As a man and as a writer, Vidia Naipaul was a free spirit. There is nobody that I can think of to compare him to. One component of that free spirit is of course his use of the English language. Among many passages that have a place in any anthology of English prose is one in An Area of Darkness (1964) that likens the Taj Mahal to the Duke of Marlborough’s Blenheim Palace. Another is in Beyond Belief (1998), in which a beautiful landscape is revealed to be the approach to Tehran’s Evin prison, in which the Iranian regime does its torturing and judicial murdering. “Hate oppression; fear the oppressed” is global advice from The Mimic Men (1967), and east of Suez, he observed, “all men are not brothers and luggage is not safe.”

Anyone who supposes Vidia to have been an unrelieved pessimist should read his early writings, particularly “The Night Watchman’s Occurrence Book,” one of the short stories in A Flag on the Island (1967), a comedy that is also a perfect work of art.

But being a free spirit had more to it than deathless prose. Vidia was born in Trinidad in 1932, outwardly one of the hundreds of millions destined to leave no trace that they had ever existed on this earth. I wonder what would have happened to Vidia if there had been no world war to turn the world upside down. Perhaps he would have been another Mr. Biswas, immersed in day-to-day details, possibly a local journalist in the footsteps of his father. But Vidia had his chance and took it.

Arrival in the England of the 1950s to take up a scholarship to Oxford was a hard test of character. In his years at the university, he first began to be anxious that he might not succeed as a writer. Not long ago, his college wanted to hang a portrait of him that the artist had donated, but Vidia refused permission, as much as to say that he would not return to the halls of unhappiness. If he could have been born with a private fortune, he liked to fantasize, he’d

Being a free spirit had more to it than deathless prose.
have been a businessman. Meanwhile he drove himself to write.

The novelist Anthony Powell was a self-appointed but influential keeper of literary reputations, and by 1962 he had recognized Vidia as “this country’s most talented and promising younger writer.” At the time I was the literary editor of *The Spectator*, and I invited Vidia to review for us. On a summer afternoon, he came to the office and we then went to have tea in a hotel nearby. On the way we passed some workmen on a scaffold. We spoke about the British work ethic until Vidia drew the line: “I’m glad you said that. If you’d said anything else, I would not have seen you again.” I never got a review out of him.

My wife and I made friends with Vidia and his wife Pat. Devoted to Vidia, protective and always on the alert to check that he was receiving his due deserts, Pat fell into the exclusive classification of Great Man’s Wife. Her face gray-white and tense, she was secretary, copy editor, publicist, and slave, saving Vidia from himself with frequent interruptions to conversations, “You *can’t* say that, Vidia.”

My diary records a telephone call that illustrates how changeable the everyday drama of his life was:

“How are you, Vidia?”

“Very low, I want to die.”

“I’m sorry to find you in this mood. I can’t think of anybody who has more to live for.”

“There’s nothing I want to do, it’s the realization I’m no longer young, it afflicts all men.”

“Well perhaps it’s not the moment to invite you to a party for my Cyril Connolly book, but that’s what I’m proposing.”

“Oh how nice, I shall come, or if I don’t I’ll find a way of telling you.”

Then I rang Pat, who explained, “He’s gone over the top” because the noise of builders in the house was getting in the way of the novel he was working on. Vidia came to that book launch, and I told him I knew noisy builders were upsetting him. He gave what my diary calls “a deep throaty laugh.”

In 1979 I did an interview with Vidia and I have looked it up. At one point he says, “I hope I am recording and chronicling this extraordinary period of ours.” Then he continues, “I know that Trinidad, like India, the other ancestral strand, is a place without any possibility. If a place has some positive element you like to feel for it, it gives you a little hope. There is intellectual nullity there nowadays. No mind at all.”
The Middle Passage (1962) and The Loss of El Dorado (1969) show that he knew very well how cruel and unjust some of the colonial past had been. There were sound reasons for the British to feel guilty, and Vidia—the grandson of indentured laborers brought over from Uttar Pradesh—was in a strong position to add to them. Contemporary cause-mongers manufacture scandal by passing value judgments on the past in the light of the present, but he was not prepared to falsify reality in this fashion. Instead he put his mind to assessing the colonial past in the light of itself. The British had created a civilization that is open and available to everyone. On his travels, he found it was no coincidence that countries where mind operates were civilized, and uncivilized where it did not. Like Socrates, he thought that the unexamined life is not worth living. Vidia’s brilliantly emblematic phrase “The world is what it is” captures the view of history and human nature that mind had given him. Those who think that tinkering with reform, political persuasion, or revolutionary force is going to change the world into what they would like it to be are displaying a failure of mind. Fictional characters who illustrate the point are at best disturbers of the peace and at worst destroyers of themselves and others. Guerrillas (1975) takes the real-life story of one Michael de Freitas, a Trinidadian like Vidia, and creates a frightening modern fable out of it. Imitating the American racist Malcolm X, Freitas raises money from gullible donors to start a Black Power movement in Britain. Believing that he is reshaping the world as he wishes it to be, he takes his white girlfriend to Trinidad and murdered her there. His illusion finished on the gallows.

Unexpectedly, then, Vidia was conservative in the best sense, on the watch for causes and consequences. Critics of the Western mind—of whom there are plenty—could hardly believe that someone from his background had drawn conclusions quite the opposite of theirs. In the eyes of some Indians he was a traitor to his race, and I once heard a Jamaican professor dismiss him as “too brown.” The West Indian poet Derek Walcott lampooned him as V. S. Nightfall, though he later apologized for it. A Marxist academic had the jargon for him as “a despicable lackey of neo-colonialism and imperialism.” The humbug of the anti-Western stance is thoroughly exposed in passages like this one from Among the Believers (1981):

The West, or the universal civilisation it leads, is emotionally rejected. It undermines, it threatens. But at the same time it is needed, for its machines, goods, medicines, warplanes, the remittances from the emigrants, the hospitals that might have a cure for calcium deficiency, the universities that will provide master’s degrees in mass media. All the rejection of the West is contained within the assumption that there will always exist out there a living, creative civilisation, oddly neutral, open to all to appeal. Rejection is therefore not absolute rejection. It is also, for the community as a whole, a way of ceasing to strive intellectually.

After Pat’s untimely death from cancer, Vidia married Nadira Khannum Alvi. Introducing her, he said to me, “She will bring a rare new fragrance to your social bouquet.” It fell to her to deal with the years of his fame. I am of the opinion that he did not care a damn what anyone thought of him. People were free to write books about his supposed bad behavior, his rudeness and intolerance. When it came to his conduct, truth and falsehood were all the same to him. When speaking in public he sometimes asked Nadira to answer questions addressed to him as though
they were too boring for words. He also had some view of the continuity of literary life. Great men had engaged in controversies that are the stuff of history, and so should we. Liberal noses are there to be rubbed in the mess of liberalism. He rubbished Iris Murdoch for using the cliché “caring and compassionate.” Seated next to someone who described herself as a social anthropologist, he asked, “What is the word social doing here?” He told Michael Astor that a rich man like him ought to set an example and go to prison rather than submit to socialist taxation.

Every writer should have a good row, I heard him say more than once. Besides, he knew he was in the right. The star guest at a literary conference in India, he simply shouted down a speaker inveighing against the former British imperial rule. The next day, the wife of the American ambassador was due to give a large formal dinner in his honor. But she took the view that terrorists and suchlike were following custom, and therefore were not at fault for what they had done. In a fury, Vidia refused to attend the dinner and persuaded many of the guests to stay away too.

With someone of like mind, he let himself go and could even sound diffident. “Tell me” was the signal that he was ready to listen and learn. We went together to a conference in Baku, the capital of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. I had an introduction to Khadija, a journalist opposed to Ilham Aliyev, the president and hereditary dictator of Azerbaijan. She arranged for three dissident Azeri writers to come to dinner. Equally accidentally, I knew Poppy, the daughter of old friends, now living in Baku because her husband, Tony Adams, late of Arsenal and formerly the captain of the English national football team, was on contract to coach an Azeri team. “Tell me,” Vidia said to Tony Adams. The two of them had nothing in common, but their mutual cross-questioning about hardships suffered and ambitions delayed was so serious that the dissident writers never got a word in.

While she was prime minister, Mrs. Thatcher invited a dozen supposedly well-informed intellectuals to dine in Downing Street and discuss the difficulty of getting it across to the public that they knew better how to spend their money than the government that took it from their pockets. Vidia was on Mrs. Thatcher’s left, and I was on his other side. As they sat down, Mrs. Thatcher asked what he thought of the prime minister of Trinidad. “A gangster and a murderer,” said Vidia, to which she replied, “Quite.”

On the morning when it was announced that he had won the Nobel Prize, I rang up to congratulate him. “Oh, so you’ve heard of my little stroke of luck, have you?” he said. He and Nadira invited my wife and me to accompany them to Stockholm. At the ceremony, a white-tie affair, Vidia had to step up to a podium and speak for three or four minutes, not more. In the event, he had picked out of the classics the story of the Emperor Julian, who, while training with his soldiers, had the “wicker part of his shield” snapped off. Left gripping only the handle, he completed a perfect parable of success with the words, “What I have I hold.”
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