

THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL: WRITING AS THE ETHICAL MEANS OF ACTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract

THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL: THE COLONIAL AS EXILE, THE COLONIAL AS WRITER, is a study dealing with analyzing the internal nature of the writer coming to maturity in the acclaimed novel by Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul. The process of coming to understand how to be a writer and how to write is the central story of *The Enigma of Arrival* novel. Naipaul's vision of what it is to be a writer is not to write the truth of a reality, but to understand the truth that is found in distance and re-creation. The novel also touches upon the ambivalence felt by the migrant writer—the writer who writes in exile—over the country or countries of his past—the country he has left and the country he has now come to live in. Yet—and this seems central to Naipaul's point about what is required to become a writer—this ambivalence is not a feeling to be mistrusted or a problem to be transcended and put behind one. The importance of a writer of Naipaul's stature is that he can express the ambivalence at the heart of his fractured identity. The novel represents the colonial as exile, as dreamer of imaginary landscapes, and as insolubly divided and multiple. **However, more than anything, it represents the colonial as writer, and writing as the natural ethical means of action for the colonial in a world that has entered the era of post-colonialism.**

Keywords: *Arrival, Ambivalence, Biography, Biographical, Colonial, Colonialism, Country, Dislocation, Ethics, Ethical*—including *Action or Means of Action and Writing, Exile, Fiction, History, Identity*—including *Dislocated; Fractured; Reified; Identification, Imperial, Irony and Ironic, Land, Landscape; Memory, Migrant, Motif(s), Narrator, Novel(s), Past, Post-colonial, Post-colonialism, Reality, Return, Self*—including *Divided, Fractured; Hybrid; Migrant; Multiple; Symbol(s), Vision, Writer, Writing.*

V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is written in biographical form. Despite its subtitle, *A Novel in Five Sections*, this work has many parallels with Naipaul's own life and experience. The novel deals with the effect of writing and the experience of being a writer on a man's life. It shows how writing can be both a calming influence and an effective means of coming to terms with dislocation, as well as being an ethical means of living. It is writing, far more than the

surroundings in the English countryside in which most of the novel is set, that provides the narrator of the novel with "my second childhood of seeing and learning, my second life..." (*The Enigma of Arrival* 82).

Nevertheless, *The Enigma of Arrival* is neither biography, nor the type of fiction that falls into the generic line of fictional-biographical prose novels, beginning with the first novel worthy of the title in English, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. While the novel seems to be centered on the realistic portrayal of the people whom the narrator meets while he is living in the ancient countryside around Salisbury, this is merely the story's façade. The true subject and the story's main source of development is rather the internal nature of the writer coming to maturity, the way he sees, meaning the ways he selects what to see and how to see it. In this way, Naipaul's narrator does not give a realistic picture of the world held in stasis; rather, he attempts to express the mediation that has occurred between him and the world. Peter Hulme, in his *Colonial Encounters*, explicitly links imperialism and the realist register,¹ its creation of an objective and solid "truth" that is not to be questioned. Naipaul does not fall into the imperialistic trap; his "realism" (if it can be called this) is shot through with the power of the subjective imagination.

The process of coming to understand how to be a writer and how to write is the central story of the novel. The narrator travels from his native Trinidad to England where he hopes to fulfill his fantasy of becoming a writer. He has what Naipaul elsewhere has called the "drive and restlessness of immigrants."² However, when the novel's protagonist reaches England, the fiction that he does write—a few descriptive pieces that are worked over again and again in

frustration because they do not say anything – is dismissed by his former self as not only poor writing, but somehow dishonest. He had been searching for a certain writing persona; he wanted to mimic the voice of an urbane sophisticate who is shocked by nothing and knows everything. In other words, he was taking on the voice he had read in the British books he had poured over as a student; he wanted to be like the writer's of Britain's "golden" imperial age. "To be that kind of writer (as I interpreted it) I had to be false; I had to pretend to be other than I was, other than what a man of my background could be" (134). There is a strong sense that in writing his early stories there was an implicit denial of the narrator's earlier self, that he had become a "mimic man" of British literary tradition and, therefore, had committed a betrayal of his roots, his authentic "background." The very reason that he denied this background, however, is that it was a background he had wished to escape by becoming a writer. In an early story, the novel's narrator leaves out certain parts, one of which is an unpleasant incident in which he is given a separate room on a passenger ship as a form of makeshift segregation: "But that topic of race...formed no part of 'Gala Night'. It was too close to my disturbance, my vulnerability" (115).

As Diana Fuss points out, "identification [. . .] is an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the "Other" is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of Self,"³ and this is precisely what was happening to the narrator as a young writer. He wanted to depose himself as "Other" and identify with the British tradition that somehow made up his picture of what it was to be a writer. Without any explicit attempt at deceit, the narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* is playing the role of what he thought a writer should be, and by doing so started to feel the "restlessness" which is such an important motif in all the earlier works of Naipaul. He felt that "between the man writing the diary and the traveller there was already a gap, already a gap between the man and the writer" (102). The gap was also specifically post-colonial in nature, for it was the colonial self, the Indian/Trinidadian

who, far from being the urban Western socialist, is an outsider in a world he did not understand. Just as Homi Bhabha analyzes the native under the pressures that colonial discourse places on him or her, Naipaul's narrator begins to detect a "hybridity," a difference "within" a subject that inhabits the rim of an "in-between reality" ⁴ The narrator, as he learns to write, understands that great literature can only arise out of a closure of that gap. That happens when man and writer become one, and when actual, real experiences become the subject of writing, rather than the rehearsing of hackneyed characters and motifs of earlier works of the canon.

One might imagine from this discussion of authenticity that the closure of the gap between the man and the writer and the root of this alienation is the denial of his earlier Indian/Trinidadian self. If he were to return to that more "real" inner being, then he would become what he always dreamed of being: a writer. However, this is not quite the case. For, though these aspects of the narrator's self had to be confronted (and the narrator did start to write about his homeland again, particularly in the travel book that was later rejected by his publisher, but which he thought was tremendously important), this does not constitute a return to the *reality* of his past life or his past country. He wrote of his past from England, and when he returned to his native Trinidad some years later, he found that the island was very much different from how he remembered it, and how he had written of it: "Trinidad had since become almost an imaginary place for me" (311). Certainly, we can say that he had thrown off the role of the English imperial writer, but we cannot say such a gesture has revealed the true Trinidadian, who writes of the true Trinidad. Rather, the Trinidad he writes of is an "imaginary place," an imaginary landscape, and an "imaginary homeland," created through memory because he is distanced from it: "Far away, in England, I had re-created this landscape in my books... but now I cherished the original because of that act of creation" (139). This is central to V. S. Naipaul's vision of what it is to be a writer: not to write the truth of a *reality*, but to understand the truth that is found in

distance and re-creation.

In the writing of his past, Naipaul's narrator comes to a fresh understanding of who he is,⁵ an understanding based on the fragmentary nature of his character. The "truth" he subsequently writes, utilizing the distance gained because of his exile from his home, is a truth that is based not in the reality of places but in the disjunction that his experience of them brings. This is illustrated very much in his own novel. The narrator manages to bring the otherness of his life in a cottage in Salisbury and his life as a young man in Trinidad into suspension, a synthesis of varying aspects. He looks out at snow, and it reminds him of "a climate quite different" (45). Strangely enough, it actually reminds him of a beach in Trinidad. This is a reminder of a repeated motif in *The Mimic Man*, an earlier novel by V. S. Naipaul, whose narrator, despite coming from a country in which it never snowed, had always thought of snow as being his element. Snow is not stable, it melts, it changes shape, and, eventually, it dissolves to nothing. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, this is what happens to snow under the writer's eye: it shifts, it transforms, and it becomes a bridge between two very different worlds. We see the same technique again after Brenda's murder when her sister comes to pick up her belongings. Brenda's dairyman husband has murdered her for her unfaithfulness. The narrator notes, "Collecting the dead person's things – it was like something from the old world, an aspect of the idea of sanctity, an aspect of decent burial, the honouring of the dead; and it seemed to call for some ritual. But there was none" (72). Here we see writing's ability to bridge difference without eradicating it, to hold the twin worlds of Naipaul's experience in a synthesis without transcending the differences, which remain very real.

It also touches upon the ambivalence felt by the migrant writer—the writer who writes in exile—over the country or countries of his past—the country he has left and the country he has now come to live in. Yet—and this seems central to Naipaul's point about what is required to become a writer—this ambivalence is not a

feeling to be mistrusted or a problem to be transcended and put behind one. As the power of the image of the snow that melts and forms into sand demonstrates, the importance of a writer of Naipaul's stature is that he can express the ambivalence at the heart of his fractured identity. The fact that he is neither fully in the world of his past, nor can he be a familiar to his new country with its completely different landscape (one, in this case, which is covered with snow), means that he can juggle these two backgrounds and these two landscapes while never truly being a part of either. He can exist within different landscapes (real or of memory) and can become an actor upon them rather than merely an object against the landscape(s) of his background. It is this ability that Naipaul weaves into his writing, giving it its power to stand above the cultures that created it.

In its very prose, *The Enigma of Arrival* seems to play out the truth expressed by its narrator late in the novel that "Land is not land alone, something that simply is itself. Land partakes of what we breathe into it, is touched by our moods and memories" (301). The landscape of Salisbury is changed irrevocably under the eye of the writer who can suspend the real and, by doing so, find truth. "Land is not land alone," recalls the dichotomy expressed in Naipaul's earlier works between land and landscape ("All landscapes eventually turn to land..." (§13†), and, similarly, writing is the process that creates landscapes, "imaginary homelands," landscapes of memory that express the hopes and wishes of the writer protagonist as much as the character of the land from which they are formed. Nevertheless, it is only through the writer's ability to transcend any individual piece of land that these landscapes can be constructed, can exist. Just as the young writer who tried to create urbane pieces of social commentary had to remember his roots, his past, and the landscapes of his history, the older writer had also to have the fresh contact of that other world, the world of cows and trees and ancient racehorses put out to pasture.

Singularity of experience breeds familiarity and contempt. Both require a freshness of

perspective, an ability to suspend notions of being “at home” with the self to write. In the countryside near Salisbury, Naipaul’s narrator discovers a new world of flora and fauna: “It was not like the almost instinctive knowledge that had come to me as a child of the plants and flowers of Trinidad; it was like learning a second language” (32). The comparison to language is very important, not only because it emphasizes the difficulty involved on the part of the narrator to come to terms with and understand the new world he is living in. It is also striking because it gives an impression of the new and more evolved consciousness of the world around him that the new landscape has brought. Where once he looked at plants and flowers in Trinidad “instinctively (and, therefore, one must assume, without thinking much), he now looks at this new world with the advantages of being alien to it. Just as those who learn a new language become highly aware of its resonances, its sounds, the depth and richness of a system that appears mundane and unremarkable to native speakers, so it takes a certain alienation to understand a new world, and to write its story. V. S. Naipaul, through his novels’ protagonists, invests all his senses to very carefully point out the relevance of any minimal detail to the big picture.

The Enigma of Arrival has been placed into the category, along with many others of the so-called novels of “post-colonial literature,” of works that deal with the colonist’s “return home.” Paul White notes that the trope of return is specifically prevalent in literature from ex-colonies: “it must be noted that amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary.”⁶ On a reading that touches the very surface, this could be considered so with *The Enigma of Arrival*. The final of the novel’s five sections is entitled “The Ceremony of Farewell” and it deals with the death and cremation of the narrator’s sister. Perhaps reflecting events in Naipaul’s own life, the novel is dedicated to the memory of Naipaul’s brother, Shiva, who died a couple of years before it was published. This actualized (as well as

metaphorical) return is, however, neither how the novel ends nor is it the main point of the story. The symbolic death, rather than initiating a concerted attempt to return, pushes the narrator further out into his writing. The feeling of the closeness of death that it awakes in the author urges him into making an even more concerted effort to finish the book he wants to write about the process of writing itself, the book that is to become *The Enigma of Arrival*.

The irony of the notion of the “return” is that, like the notion of “arrival,” such an arrival is always suspended. For how can the exile return home? The exiled writer—a main motif in Naipaul’s novels—is never happy with the place he is; he is always moving forward, onwards. And just as the only place where the narrator of the *Mimic Men*, Naipaul’s earlier novel, felt comfortable was in a neutral hotel, one in which none of his various personas competed for attention, and where he was able to sit down and write, the only place that the narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* is happy is on the precipice of beginning to write. If there is a “return,” it cannot be considered an arrival, but always as a return to setting forth, a constant step into the unknown.

Instead of seeing the metaphor of “return” as the central premise of this *The Enigma of Arrival*, Elleke Boehmer points out that cultural expatriation is the central motivation and intrinsic component of post-colonial literary experience (particularly in this novel’s case), and that expatriation is also one of the most important driving impulses behind literature worldwide.⁷ For in the novel’s very title lies its most pressing concern. The novel, the writer, never arrives. In fact, the act of writing is always the act of the exile, of the person who can never return. Like the impossibility of finding the far shore of identity in Naipaul’s previous works, so we see the impossibility of reaching the “world” as seen by the young novelist at the center of *The Enigma of Arrival*. It is not mere pettiness or homesickness that makes the narrator uncertain on his arrival in England: “just as once at home I had dreamed of being in England, so for years in England I had dreamed of leaving England” (95).

Rather, it is an early sense of what is to become a central tenet of the narrator's writing, that is, the understanding of the ultimate deferral of writing about the world, the need for a rhythm of *contretemps* in any brushes with the reality of landscapes. He no longer sees his desire for the place where he is not as a longing, something that leaves him unfulfilled, but rather the structure of what it is to write: "As a child in Trinidad I had put this world at a far distance, in London perhaps. In London now I was able to put this perfect world at another time, an earlier time" (121). The creation of the perfect world, unreachable in geographical actuality but imaginable because of exile, is at the very center of Naipaul's writing. It is this "Otherness" that allows the narrator of the novel to claim some success in his hope "to arrive" (despite the fact that there it would never really be an arrival) "in a book, at a synthesis of the worlds and cultures that had made me. The other way of writing, the separation of one world from the other, was easier, but I felt it false to the nature of my experience" (141).

V. S. Naipaul's writing then, like the aesthetic claims of his narrator, is based upon the structure of exile – and this accounts both for his ability to synthesize the worlds and the cultures that make him and the slightly elegiac tone of the novel. For the novel is elegiac. It constantly reminds the reader of the uncertainty and ephemeral nature of the world, while offering the consolation that there is wonder to be found in precisely that uncertainty. Like the novel's aesthetics, this elegiac mood resides in the structure of the post-colonial's hybrid being and the fissures in his subjectivity. The narrator of the novel looks at the ruins and "superseded things" that seem to go hand in hand with the nature of the countryside in which he lives, and he seems to see some aspect of their certain decay within himself: "That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself... a man from another hemisphere, another background" (19). The passing of nature in the countryside seems to emphasize the very lack of solidity of that place, as it reminds the narrator of the disorder and

chaos of his own home, and, more poignantly, of the disorder and chaos that the many landscapes of his history have wreaked inside of him. This factor, which unites both the cottage and his home in Trinidad, is placed in contrast to New York and London which are solid, secure, nothing like the "ridiculous and disorderly existence of the 'half-made places in the world.'"⁸ Yet it is the narrator's past, his own inability to cohere inwardly, that allows him the sensitivity to understand the turbulence and changeability of the world of the countryside: "I had thought that because of my insecure past – peasant India, colonial Trinidad... I had been given an especially tender or raw sense of an unaccommodating world" (87).

Once more, we see in the sensibility of the writer (the true sensibility, not the one that Naipaul's narrator sought as a young man), the ability to bridge a gap and to see within the landscape of the Salisbury countryside the worlds of peasant India and colonial Trinidad, and, more importantly, within himself, the same nature of incompleteness and ruin. Ruin is welcomed rather than fled from. It is openly accepted, and it is seen as something almost positive. Perfection has its attractions, and the notion of the utter beauty of nature, which filled the narrator when he first moved into his little cottage, was, in its way, perfect. However, quite naturally, the narrator accepts that this perfection cannot last: "I had lived, very soon after coming to the valley, with the idea of change, of the imminent dissolution of the perfection I had found" (87). Perfection requires, by its very nature, the repression and denial of those things that might render it imperfect or create fissures in its perfection. Looking at the once beautiful, now decaying gardens of the manor's recent imperial past, the narrator seems as though he might have liked to see them in a perfect state, but then he strongly rejects the suggestion, preferring the incompleteness of the imperfect: "But in the perfection, occurring at a time of empire, there would have been no room for me" (52). The narrator himself, with his fissured, incomplete history, is a son of imperfection, for perfection requires the whole, the spotless. He would prefer

the passing away, the continuation of disruption, to this certainty that could have neither created him nor allowed him to write.

This could well bring into question V. S. Naipaul's political position concerning the colonial system and imperialism in general. Such questions have been posed and, accordingly, Naipaul has often been written off as a conservative who has turned his back on his people and the political struggle at the heart of the post-colonial world. Perhaps there is something true in that statement; as we have seen, Naipaul is anything but traditionally political. However, in a subtle way, *The Enigma of Arrival* provides a greater challenge to the orthodoxy of the colonial's attitude toward his earlier repression. A neighbour of his brings his old mother to the cottage, and tells the narrator that she had lived there many years before. The old woman is disorientated and saddened by the changes that the narrator has made over the years. By altering the cottage, the narrator says, "He had destroyed or spoilt the past for the old lady, as the past had been destroyed for me in other places, in my old island, and even here, in the valley of my second life..." (286).

In the first place, there should undoubtedly be some reaction to the comparison of the past being destroyed "in my old island," (one assumes the narrator is referring to the destructive hand of the colonial powers) with simple renovations to a cottage on a country estate in Wiltshire. Secondly, and in the wider context of the novel's acceptance of the disruption of change—the way, in fact, that it welcomes it—it does seem as if the colonial change, the change that was put in motion by the imperial conquest, is to be suffered with magnanimity. Certainly, there is regret on the part of the narrator at the passing of perfection. And could not the perfect garden of the manor be another garden, the garden of supposed innocence, disturbed by the violence of colonial settlement? However, he neither fights it nor puts up any real opposition. He learns to live with it and welcomes it. I would not argue with the fact that this willing acceptance certainly could represent a view

towards the colonial situation that disparages open political action, yet there is a more subtle reaction to the oppressive "Other" and investment in true agency through the power of discourse. There is an argument, one to be taken seriously, that would suggest that this is purposeful ignorance, "philistinism,"⁹ an attempt by Naipaul to block off the world around him (that would necessitate political action) and cocoon himself in his exile. However, I do not believe this is the case. Naipaul is not merely putting his head in the sand when it comes to the politics of post-colonialism; rather he is making a definite choice and takes an ethical stance. Just as in his earlier novel, Naipaul's protagonist chooses the world of writing over the world of action; the protagonist of *The Enigma of Arrival* does precisely the same. The novel concludes with the narrator running back to England to begin the very novel we are reading.

The Enigma of Arrival focuses, in many connected and diverging ways, on the fulfillment of a particular worldview that is not stereotypically "post-colonial." The novel represents the colonial as exile, as dreamer of imaginary landscapes, and as insolubly divided and multiple. However, more than anything, they represent the colonial as writer, and writing as the natural ethical means of action for the colonial in a world that has entered the era of post-colonialism. *The Enigma of Arrival* is thus a very personal book. As the narrator points out in the last section of *The Enigma of Arrival*, "The story had become more personal: my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries" (309). They—the writing discoveries and inherently the novel itself—are also wide-open edifices which taken in the width and breadth of all human action and history allow, through the personal, the attempt to reach a provisional formation of the nature of the colonial in the post-colonial world. More than anything, they attest to incompleteness, openness, and instability of the subject, the world, and of life—and they attempt not to capture this ineffable impression but to allow it to play out within them.

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