

*The House That Jack Did Not Build:
Textual Strategies in V. S. Naipaul's
"The Enigma Of Arrival"*

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The writer is saying, "Pay attention. Everything is here for a purpose. Please don't hurry through it." If you race through it, of course you can't get it, because it was written so slowly. It requires another kind of reading. You must read it at the rate, perhaps, at which the writer himself likes to read books. Twenty, thirty pages a day, because you can't cope with more. You've got to rest after reading twenty good pages. You've got to stop and think.

V. S. NAIPAUL, Interview with Stephen Schiff

*T*HE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL has had critics and reviewers wondering whether V. S. Naipaul had been pulling the old "lucus a non lucendo" trick on his audience: "I'll call it a novel because it's not; it's an autobiography." Though most of the book does indeed present a chronological account of the writer's days in Wiltshire, it is only by overlooking what Naipaul is insistently foregrounding that we can classify it primarily as a memoir. I am primarily concerned here, however, not with the issue of genre but with the strategies of how the novel's apparently objective descriptions of landscapes and events are used to create moral tension and how direct expression is substituted by more indirect ways of generating meaning.

A basic device is the repetition of an incident which releases its moral meaning only upon its second or third occurrence. I will here concentrate on the first chapter since the main structural device in the novel as a whole is the setting up of that chapter as an *archetype* whose patterns are repeated in the following three sections, while the fifth, brief chapter functions as an epilogue. The quest for vision is an equally important structuring device, constituting a unifying theme. The moral character that is always

attached to this kind of search is here strengthened by the intimate relationship between vision and action, in fact by the need to let vision work with, rather than hinder, action. In a crucial part of the novel, this is exemplified by dwelling as an activity (that is, actually "building" a dwelling place) as opposed to a passive state, offering us the key to the thematization of landscapes and places.

More generally, we detect a kind of spiralling progress, which is in itself a way of affirming the circularity of existence not as hopeless return to the same but as the concession of a second chance, the certainty that every death will be followed by a rebirth. This latter point manages, without ever being explicitly stated, to answer the all-important question formulated in the last chapter: "Death was the motif; it had perhaps been the motif all along. Death and the way of handling it—that was the motif of the story of Jack" (309). This is perhaps the most striking example of the way in which form and moral content work together in a novel/autobiography whose main concern is, at various levels, the bringing together of man and writer.

The centrality of writing itself is punningly hinted at in this novel by a very simple and, as Bruce King (4-5) reminds us, characteristically Naipaulian device. King identifies the sentence "With me, everything started from writing . . ." (154) as the centre of the book (143). This device applies also to the first chapter, entitled "Jack's Garden." At a central point in the chapter (both in terms of pages and of the number of sub-sections) Naipaul describes Jack's last visit to the pub just before his death. In fact, this episode is also "central" in relation to the moral convictions expressed by the novel, particularly in the formal movement of discovery that brings about the achievement of *vision*.

The importance of the episode is signalled by the narrator—in a characteristically offhand way—when he finds it necessary to comment on the *lack* of emphasis with which it was related to him: "She spoke quite casually, giving me this news, now more than a year old. She was just making conversation" (48). As a matter of fact, it is only in a similarly indirect way that the narrator can bring himself, towards the end of the novel, to make that statement which it is difficult not to take as the moral of this

work: "This melancholy penetrated my mind while I slept; and then, when I awakened in response to its prompting, I was so poisoned by it, made so much not *a doer* (*as men must be, every day of their lives*), that it took the best part of the day to shake it off" (309; emphasis added).

However, the episode of Jack's driving to the pub at the point of death (and on Christmas eve, which is also the pagan festivity of the rebirth of the sun) makes the same statement:

To be with his friends; to enjoy the last drink; to have the final sweetness of life as he knew it. *What an effort it would have taken!* To have those blocks of ice for lungs; to be incapable of getting warm; to be fatigued and faint; to want nothing more than to lie down and close one's eyes and sail away into the fantasies that were claiming one. And yet he had roused himself and *found the energy* to dress and had driven to the pub for the holiday, before his death. . . . That final trip to the pub *served no cause except that of life*; yet he made it appear an act of heroism; poetical. (48; emphasis added)

This is the narrator's epiphanic achievement of a moral vision. But Jack is also associated with vision—in a more literal, more gradual way. It is, in fact, through Jack's observation that the narrator finally overcomes his difficulty in "seeing," which he describes most compellingly in relation to two specific imagery: the *seasons* and the *landscape*. The opening, emblematic sentence reads: "For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was." Four paragraphs later, we are introduced to the narrator's inability to distinguish among the seasons (establishing his tropical origins). This is connected to the vision motif by the use of the term "blur":

the year—so far as vegetation and even temperature went—was a blur to me. It was hard for me to distinguish one section or season from the other; I didn't associate flowers or the foliage of trees with any particular month. (11)

Jack, on the other hand, who "celebrated the seasons" as in "a version of a Book of Hours" (20),¹ seems to possess as much a right of abode with the changing times of the year as within the landscape—another respect in which the narrator sees Jack at first as blessedly free from his own inadequacies:

I felt unanchored and strange. Everything I saw in those early days, as I took my surroundings in, everything I saw . . . made that feeling

more acute. I felt that my presence in that old valley was part of something like an upheaval, a change in the course of the history of the country.

Jack himself, however, I considered to be part of the view. I saw his life as genuine, rooted, fitting: man fitting the landscape. (19)

But this, again, has something to do with faulty vision on the narrator's part:

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. . . . I saw things slowly; they emerged slowly. It was not Jack whom I first noticed on my walks. (19-20)

There is yet another way—an exquisitely formal way—by which Jack is the focus of the narrator's progress towards the achievement of vision. The encounter with Jack is, in fact, delayed and substituted at first with the appearance of persons or things which are in synecdochical relation to him. First, throughout the first sub-section (11-19) Jack is mentioned obstinately not directly but in relation to his cottage: there are seven occurrences of the phrase "Jack's cottage" (three on page 13 and one each on pages 14, 15, 16, and 18); there are also two more complex syntagms: "the still living row of agricultural cottages, one of which Jack lived in" (14) and "the cottage-row in which Jack lived" (17).

The one exception to this occurs at the beginning of page 15, and is as important as the rule:

The first afternoon, when I reached the farm buildings, walking down the steep way, beside the windbreak, I had to ask the way to Stonehenge. . . . [T]here appeared to be many paths, some leading off the wide valley way, I was confused. Such a simple inquiry, though, in the emptiness; and I never forgot that on the first day I had asked someone the way. *Was it Jack? I didn't take the person in*; I was more concerned with the strangeness of the walk, my own strangeness, and the absurdity of my inquiry. (14-15; emphasis added)

Here is one of the patterns which is repeated at crucial points in the following chapters: the missed or delayed encounter. It knits together the various parts of the novel, but more significantly it keeps reminding us of the problems of vision. In fact, the repetition of the pattern is that as the novel progresses the vision becomes more fleeting and less illuminating. In the first chapter, it is given prominence by a series of textual devices whose main function may well be that of pointers that establish the presence of a "mystery." In the second chapter, there is the explicit mention of a "vision" in relation to the writer's career. In the third, the pattern is repeated in connection with two meetings with his landlord (171; 190-91); but, as the writer realizes afterwards, the first glimpse, however "confused," was to remain his "only true glimpse" (167, 171). Finally, in the fourth and most disenchanting chapter, all we have is a story, at first interrupted by the arrival of the rooks, which tells us of a death and a burial ceremony, affording us a very brief glimpse of green, which momentarily covers up the stark chalky whiteness of death (267-68).

Naipaul has not written a consolatory novel in the ordinary sense. Learning to cope with the bare fact of change and death is the main part of its concern, but whatever action is taken, and whatever progress is made, has to be accepted as a value in itself, not because of where it leads. At most, it is a progress to vision that is similar, in its employment of formal devices as well as in its outcome, to the overall process of the "discovery" of Jack.

Jack's deferred entrance, the master pattern through which vision is problematized in the novel, is demonstrated in various ways. The narrator says, "It was not Jack whom I first noticed on my walks. It was Jack's father-in-law" (20). This "Wordsworthian figure" in fact recalls an even more icastic literary character: he is Jack's life instinct stripped to its most basic and primitive aspect, the instinct of survival (he creates "safe padded places" to cross the barbed wire [20]; he crucifies the crows or rooks, symbols of death [28, 267]); he is "The Fuel-Gatherer" (26) and in fact fits the old stereotype of the *native* ("He was fantastically, absurdly bent, as though his back had been created for the carrying of loads" [25]). He is, in short, Caliban.

The narrator continues to defer Jack's entrance: "But before I got to know Jack I got to know the farm manager" (28). The characteristic that the encounter with the farm manager invites us to assign to Jack is *independence*:

I suppose (because Jack lived in one of the agricultural cottages attached to the farm) that the farm manager was Jack's boss. I never thought of them in that relationship, though. I thought of them as separate people. (28)

This sub-section ends with a vision of Jack working in his garden "as a free man" (34). This aspect, which is not developed any further with regard to Jack, becomes important in contrast with the *dependency* that affects like an original sin several other characters in the novel.

The process of discovery through metonymy and synecdoche first appears in this account:

The old man first [Jack's father-in-law], then. And, after him, the garden, the garden in the midst of superseded things. It was Jack's garden that made me notice Jack. . . . But it took some time to see the garden. . . . [I]t took some time before, with the beginning of my new awareness of the seasons, I noticed the garden. . . . I noticed his hedge first of all. (20-21)

Jack's garden and hedge now become the objectivization of the man-must-be-a-doer imperative, bearing witness at one and the same time to the futility and the necessity of the gesture:

The hedge hid nothing. . . . And beside Jack's garden, Jack's hedge: a little wall of mud-spattered green, abrupt in the openness of the driveway, like a vestige, a memory of another kind of house and garden and street, a token of something more complete, more ideal. (21)

Later, the garden itself succumbs to the perpetuity of change and decay of which the narrator has become so painfully aware in the course of the chapter. He is now able to take a step further, however, as he assures himself that the object of Jack's undaunted activity will enter a new cycle at some later point:

So at last, just as the house was cleansed of Jack's life and death, so the ground he had tended finally disappeared. But surely below all that concrete over his garden some seed, some root, would survive; and one day perhaps, when the concrete was taken up (as surely one day it

would be taken up, since few dwelling places are eternal), one day perhaps some memory of Jack, preserved in some shrub or flower or vine, would come to life again. (86)

This is again an offhand way of making essential statements: it is an important qualification to the narrator's adherence to the doctrine of *karma*. His rejection of fatalism leading to spiritual paralysis is left to emerge slowly and to drift into the reader's consciousness as the repetition of a pattern blossoms into meaning: the survival of Jack's garden under the concrete; the path cut by Pitton through the enclosure, which "awaited only this cut to reveal the old order and beauty and many seasons' tending that lay beneath" (181); the manor greenhouse, so solidly built that it would have been "the work of less than a week . . . to replace its wilderness with order" (186)—these all testify to the same idea that whatever is *well made* (and the moral sense is here as strong as the technical one) will survive and provide its own justification for existence.

Jack's garden is also an essential element in the process of discovery through the seasons ("His garden taught me about the seasons, and I got to know in a new way things I must have seen many times before" [32]) and, above all, through the explosion of the myth of the landscape. The ruin of Jack's garden after his death finally cures the narrator of his faulty vision and, consequently, of his sense of his own irremediable out-of-placeness. At first, the narrator says that "Jack and his garden and his geese and cottage and his father-in-law" seemed to be "emanations" of "literature and antiquity (25). After Jack's death,

[s]o much that had looked traditional, natural, emanations of the landscape, things that country people did . . . now turned out not to have been traditional or instinctive after all, but to have been part of Jack's way. When he wasn't there to do these things, they weren't done; there was only a ruin. (47)

The whole of this chapter (in which prior to his vision of the ruin of Jack's garden the protagonist had learned to recognize, first, the effects of change in the valley and, second, the human agency behind that change) may be read as a *Bildungsroman* whose outcome is not the achievement of some sense of perfection but, on the contrary, a therapeutic awareness of the fact that

perfection does not exist and never has existed. The narrator being an ex-colonial, this realization has a more specific value for him than the implication that, therefore, “decay” does not really exist either. What has seemed “perfect” to him on his arrival in Wiltshire would really have been at its apex during the days of the British Empire: “But in that perfection . . . there would have been no room for me” (52).

An especially interesting example of the way in which Naipaul uses repetition to suggest moral fact is his allusion to the myth of the Fall.² Ironically, it is thought the universalizing (anti-dogmatic, anti-essentialist) stance of this novel that this—the principal—myth of Western civilization is used here to highlight a problem that Naipaul has elsewhere depicted in relation to developing countries: the immobilism induced by a more or less explicit system of caste (as the sense of what is owed to oneself).³

The first chapter of *The Enigma of Arrival* contains two more locations, in addition to Jack’s garden, which the author can exploit as settings for a first paradigmatic representation of the myth of the Fall: the valley as a whole, and the manor garden. These three lines of representation are all introduced in the sixth section of the first chapter. This section introduces Jack’s illness and the ruin in his garden. It contains also the first mention of the “bigger changes” (41) in the valley, later exemplified by the common fate of the three successive stores of hay (56; 82) and eventually described as a “withdrawal at the centre” (79)—a term with metaphoric postcolonial significance. And finally, it introduces Les and Brenda (though we do not know their names yet), who perform the roles of Adam and Eve in our virtual Eden.

We first see Brenda sunbathing in the “ruined garden” (42) of the pink cottage into which she has moved with her husband. She is, the narrator tells us, “seemingly careless of showing her breasts.” But it is in relation to the manor garden that her behavior most clearly shows a metaphorical dimension: she moves in it, as we might say, careless of her nudity and unaware of the seasons (her bare midriff “not quite suitable at that time of year”), and “like someone who had been granted the freedom of the grounds and was at that moment beginning to *taste the new*

freedom" (62). Meanwhile, her husband has been picking fruit in the manor garden, tentatively at first ("like a man nervous of being observed"), but then as if encouraged by the presence of his wife (61). To the narrator, as he had told us earlier, those "were not fruit to eat" (59). Later on, referring to the "classical gesture" with which Les had offered him a basket of vegetables, the narrator comments: "I had seen him at one of his best moments" (69), during a golden age, which was to come to an end with the exclusion of the couple from the manor.

But the pattern becomes perfectly clear only with the shock we experience when the presence of evil finally manifests itself. It is motiveless, frightfully effortless evil: all the two other women do to cause Brenda's ruin is *nothing*: they do not relate the message that would have defused the tragedy. Brenda's fatal mistake, therefore, is not her elopement with another man, not her attempt to live (as is said later in connection with her sister) a "life of choice and passion"; on the contrary, it is that in a crucial moment she had put her life into the hands of others.

As we learn from the narrator's conversation with Brenda's sister, this was no accident but rather part of her way of being, her original sin. As the narrator reflects on her life story, he understands Brenda to have been the victim of a doctrine of *karma* which transcends all boundaries of time and place: "It is as if we all carry in our make-up the effects of accidents that have befallen our ancestors, as if we are in many ways programmed before we are born, our lives half outlined for us" (74). From very early in her life Brenda had lived with a sense that something was owed to her. This had made her dependent. And the echoes of her attitude in that of the inhabitants of the valley (whose "sense of history, the assurance of continuity" is synonymous with their "sense of something owed to oneself" [50]) show how positions of apparent strength and assurance may be beset by this kind of fallacy as easily as those of more obvious subjection:

History, glory, religion as a wish to do the right thing by oneself—these ideas were still with some people in the valleys round about, though there had been some diminution in personal glory, and the new houses and gardens were like the small change of the great estates of the last century and the beginning of this century. These people—though they had come, many of them, from other places—

still had the idea of being successors and inheritors. It was because of this idea of historical inheritance and succession that many new people in our valley went to the restored church. The church had been restored for people like them; it met their needs. (50-51)

However, in spite of this pervasiveness, there is a way out, and it is paradoxically provided by the Fall itself. Though Brenda had been unable to live through the failure of her idea of herself and had eventually let "fate" destroy her, when the pattern is repeated in the following chapters the story has a different ending. Both Pitton (after he loses his job as gardener in the manor)⁴ and Mrs Phillips (after the death of her husband) eventually get a new life. There is no glamour, no sense of triumph, in this. But their time of dependence, of servitude and mimicry, is definitely over. They have survived the enigma or, as Naipaul calls it in *Finding the Centre*, "the blankness and anxiety of arrival" (13).

Later on, illness drives the narrator himself from his valley, from the cottage in which he had spent eleven years, experiencing a "second childhood of seeing and learning" (82). As a response to this, he builds his own house out of two old cottages a few miles away. The reflections that are generated by this gesture and by its consequences (when a former dweller in one of the old cottages sees herself deprived of her past) sum up what the narrator has learnt about the right attitude to history, change, and appropriation of the land through his stay in Wiltshire. What we are made to recognize as the correct attitude is defined mostly by the rejection of a series of alternatives.

In opposition to the inhabitants of the valley, the "successors and inheritors," the narrator realizes "how tenuous really the hold of all of these people has been on the land they worked or lived in," since their world, like Jack's—like anybody's—"was too precious not to be used by others" (87). This justifies his own appropriation of part of that world. This, however, does not exonerate one from adopting what is later described as a "reverential" attitude (301).

The opposite to such attitude is again exemplified through a repetition pattern, in three paradigmatic episodes: the badly gelded pony which probably bleeds to death in the first chapter, the rose that Mrs Phillips cuts "right back" in "Ivy" (201), and the incompetently run shop which ends up as "an expression of the

owner's wish to abandon the project, run away" in "Rooks" (279). In these episodes, the metaphorical impact and the polemical tone are more direct than usual.⁵ Taken together, these examples provide unusually "explicit" criticism of a criminally inept kind of intervention. They also confirm the impression of Naipaul's continuing engagement in his "country idyll" with the issues of his more controversial writings: here too Naipaul's "eye is always focused on the human costs of ill-conceived and willful attempts at the management of human affairs" (Mustafa 20).

But this is very much an exception rather than the rule, the only instance of total condemnation in a novel which is otherwise pervaded with the awareness of relativity—as in the beautiful petering sentence that concludes the second sub-section of "Rooks":

The wet river banks, the downs: everyone saw different things. Old Mr Phillips, with his memories of chalk and moss; my landlord, loving ivy; the builders of the manor garden; Alan; Jack; me. (268)

This awareness of relativity, which means coming to terms with the workings of history, finally gives its results in the consciously reverential attitude adopted by the narrator in building his own cottage. Observing Jack, learning to see him as a "doer" rather than as an "inheritor" has done much to help him find his own way, but now he must go beyond Jack. Jack "had *disregarded* the tenuousness of his hold on the land"; a great part of his achievement had been due to his "not seeing what others saw" (87).⁶

Though the narrator celebrates Jack's ability to act "as if" in the face of universal confusion, we are told that his treating his garden like a front garden, whereas in the cottages around it is no longer possible to distinguish front from back, and his careful tending of his hedge in spite of its being "meaningless" (58) both derive from the same "instinct" (21). In the last analysis, his action is largely a result of lack of comprehension,—as seen in his greeting to the narrator, "which came over less as defined words than as a deliberate making of noise in the silence" (31). What the narrator adds to Jack's attitude therefore is awareness and the need and ability to testify consciously for what Jack had merely "sensed": "that life and man were the true mysteries" (87), the "true religion of men" (318). Jack "had created his own

life, his own world, almost his own continent." He had not, for all we know,⁷ built his own house.

The most powerful incentive towards building our own house is, of course, if we were not *given* one. In this important respect the narrator's relationship with Jack is paradigmatic with another oppositional pair, developed especially at the beginning of the fourth chapter—that between the narrator and Alan, the self-destructive English writer, a frightful example of what the narrator himself might have become if he had not been constantly forced to face his own uprootedness.

The disjunction of man and writer is explicitly one of the problems that *The Enigma of Arrival* tries to address. This issue is developed most clearly in the second chapter, "The Journey." But even this chapter—which more than any other section of the book seems to be autobiographical—participates in the game of paradigmatic relationships, helping set up the chapter about "Jack's Garden" as an archetype by repeating in a more discernible way the patterns of the first.

"The Journey" begins with the narrator's arrival in Wiltshire. Chronologically, however, this chapter contains the story of the young writer's difficulty or "literariness" of vision and the account of his missed encounter with what ought to have been the writer's subject, his Trinidadian background, as he comes to realize years later: "Nearly five years before *vision* was granted me, quite suddenly one day, when I was desperate for such an illumination, of what my material as a writer might be" (135). Again, however, the vision is lost as soon as it is achieved because in the meantime "the world had not stood still" (145) and the writer realizes that the centre is neither in England nor in Trinidad, that there can be no centre only a perpetual encounter with the enigma of arrival.

A few sentences after the centre of the book, Naipaul repeats the opening of the novel: "For the first four days it rained and was misty; I could hardly see where I was" (154). But some pages later we are warned that we are not simply back at the beginning:

The man who went walking past Jack's cottage saw things as if for the first time. Literary allusions came naturally to him, *but he had grown to see with his own eyes*. He could not have seen like that, so clearly, twenty

years before. And having seen, he might not have found the words or the tone. The simplicity and directness had taken a long time to get to him; it was necessary for him to have gone through a lot.
(157; emphasis added)

This observation (given at the end of "The Journey") is obviously not the condition of the narrator at the beginning of the first chapter, to whom everything seems to be emanation of literature and antiquity and who only relates to the landscape through the works of painters and poets or through a purely linguistic kind of knowledge: "So much of this I saw with the literary eye, or with the aid of literature" (22). This latter condition, in fact, is in paradigmatic relation with that of the young writer leaving his island and arriving in England towards *the beginning* of the second chapter. The two similar sentences (the opening one and the one on page 154) therefore identify a more complex movement than circularity, that of being on two points on the same axis but on different coils of a spiral.

This parallel treatment of the human and the literary experiences provides one way of validating on a formal level what we are actually told in "The Journey": the moment in which the writer finally had his "vision" was also the start of the process through which "man and writer came together again" (135). In an even more intriguing way, we find the same concept not affirmed but rather enacted in the first, archetypal chapter: there the achievement of vision for the man corresponds to the onset of narration.

Near the end of the ninth sub-section, we are reminded one last time that the narrator "had arrived at [his] feeling for the seasons by looking at Jack's garden" (58). He then surprises us with a demonstration of his newly acquired understanding in the form of a detailed description of the manor gardener's seasonal activities (60). From now on, the narration loses its vague timeless quality and becomes truly narrative, with a chronological setting also provided by references to the seasons: "It was a good thing that the autumn was well advanced" (70); "some weeks later, before the winter turned to spring" (72); "One autumn afternoon" (82).

The use of proper names provides more specific evidence of the fact that "narration" begins with this particular section (the tenth sub-section, beginning with "Friendship has its odd ways . . .")

[59]). Up to this point, all we have had are innumerable mentions of the almost mythical "Jack," a handful of "Bray"s and one "Peter" (in direct speech); so that the introduction of "Mr and Mrs Phillips" at the beginning of this sub-section strongly contributes to our impression that the tone has suddenly changed. In the following pages, "Pitton" (or "Mr Pitton"), "Les" and "Brenda" are also given their proper names for the first time, and even a "Michael Allen" makes his appearance.

This transferral of the benefits of vision into narration prefigures the end of *The Enigma of Arrival*, in which the writer, having lived through his wealth of experiences, transforms everything into the act of writing the very book we have just finished reading. And it is fascinating to see, as a final example of the book's strategies, how something similar happens with what is probably the most sensitive issue in the novel, its exposure of that kind of organized religion which panders to the human tendency towards dependence, while in fact being unable to provide the answer everybody (including the narrator/protagonist) is looking for. This theme surfaces several times, most strongly in the corruption of Bray, set beside Jack as an example of free man⁸. But it is as an indictment against a faulty narrative that it finally achieves its most arresting form:

He began to tell a story. I couldn't understand the story. An important man in the community had asked him one day: "What do you think is the best Hindu scripture?" He, the pundit, had replied, "The Gita." The man had then said to somebody else present, "He says the Gita is the best Hindu scripture." There should have been more to the story. But there was no more. (314)

"Implicit statements" of the kind I have tried to underline in the course of this essay, even when they are not as strong and potentially controversial as this last one quoted, inevitably raise the issue of responsibility. By making his higher meaning arise as of necessity from his expressive means—his textual strategies and his rhetoric of repetition—the author is inviting his readers to share the responsibility for his statements; in fact, his readers are required to work them out for themselves. This is perfectly in line with the mood of "return and reconciliation," which has often been detected in Naipaul's more recent work (Mustafa 7;

see also Suleri); however, I would not wish to suggest that it may be a defensive strategy on the writer's part.

Naipaul is here above all affirming not simply the identity of the man's vision with the writer's vision but rather the priority of the latter over the former. It is a manifestation of what I would call Naipaul's *humanism*: the use of literary form to express a strong concern with the human condition, in such a way as to resist all kinds of dogmatic and essentialist attitudes. As we have seen, partiality, difficulty, and relativity of vision, and retrospective realization run throughout the novel as leitmotifs; they also, more important, provide its structure, a winding path towards awareness in which the moral and the literary are stubbornly intertwined.⁹

NOTES

- ¹ See also on page 31: "I saw too, as the months went by, his especial, exaggerated style with clothes: bare-backed in summer at the first hint of the sun, muffled up as soon as the season turned. I grew to see his clothes as emblematic of the particular season: like something from a modern Book of Hours."
- ² John Thieme (152) stresses the presence of this myth in *A House for Mr Biswas*, a work which has obvious affinities with *The Enigma of Arrival* in general and with the themes which we are examining here in particular.
- ³ Maybe the time is now ripe to accept the fact that Naipaul's "political" views on the Third World and his "formal, artistic strategies" can be looked at without embarrassment as part of the same concern for universal values, without the need, therefore to point out that *The Enigma of Arrival* sustains "contradictory readings" (Hayward 51), or even less to postulate "an element of muted self-criticism" (Nixon 160). As a matter of fact, the more recent insistence on seeing Naipaul's voyage of self-discovery as essentially a *rapprochement* to his roots, with the mention (as supporting evidence?) of his "fanatical vegetarianism," or of a certain "spiritual awakening in Hindu Brahminhood" (Jussawalla x), is in my view more damning than the accusations of prejudice and misplaced allegiance often moved against the author, particularly by fellow postcolonials such as Derek Walcott. It is not, in fact, (it ought not be) a matter of shifting Naipaul more to the left or to the right in a colonized-colonizer oppositional line, but rather of recognizing that in Naipaul, as in the other great non-metropolitan literary figures of this century, background has fed the capacity to explore with great subtlety and real urgency more transcendental dialectical issues.
- ⁴ For echoes of Les and Brenda's story in Pitton's, see *Enigma* 211—"Pitton expected more for himself" and so, "put his life in the hands of others"—and 254—"I had known him in his glory." See also, the references to an "unsettling" open door (55; 247).
- ⁵ See, for instance, the narrator's comments on the owner of the pony in this way: "His sentimentality frightened me. It was the sentimentality of a man who could give himself the best of reasons for doing strange things" (41).
- ⁶ I should point out that this emphasis on Jack's "unseeingness" is mine rather than Naipaul's. His narrator diplomatically postulates that Jack "saw something else, certainly" (58); and there is real, strong pathos in the encounter.

- ⁷ The text contains some fairly explicit indications to this effect. See, for example: "the little piece of earth which had come to him with his farm-worker's cottage (one of a row of three)" (20), and "(because Jack lived in one of the agricultural cottages attached to the farm)" (28).
- ⁸ Cf. *Enigma* 51. The sentence with which this development is introduced is probably another example of Naipaul's marvellously indirect statements on crucial issues, this time on the connection between dependency on religion and fear of death: "Bray began to talk to me of religion. Was that before or after the rooks came?" (269).
- ⁹ I should like to thank Professors Lidia Curti and Iain Chambers, at whose seminar in Naples a very early draft of this paper was originally presented. Thanks also to Patrick Kincaid and Salvatore Proietti for reading subsequent drafts.

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