

Naipaul's Letters Between a Father and Son (and Mother and Sister)

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In October 1953, when the twenty-one-year-old Vidia Naipaul heard his father had died, he sent a telegram to his family in Trinidad saying “everything I owe to him.”¹ That is the exaggeration of grief, but only a slight exaggeration. And although Vidia soon outgrew the intellectual influence of Seepersad, the example of his father's devotion to writing, of his almost desperate anxiety about being a writer, has motivated and also haunted the prodigious son throughout his long career.

Naipaul's relationship with his father has its supreme literary monument in his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. But its chief biographical record is the sequence of family correspondence collected in *Letters Between a Father and Son*, a book with a complicated and revealing history, involving two editions (published a decade apart in 1999 and 2009, the latter ultimately withdrawn), two editors, two rival literary agents, a biographer, the tangled relations of a large and far-flung family, and the even more tangled negotiations of publishing-world politics. The intricacies of this history are unknown to — one may even say concealed from — most readers of the published correspondence. But it may perhaps serve as a telling case study in the opportunities and dangers, the politics and personalities involved, in making a literary archive public by turning it into a book.

Letters exist because of geography: because of the distances between people. In the case of the Naipaul family correspondence, they exist because in August 1950 the elder son Vidia left Trinidad to take up a scholarship at University College, Oxford — but also because, as fewer people know, Vidia's sister Kamla, the eldest of the Naipaul siblings, preceded him by a year. She left Trinidad in 1949, also on scholarship, to study

in India, at Benares Hindu University. So the earliest letters “between a father and son” are actually between a sister and brother: Kamla writing to Vidia from almost the other side of the world, and Vidia replying with bits of family gossip, suggested reading lists, and criticisms of her handwriting, or confessing an adolescent crush. Once Vidia himself was safely off the island, the correspondence became a three-way affair, between Oxford, Benares, and Nepal Street in St. James, the west Port of Spain neighbourhood that was home to the Naipauls. The core of the book, as its title implies, is the series of letters between Seepersad and Vidia, but it’s crucial to remember that, in both the published selection and the complete sequence preserved in the archive, this is a broader family correspondence, continuing after Seepersad’s death and through the decade of the 1950s, with many letters written by and addressed to Seepersad’s wife (and Vidia’s mother) Droapatie, Kamla, the other Naipaul sisters, in particular Sati, and even the occasional scribble from Vidia’s brother Shiva, still a young boy at this time.

The original letters — which now repose in the Naipaul Archive at the University of Tulsa’s McFarlin Library — survive because they were kept separate from V.S. Naipaul’s other literary papers, a substantial number of which were destroyed in the kind of accident archivists have nightmares about. In his authorised biography *The World Is What It Is*, Patrick French describes how Naipaul “spent a lifetime meticulously recording himself.” “Always conscious of his own projected destiny,” French writes, Naipaul “had preserved everything”:² manuscripts; notebooks; correspondence; BBC scripts; newspaper clippings; and much else. A large portion of these papers, covering Naipaul’s early career in the 1950s and 60s, had been entrusted to Ely’s, a storage company in Wimbledon, for supposed safekeeping. But in 1992, thinking to have his archive valued for sale, Naipaul discovered instead and to his horror that, thanks to a clerical error, Ely’s had mistakenly incinerated the box files that had contained a third of his papers.³

French notes succinctly the significance to a biographer of the loss of Naipaul’s Oxford diaries, the manuscript of his unpublished first novel *The Shadow’d Livery*, and the journals recording his travels in the Caribbean (the subject of *The Middle Passage*) and India.⁴ To Naipaul, the loss was also financial. As long as two decades earlier, in 1972, he’d attempted to interest a library or university in purchasing his papers,

suggesting a price of £40,000.⁵ Having discovered the destruction of a sizeable portion of this asset, Naipaul tasked his literary agent with finding a buyer for what survived. “Using impeccable logic,” French writes, “Gillon Aitken argued to various interested American institutions that the loss of the boxes at Ely’s made the remaining material especially valuable.” The University of Tulsa in Oklahoma — already the home of the Jean Rhys papers and the archive of André Deutsch, Naipaul’s first publisher — made the winning bid: “\$470,000, covering material to the end of 2002, with an additional \$150,000 to become available for papers generated during the five years after that date, making a total of \$620,000.”⁶

So in 1994, along with the other papers not stored at and incinerated by Ely’s, Naipaul’s family letters made a further and final journey to Tulsa. His side of the correspondence — the letters he wrote to “home” — had previously been kept in a bank vault in Trinidad. A note in Naipaul’s handwriting filed with the correspondence in the Tulsa archive says he retrieved the letters from Trinidad intending to use them as the basis for a book about his Oxford days, never written. But now they were to see the light of publication, as part of another deal negotiated by Aitken, who offered various British publishers the travel book that was to become *Beyond Belief* — Naipaul’s revisiting of the Islamic countries he’d written about in *Among the Believers* — with an edition of Vidia and Seepersad’s “Oxford” letters thrown in to sweeten the deal. “The letters were a questionable commercial project,” Aitken later admitted to French, and the publishers Little, Brown offered a mere £225,000 for the two books. “I had to write Vidia a careful letter; he wasn’t pleased.”⁷ Aitken himself took on the task of editing the letters — or at least was officially credited for this — introducing them with a note remarking on Naipaul’s “understandably disengaged approval of the project,”⁸ and the book duly appeared in bookshops in the autumn season of 1999. A US edition soon followed, published by Alfred A. Knopf, and a selection from the sequence of letters also appeared in *The New Yorker’s* issue of 13 December 1999, helping drum up public interest in this commercially “questionable” book.

As published in this original edition, *Letters Between a Father and Son* tells a poignant family story, offering intimate insights into the relationship between Vidia and Seepersad Naipaul — a relationship the son had contemplated in his writing oftentimes

over the decades, most extensively in the essay “Prologue to an Autobiography”. The letters are also revealing of the influences and concerns of V.S. Naipaul as a young writer, of the precocious confidence of his ambitions but also of his anxieties, and shows how some of the important themes and lines of inquiry of his later books took root early on — such as the movement of peoples between and within countries and cultures, the making and remaking of the self in response to these dislocations, and their accompanying tensions and illusions. The letters enrich readers’ understanding of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a canonical work of twentieth-century literature, which reimagines Seepersad and Vidia Naipaul as Mohun Biswas and his son Anand, Nepal Street as Sikkim Street, the Naipauls’ Capildeo cousins as the overbearing Tulsis. And the letters give us glimpses into the social life of an urban, semi-creolised Indo-Trinidadian family at a key period in Trinidad’s history, the decade before Independence in 1962.

These aspects were all noted by the early reviewers of *Letters Between a Father and Son*, a few of whom also considered the question of where this book fits in the Naipaul canon, and whether we should think of it as a literary work, or as something else. Reading the correspondence, from time to time you get the sense that Seepersad certainly, and Vidia perhaps, felt conscious of the possibility that the letters could someday have a public audience. It’s most overt in Seepersad’s letter dated 22 October 1950, in which he gives the book its eventual title: “Your letters are charming in their spontaneity”, he writes to his son, suggesting that if Vidia would write regular letters describing “things and people” at Oxford, Seepersad could compile them in a volume to be called “LETTERS BETWEEN FATHER AND SON, or MY OXFORD LETTERS.”⁹

Reviewing the volume in the *London Review of Books*, the English critic James Wood made an astute observation about the way the letters seem to document Vidia’s growing sense of Seepersad as someone a novel could be written about. “Vidia’s letters contain both warm respect for his father,” Wood wrote, “and the beginning of a necessary objectification of Pa, a novelist’s weaning, in which the young man begins to see his father as others might — as a character. He writes home: ‘If I didn’t know the man, I would have said: what a delightful father to have.’”¹⁰

So the value of these letters as a document of the development of an important writer — certainly the major prose writer of the Anglophone Caribbean tradition, and a

major writer of world literature in the twentieth century — seems indisputable. But very few readers of the 1999 edition of *Letters Between a Father and Son* could have known that on editorial grounds it was a defective text. It was riddled with errors of transcription which may not have affected the book's immediate readability, but certainly damaged its accuracy as a document — in some cases, changing the meaning of what Naipaul and his correspondents wrote, and elsewhere interfering with the nuances of the epistolary conversation in these pages.

Some of these errors are almost comically hapless, as in the letter written by Vidia to Kamla in September 1950, in which he describes his departure from Trinidad, beginning his journey to Britain. In the 1999 edition, it reads:

“I learned that the plane was delayed. I was mad. I refused to believe it. But it was so. So I kicked my heels in anguish at Woodbrook until 11, then took my luggage into dear old PA 1192 and we got to Diane at about 12. The waiting room was swarming with people”¹¹

— and on it goes. Some Trinidadian readers must have felt a slight confusion on first reading this passage. Woodbrook is the Port of Spain neighbourhood where Vidia's Capildeo cousins lived; “dear old PA 1192” was Seepersad's car, a Ford Prefect. But who was Diane? This mysterious woman is not mentioned anywhere else in the letters before or after, there is no explanatory note, and there appears to be no Naipaul or Capildeo relative named Diane. But according to the published letter, this was the last person Vidia was taken to see before he left Trinidad. The mystery was solved — anticlimactically — when I finally read the original letter in Naipaul's handwriting. Piling his luggage into the family Ford, Vidia was driven not to “Diane” but merely and logically to Piarco, Trinidad's airport, about an hour east of Port of Spain. (The confusions are not limited to Trinidadian place names: later in the same letter, the 1999 edition gives the capital of Puerto Rico, where Vidia's plane refuelled, as “San Fran,” rather than San Juan.)¹²

Another example, in which a transcription error completely misrepresents what Naipaul actually wrote, comes from a letter dated 21 September 1949, written by Vidia to Kamla, giving her his impressions of India — a country he would not visit for more than

a decade yet — and specifically his opinions of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The 1999 edition reads: “From Nehru’s autobiography, I think the Premier of India is a first-class showman using his saintliness as a weapon of rule.”¹³ It is an odd assessment of a politician who was seen as a national and anticolonial hero by many, but surely not as a saint. In fact, the transcription accidentally skips two lines of the original typewritten text, and conflates separate comments on Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi. What Naipaul actually wrote (with italics added here to indicate the missing text) was:

“From Nehru’s autobiography, I think the Premier of India is a first-class showman *with a host of third-rate supporters. I don’t know whether I could agree with Nichols’ condemnation of Gandhi as a shrewd politician,* using his saintliness as a weapon of rule.”¹⁴

Thus were readers of the letters deprived of young Vidia’s considered opinion of the late Mahatma.

The 1999 edition of the letters contains numerous examples of similar misreadings and misinterpretations — often the kind likely to be made by an editor with limited knowledge of Trinidad’s geography and social history. But it also contains errors resulting from other kinds of contextual confusion. For instance, the letters were arranged by their first editor into “chapters” named according to the three terms of the university academic year. In the 1999 edition, they are Michaelmas, Lent, and Summer; but at Oxford, the terms are rather named Michaelmas, Hilary, and Trinity. (You could call this a kind of terminological inexactitude.)

It seems no one had an inkling of these problems until Patrick French examined the original documents in the Tulsa archive during his research for *The World Is What It Is*. “These letters . . . were not transcribed accurately,” French writes tersely, explaining his decision to make his own fresh transcriptions. He went on to promise that “a corrected and expanded edition is being prepared.”¹⁵ For French had persuaded Naipaul’s new publisher, Picador — who had acquired the rights to all of Naipaul’s backlist, alongside the new biography — that they should issue a corrected version of *Letters Between a Father and Son*. Furthermore, and given the kinds of errors riddling the 1999 edition, he

convinced them to hire a new editor — one from Trinidad, grounded in the place of Naipaul’s origins, and so presumably unlikely to confuse “Piarco” with “Diane.”

Here, this essay becomes a personal narrative. In July 2006, following an introduction by French and a cordial exchange of correspondence, I met Gillon Aitken at his office in London to talk about my tackling a fresh edition of the letters. We agreed on three objectives: to correct transcription errors in the 1999 edition, to beef up the book with relevant additional letters which might have turned up in the process of cataloguing the archive, and to expand the endnotes. Aitken made it clear that Naipaul would not be involved in the process, and not available to answer questions about tricky references requiring annotation. Naipaul would never read the text, Aitken explained, repeating what he’d already claimed in his introduction to the 1999 edition. The letters summoned too many painful memories for the writer; Naipaul understood the value of having the letters published (and, it did not need saying, appreciated the book royalties), but would remain “detached.” At the time, none of this seemed odd. But perhaps I should have paid closer attention when Aitken, in a subsequent email, said he would not even discuss the new edition of the letters with Naipaul, once more citing the writer’s detachment from the book and Aitken’s knowledge of his client’s preferences.¹⁶

Thus in January 2007 I paid a visit to Tulsa — fortuitously enjoying a mild winter — and spent several days in the McFarlin Library leafing through Naipaul’s original papers. Then followed several months at my desk at home in Trinidad, reading and re-reading a thick stack of photocopies, transcribing, proofreading, and re-proofreading what became a significantly different version of *Letters Between a Father and Son*. For I exceeded the brief instigated by French and agreed by Aitken — to correct, expand, re-annotate; because, as I read my way into the material of the correspondence, I realised the task wasn’t so simple.

First of all, there was a basic editorial principle to decide: how to reproduce the text of the original letters, which were sometimes handwritten and sometimes typewritten, composed sometimes carefully and sometimes in haste, with their various authors’ idiosyncrasies of style and spelling. Though Aitken wrote that, as editor, he had

“adopted a policy of non-intrusion”,¹⁷ the 1999 edition in fact approached the letters from an editorial stance of intervening to standardise and smoothen: changing the punctuation and sometimes the grammar of the texts, correcting slips of the pen or the typewriter (while, however, introducing new slips of the word processor), quietly removing postscripts and marginalia. I decided instead to offer the reader a text as close as possible, within the bounds of conventional typography, to the experience of reading the original documents — which meant retaining their idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies, and indeed sometimes their infelicities, as long as these did not hinder comprehension.¹⁸

For example, Vidia tended to use ampersands when he was writing by hand, but spelled out his *ands* when he was typing; he dropped the apostrophes in his *don'ts* and *won'ts* when typing, but not when writing with his pen. These differences may seem trivial, but they influence the flow and rhythm of the sentences as you read them, and I thought it valuable for readers of the book to experience these just as the original recipients of the letters did. I even persuaded myself I had Naipaul's approval for this approach, in a sort of a way, as he'd once declared in a 1984 interview that “a writer's writing should not be interfered with. I like people to punctuate their own way . . . I never forgive people who change my things.”¹⁹ It also occasionally happens in the letters that one of the correspondents uses a word or grammatical construction common in Trinidadian English but usually erroneous in standard British usage, as when Vidia writes of “fulling out”, not filling in, his Oxford application forms.²⁰ To keep the phrase as he wrote it is to preserve a tinge of his accent.

There were other little particularities I thought worth preserving in the published text. In a couple of letters written to her parents by Kamla from Benares, she includes marginal notes in stilted Hindi,²¹ which she obviously expects them to understand, telling us something perhaps not irrelevant about the linguistic situation at Nepal Street. Or there is the letter Seepersad writes to Vidia in August 1953 after Kamla's return home, in which he uses an air-letter form Kamla had begun writing on but abandoned,²² hinting at the necessary thrift in a household struggling to make ends meet. Or the letter from Vidia to his mother Droapatie in January 1957, announcing that he has received the proofs of *The Mystic Masseur*, and complaining about the publisher's illustration for the dust jacket, with two small sketches to demonstrate how badly André Deutsch's artist had

depicted an Indo-Trinidadian turban. I scanned Vidia's doodles and had them reproduced in the new text.²³

The 1999 edition also lacked much of the contextual apparatus which might help a broad range of readers to more fully understand the letters: information about Trinidad in the 1940s and 50s, about Indo-Trinidadian family structure, about the Naipaul and Capildeo families, about Oxford in the 1950s, about the authors Vidia and his father read closely and discussed, and much else. The book offered only a few cursory pages of endnotes inadequate to the task. So I extensively re-annotated the letters, trying to anticipate readers' curiosity about people and places, and I gave the book a brief "epilogue" which describes the later years of the main characters, the members of the Naipaul family.

But the most significant and substantial change in my revised edition were the seventy-nine previously unpublished letters I added to the 170 of the original, increasing the size of the book by almost half. Most important, these included thirty-one new letters by Vidia and twenty-three by Seepersad — so that the revised edition contains all the letters between father and son discoverable in the Tulsa archive, some of which were apparently overlooked before the papers were fully catalogued. The 2009 edition also includes seventeen new letters by Kamla, seven by Droapatie, and one by Sati — a narrow selection from the dozens of additional family letters from this period in the archive. The most affecting of these new letters may be the pair written by Kamla and Sati in the days immediately after Seepersad's death, addressed to Vidia's tutor Peter Bayley and intended to break the tragic news gently.²⁴ In the event, before the letters arrived in Oxford, Vidia was summoned to London by his cousin Bas Mootoo, and learned of Seepersad's fatal heart attack from her.

Almost half of these new letters come at the end of the sequence, in the years from 1954 to 1957. The 1999 *Letters Between a Father and Son* trails off after the death of Seepersad: there are merely six letters and one telegram from Vidia to his mother and sisters, which cover his transition from graduation to publication, a period of three and a half years. I decided this gave a misleadingly abbreviated version of what you could call the final "chapter" of the story told in the book, climaxing in the publication of *The Mystic Masseur*, Vidia's debut novel and the tangible achievement of his and Seepersad's

dream. I decided to flesh out that final chapter, and make it clear that after Seepersad's death there continued to be a regular and often equally intense correspondence between mother and sisters and son.

The "revised and expanded edition" of *Letters Between a Father and Son* was finally published in early April 2009, "edited by / Nicholas Laughlin / and / Gillon Aitken," as the title page read.²⁵ It went almost unnoticed in the press, as it was perhaps not obvious at a glance that this was almost a new book, in all but name; and furthermore Picador had decided against sending out review copies, as they considered the book merely a revision of a backlist title.²⁶ Then, almost a year later, I received a mildly apologetic email from the head of Picador, saying that "Sir Vidia Naipaul . . . has decided that he would prefer the letters to stand alone without any commentary and has therefore asked that we print the book in future without the editorial notes."²⁷ What did I think of that? I thought it was a bad idea, and replied as much, but I acknowledged that Sir Vidia was the copyright holder, and this was his decision to make. A few months later, I got a further email: "I am sorry to have to tell you that Vidia decided that he wanted to revert to the original edition of the Letters for our next reprint."²⁸ In other words, Picador were discarding my text and reverting to the error-filled 1999 version. There was no further explanation.²⁹

I was bothered by this turn of events, but quickly decided to — as it were — take it on the chin and move on. Naturally, I also tried to figure out what could have prompted this withdrawal of my edition of the letters, after it had gone through the appropriate processes of editorial approval. There were various factors in play. *The World Is What It Is* had been published, and French's meticulously researched and unvarnished biography had provoked strong reactions: praise for its deeply intelligent scrutiny of Naipaul's life, work, and perplexing personality, but anger from some Naipaul confidantes who felt the great writer had been betrayed by his biographer.³⁰ Also, Naipaul had recently fired Gillon Aitken, his agent for decades past, in favour of a former protégé of Aitken's (and now his eager rival). Perhaps the proximity of the letters project to these other events had something to do with it.³¹

But I came to suspect that a major element in Naipaul's decision was that I'd substantially changed the nature and scope of the *Letters*, and probably in ways that did

not suit the author's sense of his own life story. The Naipaul origin myth — “the ambition to be a writer was given me by my father”³² — perhaps requires that the relationship between Seepersad and Vidia, between father and son, not be diluted by the adjacency of mother and sister. And that is effectively what I had done — deliberately — by allowing more prominence to Droapatie and Kamla, especially in the concluding section of the revised *Letters*. In fact, I'd chosen to end the book with a letter from Droapatie — to give her the last word, in a sense.

It is a delightful and revealing letter, written a few weeks after *The Mystic Masseur's* publication date. Droapatie begins by saying how nice it is to get a letter from Vido every week. Then she explains in detail why she must ask him to continue contributing financially to the Nepaul Street household. The grocery bill is \$150. The light bill is \$6. The phone bill is \$10. His sister Meera needs new glasses. But among all these expenses, Droapatie managed to save \$5 to do a puja for the success of the book. “At the end of two weeks” she thereupon points out, “2 hundreds copies were sold. I definitely think it is a success, and I thank God for it.”³³ As an aside: while there's a great deal in the family correspondence about books and writing, there's also an obvious pragmatic interest in money. There are bills to pay, typewriters to repair; the correspondents go to considerable trouble sending each other transatlantic postal orders for what sound like fairly small sums. The family was often, as Kamla put it, very hard up. We should recognise that Naipaul's anxiety about getting a book written and published was primarily but only partly about a young writer's literary ambitions: he also simply needed to earn money, to support himself and his family in Trinidad.

So I entirely understand why Naipaul (or his representative) might think I had turned *Letters Between a Father and Son* into a rather different book to the one he wished it to be, by trying to recover the voices of the mother and sister who were vitally important in Vidia's personal life in the 1940s and 50s, but who have not enjoyed an equivalently central role in the subsequent Naipaul mythology. This was, nonetheless, an intention I was led to by the evidence in the very archive the writer himself took such pains to assemble and preserve.

In 2004, reflecting on the partial incineration of his papers more than a decade before, Naipaul told French: “I am a great believer in the record, that the truth is

wonderful and that any doctored truth is awful . . . I think the completeness of a record is what matters.”³⁴ These are sentiments to encourage any biographer, and indeed French has made it clear that Naipaul never requested a single revision to his authorised but often unflattering portrait in *The World Is What It Is*. However, there is a crucial distinction between “doctored” the record, as Naipaul puts it, and shaping a narrative from the raw materials of the archive. Sequestered in the climate-controlled stacks at the University of Tulsa, accessible only to researchers approved by Naipaul or his agents, the family correspondence is available to most readers at present only in the form determined by an authorised editor.³⁵ The edition of the letters currently in print — the 1999 version, complete with mysterious Diane and saintly Nehru — embodies the narrative of filial affection and literary fulfilment which Seepersad imagined when he gave a name to the correspondence still in progress. But a consideration of the full archive of letters may suggest a less obvious narrative of family ties and literary ambition within the Nepal Street household, rooted in a relationship ignored by the title *Letters Between a Father and Son*.

Here, I follow a faint line of thought triggered by a mischievous hint in *The World Is What It Is*. Describing Naipaul’s composition of *The Middle Passage*, French scrutinises the book’s infamous opening passage: Naipaul’s encounter with the “immigrant-type” West Indian passengers on the boat-train from Waterloo Station in London to Southampton. French suggests this episode may have been inspired by a letter written by Kamla Naipaul to her brother — which French quotes — describing her own journey on the boat-train at the end of a visit to Britain.³⁶ It is indeed barely the merest trace of a suggestion, but French leaves his reader wondering if Naipaul borrowed his sister’s story for his own book. This reminds me of the letter dated 24 November 1949, written by Vidya, still in Trinidad, to Kamla in Benares. “I want you to promise that you will write a book in diary form about your stay in India,” Vidya says. “Study conditions; analyse the character. Don’t be too bitter. Try to be humorous. Send your manuscript in instalments to me. I will work on them . . . Your book will be a great success from the financial point of view. I can see it even now — *My Passage to India — A Record of Six Unhappy Months* — by Kamla Naipaul.”³⁷

Vidia is at least half joking in this letter, but it nonetheless may prompt the reader to ask if Kamla did ever seriously contemplate writing about her time in India, or writing any other kind of book; and *when* she might have managed to do this, inasmuch as when she returned to Trinidad from university in India she was expected to take up a teaching job to support the family. Seepersad's expectation of Vidia, on the other hand, was that he should stay in Britain as long as necessary to complete a book, and advance the cause of Seepersad's own writing, an increasing worry in his last months.

In one of the more celebrated passages of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf invents a character named Judith Shakespeare, sister to the better-known William.³⁸ Shakespeare's sister is a kind of thought experiment, through whom Woolf considers what might have befallen a woman in Shakespeare's place and time, with similar intelligence, literary talent, and curiosity about the world, but barred by social convention from fulfilling these. (It's no spoiler to say she doesn't end well.) The example tempts me into my own thought experiment: given the opportunity and encouragement, and assuming she had the desire, what kind of book could Naipaul's sister have written?

"The record" should show that Kamla did write a book: of some sort, never published, and which I briefly held in my hands. I met Kamla Naipaul Tewarie only once, near the end of her life, when a mutual friend took me to visit. I regret that I don't recall many details of our conversation. But I do remember she offhandedly mentioned she'd once tried to write about her parents, and she sent someone to fetch the typescript from somewhere in the house. It was spiral-bound, and there was a family photo at the front, with the title *Seepersad and Droapatie*. I had it in my hands for just a minute and didn't manage to do more than glance at the first pages. Kamla said she'd once tried showing it to her brother's agent, with no result. And the book, such as it was, disappeared again. (French certainly saw it also, as he quotes a few sentences of Kamla's text in his biography.³⁹)

If Kamla's typescript still exists, it surely forms part of the "complete record" of the major author V.S. Naipaul and the minor author Seepersad Naipaul, both of them duly recognised in the Tulsa archive (as brother and son Shiva Naipaul is recognised in the archive of his own papers, recently acquired by the British Library). But just as surely, the correspondence collected in *Letters Between a Father and Son* — including

Kamla Naipaul's letters, unacknowledged in the book's title — forms part of her record as sister, daughter, teacher, unpublished writer, and member of one of the most extraordinary families the Caribbean has yet produced.⁴⁰ Comparing the 1999 and 2009 editions of the *Letters* may stimulate fruitful discussion of editorial methods, literary politics, the vicissitudes of publishing, the crafting of biographical narratives, and the nature and value of the objects that do (or don't) get preserved in archives. It should also remind us that, as material collections assembled by men and women with intentions and ideologies, archives by necessity exclude, and choose to ignore or forget.

Readers of the published *Letters* might also productively reflect on the conventions and motives that shape our ideas of authorship. Nothing could be plainer about the book than that V.S. Naipaul is credited — on cover, spine, and title page — as its sole author. He holds the copyright and receives the royalties. This seems unremarkable, even obvious, until you remember that, in both the 1999 edition and the expanded 2009 edition, approximately half the letters in the book, and thus half the published text, were written by others: Seepersad, Kamla, and the other family members who joined the correspondence.⁴¹ Even Seepersad, the father who precedes the son in the book's published title, is not formally recognised as co-author. You might attribute this omission — if omission is the fitting word — to the practicalities of commercial publication. Perhaps it also reveals something about the ways in which an archive may be used in shaping an author's public persona. The letters themselves tell a story about an author inventing his literary identity, his notion of his relationship to literature, and how this might be perceived by others; and the circumstances of the letters' publication, half a century later, tell a later chapter of that ongoing story. The *Letters* are the author's authorised version of his archive, shaped by his sense of literary destiny. After all, "everything of value about me is in my books," Naipaul has written. "I am the sum of my books."⁴²

Meanwhile, though my edition of *Letters Between a Father and Son* is officially out of print, there are copies secreted — archived — in libraries and individual readers' bookshelves. And in its pages you can find the words of a mother and sister which complicate the story — the record — of a father and his famous son.

¹ V.S. Naipaul, *Letters Between a Father and Son*, ed. Nicholas Laughlin and Gillon Aitken (London: Picador, 2009), 377 (letter 201). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the Naipaul correspondence are from this revised and expanded 2009 edition, in which the letters are numbered chronologically for ease of reference.

² Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorised Biography of V.S. Naipaul* (London: Picador, 2008), 462.

³ French also records that on the same day Naipaul was informed of the loss of the papers at Ely's — 8 October 1992 — he received a second piece of bad news: “the Swedish Academy made an announcement of the winner of that year's Nobel Prize in Literature: Derek Walcott.” French, *The World Is What It Is*, 462.

⁴ French, notes to *The World Is What It Is*, 531.

⁵ This information comes from a letter from Naipaul to his then protégé Paul Theroux: “The only asset I have,” Naipaul writes, “is my manuscripts >(drafts etc.)< & my other papers (correspondence etc). A pretty complete documentation of my writing life from 18 to 40.” French, *The World Is What It Is*, 323.

⁶ French, *The World Is What It Is*, 468–69

⁷ French, *The World Is What It Is*, 474

⁸ Gillon Aitken, introduction to *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999), xiii.

⁹ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 47 (letter 20).

¹⁰ James Wood, “Tell Me What You Talked”, review of *Letters Between a Father and Son*, by V.S. Naipaul, *London Review of Books*, 11 November 1999, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n22/james-wood/tell-me-what-you-talked>

¹¹ V.S. Naipaul, *Letters Between a Father and Son*, ed. Gillon Aitken (London: Little, Brown, 1999), 12.

¹² The correctly transcribed letter (letter 13) appears in the 2009 edition on pages 26–29.

¹³ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999), 5.

¹⁴ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 11 (letter 4). “Nichols” is the British writer Beverley Nichols, author of *Verdict on India*.

¹⁵ French, notes to *The World Is What It Is*, 508–09.

¹⁶ Personal correspondence from Gillon Aitken, 9 August 2006.

¹⁷ Gillon Aitken, introduction to *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999), xiii.

¹⁸ For a more comprehensive summary of the editorial principles I adopted in preparing the revised text, see my editor's note in *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), xv–xx.

¹⁹ V.S. Naipaul, interviewed by Mel Gussow, “It Is Out of This Violence I've Always Written,” *New York Times*, 16 September 1984,

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/specials/naipaul-violence.html>

²⁰ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 9 (letter 4).

²¹ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 304–05 (letters 159 and 160).

²² *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 357 (letter 190).

²³ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 438 (letter 241).

²⁴ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 369–73 (letters 199 and 200).

²⁵ My contract with Macmillan Publishers, owners of the Picador imprint, stipulated “a credit to the Editor” but did not rule out a co-credit to the editor of the 1999 edition, even though Aitken had made no active editorial contribution to the 2009 edition, other than approving the revised text as Naipaul's agent.

²⁶ I'd tried but failed to persuade Picador to publish the expanded edition of the letters under a new title, to make it clearer to readers, reviewers, and booksellers that it was substantially different to its predecessor. At a meeting with a Picador editor on 23 September 2008, I learned that the publisher was planning no special publicity for the new edition. Soon after the new edition appeared, the *Evening Standard* ran a brief notice on 21 April 2009, calling it a "significantly enhanced version (of an already desperately touching book)". As far as I know, this is the closest thing to a review of the revised *Letters* ever published.

²⁷ Personal correspondence from Paul Baggaley, 22 February 2010.

²⁸ Personal correspondence from Paul Baggaley, 5 July 2010.

²⁹ I can hardly blame Picador for following the binding wishes of the eminent copyright-holder in discarding the revised edition of the letters, even if the effective result is a distortion of the texts. More frustrating was the muddle in the last stage of the book's production in which I was not given the opportunity to check my final corrections to the text. As a result, more than one minor typo made it into print — particularly annoying since the original reason for a revised edition was precisely to eliminate errors.

³⁰ Indeed, the second Lady Naipaul — her husband's staunchest defender — later recounted her visit to a "witch doctor" in Uganda, and her temptation to have an appropriate curse placed on "the wretched two-timing biographers." The revelation came in an article she wrote for the British society magazine *Tatler*, and was picked up by the press on several continents, reported as literary news. See, for instance, "Naipaul, Theroux and the witch-doctor," *The Week*, 1 December 2008, <http://www.theweek.co.uk/people/40343/naipaul-theroux-and-witch-doctor>

³¹ Given that all of Naipaul's professional correspondence will eventually be deposited in the Tulsa archive, and his habit of discarding almost none of his papers, it is likely that the archive itself may, in time to come, elucidate the reasons for the reversion to the 1999 edition of the *Letters*.

³² V.S. Naipaul, "Prologue to an Autobiography", in *Literary Occasions*, ed. Pankaj Mishra (New York City: Knopf, 2003), 67. The phrase is repeated almost exactly from Naipaul's 1983 foreword to *A House for Mr. Biswas*, also collected in *Literary Occasions*, 129.

³³ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 449 (letter 249).

³⁴ French, *The World Is What It Is*, 462.

³⁵ According to the McFarlin Library's Department of Special Collections and University Archives, "Mr. Naipaul has made all of his pre-publication notes, drafts, manuscripts, and typescripts . . . open to scholars under the University's usual policies for access to unpublished materials . . . Mr. Naipaul has asked, however, that access to family and professional correspondence files . . . be restricted for the time being to scholars who have obtained his prior approval." "V.S. Naipaul Archive", McFarlin Library website, <http://www.lib.utulsa.edu/speccoll/collections/naipaulvs/index.htm>

³⁶ French, *The World Is What It Is*, 207.

³⁷ *Letters Between a Father and Son* (2009), 14–15 (letter 6).

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1945), 48–50.

³⁹ French, *The World Is What It Is*, 17.

⁴⁰ In his introduction to the 1999 edition, Aitken does recognise that “Kamla occupies a special position in this book,” and thanks her for allowing her letters to be reproduced, though the volume’s copyright notice states V.S. Naipaul is the sole copyright-holder. Gillon Aitken, introduction to *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999), xii–xiii.

⁴¹ To be precise, 92 of the 170 letters in the 1999 edition (54 per cent) and 123 of the 249 letters in the 2009 edition (49 per cent) were written by Vidia.

⁴² V.S. Naipaul, “Two Worlds”, in *Literary Occasions*, 181, 182–183.

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