



# SOME THOUGHTS ON BEING A WRITER

by V.S. Naipaul

*The following is the text of Mr. Naipaul's speech at the 1986 Ingersoll Prizes Awards Banquet.*

I do not really know how I became a writer. I can give certain dates and certain facts about my career. But the process itself remains mysterious. It is mysterious, for instance, that the ambition should have come first—the wish to be a writer, to have that distinction, that fame—and that this ambition should have come long before I could think of anything to write about.

I remember, in my first term at Oxford in 1950, going for long walks—I remember the roads, the autumn leaves, the cars and trucks going by, whipping the leaves up—and wondering what I was going to write about. I had worked hard for the scholarship to go to Oxford, to be a writer. But now that I was in Oxford, I didn't know what to write about. And really, I suppose, unless I had been driven by great necessity, something even like panic, I might never have written. The idea of laying aside the ambition was very restful and tempting—the way sleep was said to be tempting to Napoleon's soldiers on the retreat from Moscow.

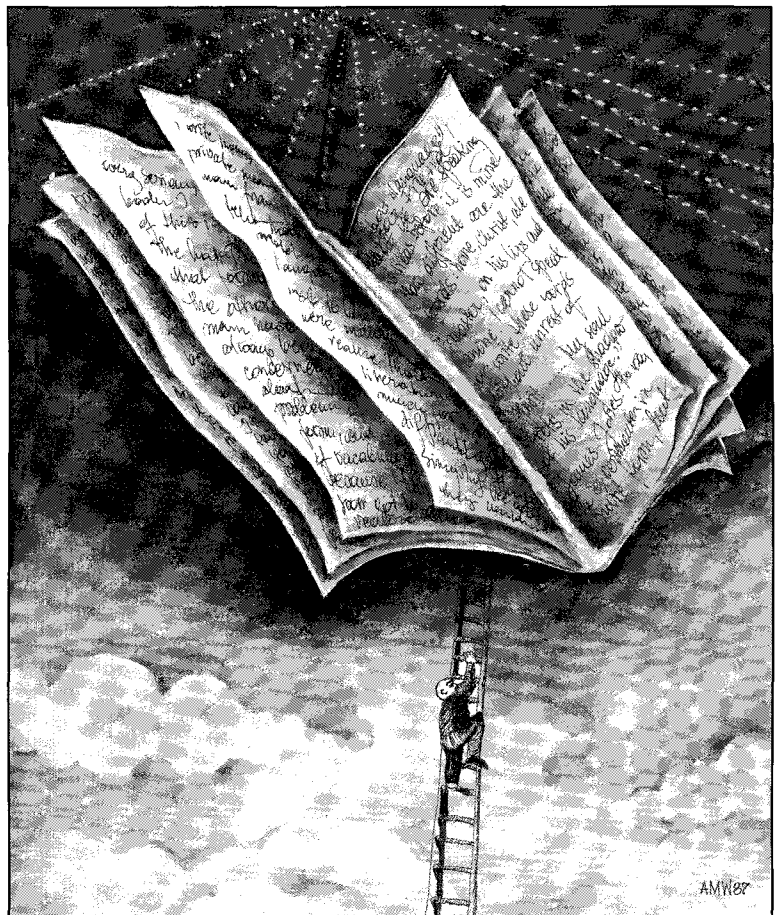
I felt it as artificial, that sitting down to write a book. And that is a feeling that is with me still, all these years later, at the start of a book—I am speaking of an imaginative work. There is no precise theme or story that is with me. Many things are with me; I write the artificial, self-conscious beginnings of many books; until finally some true impulse—the one I have been working towards—possesses me, and I sail away on my year's labor. And that is mysterious still—that out of artifice one should touch and stir up what is deepest is one's soul, one's heart, one's memory.

All literary forms are artificial, and they are constantly changing, to match the new tone and mood of the culture. At one time, for instance, a person of serious literary inclination might have thought of writing for the theater; would have had somehow to do what I cannot do—arrange his material into scenes and acts; would not have written for the printed page, but would have written "parts" to tempt actors; and—as someone who has written plays has told me—would have visualized himself (to facilitate the play-

writing process) as sitting in a seat in the stalls.

At another period, in an age without radio or records, an age dominated by print, someone wishing to write would have had to shape a narrative that could have been serialized over many months, or fill three volumes. Before that, the writer might have attempted narratives in verse or verse drama, rhymed or unrhymed; or verse epics.

All those forms, artificial as they seem to us today, would have appeared as natural and as right to their practitioners as the standard novel does today. Artificial though that novel form is, with its simplifications and distortions, its artificial scenes, and its idea of experience as a crisis that has to be



*V.S. Naipaul received the T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing on November 21, 1986.*

resolved before life resumes its even course. I am describing, very roughly, the feeling of artificiality which was with me at the very beginning, when I was trying to write and wondering what part of my experience could be made to fit the form—wondering, in fact, in the most insidious way, how I could adapt or falsify my experience to make it fit the grand form.

Literary forms are necessary: Experience has to be transmitted in some agreed or readily comprehensible way. But certain forms, like fashions in dress, can at times become extreme. And then these forms, far from crystallizing or sharpening experience, can falsify or be felt as a burden. The Trollope who is setting up a situation—the Trollope who is a social observer, with an immense knowledge both of society and the world of work, a knowledge far greater than that of Dickens—is enchanting. But I have trouble with the Trollope who, having set up a situation, settles down to unwinding his narrative—the social or philosophical gist of which I might have received in his opening pages. I feel the same with Thackeray: I can feel how the need for narrative and plot sat on his shoulders like a burden.

Our ideas of literary pleasures and narratives have in fact changed in the last 100 years or so. All the writing of the past century and the cinema and television have made us quicker. And the 19th-century English writers who now give me the most “novelistic” pleasure—provide windows into human lives, encouraging reflection—are writers who in their own time would not have been thought of as novelists at all.

I am thinking of writers like Richard Jefferies, whose essays about farming people carry so much knowledge and experience that they often contain whole lives. Or William Hazlitt. Or Charles Lamb, concrete and tough and melancholy, not the gentle, wishy-washy essayist of legend. Or William Cobbett, the journalist and pamphleteer, dashing about the countryside, and in his breakneck prose, and through his wild prejudices, giving the clearest pictures of the roads and the fields and the people and the inns and the food. All of these writers would have had their gifts diluted or corrupted by the novel form as it existed in their time. All of them, novelistic as they are in the pleasures they offer, found their own forms.

Every serious writer has to be original; he cannot be content to do or to offer a version of what has been done before. And every serious writer as a result becomes aware of this question of form; because he knows that however much he might have been educated and stimulated by the writers he has read or reads, the forms matched the experience of those writers and do not strictly suit his own.

The late Philip Larkin—original and very grand, especially in his later work—thought that form and content were indivisible. He worked slowly, he said. “You’re finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time.” It sounds simple; but it states a difficult thing. Literature is not like music; it isn’t for the young; there are no prodigies in writing. The knowledge or experience a writer seeks to transmit is social or sentimental; it takes time, it can take much of a man’s life, to process that experience to understand what he has been through; and it takes great care and tact, then, for the nature of the experience not to be lost,

not to be diluted by the wrong forms. The other man’s forms served the other man’s thoughts.

I have always been concerned about this problem of form, and even of vocabulary, because I fairly soon got to realize that between the literature I knew and read, the literature that seeded my own ambition, between that and my background, there was a division, a dissonance. And it was quickly made clear to me that there was no question simply of mimicking the forms.

In one of his early books, James Joyce wrote of the difficulty for him—or his hero—of the English language. “That language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. . . . My soul frets in the shadow of his language.”

James Joyce was an experimenter in pure form—form divorced from content. And the James Joyce point about language is not the one I am making. I never felt that problem with the English language—language as language. The point that worried me was one of vocabulary, of the differing meanings or associations of words. *Garden*, *house*, *plantation*, *gardener*, *estate*: These words mean one thing in England and mean something quite different to the man from Trinidad, an agricultural colony, a colony settled for the purpose of plantation agriculture. How, then, could I write honestly or fairly if the very words I used, with private meanings for me, were yet for the reader outside shot through with the associations of the older literature? I felt that truly to render what I saw, I had to define myself as a writer or narrator; I had to reinterpret things. I have tried to do this in different ways throughout my career. And after two years’ work, I have just finished a book in which at last, as I think, I have managed to integrate this business of reinterpreting with my narrative.

My aim was truth, truth to a particular experience, containing a definition of the writing self. Yet I was aware at the end of that book that the creative process remained as mysterious as ever.

The French critic Sainte-Beuve thought that the personal details of a writer’s life made clear many things about the writer. This method of Sainte-Beuve’s was bitterly assailed by Proust in a strange book—a strange and original and beautiful form, part autobiography, part literary criticism, part fiction—called *Against Sainte-Beuve*, where the criticism of the critic and his method, releasing the writer’s love of letters, also releases the autobiographical and fictive elements of the work.

“This method,” Proust writes—and he is talking about the method of Sainte-Beuve—“ignores what a very slight degree of self-acquaintance teaches us, that a book is the product of a different *self* from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices.” And a little later on, Proust elucidates: “The implication [is] that there is something more superficial and empty in a writer’s authorship, something deeper and more contemplative in his private life. . . . In fact, it is the secretion of one’s innermost life, written in solitude and for oneself alone, that one gives to the public. What one bestows on private life—in conversation, however refined it may be—is the product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self which one can



only recover by putting aside the world and the self that frequents the world."

And it is curious—yet not really surprising—that almost the same thought about the writer's writing self should have been expressed by a quite different writer, Somerset Maugham. In his fictional portrait of Thomas Hardy in *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham, by a wonderful stroke (which earned him much abuse), showed the tragic novelist of Wessex to

be in his private life extraordinarily ordinary, and for that reason mysterious. "I had an impression"—this is Maugham's summing up—"that the real man, to his death unknown and lonely, was a wraith that went a silent way unseen between the writer of his books and the man who led his life, and smiled with an ironical detachment at the two puppets."

## RESCUING STORY FROM HISTORY

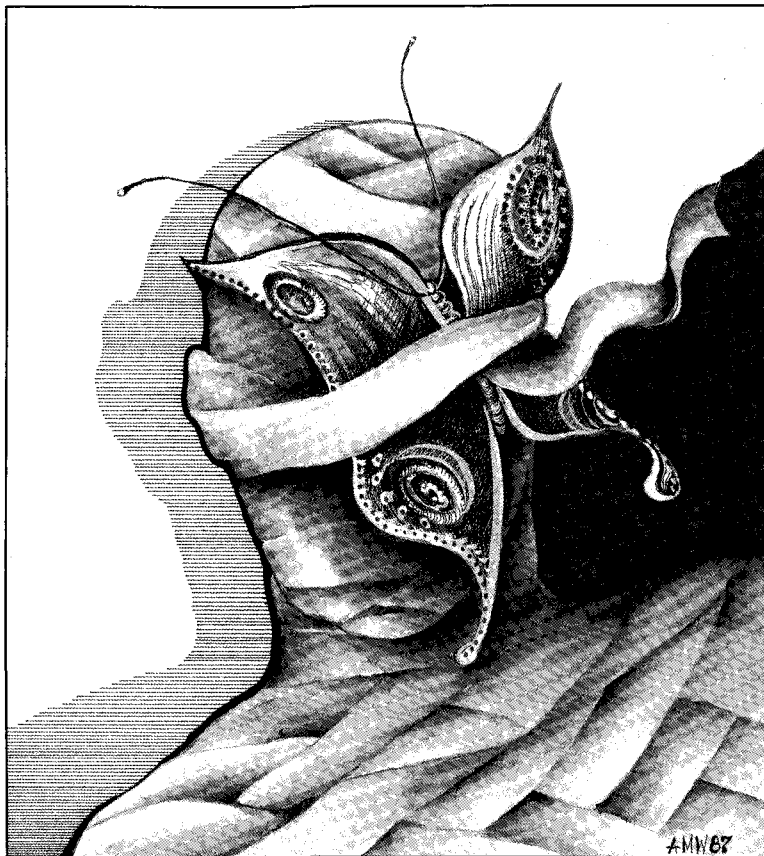
by Frederick Turner

By the end of the 18th century, the novel had already begun to replace the rich variety of narrative genres that preceded it. This is a familiar theme in the history of the arts in the modern period. One particular artistic form comes to be preferred for its freedom; it crowds out the other forms, which are disdained for their traditional limitations; finally the artist is less free than she was at the beginning, having only one genre for her thoughts rather than many. (The same thing has happened with the lyric poem.)

The great novelists of the 19th century well understood the subtle handicaps of that apparently freest of forms. In his foreword to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky berates his readers in advance for their anticipated preference for the psychologically "interesting" figures of Ivan and Dmitri, and insists that it is Alyosha, the holy brother, who is the true hero. Tolstoy implicitly does the same thing in *Anna Karenina*, giving us a Levin whose motivations are not entirely novelistic, as a counterweight to his Anna and Vronsky, who are, as it were, virtuoso compositions of novelistic psychology. In *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* we can, I think, see George Eliot struggling in the same way to release her heroines from the sociopsychological determinism that the novel form itself subtly imposes. In *Madame Bovary* we see the same theme but with a different strategy for dealing with it. Emma's psychic straitjacket is thematized as tragic, in almost the same way that in Greek tragedy the dramatic form itself, of which irony is an essential structural feature, plays the part of the divine fate that destroys the hero.

What is it that the great novelists were battling against? Essentially this: When the novel abandoned the constraints of the classical narrative genres—meter, allegorical significance, mythic structure, etc.—it had to replace them with another constraint which, because it was largely invisible, part of a body of unexamined assumptions, was the more tyrannous. That constraint is what we know as motivational verisimilitude, or consistency of character. It is made up of two elements: the sociological and the psychological. The

price the novelist pays for freedom from the old constraints is to be forced to create characters who are psychic and/or social automata; the contract between writer and reader requires that the reader be flattered in his worldly theory of human motivation, his shrewd estimate of human predictability. Since probability is now the only constraint and thus the only expressive medium whose manipulation might constitute meaning, woe betide the novelist who creates a character that resists the currently favored fashion of psychological or social determination! Such a character is not only a sort of moral insult to a reader who considers herself bound by those laws and excuses her conduct by means of them, but is also an aesthetically discordant note in the



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