

essay

An Intellectual Catastrophe

by Edward W. Said

THE strange fascination with Islam in the West continues. Most recently, the originally Trinidadian but now British author V S. Naipaul has brought out a massive volume about his travels in four Islamic countries -- all of them non-Arab -- as a sequel to a book he wrote on the same four places about 18 years ago. The first book was called *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*; the new one is *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*. In the meantime Naipaul has become Sir V S. Naipaul, an extremely famous and, it must be said, very talented writer whose novels and non-fiction (mostly travel books) have established his reputation as one of the truly celebrated, justly well-known figures in world literature today.

In Paris, for example, Sonia Rykiel's fancy showrooms on windows on the Boulevard St Germain are filled with copies of the French translation of *Beyond Belief*, intermixed with the scarves, belts and handbags. This of course is one kind of tribute, although Naipaul may not be very pleased about it. On the other hand, the book has been reviewed everywhere in the prestige English and American press, paid tribute to as the work of a great master of shrewd observation and telling detail, the kind of demystifying, thorough exposé of Islam for which Western readers seem to have a bottomless appetite. No one today would write a similar kind of book about Christianity or Judaism. Islam on the other hand is fair game, even though the expert may not know the languages or much about the subject.

Naipaul's, however, is a special case. He is neither a professional Orientalist nor a thrill seeker. He is a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to an implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals

What Naipaul attempts to document in his new book is the fate of the converted, people who have lost their own past but have gained little from their new religion except more confusion, more unhappiness, more (for the Western reader) comic incompetence, all of it the result of conversion to Islam. This ridiculous argument would suggest by extension that only a native of Rome can be a good Roman Catholic; other Catholic Italians, Spaniards, Latin Americans, Philipinos who are converts are inauthentic and cut off from their traditions. According to Naipaul, then, Anglicans who are not British are only converts and they too, like the Malaysian or Iranian Muslim, are doomed to a life of imitation and incompetence since they are converts. In effect, the 400-page *Beyond Belief* is based on nothing more than this rather idiotic and insulting theory. The question isn't whether it is true or not but how could a man of such intelligence and gifts as V S. Naipaul write so stupid and so boring a book, full of story after story illustrating the same primitive, rudimentary, unsatisfactory and reductive thesis, that most Muslims are converts and must suffer the same fate wherever they are. Never mind history, politics, philosophy, geography.

who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths -- national liberation movements, revolutionary goals, the evils of colonialism -- which in Naipaul's opinion do nothing to explain the sorry state of African and Asian countries who are sinking under poverty, native impotence, badly learned, unabsorbed Western ideas like industrialisation and modernisation. These are people, Naipaul says in one of his books, who know how to use a telephone but can neither fix nor invent one. Naipaul can now be cited as an exemplary figure from the Third World. Born in Trinidad he is originally of Hindu Indian stock; he emigrated to Britain in the 1950s, has become a senior member of the British establishment and is always spoken of as a candidate for the Nobel Prize -- someone who can be relied on always to tell the truth about the Third World. Naipaul is "free of any romantic moonshine about the moral claims of primitives," said one reviewer in 1979, and he does this without "a trace in him of Western condescension or nostalgia for colonialism."

Still, even for Naipaul, Islam is worse than most other problems of the Third World. Feeling his Hindu origins, he recently has said that the worst calamity in India's history was the ad-

vent and later presence of Islam which disfigured the country's history. Unlike most writers he makes not one but two journeys to "Islam" in order to confirm his deep antipathy to the religion, its people, and its ideas. Ironically, *Beyond Belief* is dedicated to his Muslim wife Nadira whose ideas or feelings are not referred to. In the first book he does not learn anything -- they, the Muslims, prove what he already knows. Prove what? That the retreat to Islam is "stupor". In Malaysia, Naipaul is asked "what is the purpose of your writing? Is it to tell people what it's all about?" He replies, "Yes, I would say comprehension." "Is it not for money?" "Yes. But the nature of the work is important." Thus he travels among Muslims and writes about it, is well paid by his publisher and by the magazines that run extracts of his books, because it is important, not because he likes doing it. Muslims provide him with stories, which he records as instances of "Islam."

There is very little pleasure and only a very little affection recorded in these two books. In the earlier book, its funny moments are at the expense of Muslims, who are "wogs" after all as seen by Naipaul's British and American readers, potential fanatics and terrorists, who cannot spell, be coherent, sound

right to a worldly-wise, somewhat jaded judge from the West. Every time they show their Islamic weaknesses, Naipaul the Third World witness appears promptly. A Muslim lapse occurs, some resentment against the West is expressed by an Iranian, and then Naipaul explains that "this is the confusion of a people of high medieval culture awakening to oil and money, a sense of power and violation and a knowledge of a great new encircling civilization [the West]. It was to be rejected, at the same time it was to be depended on."

Remember that last sentence and a half, for it is Naipaul's thesis as well as the platform from which he addresses the world: The West is the world of knowledge, criticism, technical know-how and functioning institutions, Islam is its fearfully enraged and retarded dependent, awakening to a new, barely controllable power. The West provides Islam with good things from the outside, because "the life that had come to Islam had not come from within." Thus the existence of one billion Muslims is summed up in a phrase and dismissed. Islam's flaw was at "its origins -- the flaw that ran through Islamic history: to the political issues it raised it offered no political or practical solution. It offered only the faith. It offered only the Prophet, who would settle everything --

but who had ceased to exist. This political Islam was rage, anarchy." All the examples Naipaul gives, all the people he speaks to tend to align themselves under the Islam vs. The West opposition he is determined to find everywhere. It's all very tiresome and repetitious.

Why then does he return to write an equally long and boring book two decades later? The only answer I can give is that he now thinks he has an important new insight about Islam. And that insight is if you are not an Arab -- Islam being a religion of the Arabs -- then you are a convert.

As converts to Islam, Malaysians, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Indonesians necessarily suffer the fate of the inauthentic. For them Islam is an acquired religion which cuts them off from their traditions, leaving them neither here nor there. What Naipaul attempts to document in his new book is the fate of the converted, people who have lost their own past but have gained little from their new religion except more confusion, more unhappiness, more (for the Western reader) comic incompetence, all of it the result of conversion to Islam. This ridiculous argument would suggest by extension that only a native of Rome can be a good Roman Catholic; other Catholic Italians, Spaniards, Latin Americans, Philipinos who are

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Muslims who are not Arabs are inauthentic converts, doomed to this wretched false destiny. Somewhere along the way Naipaul, in my opinion, himself suffered a serious intellectual accident. His obsession with Islam caused him somehow to stop thinking, to become instead a kind of mental suicide compelled to repeat the same formula over and over. This is what I would call an intellectual catastrophe of the first order.

The pity of it is that so much is now lost on Naipaul. His writing has become repetitive and uninteresting. His gifts have been squandered. He can no longer make sense. He lives on his great reputation which has gulled his reviewers into thinking that they are still dealing with a great writer, whereas he has become a ghost. The greater pity is that Naipaul's latest book on Islam will be considered a major interpretation of a great religion, and more Muslims will suffer and be insulted. And the gap between them and the West will increase and deepen. No one will benefit except the publishers who will probably sell a lot of books, and Naipaul, who will make a lot of money.

poem

Poverty

By Kazi Nazrul Islam

Translated by Md Mahfuz Ali

O poverty, thou hast instituted my worth to undergo
Ample grace and nobility, impregnating my essence
With gifts ranking with the dignified position of Christ.
Oh ascetic, thou hast lent my belongings the lustre of thorny crown.
An irrepressible and unbridled audacity to unfold
What is reckoned as unscrupulous, a presumptuous-naked glance.
The lash of tongue pointed and sharpened like a razor.
My lute lying under your imprecation becomes my sword.



On conceited ascetic, thy art lets my sorrows smoulder.
Rendering the tasteful, fadeless gold bland and insipid to my senses,
Draining my emotion, beauty and vitality untimely!
Be it my attempt ever so to bring cup of leaves
Brimming up with thy gifts of beauty -- O hungry poverty,
Thou come ahead of me draining the contents of my cup!
Your glances are caught by the blazing spectacle
Of the empty-deserted land, lying in the realm of my imagination.
My eyes shed down a shower of the embers of fire upon my beauty.

The very head and front of my yearning gushing out from the stalk of
Melancholy enriched with the gleaming shades of yellow
Blossoms into a flourishing state as the "shelalika" becomes
Sweet-smelling, expanded and white with its dazzling brightness.
O merciless poverty, thou with your indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation, hewing down like a wood-cutter
Stems, stalks and branches originating from the flash of my hopes.
The whole of my heart squaring with the morning hour of "Aswin"
Rolls towards the verge of bursting into tears, saturating its innermost region
With pathos like the earth bedraggled with glossy dew-drops.

Thou art the sun, thy searing heat dries out the dew-drops oozing
Out of my pathos! I am but cast in my dejected mood to fade
Into the shadowy regions of the cosmos!
The immediate jewels of my dreams based on the elements
Of beauty, and welfare prove shattering! I let the suffocating stream
Of liquefied poison flow into my throat, thou go on saying "what a
diffusing sweetness ambrosia possesses being immune from spells
of pangs, intoxication and mania!"
O weak spirit, striving for immortal spirit of gods is not they practice
Of austerity upon the pain-breeding earth.
Thou art in all its likelihood a snake,
Thou emerge out of the womb of suffering.
Thou will string together garlands
Squatting down in the midst of the thorny grove,
And I inject a vaccine of sadness into your forehead.

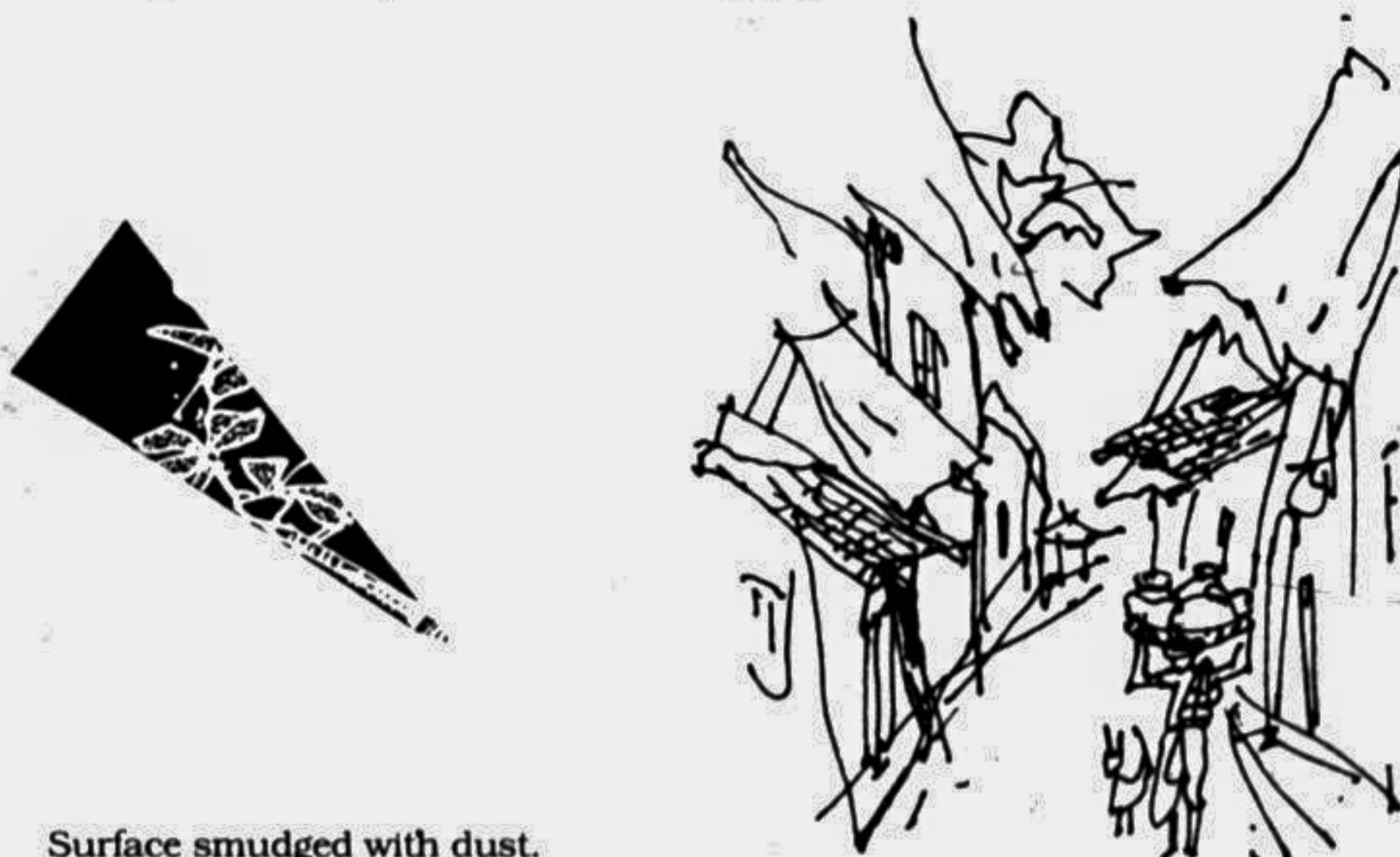
With the habitual practice of producing musical sounds with my voice
In harmony with a tune and threading wreaths, I exist with the pangs

In my throat being all over spotted with the deadly stings of my snake!

O merciless hermit, "Durbasha", Thou move from door to door with
your alms-bag! There the bride and bridegroom pass night happily
O rude voice,
Go there at times and call "Fool, listen, the earth is not
a luxurious abode put at some one's disposal,
being badly affected by the tormenting crisis and separation
of love, the burden of sorrows intensifying more and more,
the stinging and prickly hands of lover lying beneath the
coverlet, so exhaust yourself on
enjoyment at this moment! Then issues a cry
Of distress and lamentation.
In the twinkle of an eye, that happiness blazing
With the flame of celestial lamp becomes extinguished,
As if the murky-night hangs heavy and yet heavier upon them.
There lies a thin boy afflicted with the plague
Of regular starvation on the winding path-way.
What magnetises his glances, curving his eyebrow in the shape of a bow!

Thou indignantly let flood of fire roll through and consume
A pair of my eyes with heavy stroke
Spurring the emergency of epidemic, famine and flooding.
The sky-scrapers fly out in the locality identical with pleasure garden.
Only death sentence is enshrined in the legislative frame work of thy custom.
Modesty that is no longer heavy
With charges of transgression is snared by you.
Thou crave for the blithering-uncovering of nakedness.
Something bearing the closest similitude to the
Terms "scruples, coyness" is banished from thy consciousness,
And thy titanic position towers over anyone
Who lingers in his servile-stooping condition.
The voyagers venturing for death at your instigation
Wear the hanging rope round their neck with a face glowing with smile.
Igniting the coil of daily's scarcity in bosom,
Death-oblation fires with a desire for devilish-pleasure!

Thou grab the crown of "Lakshmi" dragging it down to the lowermost



Surface smudged with dust.
By the artistic skill, what modes of music slide out
Of the lyre of "Sardar", oh excellent tuner
All tunes seizing my auditory sense so far
Seem to modulate into high-pitched cries.

A sad tune emanating from a ringing "Sanai"
Reached my consciousness with its musical note with
The termination of my sleepy, slumberous state yesterday!
As if some one's abode had not resounded with their return!
The tune segued into the pitiful wailing, reverberating in their abodes
As if it had called them to hasten their steps homeward.

The heart of the bride being enchanted with the tune of "Sanai" wafts away

Where their dear ones are on the brink of coming back!
The lady's maid asks "why do you wipe tears and collyrium from your eyes?"
The tune of "Sanai" gaining up the intensity
Of the pathetic cry "come, come"
Rings in my ears still today
With the break of sleep at dawn as it had been.
The withered 'Shelalika' like the widow's smile being
Plucked from its stalk drops on the ground.

Inhaling the pleasing and agreeable aroma the butterfly buzzes about,
Moving its wings swiftly upward and outward.



Being saturated with an irrepressible infatuation
It numbs calyx of a flower with kisses in
Response to its shamelessness and intrepidity.
The wings of bumble-bees being shaded with pollen,
It came to be speckled all over with the natural hues of yellow.
And its organs became smeared with honey.
As if there had swelled forth
The flow of life in every corner of the earth!
My lips quiver unconsciously with the humming-tune of singing hymns
To the awaiting joy and happiness!
My eyes could not check the unrestrained flow of tears!
As if some one had tethered the thread of unification to the earth!
Carrying the floral-tribute in the clay-kneading hands,
The earth goes forward, giving me a presentation,
As if she is my younger daughter, my dear one.
A sputter of shudder gains up the upper hand in me unconsciously!
Most probably my child cries, keeping vigilant in abode.
O cruel ascetic, not a little bit of food
Slipped into thy mouth since yesterday.
Thou cry in abode and become afflicted
With the plague of regular starvation.

My son, o my dear one, my ability proves abortively stillborn
To provide you with a smidgen of milk for your sustenance!
My right does not claim itself to the blithe-domain!
Unendurable poverty manifesting itself in my son as well as wife
Lets the pathetic and hear-rendering tears
Spill out of their eyes at my door!
Who will play upon the pipe?
Where from should I extract the essence of the smile
Of the blithe beauty? Where shall I find nectar of a flower?
Brimming up a glass compounded of the essence of "Dhutura"
With the tears of my eyes, I finish drinking it!
Still today, the "Sanai" breathing out the song to the age to come
Sets my auditory-sense within its grip
It is as if it were wanted to wailing only
Being emblazoned with an emblem of nothingness.