.

However, the seeds of the impossibility and inevitable failure of his undertaking lie within his very statement. The thing he is trying to "pin down" is "beyond any one man to control". This is not merely because the extent and magnitude of the complexity that history offers to the poor historian is too great. It is because, like the self, like the homeland and like politics, history too lends itself to the play of the imaginary. If one searches for certainty and solidity from history, this search too will provide a merely illusory picture. We see it occurring in the very telling of the narrator's personal history. The narrator sees it too and shows a self-conscious distaste for the machinations of history even as he himself is writing it. For example, in the incident in which the Deschampsneuf's horse, Tomango, goes missing (and is found killed some days later, having been made part of a violent sacrifice), the narrator considers the way that the event has been passed down through history. He compares it to the 1913 Derby, at which Emily Davison's walking beneath the King's horse was a conscious act of writing history and enacting the body politics of the cause of women's suffrage.

The comparison is relevant to the author's and the narrator's view of history: "They are both events, which, becoming history, lose their horror and obscenity and appear the natural, almost logical, expression of a mood; they are events which now have been oddly expected and dramatically right."[13] History flattens the events of which it is made (just like the roles played by exiles in the London boarding

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 97.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 168.

house are "two dimensional"[14], and creates a simple picture, one that works as a dramatic spectacle. Although the narrator of *The Mimic Men* looks for some kind of calm, and perhaps a way of describing his incompleteness, he finds the same incompleteness in history. This is the main reason why the great history that the narrator had planned to write (in place of the novel we are reading) never gets finished.

It should be clear, by now, that writing lies at the very center of the exiled subjectivity's malaise, that it is the thing that both authorizes and, ultimately, frustrates the attempt for fullness or completeness. It is no mistake that in describing the frustration of the narrator to find himself, his "homeland," an authentic political position, or to understand his (his)story, the readers are often couched in the terms of literary discourse. Ralph Singh plays roles in a drama, and the landscapes that create his agency are imaginary. He speaks in borrowed phrases as he tries to find a way to express his historical experience. It is expression, narration, writing, that is placed as a central component of the "restlessness" that besets the novel's narrator and, beyond him, the exiled subjectivity. Yet, it is writing – not the writing of history, but a writing of a very different sort – that ameliorates, though perhaps does not solve, the narrator's difficulties to a point where he can proclaim, at the end of the novel, "I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city"[15].

The Mimic Men is certainly not a historical novel. Its narrative is non-linear, modernist, and it relies on the narrator at its center who, while not entirely reliable, determines both the shape and direction of his story's telling. Bruce King has called the work "a Caribbean East Indian rewriting of *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Remembrance of Things Past*"[16]. This probably does little service to V. S. Naipaul, both ghettoizing his work by its national origin and, implicitly, continuing the frankly racist comparison between the great Western canon and the inferior mimickers of the New World (cf. Saul Bellow's often quoted question: "Where is the Zulu Tolstoy?"[17]).

The comparison however does have a modernist slant and, like those works, Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* brings the questions of memory and writing into close proximity. The novel's protagonist is not quite sure of some of the facts of his life and explicitly states, "The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have"[18]. This, however, is not merely an acceptance of the uncertainties of memory or even of the impossibility of saying specifically what one means. The edited version of his life, his written life, is all he has. There is no notion of his life

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 17.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 300.
[16] Bruce King, *V. S. Naipaul*, New York, St. Martin's, 1993, p. 70–71.
[17] Qtd. in Gary Shapiro, *On the Post-Nationalist Writer*, 11 Feb. 2006, http://www.nysun.com/article/12795, accessed 15 Feb. 2011.
[18] V. S. Naipaul, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

beyond the writing of it. Even his life – in the same way that the landscapes and history were – is imaginary.

Still, in the process of writing, Naipaul's narrator accepts the illusory nature of existence, its lack of completeness. When he leaves Isabella for England, he finds a piece of paper slipped into the book, he suspects by his friend, Hok. On it, a simple message is written, an incomplete message, its incompleteness signalled by ellipses: "Some day we shall meet, and some day..." It is the open ending of this message that touches Singh, and gives him some kind of hope: There is something, after all in the staged occasion, the formal sentiment. It came to me on the ocean, this message ending in dots, telling me that all my notions of shipwreck were false, telling me this against my will, telling me I had created my past, that patterns of happiness or unhappiness had already been more or less decided[19].

He sees within the simplicity and formality of the message a solution to his dilemma that might save him from "shipwreck" (the word the narrator uses repeatedly to describe the feeling of being lost on the voyage towards his identity). "I had created my past," it tells him. There is something in the textual nature of the message, perhaps in its incompleteness, that allows him, rather than looking for his identity and his history as complete and solid structures, to see identity as something that he has created himself, as an imaginary object. Happiness or unhappiness is determined within that imaginary object. The text of the novel itself is like the tiny scrap of text on Hok's piece of paper and that it functions in the same way. In creating the imaginary artifact of the novel and thereby textualizing his life (for it is "the edited version"), the novel's protagonist, who is in many ways an alter ego of Naipaul himself, has enabled himself to break free from his dependence on a notion of completeness. He no longer fears shipwreck because he no longer hopes to achieve the dry land on which he once thought he stood – identity, a homeland, a history. Rather, he is happy to be awash in the sea of becoming. The narrator says he has found the book difficult to write, much more difficult than the articles he wrote during his political career. Those were written quickly and without effort because he was writing within the role that he had made for himself. He even says that the article about his father "wrote itself." While the article was "deeply dishonest," however, the book is – in a way that his great history could not have been--honest, because it accepts its own limitations: "The writing of this book has been more than a release from those articles; it has been an attempt to rediscover that truth."[20]

By the end of the novel, the writing process has done its work. The narrator no longer feels the restlessness he did before. Rather, in his almost location-less position, at his desk, in the country hotel (a residence for transients) that he has made his uneasy home, he believes that he has worked out to some extent the

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 214.
[20] *Ibidem*, p. 226.

contradictions of his being, the truth of his state. He thinks that he might now do something of worth: write a history of the Empire or go into business again. If he does so, he says, "[...] it will be the action of a free man." Writing has enabled Naipaul's protagonist in *The Mimic Men* to understand that he is neither singular nor an image of wholeness. It is writing – rather than marriage, politics, travel, education – that has allowed him to come to terms with his freedom. As such, there is some trepidation, as well as hope, at the end of that writing. "Yet some fear of action remains"[21], Singh says. Is there the possibility of action in the world (as opposed to writing, which is presented here as an innocence, an absence of action), action that does not rely on a return to the restlessness or role-playing from which writing has freed the narrator? The novel seems to suggest so.

The final image of the novel finds the narrator hiding behind a column, observing, but not interacting with a woman who was once his lover. Michael Gorra has suggested that the nature of post-colonialism is that there is "no way to become the sole author of the self. Texts are made of other texts. And so the frenzy and the fear, the raw nerves, the long line of books, the body of work built up as a stay against the pain of one's own dependency, desperately trying to write into being the self that one knows one can never fully achieve."[22] *The Mimic Man* appears to propose the precise opposite: that writing is the acceptance that the self can never be achieved. It is action, living in the world, that creates a dependency on the world, the "frenzy," the "fear".

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[21] *Ibidem*, p. 300.
[22] Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 7.