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## 'How is it going, Mr Naipaul?' Identity, Memory and the Ethics of Post-Colonial Literatures

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“How is it going?” - Identity and Memory in post-colonial literatures

**Dennis Walder**

*Open University, UK*

As Stuart Hall remarks at the beginning of a wide-ranging collection of essays exploring *Questions of Cultural Identity*, “There has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of ‘identity’, at the same moment as it has been subjected to a searching critique”. “How is this paradoxical development to be explained?” he continues. “And where does this leave us with the concept?” His account of the reasons why the question of identity is both compelling, and problematic, is enlightening. As he points out, various disciplinary areas have been engaged in a deconstructive critique of the notion of “an integral, originary and unified identity”, a critique that has been at the centre of post-Cartesian western metaphysics, but which has more recently been developed further within the discourses of a psychoanalytically-influenced feminism and a Marxist-influenced cultural criticism. In addition, according to Hall, “The endlessly performative self has been advanced in celebratory variants of postmodernism”; with the result that, as he puts it, within this broad, “anti-essentialist critique of ethnic, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity and the ‘politics of location’ some adventurous theoretical conceptions have been sketched in their most grounded forms. What, then, [he concludes] is the need for further debate about ‘identity’? Who needs it?”<sup>1</sup>

My immediate answer is, *we* do – and if, for now, I take “we” to denote those of us interested in post-colonial literatures, this paper is one attempt to frame an affirmative answer, in terms of a broader context than is usually brought into play under the post-colonial rubric. The difficulty of responding directly and straightforwardly to Hall’s question is highlighted by a telling moment at the beginning of one of the narratives of post-colonial literary studies, a moment of reflection prompted by the publication of a selection of papers from the first

Commonwealth Literature Conference held at Leeds in 1964, a selection edited by John Press of the British Council and published by Heinemann Educational in September 1965 – a month also marked by the appearance of the first number of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, edited by South African Arthur Ravenscroft. This striking concatenation of events included a moment of reflection articulated by one of the authors discussed at the Conference, V.S. Naipaul, who, when reviewing Press's book for the *New Statesman* on 24 September 1965, commented fretfully

Things move so fast nowadays, even in the Literature Schools. Commonwealth writing as we understand it is so new, and already it is being picked to pieces . . . it all seems to have been codified already. I know now, for instance, that the difference between the United States and Canada is that the United States had a revolution and Canada didn't. But I also get the impression that the point has been made so often before and has become such a received idea that it is now almost without meaning. Then there is the West Indian with his search for identity. Here is a phrase that has gone deep. Students already – how disquieting! – preparing theses, write or even telephone to say that they get the impression from my works that I am engaged in a search for identity. How is it going? At times like this I am glad to be only a name. I also feel that the search, whoever started it, has been pretty well abandoned; and that what might have been a genuine stumbling in the early stages is now regarded as a necessary posture.<sup>2</sup>

So already the theme of identity had, according to one of those writers identified with it, become a received idea, a phrase almost without meaning, a necessary posture. The speed with which the apparently new category of Commonwealth literary studies and its associated themes emerged and became institutionalised, despite the objections of writers like Naipaul, was striking, and does not need rehearsing here.<sup>3</sup>

But what Naipaul is really objecting to about this codifying and institutionalising of an aspect of literary study is something that has been going on for a long time, certainly predating the Commonwealth Literature Conference of 1964. Consider, for example, the account in R.K. Narayan's comic and poignant novel *The English Teacher* (1946) of the teacher Krishnan's decision to resign from his post at Albert Mission College, Malgudi:

I would send in a letter which would be a classic in its own way, and which would singe the fingers of whoever touched it. In it I was going to attack a whole century of false education. I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young

minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, as Krishnan argues with himself, “What fool could be insensible to Shakespeare’s sonnets or the *Ode to the West Wind*?” And “what about examinations and critical notes? Didn’t these largely take the place of literature?” All the ideas had been “uttered a hundred times before”, and merely attacking the system would look like “a rehash of an article entitled ‘Problems of High Education’, which appeared again and again in a week-end educational supplement - the yarn some ‘educationist’ was spinning out for ten rupees a column.” “This is not what I want to say”, he mutters to himself. “There is something far deeper that I wish to say.” But instead, he writes “Dear Sir, I beg to tender my resignation for personal reasons. I request you to relieve me immediately . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Narayan does not even attempt to tell the reader what that something far deeper is that his narrator wishes to say, but, ironically, his English teacher goes on to use that same functional register the imperial masters taught the cultural “morons” of India, as a way of resolving his dilemma, while avoiding the tired oppositional clichés of the local “educationists”.

Anticipating what Gauri Viswanathan was to go on and show at much greater length in *Masks of Conquest* some forty years later, about the imposition of English studies as an instrument of colonial control and cultural assimilation,<sup>6</sup> Narayan’s narrator nonetheless desires to maintain a grip on the classics of the English canon that have shaped his sense of who he is (as they also shaped Narayan, whose father was an English teacher). In other words, at the same time as questions of personal, cultural and national identity are raised, Narayan avoids direct engagement with them, leaving them, so to speak, “under erasure”.

This Derridean notion helps us towards one kind of answer to the question, of why we need continue discussing identity, despite the tiredness of the issue. Stuart Hall suggests that unlike those forms of critique “which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with ‘truer’ ones, or which aspire to the production of positive knowledge, the deconstructive approach puts key concepts ‘under erasure’.”(p.1) Although they have not been entirely superseded, and we

have to continue to think with them, we do so in terms which take us beyond the paradigm in which they were originally generated: operating “under erasure” means trying to think through the interval we have created between reversal to an earlier model and the emergence of a newer way of thinking. But where might we find a set of discourses that promote this sense of identity as thus unsettled, hovering between reversal towards an older model as a matter of geographical and religious and historical fixity on the one hand, and a newer model as a process of struggle towards something decentred and deferred?

Prompted in the first instance by writers rather than critics or theorists, I have found one starting-point for developing such discourses through the work of V.S. Naipaul, whose resistance to being labelled is itself part of what intrigues, as is the fact that for him, identity is as central as it is complex and unresolved, generating a continuous rewriting of the same stories from different perspectives and within different genres – most substantially, perhaps, in *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), although typically that work has been - not superseded, but qualified and redefined by more recent writing, such as *Reading and Writing* (2000).

As Naipaul remarks in *Reading and Writing*, Narayan’s “world is not as rooted and complete as it appears”.<sup>7</sup> Indeed not. Yet Narayan’s method, though lighter in touch than Naipaul’s, anticipates the later author’s urge to record the reactions of people caught within situations of profound and continuing cultural and historical disjuncture, by using narrators who are themselves entangled participants. Of course Naipaul’s vision of the struggles of his protagonists and alter egos to find themselves involves a level of alienation, violence and despair that contrasts sharply with Narayan’s quietly affirmative view of the continuing validity of Hindu mythology in the present, whatever complexities Narayan may reveal in relation to his Anglophone inheritance. Yet I cannot imagine Naipaul’s writing supporting a narrator who, like Narayan’s English teacher, ends up communicating with his dead wife, a wife who appears to him in person at the end of his narrative so that, in the words of the concluding paragraph of *The English Teacher*,

We stood at the window, gazing on a slender, red streak over the eastern rim of the earth. A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy – a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death.

The boundaries of Naipauls' characters never "dissolve" - except perhaps as a sign of insanity, for instance in the central (Green Vale) section of *A House for Mr Biswas*, when the disintegration of Biswas' character takes the reader into another, non-realist realm. But apart from such moments, Naipaul's characters are distinct in their often precarious apartness; nor does his kind of realism allow for the acceptance of the kind of fantasy or myth apparent in Narayan. Yet Naipaul's narrators do share a driving need to define themselves, often in terms that involve taking up a position in relation to the long traditions of English literature – or indeed, in relation to the newer traditions of Commonwealth or post-colonial literatures, despite the author's explicit objections to the premature codification of issues generated by their institutional arrival.

Thus Derrida's notion of a concept lying "under erasure" (*sous rature*), with its implications of thinking in or across margins, or indeed more materially of writing as *re-* or *overwriting*, seems an apt concept to prompt a rethinking of Naipaul's ongoing project – a project transformed, as Stuart Murray has observed, from *Finding the Centre* (1984) onwards, and most fully exemplified in *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), a work Murray rightly calls a "new departure" that made it "increasingly difficult to accommodate him within the paradigm of postcolonial writing."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Naipaul's "new departure" is defined by those disarmingly frank passages in *The Enigma of Arrival* about his own writing, when the narrator remarks that it became necessary, after the success of his first "inspiration" - writing fast and very simply about the street in Port of Spain where he had spent part of his childhood, when he realised that his subject was not his "inward development", but "the worlds I contained within myself"<sup>9</sup> – after that initial illumination, it became necessary to "acknowledge more of myself" before going on to explore "India" (surrounded with scare-quotes to highlight its constructed nature), the India of his forefathers and an India that he had as he says "partly grown up in" and "that was like a loose end in my mind, where our past suddenly stopped.

There were no models for me here; in this exploration; neither Forster nor Ackerley nor Kipling could help. To get anywhere in the writing, I had first of all to define myself very clearly to myself” (pp.140-1). But that clarity eludes him, as he goes on to pursue the earlier self that has travelled from Trinidad to London upon a journey he identifies with the journeys of all those whose “restlessness and the need for a new idea of the self” had driven them from the New to the Old World (p.145).

In *The Enigma of Arrival* we follow the narrator’s attempt to root himself within that Old World, in an ancient English landscape. The attempt seems at first to succeed, but it is then defined as a mere writer’s fantasy, so that in the final section of the novel, which begins as a meta-narrative about trying to write a book called *The Enigma of Arrival*, it is admitted that “the story had become more personal, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing, rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end.” (p.309) That “end” is both the end of this fiction, and the end of his life up till then; but it is also the completed life of his sister, whose funeral rites he has returned to Trinidad to take part in, a return that forces him to face the extinction of self he has been fearing night after night in the repeated dream of an exploding head. Coming together with his grieving family enables him to experience “a real grief where melancholy had created a vacancy . . . And that was when . . . I laid aside my drafts and hesitations and began to write very fast about Jack and his garden.”(p.318) That is, accepting his familial grief as part of his present identity, enabled him to write about the neighbour who had come to stand as an image of that rooted, communal yet hierarchical Englishness he desired, and wished, vainly, to identify with.

I say vainly, because although there is a sense in which the narrator (who both is, and is not the author Naipaul) – although there is a sense in which the narrator *does* identify with this vanished or dying Englishness, most notably in that part of the novel when he remarks that he “felt at one with my landlord” (p.174), he is at the same time unable to forget the history that lies between himself and that landlord, the history of empire, so that while he

feels “in tune with what I saw, or thought I saw” on the Wiltshire estate, he is also “nervous” of undoing the “magic of the place.” (p.175) For the author Naipaul, no place is immune to decay and corruption, not even the imagined, idealised, orderly, and seemingly powerful centre to which, like other migrants, he yearned to go, but where he has found little more than indifference to his presence. Identifying with that idealised “other” brings to him simultaneously the warmth of recognition, and the chill of understanding that the other is a construct; not so much an identity found, as an *identification*, based on desire.

There is a telling realisation that, when the narrator describes himself in the first days of his departure from Trinidad, he does so as someone aware of *other* migrants: “In each [of whom] there were aspects of myself”, as he admits. The displaced narrator can, if only momentarily – yet it is a moment he feels compelled to record – this narrator *can* identify with the black man, whose awareness he shares of the excluding, racist classification invoked by the ship’s purser who wants to put them together in a cabin en route from New York to Southampton. Naipaul for once records an experience of identifying with those he is so often accused of expressing prejudice towards, although it is an experience of identification that he simultaneously wants to resist, because he believes it will diminish him: “Racial diminution formed no part of the material of the kind of writer I was setting out to be”, he says. But he is obliged to admit that at that point: “Thinking of myself as a writer, I was hiding my experience from myself; hiding myself from my experience.” (pp.115-7)

Hiding from his experience of racial classification while he records both the experience and his inadequate self-reflection upon it suggests the wider issues at stake here, while also delivering Naipaul at least momentarily from the usual identification of him as among the racists. The writer’s uncertain relation with his own experience of himself and his self-definition, points towards a second kind of answer to the question of how and why we might continue to think about identity, which is - that it requires us to think about what sort of problems arise in relation to it when faced by what Stuart Hall calls the apparent “irreducibility” of the concept: erasure is, as the metaphor implies, never complete –traces of



the original always remain. What are these problems? Problems of agency and politics, highlighted by Naipaul's account of the process of his own temporary subjectification to the politics of exclusion. Hence, according to Hall, there is a need to reconceptualise identity as a question of "identification". For Hall, this reconceptualising of identity in terms of identification draws meanings from both the psychoanalytic and the discursive (Foucauldian) repertoires, without being limited to either, and it is certainly relevant here, if not preferable to discussions of identity exclusively.

Why might "identification" be more useful a problematic than "identity"? Well, if the familiar, common sense definition of identification involves the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, with the closure of solidarity and allegiance this implies, then adopting the more discursive, historically specific approach suggested by it might enable us to see identity as, once again, a construction, hence a process never completed. It is Naipaul's anguished awareness of the incompleteness of his identity at moments such as that in which he recalls being momentarily made to belong to an excluded group, that brings to the fore the constructedness, temporality and hence fragility of his sense of self – and the pressing need to keep rewriting it. As Hall says, identification is a process involving certain conditions of existence, including "the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it"; yet it is "in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference". There is, in other words, "never a proper fit", instead either an "over-determination or a lack" (pp.2-3).

Another way of putting this is to say that thinking through the question of identification leads one to an understanding that the concept of identity can only be a "strategic" and "positional" one, and far from signalling "that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change", this notion, by allowing in time and history, accepts not only that identities are never unified, but that they are increasingly "fragmented and fractured". Hall claims that it is above all in relation to the processes of "forced and 'free' migration which have become a global phenomenon of the so-

called ‘post-colonial’ world” that we need to situate the debates about identity now (pp.3-4). We must try and understand how our multiple identities are constructed within specific historic and institutional sites, even if this necessarily implies a fictionalising, a process of narrativization of the self involving fantasy, the imaginary and the symbolic, but which nonetheless does not undermine its discursive, material or political “effectivity” (p.4).

I am not convinced that it is possible to manage all of this, and certainly not simultaneously. Nor am I interested in pursuing further Hall’s theorising polemic, since, as he goes on to admit, not only are the Lacanian and post-Althusserian tides receding, but attempts such as Judith Butler’s to propose a postmodern, performative space for identity (e.g. in *Bodies That Matter*, 1993), leaves us with a “tangled and unconcluded argument”, the end of which is simply to acknowledge both the necessity and the “impossibility” of identities (p.16). Tell that to those oppressed by the identities they have been given, as “other” to a dominant or more powerful group. More fruitful, it seems to me, as my interpolation of references to Naipaul’s fictionalising of post-colonial identities within this account of Hall’s argument might suggest, is to look at where the narrativization of the self has been taking place in some historically specific if discursively ambiguous instances of narrative. Moreover, these instances highlight a significant common theme in relation to both identity and identification – neither of which is either stable or timeless – and which implicitly pulls in the personal and the political. That theme is memory.

One reason for the relevance of this theme is pretty obvious. Narrativization takes place through and by means of time; and it relates closely to the long-standing and familiar western or specifically Lockean sense of identity as a construct based on memory. As critics and scholars with an investment in the construction “post-colonial”, we may well wish to assert or imagine alternative, non-western kinds of narrativisation, and these are certainly available, although given our mixed and muddled or plural inheritances, not in any pure or unmediated form. But, as Nayantara Sahgal remarked in an address to the Silver Jubilee Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies at the University of Kent

in 1989, if it is time “for interpretation to flow many ways instead of only west to east”, “the question of direction is itself no longer relevant when the migration of cultures is leaving cultures open-ended, and when migration can take place without ever leaving one’s soil. Where does one culture begin and another end when they are housed in the same person?”<sup>10</sup>

But even for Sahgal, with a sense of her self as identified simultaneously with ancient Hindu culture and a western-inflected modernity, a crucial aspect of the construction and negotiation of identity today lies in the complex relations between present and past, on a personal if not also on a social and historical basis. After all, the past figures importantly in people’s self-representations in general, because it is through memories of the past that we represent ourselves to ourselves, and usually through narrative; although those narratives are not necessarily literally written, as is commonly assumed, but may be oral, tactile, visual, dramatic or, as with Hester’s reaction to her mother’s dress among the “second-hand poor white junk” on the floor in Athol Fugard’s *Hello and Goodbye* (1965), may rely on the sense of smell.<sup>11</sup>

The instability and contingency of such narratives are precisely what you would expect from anything dependent upon memory – which, as that fourth-century north African subject of the Roman empire, St Augustine, long ago pointed out, only exists in the present. As soon as Augustine turned to himself to ask “Who are you?” the answer, beyond those creaturely functions we share with animals, was memory - a vast storehouse of images, a cloister of secrets, an immeasurable sanctuary (as he variously characterises it) - memory, to which we address ourselves and yet which remains a puzzle, although without it, as Augustine says and neurologists such as Oliver Sacks have proved, we could not even speak of ourselves.<sup>12</sup> I am not saying that Augustine simply anticipates our understandings, however: his account of memory occurs in Books X and XI of the *Confessions* (397-8) where, according to Thomas Docherty, the first signs of modernity may be discerned, if we think of Augustine’s conception of time linking events not merely in the classical, linear, chronological way, or simply by cause and effect, but in terms of a singular horizon of interpretation, the omniscient

God - terms which, says Docherty, anticipate the modernity of thinkers from Descartes onwards who call, not on God, but on a conception of the unified human self, as a subject existing through and beyond time.<sup>13</sup> Docherty is persuasive for example in construing T.S.Eliot's ruminations in *Four Quartets* (1943) upon memory, time and timelessness, as another migrant writer's escape into a constructed present, but these cannot be taken as representative of even western modernity, insofar as anybody's can; nor does Augustine present so unambiguously modern a conception of memory, even assuming we can simply replace his call on the wholeness of God with a call on the wholeness of the unified human self.

Memory is questioned, indeed radically defamiliarised by Augustine, but he still conceives of it as the *source* of his sense of self; nor is there any gap between what he remembers himself to have been, and what he now finds himself to be; moreover, what he remembers himself to have been is demonstrably narratable, as in those earlier books of the *Confessions* that precede his reflections upon memory. For Augustine, there is an unbroken link between the narratable past and the present in which it may be narrated and, it seems to me, it is not until Jean-Jacques Rousseau that this link is severed – another exile who, in *his Confessions* (1781-8), anticipates the instability and uncertainty of our own conceptions of identity as represented by, say, *The Enigma of Arrival*, in its profound questioning of the multiple selves of the past, and their “truths”. The opening words of Rousseau's *Confessions* characteristically express a double untruth, while claiming the truth: “I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator” he begins. “I want to show my fellow-men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man is to be myself.”<sup>14</sup>

The gap between the narrating, fictionalising “I” and the self which is its subject in Rousseau may be discerned variously inscribed in all those nineteenth-century *Bildungsromane* from *Werther* and *Jane Eyre* to *Great Expectations* and *The Story of An African Farm*, all of which display the progress (or, latterly, the decline or degeneration) of the self by means of a double perspective, internal and external, if not literally first-person

and third-person. But as another wanderer upon the face of the earth, Rimbaud, famously wrote in his *Lettre du Voyant* (1871), “Je est un autre” (“I am an other”),<sup>15</sup> summing up the increasing sense of disconnection or splitting that troubles the modernist inheritors of romanticism’s yearning for past selves; a splitting already there in Rousseau, in the multiplicity of remembered selves his writing generates, and the incompatibilities between them. It is the lack of fit, the emptiness or excess, between narrating and narrated selves in Rousseau’s writing, or, in Derridean terms, between presence and absence, that continues to engage us now when, for example, we might seek ways of narrating the self that bear witness to events that appear to have disrupted our frames of reference entirely – events such as the Holocaust.

To say “such as” is already to imply that the Holocaust is not unique in human history, or at least that there *is* a frame of reference within which it becomes narratable. The paradox is that we are unable to write or indeed talk without referring to or inhabiting in some sense what we inherit or recall, which leads to some difficulty - if we accept Primo Levi’s insistence in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988) that only the “drowned” could truly bear witness to the extreme experiences that he survived to remember, despite the fact that “all, or almost all the factors that can obliterate or deform the mnemonic record are at work” in such remembering.<sup>16</sup> The result is bound to be fragmentary, incomplete, and in need of decipherment. The Holocaust created a world in which the victims were robbed not only of their lives, but of their identities, and our memories of them. Their histories were subject to erasure in the bad sense – as we have seen in the activities of Holocaust deniers. But not only did the Nazis fail to destroy all the evidence of the camps, there were traces, there were survivors, more and more of whose narratives have emerged in recent years, even if we include in such narratives, at one extreme, Benjamin Wilkomirski’s 1995 “memories” of a concentration camp childhood that he never had, or, as in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), the author openly interweaves “Kindertransporten” narratives within his own fictionalised quest for identity, identifying with the victims while acknowledging an allegiance to the

perpetrators, or, to shift media, we have Roman Polanski's 2002 film version of the Polish pianist Szpilman's survival – even if, in all these cases (and there are many more), what we have is narrativization as an objective correlative for the writer's own memories, too painful for direct representation.<sup>17</sup> For Wilkomorski, Sebald and Polanski, it seems that only through other selves, may you find your own lost self, but only for a time, in its engagement with history.

This has obvious implications for post-colonial writers. Naipaul once notoriously claimed that the Caribbean had no history. What he should have claimed, and indeed was testifying to, was the loss or erasure of history, of many histories, through the extreme events of slavery and indentured labour, and his own inability to represent this loss, these losses. As he later remarked in a flash of self-awareness in *A Way in the World* (1994), “that feeling of the void had to do with my temperament, the temperament of a child of a recent Asian-Indian immigrant community in a mixed population: the child looked back and found no family past, found a blank”. In his feeling that his place had no history, he was responding to “something missing, something that had been rooted out” in himself.<sup>18</sup> When South African filmmaker Deborah Hoffman was asked why she had made her documentary about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - *A Long Night's Journey Into Day* (2001) - she said it was because although her family were Holocaust survivors, they had kept that history secret from her as a child, and here was an opportunity at last to “bear witness”.<sup>19</sup> Bear witness to what, exactly? To the complex, remembered and forgotten, or denied lines of affiliation between Germany, Israel and South Africa, all connected with each other through history, politics and migration.

To pursue such complex lines of affiliation – which I cannot do in any detail here - would be to confirm a suggestion made by the philosopher Avishai Margalit in his recent book on *The Ethics of Memory*, to the effect that although we think of memory as primarily to do with individuals, there may be such a thing as a *community* of memory, which goes beyond “natural” communities of memory such as families, clans, tribes, religious communities and

nations, but which also responds to the moral claims of the past. It is important to stress that this idea is something different from that form of postmodernism that turns everyone into others, a carnival of otherness that, as Margalit puts it, simply changes masks at will. For Margalit, there is an obligation on all of us to admit some “minimal shared moral memories”, memories of “striking examples of radical evil and crimes against humanity, such as enslavement, deportations of civilian populations, and mass exterminations.” This obligation implies a very difficult project: institutions to store and diffuse such memories tend to be bureaucratic and soulless; networks of people carrying out the division of mnemonic labour are not always coherently connected; and there is the problem of “biased salience”: it may be easier for the peoples of Europe to remember Kosovo than Rwanda, for example.

Nonetheless, we are *obliged* to remember, precisely because of the efforts of “radical evil” (a Kantian notion) “to undermine morality itself by, among other means, rewriting the past and controlling collective memory.”<sup>20</sup>

The “new” South Africa of the last decade provides good recent examples of the recording, preservation and representation of memory against such rewriting and control: thus the so-called *khulumani* (or “speak-out”) groups of apartheid victims and sympathisers meet regularly to relate their experiences, support each other, and engage government on issues of justice, reparation and protection. One of these groups turned to dramatic representation, in the form of Bobby Rodwell and Lesego Rampolokeng’s *The Story I Am About to Tell* (1999), in which survivors recalled what had happened to them, provoking both catharsis and walkouts in the audiences who witnessed them.<sup>21</sup> For those South Africans who walked out, the past may be rewritten, but should be forgotten: an area of personal sin and social trauma, from which they would like to imagine they have now escaped, but which haunts them as never before. The yearning for restitution may be as powerful as the reminders of suffering and shame that are inscribed within both private and public life, but that can also lead to its repression.

It is a tribute to the South African playwright Athol Fugard that, despite his recent migration from the country, he continues to try and write himself into this ongoing, communal memory script, although with sometimes debatable success. His most recent play, *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (premiere 4 May 2001), for example, is about an Afrikaner poet in exile in London who tried to change things through his writing, and who has become a set of memories shared by three women – his wife, his mistress, and their illegitimate “Coloured” daughter – this play challenges the way the South African past is remembered, insofar as it is, by bringing the dead man “to life” as a vibrant physical presence on stage who is remembered differently by the different women, all of whom he has betrayed in one way or another, including especially his “spook kind” (ghost child), as she calls herself, the troubled young woman who links past, present and future. Bearing witness to the present seems to have become for Fugard a need to bear witness to the past, through memory. There is, he implies, a newly dominant, monolithic narrative construction of the country’s past, including its most significant traumatic events, that should be resisted; what is most striking about his last play is how far it seems to be saying that without sharing a sense of the multiplicity, even the constructedness of the country’s pasts, there can be little progress to the future.

Margalit is perhaps too pessimistic about formal and informal communities as sources of shared memory. I would like to think that, for example, those of us committed to the post-colonial project, through the “thick” relationships of family or friends, or the “thin” relationships of institutional or other connection, that we share a sense of the importance of remembering the radical evil of apartheid, just as we recall instances of slavery and genocide, as part of our admittedly contingent sense of who we are in the present. One way of creating or sustaining such a community of memory is through responding to the force of certain quite specific representations of the past – representations that acknowledge an ethical dimension to the struggle to understand the meanings of identity, identification and memory. Such representations may or may not be aesthetic or literary; although I would say that the mix of experiential intensity and reflective detachment characteristic of artistic forms carries the



potential to affect debates about who we are and how memory may or may not contribute to that fragile, contingent sense of ourselves in a way that is more than merely conceptual. How is it going, Mr Naipaul? It is still going.

Note: This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Open University Post-Colonial Seminar on 25 March 2003 at the Institute of English Studies, University of London.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?', in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: New Delhi: Sage, 1996, p. 1. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> 'Images', in Robert D. Hamner, ed., *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, London: Heinemann, 1979, pp.26-27.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, my *Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp.61ff. Dr Gail Low of the University of Dundee is currently engaged in an extended study of the history of Commonwealth/post-colonial studies in the UK.

<sup>4</sup> R.K.Narayan, *The English Teacher*, Madras: Indian Thought Publications, 1984, chapter 8, p.220.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.221.

<sup>6</sup> See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> V.S.Naipaul, *Reading & Writing: A Personal Account*, New York: New York Review of Books, 2000, p.55.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Murray, "Naipaul Among the Critics", *Moving Worlds*, 2,1 (2002), 58.

<sup>9</sup> V.S.Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in five sections*, London: Penguin Books, 1987, p.135. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Nayantara Sahgal, "The Schizophrenic Imagination", reprinted in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford, Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1992, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Athol Fugard, *Port Elizabeth Plays*, ed. Dennis Walder, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.182. See also my chapter, 'Memory Plays', *Athol Fugard, Writers and Their Work*, Plymouth: Northcote House, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. and ed. R.S.Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964, pp.212-216; Oliver Sacks, "A Matter of Identity", *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, London: Picador, 1986, pp.103-110.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Docherty, 'Now, here, this', *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, eds., London: Longman, 1999, pp.50-3.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, transl. Angela Scholar, ed. and intro. Patrick Coleman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> Qtd in Charles Nicholl, *Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud in Africa 1880-91*, London: Vintage, 1998, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, transl. R. Rosenthal, London: Abacus, 1988, p.12.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments; Memoirs of a Childhood, 1939-1948*, transl. Carol Brown Janeway, London: Picador, 1996; W.G.Seibald, *Austerlitz*, transl. Anthea Bell, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001; Wladyslaw Szpilman, *The Pianist*, transl. Anthea Bell, London: Phoenix, 2000.

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<sup>18</sup> V.S.Naipaul, *A Way in the World: A Sequence*, London: Minerva, 1995, p.73.

<sup>19</sup> Deborah Hoffman, Interview with Fergal Keane, Tricycle Theatre Cinema, Kilburn, London, 24 May 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp.69;74;78;83.

<sup>21</sup> Personal Interview with Bobby Rodwell, Grahamstown, South Africa, 11 July 1999.