

*Emilia Ivancu*

Ways of Seeing, Illusion and Memory's Time in the Novel *The Enigma of Arrival* by V. S. Naipaul

ABSTRACT

Building on John Berger's theory regarding the multiple ways of seeing constitutive of a contemporary work of art, the present paper aims to prove that, in the autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival* by V. S. Naipaul (named after a painting of Giorgio de Chirico's, whose title was given in its turn by Apollinaire), the painting which stands at the centre of the novel is turned into a personal mirror of the narrator's life. The painting is an illustration of the personal experience of the narrator as regards his relation to the newly discovered territories of Britain, and the history of the place under the aesthetic experience of the painting and his memory's time. Under the aesthetic experience of the painting and his memory's time, the narrator's life becomes in the end, a prolongation of his own experience of the painting, that is a self-projection onto it, which results in a delusionary experience of space and time, and thus of his own life.

KEYWORDS

V. S. Naipaul; Mirror; Home(ly); the Other; Narrative.

EMILIA IVANCU

Université Adam Mickiewicz, Poznan, Pologne/
Université 1 Decembrie 1918, Alba Iulia,
Roumanie
em.chandelier@gmail.com

"To walk is to lack a place"¹ – this proposition expresses all the essence of V. S. Naipaul's works, particularly of *The Enigma of Arrival*, a novel full of verbs and phrases denoting movement against a space not empty of meaning, on the contrary, but empty of warmth and shape, a space which could never become a place. Half autobiography, half a novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* revolves around the errand of a man who is trying really hard to make a connection with the territory he decides to turn into his dwelling place, but all his effort to feel the land, to feel the spirit of the place remains echoless and the shivers of solitude and *homelessness* become even more acute. The stranger who arrives in England comes with an imaginary map in his mind, an imaginary map which was supposed to become real. This imaginary map induced by the literary and historical works the character has fed himself with for years turns out to be cold and deserted, lacking the will to open to the eyes of the stranger except in a form of a decaying illusion, whose taste will turn bitter in the end:

The history I carried with me, together with the self-awareness that had come with my education and ambition, had sent me into the world with a sense of glory dead; and in England had given me the rawest stranger's nerves. Now

ironically – or aptly – living in the grounds of this shrunken estate, going out for my walks, those nerves were soothed, and in the wild garden and orchard beside the water meadows I found a physical beauty perfectly suited to my temperament and answering, besides, every good idea I could have had as a child in Trinidad, of the physical aspect of England.²

From the point of view of aspect, the stranger's imaginary map overlaps with the geographical map, but the lands, decayed and under powerful industrial changes, stir emotions. The peaceful feeling at the beginning disappears, while moments of the personal past and of the historical past of England overlap with the slowly but irreversibly changing lands. The text abounds both in chronicity and topology, in chronotopy. But even the multiple historical points which meet in the novel cannot make up for the desolation of being, cannot offer accommodation for the self, and under the dissolutive background of England, which resonates into the melancholic heart of the *stranger*, and which seems a journey through a painting, and consequently through another story.

The painting, which inspires the title of the novel itself, seems to be both a mirror of the *stranger's* destiny, as it speaks about a meeting point between one and the Other. Before transmitting the message of its representation, the painting is first a symbol in itself through the function it has, that of representing, of creating a double of a reality it mirrors. On the other hand, Giorgio de Chirico's painting is a painting of illusioned limits; it presents two identities, one who has just arrived and another one who discovers the mystery of the seashore, comprising the mystery of a journey, but also the mystery of one's journey to the Other. Hence, the painting contains the dimensions of

identity and alterity and the mystery one lives in the presence of the Other. The arrival is the ultimate end of a journey and Naipaul's book is a book of a double journey: one is that of a Trinidadian to the East, to become a writer and the other is that of an uprooted person who is striving to find his roots in a land constructed by then only with illusions. The novel *The Enigma of Arrival* is a representation in frame, it is the personal meaning and experience of the mystery that man carries everywhere he should go:

I felt that in an indirect, poetical way the title referred to something in my own experience; [...]. What was interesting about the painting itself, "The Enigma of Arrival", was that – again because of the title – it changed in my memory. The original (or the reproduction in the "Little Library of Art" booklet) was always a surprise. A classical scene, Mediterranean, ancient – Roman – or so I saw it. A wharf; in the background, beyond walls and gateways (like cut-outs), there is the top of the mast of an antique vessel; on an otherwise deserted street in the foreground there are two figures, both muffled, one perhaps the person who has arrived, the other perhaps a native of the port. The scene is of desolation and mystery: it speaks of the mystery of the arrival. It spoke to me of that, as it had spoken to Apollinaire.³

The narrator, whose writing is inspired by this painting, manifests the need to get out of himself and transfer to another reality that the painting brings. It is the need that the status of the migrant, which comprises both solitude and unsettlement, urges within with the aim of finding another identity in a limited space to make one's home. It is the



desolation and the mystery that spoke to the narrator from the painting and which mirrored the solitude expressed throughout the novel. The narrator's identity is, in this way, shaped and coloured by the *enigma of the arrival* he himself experienced and re-created in his memory time and time again. Only that this meeting in reality never seems to take place and the result will be only a journey of solitude and self-reference, a walk with no place to attach to. The narrator can only identify this scenery he meets with the part in himself that spoke to the new location, to the new *unhomely* home. The narrator tries a transgression of identity, but what he actually accomplishes is an extreme feeling of alterity that the illusion produces. And the cleavage that appears rises from the very attempt of the *stranger* to adjust to the space he intends to make his *home*.

In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger states that the visual arts have always existed within a social preserve, and this preserve was initially magical or sacred⁴. Thus the experience of art was the experience of the sacred, and art was consequently set apart from life so that it could maintain its influence upon it. Together with the arrival of modernism, art was deprived of its sacred, magical function, and became ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free. In other words, it became part of the everyday life, and part of the everyday experience. As John Berger puts it, the images of art have entered the mainstream of life over which they no longer in themselves have power. One consequence, I would argue, is that man creates and interprets art according to his or her own experience, sometimes even turning the object of art into a mirror in which he or she looks for himself or herself.

De Chirico's painting, which inspires the novel *The Enigma of Arrival*, before

conveying the message of its representation, is first a symbol in itself through the function it has, that of representing, of creating a double of the reality it mirrors. On the other hand, Giorgio de Chirico's painting is a painting of illusioned limits; it presents two figures, one who just arrived and another one who discovers the mystery of the seashore, comprising the mystery of a journey, but also the mystery of one's journey to the Other. Hence, the painting contains the dimensions of identity and alterity and the mystery one lives in the presence of the Other. The arrival is the ultimate end of a journey, and Naipaul's book is a book of a double journey: one is that of a Trinidadian to the East, to become a writer, and the other is that of an uprooted person who is striving to find his roots in a land constructed up to then only of illusions. The novel *The Enigma of Arrival* is a frame representation, it is the personal meaning and experience of the mystery embedded in a person's personality, and carried along inside, no matter where he might go.

The Narrator, whose writing starts from this painting, manifests the need of getting out of himself and relocating to another reality, created by the painting, thus confirming what Sanda Berce opines when analysing the work of art of the Norwegian artist Jeannet Christiansen: "The viewer [here the Narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* and the viewer of de Chirico's painting] sees oneself framed in history, a narrative of passed/past event. It sees oneself as another because such work can live only as a *piece of memory* and 'narrative' about the work as the trace of the recall."⁵

It is the need implicit in the status of the migrant (which comprises both solitude and unsettlement) that urges the individual to find another identity in a limited space, to make his home. It is the desolation and the mystery that the narrator heard speaking from the painting, and which found an echo

in his solitude expressed all over the novel. The Narrator's identity is, in this way, shaped and coloured by the *enigma of the arrival* he himself experienced and recreated in his memory time and time again. It is this *enigma of arrival* that triggers off the frame of a story that will be repeated in both these books about memory several times. The summary of the story that the Narrator in *The Enigma of Arrival* offers is the following:

My story was to be set in classical times, in the Mediterranean. My narrator will write plainly, without any attempt at period style or historical explanation of this period. He would arrive – for a reason I had not yet worked out – at the classical port with the walls and gateways like cut-outs. He would walk past that muffled figure on the quayside. He would move from that silence and desolation, that blankness, to a gateway or door. He would enter there and be swallowed by the life and noise of a crowded city (I imagined something like an Indian bazaar scene). The mission he had come on – family business, study, religious initiation – would give him encounters and adventures. He would enter interiors, of houses and temples. Gradually there would come to him a feeling that he was getting nowhere; he would lose his sense of mission; he would begin to know only that he was lost. His feeling of adventure would give way to panic. He would want to escape, to get back to the quayside and his ship. But he wouldn't know how. I imagine some religious ritual in which, led on by kindly people, he would unwittingly take part and find himself the intended victim. At the movement of crisis he would come upon a door, open it, and find himself back on the quayside of

arrival. He has been saved; the world was as he remembered it. Only one thing is missing now. Above the cut-out walls and buildings there is no mast, no sail. The antique ship was gone. The traveller has lived out his life.⁶

The story summarised here definitely contains the mystery which surrounds de Chirico's painting. The Narrator, who is in the end the character of this short story, upon his arrival on the island, will start writing (and we do not know what exactly he will write about). Meanwhile, all his feelings turn into fear, all his life will be lived, the ship which brought him will be gone as the ship will be his beginning, and his end will mean facing the life he has lived, the journey he has made. This will now remain encompassed only in his memory and the narrative that he himself creates in his mind through memory. The most curious thing is that this story created by the Narrator in *The Enigma of Arrival* is the same story that will later be woven into one of Naipaul's novels, *Half a Life*, the story of Willie, who arrives in the heart of Africa at his wife's family, and realises it is not his life he lives, but another life, that he is a stranger to himself and wants to leave:

[...] Willie was trying to deal with the knowledge that had come to him on the ship that his home language had almost gone, that his English was going, that he had no proper language left, no gift of expression. [...] But all this while Willie felt there was another self inside him, in a silent space where all his external life was muffled.⁷

The same narrative frame is to be found in *New Clothes*. Here the character is a nameless Narrator who is taking a trip into



the heart of a country like Guyana on a mission, 'a carrier of a mischief'. He meets aboriginal people on the island, and feels proud of himself and initially analyses the people and places with detachment. However, after some time, his feelings turn into despair and a sense of meaninglessness, just like those of the Narrator in the story inspired by *The Enigma of Arrival*. While accompanied by two local boys as his guides on the way, he starts feeling as follows:

The march begins. The Narrator is no longer at ease, no longer the man he had been. The path moves away from the upland river to the forest. Such beauty there; but something of the safety and wholeness of the previous has left the narrator. Something nags; he never has to search far for reason. As often as he rejects it, as often as he applies his mind to it, unease returns, to come between him and the moment; and below all of this now, and adding to his agitation, there is the idea of his cause, the starting point of the journey. [...] He begins to feel, too, that the journey is lasting too long. [...] he begins to wonder – at first in a light-headed way, and as though the idea is quite absurd – what would happen if he were to withdraw from what he has undertaken to do.⁸

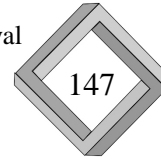
As we can see, the discourse is similarly constructed, echoing the same sense of loss, the same strangeness, the same sense of not belonging. All these are equally present in the structure of *The Enigma of Arrival*, the narrative which recounts the story of the Narrator's (and Naipaul's) arrival in England in order to become a writer:

And it did not occur to me that the story of "The Enigma of Arrival" – a sunlit sea journey ending in a

dangerous classical city – which had come to me as a kind of release from the creative rigours and the darkness of my own African story, it did not occur to me that the Mediterranean story was no more than a version of the story I was already writing. [Half a Life][...] So that again, years after I had seen the Chirico picture and the idea for the story had come to me, again, in my own life, was another version of the story of "The Enigma of Arrival".⁹

Painting with V. S. Naipaul, as in *The Enigma of Arrival*, is a duplication of reality, yet it is not part of the world itself, it is not born in the novel, as a manifestation and thus healing means of the selves of those involved, but appears as an aesthetic object and remains so.

In the book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger gives an example in which the view on a painting can be mediated by words and thus the meaning is conveyed through the prism of those words: first we are shown a painting by Van Gogh, entitled *Wheatfield with Crows*, and on the next page, the same painting sports the following handwritten commentary below it: "This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself."¹⁰ Then we are shown how the words influence the way we see the painting, as now "the image illustrates the sentence"¹¹, showing the fact that when we look, "We never look at just one thing: we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves"¹², in this case we relate rather to the knowledge of the fact that the painting was Van Gogh's last painting before he died. In the same manner, for the narrator in *The Enigma of Arrival*, the function of De Chirico's painting is that of illustrating the title it bears – a title added to it by Apollinaire – and the relation he has with the painting, but through the filter of



the title and the echo thus created in his mind.

Hence for Naipaul's narrator, the painting is regarded aesthetically and thus becomes objectified, implying a distance of observation in the relation with the object of art. The narrator can find himself in the painting, yet, there is no direct, organic relationship between him and the painting. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, the title overlaps the painting itself and is stronger than the message that the painting might have without its title, in this case, the self of the narrator being projected onto the canvas with the desire to see his own experience as reflected on it. Yet, because the meaning is induced, the painting and thus the image itself are barred from continuing to be creative in their own way, the title preventing this, and also the viewer from working on all its other possible meanings. Moreover, when looking at an image, either painted or photographed, the paradox springing from it is, as in the case of a mirror, that it shows the absence of the represented object while bringing it for observance. This is why in the case of Naipaul, the painting accentuates or is a ghostly sign of something that maybe once was or that he wishes it was but is not there (anymore). As compared to the mirror which shows something that is present in its front, as a mirror shows only as long as something is there, the painting or the photograph, though more creative in their potential are the sign of something or somebody that is absent. Through this very function, the reality it projects and the echo of this reality upon the viewer is a prismatic one, but prismatic in the sense of ectoplasmic, a presence that is absent or an absence that is absent. Consequently, the narrator in *The Enigma of Arrival* looks at the painting through the filter of its title, thus the painting conveying its meaning as disembodied in a way from its possible initial intention and its potential of future meaning

revelation, and in consequence the narrator sees in the painting the relation between his own past experience and the possible interpretation offered by the title accompanying it. In this case, the relation between the viewer, in our case, the narrator and the object if his gaze is one which reflects in a rather selfish way the feeling inside him projected on the canvas in this manner. The image projected is ectoplasmic because it does not speak of the painting itself but of a ghostly, lonely feeling the narrator has when looking at the painting, where, unconsciously, he can actually see himself. In this case, the narrator transforms the painting into a mirror, but a false mirror, in the attempt of the viewer to re-establish a connection with his own past. The mystery he can find in it is the mystery of a reconnected past situation, that of his arrival, changed into an object of reflection and forced upon the painting to acquire the attributes of a mirror, which is specular and spectral, but on account of its fake nature, producing ectoplasmic images.

Consequently, the painting which stands at the centre of the novel in order to illustrate the personal experience of the narrator as regards his relation to the newly discovered territories of Britain, and the history of the place is turned into a personal mirror of the narrator's life. His life becomes in the end, under the aesthetic experience of the painting and his memory's time a prolongation of his own experience of the painting, that is a self-projection onto the painting, whose result is a delusory experience of space and time themselves, and thus of his own life. Time and space in the novel are insoluble as is the narrator's experience of the painting, and consequently his own life, and the novel proves in the end John Berger's statement that "We never look at just one thing: we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves".¹³

References

Berce, Sanda, "Explorations in the hermeneutics of vision: The rhetoric of modernity (Dialogue, difference and the Other)" in <http://www.ceeol.com/aspx/getdocument.aspx?logid=5&id=40D98CFF-876A-4E47-AE6B-43AD038A326C>, retrieved on March, 22nd, 2008.

Berger, John et al., *Ways of Seeing* (Based on the BBC television series with John Berger, London, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.

Naipaul, V. S., *The Enigma of Arrival*, London, Penguin Books, 1987.

Naipaul, V. S., *Half a Life*, London, Basingstoke and Oxford, Picador, 2001.

Naipaul, V. S., *A Way in the World*, London, Heinemann, 1994.

Sharp, Joanne P., "A Topology of "Post" Nationality: (Re)mapping Identity in *The Satanic Verses*", *Cultural Geographies*, 1994; 1.

Geographies, 1994; 1; 65.

² V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, London: Penguin Books, 1987. p. 52.

³ V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, p. 91-92.

⁴ John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing* (Based on the BBC television series with John Berger, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p. 32.

⁵ Sanda Berce, "Explorations in the hermeneutics of vision: The rhetoric of modernity (Dialogue, difference and the Other)" in <http://www.ceeol.com/aspx/.aspx?logid=5&id=40D98CFF-876A-4E47-AE6B-43AD038A326C>.

⁶ V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, p. 92.

⁷ V. S. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2001, p. 132, 133.

⁸ V. S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World*, p. 57, 61.

⁹ V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, p. 93, 97.

¹⁰ John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*, p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*, p. 9.

Notes

¹ De Certeau in Joanne P. Sharp, "A Topology of "Post" Nationality: (Re)mapping Identity in *The Satanic Verses*", *Cultural*



Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of Arrival and the Afternoon*, 1911-1912