

## **Envisaging Identity: Transplanted Colonial Nostalgia in V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival***

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### **Abstract**

*A “transplanted colonial nostalgia” for rural England was imposed through colonialism, while erasing the fact that the English countryside was materially maintained on the back of the profits of the plantation economy. *The Enigma of Arrival* combines elements of fiction and of non-fiction, and blends autobiography with material not directly concerned with the personality of the author. It interweaves a description of Naipaul’s development as a writer with a detailed narrative of rebirth in the Wiltshire countryside, in the course of which the lives of the local inhabitants are subjected to Naipaul’s intense and wondering scrutiny. *The Enigma of Arrival* is read as a dialogue of past and present selves, and is compared with other narratives of colonial migration to the metropolis, and with Naipaul’s other accounts of his life. The present paper is a comprehensive attempt to explore Naipaul’s idea of “identity” that is sometimes inherent in the scheme of things at social, political and even at psychic level. In the novel *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul establishes that historically when different culture and communities becomes antagonistic to each other.*

**Key Words:** *Identity, dislocation, nostalgia, history, sacrifice*



### **Introduction**

Indian authors have influenced entire world with their writing. Indian authors in English have portrayed India; its rich cultural heritage and societal norms to readers. Transplanted nostalgia thus re-examines the place of colonial nostalgia in a multicultural England while acknowledging, as Baucom does, the affective appeal of this same nostalgia. However, Baucom fails to acknowledge that Naipaul also recognizes the interconnected material histories between the ruined landscape of Trinidad and the ruins of the manor. Baucom's important work concentrates largely on the result of renewal and redemption and Naipaul's relationship to England after Naipaul establishes himself in England, but fails to focus on the material *processes* of this renewal and redemption. Similarly, Nixon argues that Naipaul consigned his vision of greatness to the colonial era and remained there, *The Enigma of Arrival* reflects the fact that Naipaul discovers that this vision of greatness came at the cost of his own pinched, nervous childhood and the degraded way the Trinidad landscape was viewed. Naipaul realizes a sense of loss over his belated arrival into the landscape of rural England because empire is firmly past. But through negotiating this loss, he realizes that it is based on much earlier yearnings growing up within colonial institutions where the landscape of Trinidad was systematically ruined to support empire's growth. Transplanted nostalgia, like ironic nostalgia, acknowledges the erasure of complex material circuits that connect Britain's rural landscape and the landscape of the colonies in order to assert that national nostalgia should be nuanced to reflect Britain's contemporary multicultural landscape.

Naipaul's work invites meditation on the nature of individual identity, and on its relation to self-contradiction. His practice of self-reference combines consistency with divergence, variation with repetition. The frequency with which he returns to reinvent the narrative of his life, and to revise earlier works, affords a sense of the instability of his identity, of the provisionality of his conclusions, and of disjunction. "Every book is quite different from the other" (interviewed by Raoul Pantin 19), he has stated. This, however, is by no means an unqualified account, on Naipaul's part, of what he does. His work displays a notable ambiguity: it contains both centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, and blends formal fragmentation with thematic unity. This fragmentation is a response to what he perceives as the disparate nature of his experience, and to the disruption of his world, which he seeks to restore to a state of coherence. He defines as one aspect of his artistic project the aspiration "to reconstruct my disintegrated society, to impose order on the world, to seek patterns" (Interviewed by Adrian Rowe Evans 52). The fact that the various accounts of his life that he offers do not propose radically divergent interpretations of his experience, and that the views expressed in his books are more often in harmony than in conflict, ultimately fosters a perception of consistency in relation to his oeuvre. He has declared, "All my work is really one. I'm really writing one big book" (interviewed by Ronald Bryden 367).

Part of the complexity of his work proceeds from its entertaining contradictory attitudes towards its material. There is an unresolved and important ambivalence in his attitude towards the history of empire: he conceives of colonial rule both as a system of base pillage and as a lost ideal of order, and he views the metropolitan center at once as fulfilling and betraying an ideal. At times, he seems to reconfirm imperialist assumptions, while at other times he offers to refute them. Another aspect of this ambivalence, and a recurring theme of this discussion, consists in the complex viewpoints he adopts in relation to his subjects. He moves between the stance of insider and that of outsider with regard to the societies he portrays, and blends, in an unsettling manner, sympathy with irony, cruelty with compassion, in the treatment of certain characters. These ambivalences are interpreted as the product of his situation of cultural dislocation.

*The Enigma of Arrival* combines elements of fiction and of non-fiction, and blends autobiography with material not directly concerned with the personality of the author. It

interweaves a description of Naipaul's development as a writer with a detailed narrative of rebirth in the Wiltshire countryside, in the course of which the lives of the local inhabitants are subjected to Naipaul's intense and wondering scrutiny. Attention is distributed equally between the consciousness which perceives and the object of its perceptions: the writer is "defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 309). The Wiltshire sections have a fullness of detail which suggests that they derive from observation, but they also incorporate elements of invention, as Naipaul indicates:

There are two kinds of truths: I couldn't take the real life I saw in Wiltshire and hang philosophical ideas about change on it. You can't do it, legally or imaginatively, so you create your own construct, which sums up the truth, to talk about flux and so on? (Interviewed by Aamer Hussein 4)

*The Enigma of Arrival* is concerned to record with scrupulous fidelity Naipaul's initial impressions of the Wiltshire landscape, and faithfully recapitulates his every erroneous assumption concerning his new location. The first line of the book introduces the subject of perception which is the work's abiding preoccupation: "For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 11). The work proceeds to depict with painstaking clarity what it was that Naipaul failed to see, and the process of learning to interpret it: "I saw what I saw very clearly. But I didn't know what I was looking at. I had nothing to fit it into" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 12).

Knowledge came slowly to me. 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. If I knew then what I know now I would be able to reconstruct the seasons of Jack's garden or gardens. (*The Enigma of Arrival* 32)

Gradually Naipaul masters this second language, and the novel revises its initial impressions. He learns to see his surroundings as constructed rather than inevitable, man-made rather than natural, mutable rather than unchanging. The novel interprets the various strata of historical endeavour legible in the Wiltshire landscape as evidence of a process of change which, as it not altogether persuasively argues, amounts to a vision of flux rather than of mere decay. A consciousness of prior ignorance and subsequent understanding imparts reminders that the person who writes is distinct, and sees differently, from the person who first arrived in the valley. In the first section, entitled "Jack's Garden", Naipaul constructs an edifice of assumption around the figure of Jack - perceiving his life as emblematic of a form of timeless pastoral harmony with the land, from which Naipaul feels excluded - only to proceed to expose this pastoral as illusory, but nevertheless to persist in construing Jack's life as the affirmation of an ideal. At first, Jack is no more than "a figure in the landscape", (*The Enigma of Arrival* 31) but over the course of time, as Naipaul observes him at work in his garden. Jack's diverse activities marking the passing of the seasons, he comes to think of his existence as a living "Book of Hours". A contrasting, retrospective consciousness simultaneously makes itself felt: "Jack lived among ruins, among superseded things. But that way of looking came to me later, has come to me with greater force now, with the writing" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 19). Naipaul's misapprehension, which he devotes considerable narrative energy to elaborating, consists in seeing Jack's life as a survival of the past, rather than as a matter of choice. Naipaul's reading of the figure is defined in reaction to his own sense of being an intruder: "I felt unanchored and strange" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 19). He polyphonically interweaves his initial and revised impressions, and distances himself from assumptions he is nevertheless at pains to record:

Jack himself, however, I considered to be part of the view. I saw his life as genuine,

rooted, fitting: man fitting the landscape. I saw him as a remnant of the past (the undoing of which my own presence portended). It did not occur to me, when I first went walking and saw only the view, took what I saw as things of that walk, things that one might see in the countryside near Salisbury, immemorial, appropriate things, it did not occur to me that Jack was living in the middle of junk, among the ruins of nearly a century; that the past around his cottage might not have been his past; that he might at some stage have been a newcomer to the valley; that his style of life might have been a matter of choice, a conscious act; that out of the little piece of earth, which had come to him with his farm-worker's cottage (one of a row of three) he had created a special land for himself, a garden where (though surrounded by ruins, reminders of vanished lives) he was more than content to live out his life and where, as in a version of a Book of Hours, he celebrated the seasons. (*The Enigma of Arrival* 19-20)

The emphasis, by the end of the paragraph, is on re-affirming something akin to the initial impression: scepticism is submerged in affirmation. He explodes one set of notions about the character, in order to construct a new set. The musical interplay of inference and counter-inference, assertion and retraction, continues. Restating already discredited beliefs about the figure, he likens Jack's garden to "a medieval village in miniature . . . This was Jack's style, and it was this that suggested to me (falsely, as I got to know soon enough) the remnant of an old peasantry" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 22).

The parenthesis indicates the provisionality of the novel's predicates. The work repeatedly recapitulates its progress, summarizes its discoveries and reminds us of what has gone before. The manuscripts of the novel show Naipaul busily revising himself in an attempt to recreate his initial impressions of Wiltshire, and carefully striving to simulate the casual, natural progress of his thought. As a postscript to this apparently definitive and affirmative interpretation of Jack's life, Naipaul appends the discovery that Jack was possibly not the man he has imagined him — that he was perhaps a domestic tyrant. The repeated revision of the work's assertions has the effect of suggesting the provisionality of judgement, as well as hinting at the mystery which surrounds other human beings, and the difficulties of reading a social milieu in relation to which one is an outsider.

Writing about Giinter Grass, in terms suggestive of his own work, Salman Rushdie identifies a connection between migration and scepticism which offers itself as also applicable to Naipaul's practices in *The Enigma of Arrival*:

This is what the triple disruption of reality teaches migrants: that reality is an artefact, that it does not exist until it is made, and that, like any other artefact, it can be made well or badly, and that it can also, of course, be unmade. What Grass learned on his journey across the frontiers of history was Doubt (*Imaginary Homelands* 280)

Naipaul connects the autobiographical impulse with a sense of cultural relativism: the consciousness of straddling two cultures produces the need to explain himself, and to place his perspective for the benefit of his audience. Jack's case is central to the work: many of the other discoveries Naipaul arrives at concerning the Wiltshire landscape and its inhabitants are anticipated by the first section. In this sense as in others the work can be seen to be organised around a structural principle of recapitulation and revision, and of variation within repetition. In the same way that Naipaul comes to realize that Jack is not as rooted in the land as he had first imagined, so he discovers that the Phillipses, the manor servants, are, like himself, intruders.

Naipaul learns to perceive the natural environment as artificially constructed. Human

intervention in the landscape is inseparable from the novel's vision of decay: either humans interfere, and the landscape degenerates, or they fail to maintain it, and it goes to ruin. Jack's death, obliquely hinted at by the observation that the smoke from his chimney one day suddenly stops, is reflected in the way his garden runs wild:

So much that had looked traditional, natural, emanations of the landscape, things that country people did -- the planting out of annuals, the tending of the geese, the clipping of the hedge, the pruning of the fruit trees —now turned out not to have been traditional or instinctive after all, but to have been part of Jack's way. (*The Enigma of Arrival* 47)

The mutability of the world Naipaul observes around him adds to the instability of his conclusions. The work embodies a "sense of what is, wasn't always, has been made, and is about to change again and become something else". Revisions impel the drama of *The Enigma of Arrival*, while acting to frustrate the logic of chronological progression: Naipaul repeatedly retraces his steps to reconsider the same events and places from a fresh perspective. The work's repetitions serve to mime the rhythms of the temporal process. Varied agricultural tasks measure the progress of the seasons, and shape the passing of time according to a pattern of cyclical return. Christopher Ricks describes the effects of the novel's style — "With slow rotation suggesting permanence" (*V S Naipaul* 17) —and notes the fidelity of Naipaul's prose to the processes of thought, with reference to a quotation from Coleridge about the function of poetry:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air, at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. (*Biography Literaria* 14)

Journeys, as noted below, figure prominently in *The Enigma of Arrival*. The repetitions of *The Enigma of Arrival* serve as a fixed point against which to measure the unfolding of our own understanding as well as Naipaul's reading of his environment. "For the first four days, it rained and was misty; I could hardly see where I was" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 154). This repeats, with slight variations, the first two sentences of the work. By the time one reads these words again on page 154, however, one has a greater understanding of the route by which Naipaul has arrived in Wiltshire, and of its place in his personal history. He revises one's sense that his arrival in Wiltshire is simply a beginning, by locating it as part of a process: he is constantly arriving in places. In the first section, Naipaul anticipates Pitton's dismissal, and the decline of the manor gardens into dereliction, which is portrayed more fully in "Ivy". The pattern of anticipation and recollection highlights the thematic parallels between the two sections: both detail a series of changes which amount ultimately to a narrative of decay. There is a verbal echo: Pitton is dismissed, and "quite suddenly, from one day to the next, part of the routine of the manor I had grown into, part of my new life and comfort, my private, living Book of Hours, was snapped". By the time that Naipaul repeats and develops his account of this event, the reader has a sense of the larger pattern to which it belongs. There is variation within repetition: while Naipaul extrapolates an affirmation from Jack's story, refusing to accept that Jack's labours are mocked by the subsequent destruction of their fruits, the conclusion of "Ivy" might be thought to be melancholier. Pitton acquires a new life in the town, and eventually ceases to "see" Naipaul; the estate lapses deeper into decay. The end of "Jack's Garden" anticipates the end of the work, in describing the illness which is to cause Naipaul to move out of the valley,

and which puts an end to the period of Naipaul's life described by the work.

*The Enigma of Arrival's* retractions and repetitions measure the distance between Naipaul's earlier and later self. The writing of autobiography entails a process of self-revision; it involves a distance between experience and the narrative which is constructed out of it. Frank Kermode explores how the difference between the self that recounts and the self that is the subject of the narration is counterbalanced by self-recognition; part of the satisfaction of autobiography lies in its fostering an emergent sense of identity. Kermode notes the significance here of recurrence, which enables authors to persuade us that the self is continuous, and that, in Ralph Singh's words, "The personality hangs together" (*The Mimic Men* 219). Kermode argues that an autobiography's meaningful moments acquire importance with the advantage of hindsight and through the action of memory. John Sturrock comparably observes that the autobiographer embraces in retrospect accidents that may have seemed painful and unmeaning at the time (*The Language of Autobiography* 6). Sturrock considers it a feature of autobiography that there should be a life-task waiting to be revealed in the fullness of time and in the light of retrospection. There may be a resultant tendency for the autobiographer to over-rationalize his or her life in an endeavour to coerce it into the required shape, as does Naipaul's mystic masseur Ganesh in his autobiography.

The implicit narrative of "Jack's Geirden" is one of loss: although Naipaul invests his story with an affirmative significance. Jack falls ill and dies, and his garden is neglected and eventually destroyed. The landscape of *The Enigma of Arrival* is littered with images of deterioration: the changes described do not tend to be for the better. Naipaul's observations record a shifting attitude to the land: the mechanization of farming techniques, which he views as a desecration, is symbolized by the deformed cows which are "the mistakes of an industrial process awaiting death. Naipaul derives from his observations a lament for the passing away of an old, superseded way of life: The land, for the new workers, was merely a thing to be worked" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 16).

The landscape of *The Enigma of Arrival* is perceived through a filter of literary allusion. Naipaul encounters a sheep-shearing ceremony which is "like something out of an old novel, perhaps by Hardy" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 18). The sight of hares recalls to him Cobbett's mention of these animals. Naipaul writes that "the view through which I walked, was of a Nature almost unchanged since Constable's day" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 185). It is as if his observations are validated by what he has read and witnessed on the canvas, and vice versa. This, however, is an impression which is subject to modification. It is his initial belief that he inhabits a literary landscape familiar to him through his education in Trinidad: but the landscape demonstrates, in places, an inability to sustain such references: "No lowing herd winding o'er the lea here, as in Gray's *Elegy*; no sober herd lowing to meet their young at evening's close, as in *The Deserted Village*" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 80). Naipaul's allusions do not only point to particular survivals of the past, but also remember obsolete ways of life, and function as another index of loss and decline. In an early version of *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul unambiguously declared that these allusions were an aspect of the false expectations he entertained of England, and that they impeded his capacity to see it: "These literary influences constantly came to me in England; they came between me and what I saw; it was not easy for me to get rid of them and look directly" (Notebook containing plans for *The Enigma of Arrival* 1). This judgement has itself been subject to revision; in the finished version of the work, Naipaul is not so emphatic. "So much of this I saw with the literary eye, or with the aid of literature" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 22). The allusions are once more invested with a form of validity, and express a truth about the English scene.

An intimate connection between reading the landscape and reading the literature is implied by Naipaul's essay, "Jasmine", where he manifests an equivocal attitude towards his relation to an English literary tradition, hesitating between considering himself as an outsider to it and as an heir. He states that "this literature was like an alien mythology" (*The Overcrowded Barracoon* 23), but writes of adapting it to the Trinidadian scene. He seems to distance himself from the politically-motivated argument that English literature referred to a world too remote to be applicable to the Trinidadian situation, an argument illustrated by "Wordsworth's notorious poem about the daffodil. A pretty little flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us?" (*The Overcrowded Barracoon* 23). Elsewhere he unambiguously asserts: "I cannot myself see why anyone should deny himself the pleasures of any literature or song" (*The Middle Passage* 65). He concludes the essay, however, with an instance of his inability to connect the wider world with the landscape of his childhood: the name "jasmine" refuses to attach itself to the flower he has known.

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul is reborn into a countryside which he has read about from a distance, and the novel records the process of learning to read the landscapes of Wordsworth, Gray and Goldsmith. He associates his rebirth with an ability to put a name to another type of flower: "These peonies of my convalescence, these peonies around my cottage, were my first; and they stood for my new life" (*The Enigma of Arrival* 180). He implies that he now considers himself an inheritor of the tradition. Derek Walcott contends that, in *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul seeks to inscribe himself in the tradition of English elegiac pastoral, invoked by means of these allusions, as if to signal his arrival in the canon. His relation to English literature is not dissimilar to that of nineteenth and early twentieth-century American literary migrants in Europe: Pound and Eliot, for instance. Underlying the impulse to declare themselves part of the tradition through a wealth of allusions may be detected an anxiety about not fully belonging. Michael Gorra suggests that the position of the colonial writer is characterized by a sense of belatedness, and of the difficulty of carving out a place in the metropolitan literary culture.

*The Enigma of Arrival* supplies images which both conform to and defy traditional conceptions of England. "The Journey" offers an account of Naipaul's first impressions of England, when he arrived in 1950. He proclaims here a distance from his younger self, who had harboured idealized notions of metropolitan culture. *The Enigma of Arrival* embodies a complex of conflicting attitudes towards England, based partly on a distinction between past and present, town and country, idea and reality. On the one hand, the work narrates the process of a disillusionment. On the other, the preconceptions with which he emigrated are exposed as inadequate. Naipaul destroys idealized images of rural England by portraying the invading pressures of modernity—gone are Goldsmith's and Gray's lowing herds—but at the same time finds historical continuities; what he has read both validates and is validated by what he sees. To judge by the work's use of allusion, he appears to retain an affection for the idea of England which is enshrined in its literary culture. His ambivalence arises from a "colonial" condition of cultural dislocation.

E.H. Carr, in a well-known formulation, described history as "an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (*A Congo Diary* 36). Not only does Naipaul see the present as doomed to repeat the past: "Miranda's failure is still relevant, and the whole business of New World slavery is still with us. The borrowed revolutions of South America are also still with us" ("Letters from V S Naipaul to Diana Athill" 1). His perception of the past is, in addition, shaped by his sense of the present. His depiction of the failures which have attended West Indian history is a response to

the new politics, the curious reliance of men on institutions they were yet working to

undermine, the simplicity of beliefs and the hideous simplicity of actions, the corruption of causes, half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made . . . .  
("Echoes of Empire: Conrad and Caliban" 216)

A tendency to see patterns in history is enhanced also by his practice of self-reference: both history and Naipaul repeat themselves.

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