

## Bobby in between: the use of space in V. S. Naipaul's *In a free state*

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La novela crea un espacio —mítico, acaso, como el del viaje puede serlo— (...) o lo inventa para instalar en él una metáfora (viaje = vida = busca, descenso a los infiernos) genuinamente reveladora, como toda metáfora debe serlo.

[Ricardo Gullón, *Espacio y novela*]

The expatriate's sense of alienation, of not being part of a given culture and landscape can undisputably be considered V. S. Naipaul's favourite theme; especially since his own personal situation seems to consist of a voluntary exclusion from any culture and landscape. The central characters of Naipaul's narratives usually appear as individuals from whom the absolutely necessary, inner human strength of the intimacy of 'home', of a knowledge of belonging, has been brutally ripped off and therefore must be reconstructed, redefined, or, as a lesser evil, assumed and learnt to live with. Indeed, the theme is a central one in the whole of the New Literatures in English, for they very often present the anxiety of a character in a world that is not his or her own, and they deal with

his/hers subsequent search for the particular involvement needed to be at ease within it. Colonization, of course, is the historical (and fictive) event to be held responsible for the prevailing mood of uneasiness that trickles down Naipaul's narrative production as well as the reality of today's world, a feeling which in some way accounts for the ethnic-related cultural and ideological currents that are sweeping Western countries at present.<sup>1</sup> This paper, then, attempts to trace the use given to Bobby's relationship to and placement within space in V. S. Naipaul's short novel "In a Free State", or what is the same, it represents a precarious try at discovering how the reader is allowed to picture Bobby's individual struggle to shape a definition of himself against the backcurtain of the African space.

"In a Free State" ("FS"), however, conforms a rarity within the whole corpus of Naipaul's work. The story is a close look into the life of a white civil servant in Africa who, during his years of study at Oxford, suffered a severe mental breakdown due to his homosexual condition. His subsequent migration to Africa in order to make a living that would secure both

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce King considers the connection between the national identity and the personal identity themes as follows: "How a new sense of place and placelessness meet can be seen in the way many Commonwealth novels are both national epics in some way allegorising political and cultural history and yet products of an international sensibility attracted to post-modernism, the self-reflective and themes of alienation" (1991, 14).

his economic and his sexual and mental integrity is therefore presented through his own eyes as the definitive move that saved him from the certainty of an unhappy existence, while Africa stands for him as the paradisiacal space where his salvation is being materialized. Thus, the themes of alienation on the one hand and the relationship with a borrowed physical environment on the other are closely related since very early in the story:

A breakdown. It's like watching yourself die. Well, not die. It's like watching yourself become a ghost .... With a chuckle, as though speaking to a child, he said, 'Look at that lovely tree.' She obeyed. And when the tree had been looked at, he said, solemnly again. 'Africa saved my life.' As though it was a complete statement, explaining everything; as though he was at once punishing and forgiving all who misunderstood him. She was stilled. She could find nothing to say. ("FS", 116)

358 Bobby's deep thankfulness to and fondness for the land where he now lives is further shown throughout the story on several occasions when he overtly states his gratitude to Africa ('My life is here' ("FS", 126, 161)), and when, in a most adequate parallel with the car trip that gives narrative support to the story and at the very moment they seem to achieve the highest degree of intimacy, he recalls the image that provided him with the gleam of hope sufficient to hold on during his long recovery:

It's strange,' Bobby said. 'I never learned to drive until I came out here. But during my illness I always consoled myself with the fantasy of driving through cold and rainy night, driving endless miles, until I came to a cottage right at the top of a hill. There would be a fire there, and it would be warm and I would be perfectly safe' ("FS", 153);  
and a bit later:  
'I suppose,' he said, 'this is the sort of drive I used to dream of. The mountains, the rain, the forest. To me it's like Bergman country'.  
("FS", 162)

Seen in this way, "In a Free State" presents itself as a doubly inverse perspective of the problem of

post-colonial alienation: we are not facing the more standard case of an ex-colony native whose collective identity has been so savagely damaged that he must construct a solely individual identity by himself, like, for instance, Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*, or even the very V. S. Naipaul. Instead, we attend a colonialist's search for a collective identity in a society which has been object of colonization by his peers. Still, the story delivered in "In a Free State" is not simply that of the colonialist who faces the problem of dealing with his link with and role within the native African society. Naipaul's endeavour, however, lies even deeper. The twist in his work is the characterization of Bobby with the particular trait of his homosexuality, which is solely the character's concern and because of which the character has attached himself to a strange society from which he expects a complete acceptance. Bobby is fighting the very individual drama of his sexual condition, a drama which should stand in a totally separate level with regard to the colonizer-colonized interrelation, but which is mingled with it by Bobby's naïve attempt to solve the personal through becoming involved in the collective. Bobby's collective involvement proves a flaw; there is no commitment to the community that receives him (although Bobby is constantly trying to create the illusion: 'I am here to serve,' Bobby said. '(...) People who don't want to serve have no business here. That sounds brutal, I know, but that's how I see it' ("FS", 118)).

The complexity of the case illustrated in Bobby, therefore, is twofold because it combines the topic of the improper and difficult presence of the representative of a past collective offence which has resulted in the natives' freedom being usurped, together with the dramatic, very intimate fight of an individual who dearly expects an alien society to grant his individual self the freedom his own society did not allow for. In this sense, Bobby's relationship with the African reality is intrinsically dishonest and untrue, and in some way epitomizes the situation of many white expatriates in Africa whose compromise with it is nule because their interests are merely economic or professional. Peggy Nightingale (164) has the same doubts as far as Bobby's honesty is concerned. It is true, however, that the desperate and vivid fight that Bobby is putting up to achieve a certain degree of definition, adequacy and (sexual) freedom within the African reality in which he lives justifies him in the eyes of the reader.

Thus, the specificity of his case does not stop "In a Free State" from being a subtle study into the general reality of the ex-patriation mood and the consequences of colonization. Rather, its depth derives from the masterly clash produced between colonialist and native attitudes, between individual and collective interests, so that the story results in a very sound insight into the pathetism of the human condition.

The space component is crucial to "In a Free State". The very narrative axis of the story —Bobby and Linda's drive through the African country— posits a spatial meaning, and the significance of the drive is enhanced by the fact that, after all, the story presents two characters discussing their adequacy or inadequacy to a reality while they cross the very space that contains it. In this level of meaning it is important to note the fact that the journey leads them North to South from a stable, safe place (the capital) into a world of risk and danger in which they will gradually become aware of their vulnerability. Two separate atmospheres are generated by the two worlds that are in contact: Bobby and Linda's, who are constrained in the inside of the car, and the vastness and openness of the African land.

The importance of space in terms of textual presence is also great: before a brief summary of the political and social instability that will constitute the hidden, indirect motive of Bobby's gradual change, the very first words of the short-story set the place in which the action will occur. After that, almost every single one of the many sections in which the nine chapters are divided opens with a presentation of the place the characters are at or are going through in the car. The description of the breathtaking at times, at times desolate and grey landscapes that appear in the story is attended to carefully, as is the selection of the variety of surroundings and their corresponding atmosphere.

Bobby and Linda's first stop in order to take a gasping look at the 'famous view' will reveal the feeling they share with regard to the African landscape: they both acknowledge the extreme beauty of the scenery. But the 'famous view' also serves as a means of presenting the divergent attitude that Linda and Bobby hold towards the African reality. While Linda restricts herself to a mere admiration of the landscape, which she simply contemplates as something to take pictures of, Bobby projects a romanticized link with it, a projection that, in a certain way, lets the reader see the

illusory nature of that link. This is comprehensible because Bobby has come to Africa to escape his native country and society, and he preserves a terrible memory of his homeland, opposed to the idealized vision of it that is transmitted to the outside and, correlatively, to the vision that the colonialists have tried to reproduce in their resorts in Africa:

(...) between coloured prints of English scenes. There were old magazines: photographs of parties, dances, country houses, furniture: an England, as it were, for export, carefully photographed, with what was offending left out. The English countryside Bobby knew best was a spreading semi-industrial confusion of housing developments like tent-cities, old houses lost on busy main roads, railroad tracks, factory buildings; where what remained of nature — a brook, it might be, with pollarded willows — looked only like semi-urban wasteland. ("FS", 132)

Linda's attitude oscillates between the general belief that Africa is a continent of picturesque grandeur, and the nostalgia of some spots that she sees as reminders of the lushness of English countryside (Bobby, of course, refutes her observations; to him nothing can be compared to Africa):

'You wouldn't believe you were in Africa,' Linda said. 'It's so much like England here.' 'It's a little grander than the England I know'. ("FS", 112)

Bobby and Linda were enclosed by green; the highway was hidden. Not far ahead of them a line of trees, some white and leafless, marked the course of a stream. Beyond that the land sloped up again, parkland. 'Like England,' Linda said. 'Or Africa'. ("FS", 128)

In truth, Linda finds it impossible to identify, not even in the least, with a land that seems a mystery and to which she is sure she does not belong: "'That's the sort of thing that makes me feel far from home,' Linda said. 'I feel that sort of forest life has been going on forever'" ("FS", 161). The fact that she was forced to travel to Africa because her husband's possibilities in

England were nimious somehow explains why she feels uncomfortable here. Linda's inadequacy, which arose from the beginning when she had to overcome the shock of her arrival, is expressed in spatial terms ("FS", 217-218). But at the core of her argument with Bobby there lies the belief that there is some essential difference between England and Africa that makes the natives of one be unfit to live in the other, and displaced life therefore becomes a continuous make-believe: "You say nothing about it, you can't say anything about it. Outside you encourage and encourage. In the compound you just talk and talk. Everybody just lies and lies and lies" ("FS", 218).

The make-believe has been designed to cover up the confusion within. While Bobby refutes Linda's arguments, she states—in spatial terms again— what position one should adopt to be safe and avoid the state of confusion that makes it so difficult in Africa. In the end she suggests an attitude for the colonialists to adopt that is restricted to two choices only:

'It's their country. But it's your life. In the end you don't know what you feel about anything. All you know is that you want to be safe in the compound.'

(....)

'You should either stay away, or you should go among them with the whip in your hand. Anything in between is ridiculous'. ("FS", 218)

Echoing 'absurd' in the 'famous view' scene, 'ridiculous' is the word that Linda uses in this and in other occasions to refer to the inadequacy of Bobby's actions and assertions. Linda's function at Bobby's side is more clear now: through the contrast between her attitude and his, she will unconsciously undertake the task of exposing Bobby. Unlike him, Linda discards any possibility of an ultimate integration in the African reality, embodying a truer involvement with the African reality (though much more simplistic and despicable).

The ridiculous outcome of most of Bobby's actions in the course of the story, then, is a consequence of his determination to extend to the social and cultural realms the fictitious link he has set up with the African space; a consequence, in short, of his noble wish to integrate. Bobby's endeavour will place him in a very difficult spot: he finds himself at a loss in dealing with the Africans, while at the same time

he blatantly rejects the practice of violence or denigration on them. Within him a conscience has arisen of what he should be like, of what he should say, of how he should react, to the point that his statements and behaviour are a constant show of concern for the Africans' ways and feelings, of delicacy towards the African reality in all its richness and variety. Bobby's stubbornness in shaping a correct attitude towards the natives will be useless, and even foolish, because he will have a hard time facing the complex mixture of feelings existing between former colonizers and the colonized people, and because he seems unable to acknowledge the basic dishonesty derived from his real concern. In Linda's words, he is "in between", and consequently ridiculous.

In a way, Bobby's pretense is a feature of his personality that the narrator is eager to highlight. His own declarations put forward his need to act in order to achieve a certain conscience of self, a certain identity: "'You do terrible things,' he said after a while, the smile gone, his voice altered. 'You do terrible things to prove to yourself you are a real person'" ("FS", 154). Furthermore, the narrator suggests there is something excessively dramatic about Bobby: his reactions and moods are overplanned, thought in advance, and his state of mind is usually prepared for the occasion (as an example, the first of these moods right after the trip has started: "Bobby set his face. He decided to be sombre, to give nothing away. He had shown goodwill and that was enough for the time being" ("FS", 112)). After the roadblock the narrator describes the manner in which Bobby drives off from it, and the lyrical references to the landscape indicate that this momentary attitude could be extended to the whole drive through the country and, why not, to his whole existence in Africa:

He was in fact racing, half acting out, after the peculiar excitement of the roadblock, a make-believe of danger and escape on the empty African road, lined now on one side with the tall, bare, candelabra-like branches of sisal: the rain almost gone, the clouds high, the light shifting, the rolling land streaked with luminous green, bright colour going on and off the distant mountains. ("FS", 142)

It is obvious that Bobby's ways are usually forced by him: he repeatedly misreads young boys'

expectations and, although he has a vague idea that he is not quite sure about his sexual approaches, he is constantly baffled by the results; he wears a native shirt that upsets almost everybody's—including the soldiers'—sense of proper dressing for a white colonialist; in spite of Linda's warnings, he stubbornly misinterprets the Africans' laughter, a subtle *leitmotiv* throughout the story; he is taken in by the army lorry drivers' indications to overtake. His reactions at some points, thus, are ambiguous and can only be understood as the revelation of his own confusion, the materialization of his annoyance and bewilderment at the Africans' ways. Such is the case when the gas-station boy scratches his car windows and Bobby appeals to his status as a government officer to claim a compensation and then strikes the boy ("FS", 148), and when a bit later he expresses his admiration at the change operated in him by Africa ("It never occurred to me that I might want to use myself fully as a human being" ("FS", 160)), and then refrains from intervening in the turmoil of the rebellion and the hunt for the king, in the conviction that "it's not your (Linda's) business or mine. They have to sort these things out by themselves" ("FS", 217). In a sense, with his pretending behaviour, Bobby conforms to Linda's idea of the white colonialist, one who "lies and lies and lies."

There is a key scene at the end of the story that becomes the definitive spatial metaphor for Bobby's clumsiness and fictitious behaviour. When they encounter the soldiers, who have set up a roadblock, Bobby stops the car for no reason whatsoever, and he lingers there trying to talk to them. Out of his own confusion, or maybe because he feels he should show some concern for the prisoners held by the soldiers, Bobby enters the filthy building in which they are resting in order to talk to their officer:

His instinct was to get back in the car and drive without stopping to the compound. But he controlled himself. Quickly, right hand swinging, he crossed the bright road into the dusty yard and the shadow cast by the stone building, and went through the open door.

As soon as he entered he knew he had made a mistake. ("FS", 229)

What follows is the soldiers' beating and vexing him. They humiliate Bobby by "rubbing his face hard on the floor, now this side, now the other" ("FS", 232),

and by breaking his wrist and smashing his watch. Linda will notice the broken watch ("FS", 234), thus recalling for the reader the watch that symbolized his unstable mental state during his stay at the asylum. This reference could be understood as the symbolic indication of a new period of mental instability.

From here onwards the reader attends Bobby's gradual acquiring of a diffuse idea of his inadequacy. John Thieme (158) denies the existence of a revelation or definitive change in the characters, and so does Peggy Nightingale: "Bobby and Linda do not come to a shattering self-discovery, but return unenlightened at the story's end to the same patterns they had followed before their journey began" (161). In my belief, while that can very well be said of Linda, it cannot be so easily said of Bobby, for there is no display of his 'patterns' after he has finally made it to the compound. Rather, the narrative points at a change in him through the use of spatial references, with regard to which Bobby's thoughts begin to be somewhat like Linda's. Bobby devises a certain degree of failure in his attempt to integrate in the African world.

After the beating Bobby and Linda resume their drive, and Linda wonders whether the compound has been destroyed by the rebellion. Pointing at the fact that the compound is his natural space in Africa, Bobby's mind finds no other destination: "But there was no other place to drive to" ("FS", 234), just in the same way that Linda had commented on one of the criticisms whites posit on Africa: "'You know what they say about Africa,' Linda said. 'You drive these long distances and when you get to where you're going there's nothing to do. But I must say I'm beginning to feel it would be nice to see the old compound again'" ("FS", 215). Bobby begins to think of the compound as 'safe', and his relief is underlined spatially by the tense isolation achieved in the intimate enclosure of his bedroom, to which he runs for shelter as a beast to its den. Facing Luke's overt laughter, Bobby's sense of humiliation is so intense that he finally makes a mental move out of the ridiculousness that had so sharply been defined by Linda: "Bobby thought: I will have to leave. But the compound was safe; the soldiers guarded the gate. Bobby thought: I will have to sack Luke" ("FS", 238). Bobby contemplates treating Luke following one of the two choices Linda had suggested for a white's right relationship with the Africans: either 'stay away' (i.e., 'leave') or 'go among them with a whip in our hand' (i.e., 'sack

Luke'). The ending is open both to Bobby's resuming of his eager attempts to integrate, or to his final discarding of any such possibility.

We close the paper by positing the idea that, if not for the characters, then there is certainly a revelation for the reader. Naipaul provides the reader with the necessary tools to produce a sketch of the characters that allows him to draw a conclusion about them and their relationship to the African reality. By means of the ironic role of the narrator, who focalizes the story through Bobby so that the reader can picture the weakness of his convictions and the illusory nature of his projection on the African space, of the provision of the full conversations between Bobby and Linda, and of the physical position given to him within the spatiality of the story, the reader can occupy his own point of view and place (which could be metaphorically termed 'the back seat of

Bobby's car'). The result, in my opinion, is the strong impression that Bobby's illusion has, if not shattered, at least cracked by the end of the novel: he is out of place.

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