

# 'The World Is What It Is': Literature and Social Change

HARISH TRIVEDI

In this brief paper, I propose to explore and arbitrate between two directly opposed view-points on what literature can or cannot do by way of transforming society and the human condition. I discuss in particular two writers from the Third World and more specifically the Caribbean, Martin Carter and V.S. Naipaul, and two from mainstream Anglo-American literature, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden.

## I. Dreaming of Change: Martin Carter, Poet-Politician

It was the poet-politician from British Guyana, Martin Carter (1927-97), who wrote the simple inspirational line which served as the rubric of the conference: 'I dream to change the world' where this paper was presented. It comes from a poem of the same title and occurs at the culmination of a short passage suggesting a personal loyalty as the context of this stirring political declaration:

... if you see me  
looking at your hands  
listening when you speak  
marching in your ranks  
you must know  
I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world.<sup>1</sup>

As Carter's poetic fame remains confined to Guyana and to the West Indies, it may be useful to recover and recapitulate briefly the main facts of his life and works, and thus the fuller biographical and political context in which this statement is embedded.<sup>2</sup>

Carter grew up under colonial rule, served as a civil servant while he also joined the People's Progressive Party (PPP), and it was in the party journal *Thunder* that his first poems were published in 1950. He is now regarded primarily as a poet though there was certainly

a period in his life when he seemed primarily to be an activist for freedom and a politician. After the PPP won the first general elections in Guyana in 1953, the British rulers reasserted their control and Carter was arrested then and again in 1954. His volume, *Poems of Resistance* (1954), bears witness not only to his courageous role in the political turmoil of the times but also, paradoxically, to how his participation in politics helped him gain attention as a poet; he was, as the critic Paul Singh put it, 'jailed into poetic prominence.' In any case, this was the beginning of his reputation as 'the poet of revolution' in the Caribbean, a radical writer whose 'revolutionary voice' may subsequently have been muted but who nevertheless retained 'his fiery sense of engagement.'<sup>3</sup>

In the years of political uncertainty that followed, Carter worked for the major sugar-producing company Booker (which later instituted the fiction prize), and when the multiracial PPP split into two in 1955, with the East Indian population of the country by and large rallying around the PPP and the population of African descent breaking away to form the People's National Congress (PNC), Carter identified with the PNP though he was himself of mixed European, East Indian and African descent. In a poem written later, Carter celebrated the racial identification that he now proclaimed: 'I come from the Nigger yard of yesterday.' This is probably the poem he is best known by, a poem even more quintessentially identified with him than the one in which he says: 'I dream to change the world...'

In the evolving political scenario of Guyana, the PPP won the elections in 1961 whereupon Carter joined in vigorous political action against the government. When his own party the PNC won the next election in 1966, Carter served initially as a delegate to the United Nations and then as the Minister of Information for much of the term of the government, from 1967 to 1971. Though power did not corrupt him personally, it certainly left

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Harish Trivedi is a former Professor of English, University of Delhi

him highly disillusioned with how it does corrupt most people including those who were robustly idealistic when they had not yet to come to power. In 1978 he resigned from the PNC to join the Working People's Alliance (WPA), a socialist party now formed to fight the corrupt authoritarianism of the PNC! He was beaten up while some of the leaders of the WPA were murdered. He seemed to have grown thoroughly disenchanted and spent the last two decades of his life away from active politics, with stints as a lecturer or writer-in-residence at various universities.

It has seemed worthwhile narrating Carter's career in some detail for his would appear to be an exemplary and in fact a salutary life, so far as the juxtaposition, interrelation and the uneasy mixture of poetry and politics is concerned. He himself had indeed dreamed to change the world, and he had more than dreamed for he had actively striven to turn those dreams into reality. But just when his dream seemed to be half-way to realization and when his wish and desire to change the world was endowed with the authority and the power to do so, he found the ideal too illusory for attainment. His disillusionment and consequent turning away from politics to a life, and poetry, of relative quietude and reticence marks not his disillusionment alone, for a number of other poets from all parts of the world seem to have trodden the same path and to have arrived at the same sad awakening.

## II. 'For Poetry Makes Nothing Happen': Yeats and Auden

Locally, among those who continue to read Carter and acclaim him as Guyana's greatest poet, he is sometimes compared with more widely known poets who also represented in their life and works a mixture of poetry and politics. Among the most prominent of these are W.B. Yeats and Pablo Neruda. The comparison with Yeats is evoked in some detail for example by Al Craighton in his review of a special issue of a journal focused on Martin Carter.<sup>5</sup> After citing a passage from a biography of Yeats, Craighton comments: 'Substitute Guyana for Ireland and that could well be a comment on Carter.' This is a little facile, of course, but one appreciates the general intent behind the comment.

As is well known, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), one of the greatest poets of all time in the English language, was a supporter of the Irish nationalist literary and cultural movement though with conspicuously less fervour than several of his close associates such as Maud Gonne or Lady Gregory. When Ireland attained independence, he was nominated to the Senate in 1922

and re-nominated in 1925; he retired because of ill-health in 1928. When he was awarded the Nobel prize in 1923, the citation said it was partly because his poetry 'in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.'<sup>6</sup> And yet, even while a senator, Yeats openly criticised several policies and actions of the new government such as those relating to Roman Catholicism.

When Yeats died in 1939, W. H. Auden wrote an elegy for him, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats, September 1939,' which is in its own right a major English poem of the twentieth century. And perhaps the most often cited single line from this poem, often quoted entirely oblivious of the context, is: 'Poetry makes nothing happen.' To provide again a personal-political context for this apparently aphoristic statement, here is a fuller extract from this long poem:

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all;  
The parish of rich women, physical decay,  
Yourself; Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.  
Earth, receive an honoured guest:  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry.<sup>7</sup>

What Auden seems to be saying is that politics may make poetry happen, for it may provoke or 'hurt' a person into writing poetry, but poetry cannot make politics happen. When poetry has 'happened' or come into being, it continues to exist in an autonomous state, where its continued existence or survival may be thought to be a happening in itself. Thus, poetry happens and survives by itself, in isolation, in the remote and inviolable 'valley of its making;' but beyond such 'making' of itself, it can 'make' hardly anything else happen. However, its own making is, apparently metaphorically, also 'a way of happening.' The death of Yeats, in Auden's view, distinguishes Yeats the Irish nationalist from Yeats the poet. As he can no more make poetry happen, Yeats is now an empty Irish vessel.

Auden (1907-1973) was, of course, himself a political poet. He arose as a poet in the 1930s, perhaps the most political single decade in the whole history of English literature, an 'engaged' decade which witnessed a strong impact of the Soviet revolution on English literature and

in which the very term 'politics' acquired an inescapable Leftist connotation. Auden soon came to be regarded as the representative poetic voice of this period of English poetry which was to be called 'the Auden Era.' But already by the end of the decade, especially after his short seven-week foray into the Spanish Civil War in 1936, which was his first and only real brush with the actual playing out of politics, Auden realized how naive and ineffectual poetry seemed to be before the brute complexity and intractability of politics. Written in 1939, his obituary to Yeats is an acute reflection of his disillusionment. Poetry makes nothing happen, except itself – though that is in itself a blessing and a consolation, of course.

### III. 'The World Is What It Is': V.S. Naipaul

As with all parts of the world, the Caribbean too abounds in a variety of literary voices. Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of all its writers, V. S. Naipaul (1932- ), takes a less upbeat and sombre view of the world, in which a radical or romantic vision or even individual human agency counts for less in the shaping of the world than larger historical forces, such as the long and exploitative domination of the colonies by European powers. His mid-career novel *A Bend in the River* ( 1979), which many regard as among his finest works, in fact begins with what may be considered an utterly non-euphoric and even chilling statement: 'The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.'

As a rule with Naipaul, what he seems to say and what he actually says are two different things, for the latter is often more complex and layered. Here too, the opening phrase, 'The world is what it is,' may seem to be a fatalistic or cynical statement, imbued with a sense of resignation that devalues human agency, and the frame syntax of what follows seems to reinforce precisely this sense: 'men who are nothing... have no place in it.' But all this is seriously qualified if not up-ended by the parenthetical phrase which specifies that men who are nothing are those who have meekly and without resistance submitted to their own marginalization and disempowerment; they are men 'who allow themselves to become nothing.'

This striking opening sentence thus turns out to be not a denial of human agency but an affirmation of it, a statement not of resignation but instead of resistance and opposition. The world will do what it can to turn some men into nothing, but only those men will become nothing who let themselves be turned into nothing – and, by implication, not the others who can put up a successful resistance to the world, men who can, to evoke the title

of another book of Naipaul's, make their way in the world. Throughout his writing career, Naipaul has depicted the wretched of the world with unremitting realism, registering acutely the debilitating physical and psychological effect on them of colonial and racial oppression. This is in contrast to a pious or falsely buoyant view of the Third World which is often not only unrealistic but indeed patronising.

As the novel unfolds, a dialogic polyphony of voices begins to be heard which further complicates what one may have initially taken to be the import of the title and the opening phrase of this novel. A specially privileged character named Indar, modelled in some details on Naipaul's own life such as his education in Britain, and keen to 'make his own way in the world' (French 385), at one point delivers an impassioned speech to the hero of the novel, Salim:

I'm a lucky man. I carry the world within me. You see, Salim, in this world beggars are the only people who can be choosers....The world is a rich place. It all depends on what you choose in it. You can be sentimental and choose the idea of your own defeat....We've been clinging to the idea of defeat and forgetting that we are men like everybody else....I'm tired of being on the losing side....I know exactly who I am and where I stand in the world. But now I want to win and win and win. (Qtd. in French 385)

Contrary to appearances, this is not so different after all from Carter's heart-felt cry for radical transformation. If anything, Carter's was a 'dream' while Indar's hard-headed project looks rather more implementable. There are in literature many ways of perceiving the world and registering the fact that it is, inevitably, always changing and amenable to change. Different writers may stand at different political angles to the world and these may bear simple sloganistic labels, but the expression in literature of even a simple political position is made infinitely more complex and rich through the mere fact that literature is not a slogan on the wall. On the other hand, literature can only talk about change and depict change but not be the change. It is in this complex sense that poetry makes nothing happen, that the world is what it is, and yet one can dream to change the world, and poetry can be that dream. As Yeats said (or, more accurately speaking, cited, as an epigraph), 'In dreams begin responsibilities.'<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

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1. Text as quoted in the *Trinidad Express*, 15 October 2011. It is a

- measure of both Carter's current obscurity and the metropolitan bias against literatures of the Third World that the full text of the poem is difficult to find even on the net. Incidentally, Carter is not among the twenty-five Caribbean authors included in *The Arnold Anthology of Post-colonial Literatures*, ed. John Thieme (London: Arnold, 1996), 936 pp.
2. This summary narrative of Martin Carter's life and works is based mainly on <http://www.jrank.org/api/search/v1?css=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jrank.org%2Fjrankweb%2Fresources%2Fcss%2Fsearch.css&css&s=0&1=10&ci=1328&q=martin+carter>; accessed 10 September 2011.
  3. <http://www.martincarter.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 16 September 2011.
  4. Al Craighton, 'The Mob at the Door: A "Biography" of Martin Carter,' in 2001Guyanaundersiege.com, accessed 16 September 2011.
  6. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/). Accessed 10 September 2011.
  7. 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats, d. Jan. 1939,' in *W. H. Auden: A Selection by the Author*, the Penguin Poets series. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958, pp. 66-67.
  8. Epigraph to W. B. Yeats, *Responsibilities* (1916); cited from 'An old play.'