



# V.S. Naipaul's *A way in the world*: contesting liminality by translating the historical past

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## Abstract

### V.S. Naipaul's *A way in the world*: contesting liminality by translating the historical past

*In this article the concept of liminality is understood in a broad sense to mean the incompleteness of historical representation and the restrained view of reality. The ensuing discussion of the theme will be divided into three parts; each incorporating parts of Paul Ricoeur's analyses in "The reality of the historical past" (1984). Ricoeur investigates the reality of the historical past under three categories – the Same, the Other, and the Analogue. Under the sign of "the Same", contesting liminality is first discussed as the re-enactment of the historical past. This re-enactment of the past, however, has differences in the present on account of imaginative reinterpretations and repatterning of documentary evidence. Under the sign of "the Other", the second part of the article discusses Naipaul's strategy of taking distance to counteract liminality in rewriting the historical past from the vantage point of a writer-traveller. Finally, the analysis under the sign of "the Analogue" points out that the commitment to combat liminality implies an unending attempt at rectifying and reconfiguring the historical past in order to accomplish continuity and renewal.*

## Opsomming

### V.S. Naipaul se *A way in the world*: om liminaliteit te beveg deur die historiese verlede te verklaar

*In hierdie artikel word die konsep liminaliteit breedweg verstaan as die onvolledigheid en beperktheid van voorstellings van die*

verlede. Die bespreking van die tema word in drie dele verdeel gebaseer op Ricoeur se analise in "The reality of the historical past" (1984). Ricoeur ondersoek die werklikheid van die historiese verlede aan die hand van drie kategorieë – die Selfde, die Ander en die Analoë. Onder die teken van "die Selfde" word die teenwerking van liminaliteit eerstens bespreek as die herbeleving van die historiese verlede. Hierdie herbeleving van die verlede verskil egter van die hede op grond van verbeeldingryke herinterpretasie en die herorganisasie van dokumentêre bewyse. Die tweede afdeling van die artikel, onder die teken van "die Ander", bespreek Naipaul se strategie om liminaliteit te bestry deur afstand te skep en die historiese verlede te herskryf vanuit die oogpunt van 'n skrywer-reisiger. Ten slotte toon die analise onder die teken van "die Analoë" dat die projek om liminaliteit te oorskry 'n nimmereindigende poging impliseer om die historiese verlede reg te stel en weer vorm te gee ten einde kontinuïteit en vernuwing te bewerkstellig.

## 1. Introduction

[I]t is only by means of the unending rectification of our configurations that we form the idea of the past as an inexhaustible resource (Ricoeur, 1984).

Mixing semi-autobiography, travel writing, documentaries, character analysis and fiction, *A way in the world: a novel* (1994)<sup>1</sup> is a book of nine sectionalised meditations through which V.S. Naipaul arrives at a deeper understanding of his multicultural heritage and hybrid identity. The novel also celebrates Naipaul's masterful skill of using different literary genres to illuminate "areas of darkness" surrounding him and to transmit his diasporic experience. Inhabiting "two worlds" – the world inside his East-Indian extended family in Trinidad, and that of the outside world, Naipaul seeks to translate liminality by incorporating individual stories into the geopolitical and socio-cultural history of Trinidad. To a certain degree, Naipaul's achievement in interweaving personalised (post)colonial experiences with Spanish and British imperial (ad)ventures has generated a new way of re-charting the terrain of English literature.

## 2. Re-enacting (un)written histories

Attempting to find "a proper form" suitable for his "every kind of experience", Naipaul often writes against and beyond generic

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1 The title in the 1994 British edition is *A way in the world: a sequence*. London: Heinemann.

boundaries because “the literary forms [he] practiced flowed together and supported one another” (Naipaul, 2003:24, 20). Naipaul remarks that the literary models he studied and applied as a result of his colonial education do not work for him because they “dealt with entirely different societies” (Naipaul, 2001:484) in which the possibility of “a wider learning, an idea of history, a concern with self-knowledge” exists (Naipaul, 2003:25). On account of his travels to many different parts of the world, Naipaul wonders “whether the borrowed form of novel” could offer more than “the externals of things” (Naipaul, 2003:25). In order to translate the essence of his Indo-Trinidadian-English experience, Naipaul has to find his own way in the world of literature.

As a result, Naipaul has created a new world in which he fights against historical incompleteness, absence, and liminality by way of re-enacting the historical past in the present. Grounded in Ricoeur’s proposal to think about the reality of the historical past, first under the sign of *the Same*, that is, history as a re-enactment of the past in the present by documentary thinking and imaginative construction, the following discussion concentrates on three sections – chapters 3, 6, and 8 from *A way in the world* (1994),<sup>2</sup> all of which are subtitled as “An unwritten story”. Unwritten in one way or another, these stories, either based on verifiable materials or about historical figures, are intended to be true yet lost histories. Naipaul has also demonstrated in these three unwritten stories new ways of re-enacting and transforming history by bringing a personalised past into the cultural and historical past of Trinidad. Structurally a story-within-a-story, Chapter 3 of the novel, “New clothes: an unwritten story”, indicates how a “real” story can be written by asking the question “Who is this narrator? What can he be made to be?” (*Way*: 47). If the narrator were made a writer or a traveller, the story would have been identified as true to the author’s experience, but the invention of a story seemed to “falsify what [he] felt as a traveler” (*Way*: 46). Finally the author decides to create his narrator as a “carrier of mischief” and “revolutionary of the 1970s”, who seeks the help of Amerindians to overthrow the African government on the coast (*Way*: 48). The narrator of “New clothes” is the author’s creation of a protagonist for failed attempts to understand people of an entirely different background in a changing situation. While the story remains unfinished and unwritten, the author, fortunately, could

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2 Henceforth the abbreviated title, *Way*, plus the relevant page numbers will indicate references to Naipaul, V.S. 1994. *A way in the world*. New York: Vintage Books.

"move into and out of the narrator's consciousness at will and narrate through him, withholding the illusion of control over his own story that comes with first-person narration" (Barnouw, 2003:136). In so doing, the author allows his readers to observe his process of shaping and depicting this English narrator, who is at the same time trying to transcend narrative limitations. Ricoeur's perception of re-enactment, derived from joint powers of documentary interpretation and imaginative construction, reveals that the re-enacted history is and is not what can be assumed to be a "real" past. In this unwritten story, Naipaul's experiment with narrative strategy shows that discovery and invention are indispensable in representing a recent or a remote past.

Chapter 6, "A parcel of papers, a roll of tobacco, a tortoise: an unwritten story", opens with the narrator's wish to write "a play or a screen play, or a mixture of both" about Sir Walter Raleigh's last expedition to find the gold mines of El Dorado (*Way*: 163). Even if the screenplay is unwritten, Naipaul's reinterpretations of Raleigh's mission filter through the ship surgeon who questions Raleigh on the truthfulness of his book, *The discovery of the large, rich, and beautiful empire of Guiana* (1595). The surgeon reminds Raleigh that when he writes about the Trinidad side of the Gulf, everything is correctly and clearly recorded, "[r]eal knowledge, real enquiry," but on the Orinoco side, where the gold mines are supposed to be, he depicts "a strange land of diamond mountains and meadows and deer and birds" as if written by someone else (*Way*: 175). In contrast, the surgeon reveals that the Spaniard chronicles everything, gets it attested and ships it back to Spain in duplicates and triplicates. Having a great deal of historical information and underscoring the inconsistencies in Raleigh's account, the surgeon regards Raleigh's version of his explorations in the Gulf as a "deliberate mixture of old-fashioned fantasy and modern truth" (*Way*: 175). Perhaps right in his judgment, the surgeon may never understand Raleigh's actions, his motivations and fears, and his sense of the world shaped by personal experience. The question whether the surgeon will rationally and judgmentally be a suitable narrator to tell and pass down Raleigh's story even though it is unwritten can rightly be asked. Apparently, the surgeon and Raleigh personify dissimilar attitudes toward the historical past. Whereas history means documentary evidence to the surgeon, it is a repository of personal stories to Raleigh. Above all, Naipaul seems to be more interested in exposing the complication of multiple perspectives on the historical past than in providing an ultimate solution to how history might be written.

In Chapter 8, “In the gulf of desolation: an unwritten story”, Naipaul portrays Francisco Miranda at the end of his life. This chapter once again begins with the narrator’s idea of doing a play or a film about the history of the Gulf as “a three-part work: Columbus in 1498, Raleigh in 1618, and Francisco Miranda, the Venezuelan revolutionary, in 1806” (*Way*: 245). Despite Miranda’s legendary fame, Naipaul perceives the apprehension, estrangement and disillusionment of a revolutionary, as well as his inability to find a way in the world. Through the first-person narrator, Naipaul remarks that the crucial reason why Miranda is not well known and his story is unwritten is because “on the day he was betrayed he was separated from his papers” (*Way*: 251). Therefore, “where Miranda should have been in historical accounts there was a void,” says the narrator, who tries to fill in the void by inventively rediscovering Miranda’s lost papers (*Way*: 350). As a result, Miranda’s anxieties and fears become known through the re-created epistolary discourse, which shows an integration of fictional and factual elements. Interestingly, Naipaul has rendered Raleigh’s and Miranda’s historical adventures in his major work on the history of the New World, *The loss of El Dorado* (1969). Nonetheless, taking a new angle a quarter of a century later in *A way in the world*, Naipaul repatterns the documentary material and rewrites a historical fiction about Raleigh and Miranda. Rediscovering and re-plotting the same documentary facts differently in the former book subtitled as “history” and in the latter subtitled as “novel”, Naipaul illustrates Ricoeur’s idea of *the Same*, namely, the re-enactment of the historical past in the present. In so doing, Naipaul has questioned the generic boundaries between history and fiction, and transformed historical incompleteness and liminality by re-constructing and re-enacting personal stories within the history of the place.

### 3. Recognising the difference: change and re-creation

Reading *A way in the world* as Naipaul’s “fin de siècle” work, Timothy Weiss (1996:121) points out that the novel exhibits Naipaul’s “experiential values”:

... faithfulness to one’s ‘essential’ self, the use of history and memory to revise one’s perspectives on self and community, and the power of self-creativity through writing, reflection, and dialogue with others.

Naipaul thus undertakes a long journey to understand one’s responsibility for a world shared with fellow human beings from past, present and future, and with individuals of different cultural and

ethnic background, ancient or modern. Relying on Ricoeur's study of the historical past under *the Other*, this section looks at the translation of liminality from the position of recognising the sameness and strangeness in self, history, and the world.

In *A way in the world*, Naipaul gives accounts of his growing knowledge of himself and others, as well as his effort to discover and re-create personal and cultural histories. The novel especially reiterates that every individual has a unique vision, a different story to tell, and his or her story is in one way or another intertwined with the narrator's story as well as that of the author's. Naipaul examines "difference" in the sense that "[t]he historical fact would [...] have to be grasped as a *variant* generated by the individualization of [...] invariants" (Ricoeur, 1984:8). Listening to these variant and individualised stories, the narrator is endowed with a deeper understanding of the Heraclitean philosophy of the world in flux. As Ricoeur (1984:18) states,

... historical conceptualization must itself be conceived of as the search for and the positing of *invariants*, understanding by this term a stable correlation between a small number of variables capable of generating their own modifications.

Modification unquestionably demands a certain amount of rewriting and remaking. Furthermore, historical conceptualisation depends on and is enriched by recognising similarities and differences. Naipaul considers the remaking of oneself or one's world as a common wish, but a rare capacity for the writer. Speaking through the narrator in the last Chapter "Home again", Naipaul comments on Blair's inability "to remake himself" because he was not a writer (*Way*: 373).

With the gift of writing, Naipaul tries to bridge "the gap separating the self and its other" and the chasm between himself as man and as writer (Ricoeur, 1984:17). Naipaul has paralleled much of his individual experience with his observation of the contemporary world. His struggle and success as a writer coincide with worldwide changes after the collapse of imperial power and the tide of immigration during the second half of the twentieth century. Being a product of these social and cultural changes himself, Naipaul has played an influential role in redefining the meaning of Englishness and reforming the landscape of English literature by re-examining and rewriting the history of colonisation from the perspective of a Third-World individual. Being an exile and ex-colonial in a post-war, postcolonial Europe has provided Naipaul with the momentum for *taking a distance* and *spiritual decentering* (Ricoeur, 1984:15, 16). In

a narrow sense, *taking a distance* means uncovering strangeness in the self, recognising an otherness of the historical past in relation to the present. In parallel, decentring suggests repudiating an unchanging view on self and challenging a conventional attitude toward history.

Looking at the houses and streets in “Prelude: an inheritance” – in the opening chapter of *A way in the world*, the narrator could not help having the “half-dream” of “knowing and not knowing” and a “shifting” sense of reality (*Way*: 4). Listening to stories about Leonard Side, the decorator of cakes and arranger of flowers, from the woman teacher who seemed to know him quite well but could not explain his idiosyncratic “feeling for beauty”, makes the narrator wonder whether Side himself had come to any understanding of himself and his ancestors (*Way*: 10). Interestingly, the narrator re-creates an ancestry for Side through the association of his name with Syde, linking him to a Shia Muslim group in India or the dancing Lucknow, “the lewd men who painted their faces and tried to live like women” (*Way*: 10). The narrator therefore reveals how little one knows about one’s inheritance. This idea is further developed in the second chapter, “History: a smell of fish glue”. During his short-term job in the Registrar-General’s Department in Trinidad before his departure to England, the narrator was told that “[a]ll the records of the British colony, [...] since 1797, [...] together with a copy of everything that had been printed in the colony” were kept in the department vault (*Way*: 41). The narrator’s vivid memory of “the smell of fish glue” with which these documents were bound implies a correction of his childhood feeling that the island was out of history due to “the light and the heat [that] had burnt away the history of the place” (*Way*: 74). Acknowledging the strangeness within and around him, the narrator returns to his native Trinidad as an aspiring writer with a mission to revisit and rediscover his and the nation’s historical past. Although documents may “hunt up” the story of the land, the narrator points out that a “historical bird’s eye view” cannot really explain “the mystery” of what one has inherited (*Way*: 11). As shown in *A way in the world*, Naipaul has portrayed his characters – the disillusioned Columbus, the half-demented Raleigh, the dishonoured Miranda, the doomed Blair, as well as the omniscient narrator who resembles Naipaul himself – as unique individuals whose life or death, histories or mysteries constitute different ways in the world.

#### 4. Rectifying and refiguring the past

Naipaul’s strategy of contesting liminality by translating the historical past in terms of fictionalising history and historicising fiction can be

better understood with reference to Ricoeur's observation of the Analogue. Ricoeur (1984:36) concludes that

... *analogy* acquires its full sense only against the backdrop of the dialectic of Same and Other: the past is indeed what is to be *re-enacted* in the mode of the identical. But it is so only to the extent that it is also what is *absent* from all of our constructions.

The historical past that has been re-constructed is a re-creation from repatterning the similar and imagining the difference in the "real" past. Also, the experience of the historical past is no more than a historical awareness built and commented on knowledge or understanding. Fiction, through which experience is transmitted and transformed, demands continued rectification and reinterpretation. Naipaul explains that "[e]very exploration, every book, added to [his] knowledge, qualified [his] earlier idea of [him]self and the world" (Naipaul, 2002:168). The expansion of knowledge and qualification of earlier ideas suggest re-enacting and refiguring experience in a different light in a new book.

On the act of re-enactment Ricoeur (1984:11) comments: "the past *survive[s]* by leaving a trace", and therefore, "we become *inheritors* of the past in order to be able to re-enact past thoughts". Naipaul is an inheritor of a writing ambition, which had been passed down to him from his father as "a subsidiary gift" together with the "fear of extinction" (Naipaul, 1984:72). To make a start as a writer, Naipaul had no literary model to fall back on and was "to be spared knowledge" (Naipaul, 1984:18). In Trinidad, "there was the great unknown" (Naipaul, 2001:483). The familial and ancestral past was forgotten and became mysterious; historical and cultural documents were tucked away unread; colonial school education remained abstract and explained nothing. Naipaul felt "two worlds separated [him] from the books that were offered [...] at school or in the library (Naipaul, 2003:20): "the world outside that tall corrugated-iron gate, and the world at home [...], the world of [his] grandmother's house" (Naipaul, 2001:482).

Even so, Naipaul has learned to look at the inside and the outside of his "two worlds" with the eyes of an experienced writer-traveller, and the nerves and curiosity of a stranger, hoping "to arrive, in a book, at a synthesis of the worlds and cultures that had made [him]" (Naipaul, 2002:172). A notable feature in Naipaul's literary venture is that he reworks in a later book materials and elements used in his earlier texts. In *A way in the world*, Naipaul rewrites the material he treated in *The loss of El Dorado*, especially historical fictions on



Raleigh and Miranda. Confronting the question whether he is “conscious of reworking the elements of earlier fiction”, Naipaul has responded, “Yes. Getting the angle right: having acquired the material, writing about it another way and so producing new material” (Naipaul, 1998:55). Naipaul’s answer corresponds to Ricoeur’s concept of the Analogue blending the similar and the different. For Naipaul, it is the right angle that matters in rectifying and reworking, and which can generate a feeling of familiarity and unfamiliarity at the same time. From the position of a mature man and renowned writer looking back at his younger self and his years as a struggling writer, *A way in the world* replays familiar Naipaulian themes: the smallness of colonial life, the strangeness of living in a metropolis, and the difficulty in keeping his ambition to be a writer. Besides the chaotic life and corrupted politics in the postcolonial Third World, *A way in the world* exhibits a gentler approach and a more sympathetic tone than those in Naipaul’s previous books, for example, *A bend in the river* (1969). Furthermore, *A way in the world* reveals Naipaul’s refiguration of Trinidad once depicted by him in *Miguel street* (1959) with bitter irony and absurd comedy. Actually, both the familiar and the unfamiliar have contributed significantly in Naipaul’s quest for continuity and renewal, and in turning his writings to one composite opus. Looking at this cycle of reworking and reinterpreting from Ricoeur’s idea of the past surviving by leaving its trace, the present text, recalling aspects of previous texts, will perhaps be incorporated as a trace from the past in the next book. In this sense, the temporal division between past, present and future collapses in the present. Moreover, this temporality offers a literary space to rectify past experience with an increased knowledge, and to reinterpret history from a present consciousness. The three “unwritten stories” about historical figures from different centuries in *A way in the world* have demonstrated how creative imagination works in bringing separate stories together to tell one “meta-history” of the Gulf.

Naipaul’s intertextuality merges the forces of re-enactment and distancing, illustrating a changing vision of oneself and one’s community. Thanks to “a different way of writing” each time, individual and collective histories are continuously translated to meet with the growing and shifting knowledge of the historical past (Naipaul, 2003:15). Positioning the reality of the historical past under each of the “great classes” of *the Same, the Other, and the Analogue*, Ricoeur (1984:36) has found a way “to think more clearly what remains *enigmatic* in the pastness of the past”. Similarly, *A way in the world* witnesses Naipaul’s search for a way in the world of

fiction to contest liminality through rediscovering, reconstructing, and rectifying history so that his personal experience or the experience of individuals like him will be represented and incorporated in literary and cultural histories.

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### Key concepts:

generic hybridity  
historical representation  
incompleteness  
liminality

### Kernbegrippe:

generiese hibriditeit  
historiese voorstelling  
liminaliteit  
onvoltooidheid