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V.S. Naipaul: The Melancholy Mandarin

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul is often appreciated for his artistic sophistication and insight but criticised for perpetuating colonialist discourse in regard to England and the Third World. This essay seeks to explain, in particular, his textual responses to England and India, two cultural regions that have exerted profound and sustained influences on his literary and psychic development. It argues for the value of a psychobiographical reading of Naipaul's texts in order to ascertain what it may reveal about the enigmatic complexity of his cultural loyalties. To date, postcolonial studies has shown a preference for social and political readings, but such analyses tend to focus critics on the contentiousness of Naipaul's writings — on what he has written, rather than why. I contend that it is important to ask 'why' because Naipaul's view of the world is inextricably tied to his colonial subjectivity.

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> Like it or not, Naipaul's work represents an important postcolonial impulse/response that begs to be understood and interpreted.
> Selwyn Cudjoe (Cudjoe xiv)

> I long to be happy, I still have a great instinct towards great happiness and delight and pleasure. And the idea was that the work would absorb and obliterate all my distress, continually.
> V.S. Naipaul (Rowe-Evans 59)

V.S. Naipaul is often appreciated for his artistic sophistication and insight but criticised for perpetuating colonialist discourse in regard to England and the Third World. This essay seeks to explain, in particular, his textual responses to England and India, two cultural regions that have exerted profound and sustained influences on his literary and psychic development. It argues for the value of a psycho-biographical reading of Naipaul's texts in order to ascertain what it may reveal about the enigmatic complexity of his cultural loyalties. To date, postcolonial studies has shown a preference for social and political readings, but such analyses tend to focus critics on the contentiousness of Naipaul's writings — on what he has written, rather than why. I contend that it is important to ask 'why' because Naipaul's view of the world is inextricably tied to his colonial subjectivity.

Naipaul's colonial subjectivity is not in question, of course. Many critics acknowledge the colonial conditions that have contributed to Naipaul's fiction and travel narrative, but few have produced detailed analyses of those conditions and attempted to locate his work in its historical context. Of those few, Selwyn Cudjoe argues that Naipaul 'must be understood as a product of his history and his time' and seeks to locate his work within the Caribbean tradition from which it arose (Cudjoe 4, 5). Similarly, Vijay Mishra has argued that Naipaul's texts are allegories of diaspora (Mishra 191, 214), and he comes closest to a detailed examination of the historicity of Naipaul's writing and his textual themes. Both of these critical analyses explain, among other things, Naipaul's flight from the West Indies to London as a young, aspiring writer and assist a cursory understanding of Naipaul's antipathy toward the Third World generally, but they do not shed light on the degree of aversion he displays in his texts toward India, the home of his ancestors. Neither do they explain why Naipaul implicitly absolves England of culpability in its imperial ventures.

In an attempt to understand this aspect of Naipaul's complex literary persona, this essay will begin by looking into his texts to trace the influences of India, the culture and the geographical region that his forebears left behind, and England, the culture and geographical region to which he directed his energies and loyalties. It contends, firstly, that both India and England were constructed as myths in Naipaul's mind as a result of his displacement into an in-between region — Trinidad — that neither he nor his community embraced as 'home'. It then proposes that Naipaul's texts can be read as melancholic expressions. This reading is grounded in Freud's theory of melancholia and Kristeva's theory of abjection.

Indian presence in Trinidad was the outcome of England's recruitment drives for post-slavery labour in the West Indian sugar plantations. Members of Naipaul's grandparents' generation were part of the Indian response to these drives which took advantage of disrupted Northern Indian communities made vulnerable by drought and social change. Having been irrevocably altered by the experience of indenture, Naipaul's family remained in Trinidad, struggling to find a new balance between Indian tradition and the demands of cultural reconstitution in a colony. By the time Naipaul was born in 1932, India had become an almost-forgotten presence, deep and remote in memory. He would later speak of this India as an area of darkness that he could not penetrate (Naipaul 1964 275). When it was recalled, according to Naipaul, it was in terms of decayed splendour: India had been, for instance, 'a dismal, dusty land, made sadder by ruins and place names that speak of ancient glory … like Ayodhya' (Naipaul 1972a 36). In his version, the degrading circumstances of Indians signing up for indenture had little if anything to do with the British, but with escape from a sense of ruin receding into a very distant past.

Against this sense of decay and encroaching extinction, and as a remedy for the fear it invoked, Naipaul developed a reverence for writing as one, if not the only, vocation of nobility. He was influenced in this by his father who (unusually at the time in Trinidad) had chosen journalism as a career and who had passed on his own incomprehensible fears of loss and associated remedy. Naipaul says: 'And what is astonishing to me is that, with the vocation, he so accurately transmitted to me … his fear of extinction. That was is subsidiary gift to me. That fear became mine as well. It was linked to the idea of the vocation: the fear could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation' (Barratt 84).

Naipaul's own colonial English education consolidated his veneration of England as the cultural centre of writers. His desire to become a writer, however, was less to do with a desire to actually write than it was to do with an internalisation of the exalted opinion empire held of its own literature and its writers; and because he understood that the better the command you had of a culture's text, the more likely you were to be embraced by it. He recalls: 'when one was young one behaved as though there was God — that God was publisher, editor and critic,

and if you were good, regardless of your background and your themes, you would be received into the pantheon of writers' (Hamner 1979 53).

Naipaul's desire to be embraced into the pantheon of England's writers can be understood as a psychological imperative, and is revealed by deploying Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and Freud's theory of melancholia. If, for the purposes of this analysis, we accept Freud's theory of the psyche as it is defined in 'Mourning and Melancholia', and we augment its use in studying the individual's concept of his or her place in the primary social unit, the family, to a deployment for how it might elucidate Naipaul's concept of his place in the broader social arenas of ethnicity/race/nation, then Naipaul's biographical expressions become expressions of melancholia.

To enable an exploration of Naipaul's textual melancholy, India is posited as Naipaul's id, the deepest part of his unconscious self, the place of origin and myth, the place out of which his family reconstituted an identity consistent with the external reality of Trinidad. Trinidad functions as his ego, under the influence of English mores and values. England, then, is Naipaul's superego, and out of this relationship between his ego and superego, in opposition to the unruly forces of the id, or, in terms of the parallel we are working with, between Trinidad and England, in opposition to the destitution of India, Naipaul develops an ego-ideal — to be a writer in the tradition of the English greats — that is entirely consistent with the textuality of empire.

Kristeva's theory of the abject, as it is discussed in *Powers of Horror*, allows us to understand that in the opposition between the superego and the id, the superego's formation of an effective ego-ideal is critical to its defence against the abjection of the id. Naipaul's identification of India with destitution and abjection, and of England with writing and nobility, underscores the necessity of his move to London in order to avail himself of the nobility that writing from the metropolitan centre offers. Therefore Naipaul's dependence on the metropolitan centre is not just an outcome of underdevelopment in the colonial periphery, in that he is drawn to the intellectual and material opportunities that it provides, but more a matter of psychological survival, in that London will award him the nobility of writing that will hold at bay the abjection that always threatens.

It can be understood, also, that the more wonderful his new ego-ideal of being a writer in England appeared to be, the more the threat of abjection loomed, and I submit that this is a phenomenon linked to the geographical separations of his psyche. What I mean is that Naipaul's psychic development in Trinidad was grounded in an 'in-between', knowable and fixed location subjected to opposing cultural forces of which he had no tangible experience. Neither India nor England could be submitted to a 'reality check' and so took on extraordinary mythical proportions. There also appears to have been an assumption when he left Trinidad that when he arrived in London he would finally feel 'at home' in the world, not only because he perceived that London fostered writers, but also because

of a perception that London was that real and actual heart of civilised society for which he longed and of which Trinidad was only a copy. Unfortunately for Naipaul, he became painfully aware that his fantasy — the one in which England would work its magic, embrace him and make a writer out of him — was a long way from being realised and he also realised that London was 'something less than the perfect world [he] had striven towards' (Naipaul 1987 121). He says: 'I came to London. It had become the centre of my world and I had worked hard to come to it. And I was lost. London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go' (Naipaul 1991 416).

It is evident from various texts that after so many years of desire, his disorientation at finding the real England different from his fantasy threatened his ambition and had him casting around for explanations, but it becomes increasingly evident from the myriad of Naipaul's recollections that despite his initial shock, he is less inclined to fault England for its failure to deliver him a writer's paradise than he is disposed to blame his own colonial imperfections. He acknowledges that in London he is confronted by feelings of colonial marginality, incongruity and inferiority, confessing that: '[o]ne of the terrible things about being a Colonial … is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know' (Rowe-Evans 40), but he appears to suffer no frustration that the 'second-hand' (Naipaul 1979a 57) society from which he hails is the product of imperialism. Indeed he is at pains to reassure his audience that he harbours England no ill-will: 'I like London … it is the best place to write in' (Naipaul 1979b 12).

Undoubtedly there is an element of pragmatism in his response given that Trinidad cannot compete with London's commercial apparatus for the publication and promotion of books, neither can it offer a reading audience. However, once Naipaul was confronted with the reality of England and became reconciled with the need to create his own writing career rather than have it bestowed upon him, why did he not, at that point, form a more critical view about English cultural value generally; why, for instance, does he not question the role of Britain in the displacement of his family from India to Trinidad, and why, in a postcolonial milieu of reckoning by the majority of 'postcolonial' writers, has he produced books that are remarkable for positing India as hapless, decaying, and deserving of foreign invasion? 'Every discipline, skill and proclaimed ideal of the modern Indian state', he says, 'is a copy of something which is known to exist in its true form somewhere else' (Naipaul 1972b 90) and, '[e]ighteenth-century India was squalid. It invited conquest' (Naipaul 1964 216). He sees 'ruin on ruin' (218) and futility (238). He accuses Indians of banality, simplicity, inadequacy and intellectual failure (Naipaul 1972b 79–90). He declares that the misfortune of successive invasions in India is that they have slowed down the rate of decay: 'It is as if successive invasions, by the reaction they provoked, that special Indian psychology of dependence, preserved an old world which should have been

allowed to decay centuries ago' (96–97). This is indeed moral censure stretching into the distant past.

England, on the other hand, is portrayed in an entirely different light. Tellingly, there is no rancour towards the English for their oppression of Indians:

> We had been slaves for centuries, and when the independence movement started we had to have some tonic — that we were not as bad as the British had called us. To gain our self-respect, we started thinking we had a very ancient civilization — and of course there's some truth in that. But then it also had its weaknesses that made us slaves for a long time. (Naipaul 1991 416)

It is not that Naipaul fails to see England's part — he recognises it readily enough — but that he censures Indians for their own subjection. Naipaul accepts Britain's role as conqueror as inevitable, not only because Indians are unworthy to govern themselves, but also because Britain is a most worthy governor: 'No other country was more fitted to welcome a conqueror; no other conqueror was more welcome than the British' (Naipaul 1964 226). He speaks nostalgically of the Raj, describing it as a 'tremendous achievement' (213) and defends British narcissism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as 'justifiable' (209). He does agree that the British pillaged the country thoroughly and contributed to the irrevocable decline of local Indian manufacture and craft and owns that perhaps the British are responsible for Indian artistic failure and Indian bewilderment, but he says that this has to be accepted because '[i]t was a clash between a positive principle and a negative; and nothing more negative can be imagined than the conjunction in the eighteenth century of a static Islam and a decadent Hinduism' (223). He adores the railways of the Raj, as many do, but laments that a 'service so complex and fine deserves a richer country, with shining cities organised for adventure' (237). Even India's landscape fails an internalised romantic standard.

The beginnings of an understanding about Naipaul's cultural loyalties are found in a comment made by Naipaul himself: 'in my attempts to come to terms with history, my criticism, my bewilderment and sorrow, was turned inward focusing on the civilisation and the social organisation that had given us so little protection' (Naipaul 1991 399), and the centre of the answer lies in understanding that Naipaul's assessments of England and India are less about political and social realities than they are about himself. Kapur expresses it particularly well:

> it should be clear, at this late stage in Naipaul's career, that the value of his work does not rest on his political analyses. To read the works solely as political or historical narratives is to do them an injustice, to refuse to consider them on their true merits. Their grand sweep notwithstanding, Naipaul's books have never really been about politics or history. His chronicles have been profoundly personal; his political stands should be read for insight into Naipaul himself, as autobiography. Naipaul's manifold insecurities are imprinted on every outlandish judgment and every flawed political analysis. (Kapur 1998 57)

Haydn Williams observes that although Naipaul's search to find his lost imagined India has proved to be in vain, his voyages to India have proved to

be immensely fruitful for self-discovery. Any disillusionment he has felt has ultimately been with himself (Williams 359–60). This can be seen in his texts as slippages from criticism of India to criticism of himself. He says: '[the] idea of ruin and dereliction, out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself' (Naipaul 1987 19).

It is clear that Naipaul is inclined to deal with his bewilderment and sorrow by turning inward with his criticism. What he finds to criticise is that which he sees when he turns to India: abjection — the very thing that opposes his ideal of nobility. The tragedy is that Naipaul's apprehension of abjection — that is, both his fear and cognisance of abjection — and the consequent formation of his desire to be a writer (the means to attain nobility with which to resist it), both have their origins in England's imperial intrusion into India, and only England can assist him to become a writer. England is both the cause and remedy of his need; England is responsible for the life in Trinidad that resulted in the shaping of his fantasies of India and England. When he arrives in London and discovers his fantasy of a writer's paradise shattered, he finds himself in a double-bind. How is he to deal with his bewilderment and sorrow? If he directs his grief outwards towards England he risks alienating the writing industry that he needs more than ever to assist him in his quest to be a writer. There is no question of returning to Trinidad. According to Kristeva's theory there is no question of abandoning his ego-ideal for to do so will leave him floundering in utter abjection. The alternative, according to Freud, is to turn his grief inwards, and there he beholds the abjection of India. It can be understood, consequently, that whether he turns his grief towards England or towards India, the same psychological abyss threatens him.

In his subsequent journeys to the real India, then, he sees only the abjection that he expects to see. This is born out in the acute revulsion he expresses, wherever he goes during his first visit, about grime and excrement. Kristeva identifies abjection with the body's rejection of unwanted matter as a symbol of loss and death and says: 'it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 4). Given that Naipaul is a composite man made of disparate cultural parts, his sense of wholeness, completeness, order and identity is precarious and easily disturbed. At the first disturbance to that vision his very identity is in question, and as his comments over the years suggest, the question mark remains. He insists that he belongs nowhere, that he has no political affiliations, that he is homeless. He has almost glamorised the condition of exile, which again, according to Kristeva, is a feature of abjection. Permit me to quote Kristeva at length:

> The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter — since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing

to know his abjections is not all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.

Instead of sounding himself as to his 'being', he does so concerning his place: '*Where* am I?' instead of '*Who* am I?' … A devisor of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines — for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject — constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved. (8)

Thus we can see that, beset by abjection, Naipaul is fundamentally concerned with where he does or does not belong. It is a matter of 'place', which helps to explain why, when he arrived in London, he was so bewildered when it turned out to be a place other than he expected, and when he discovered that as a colonial he did not really belong.

Notwithstanding his claim to homelessness, however, Naipaul did make a choice after he arrived in London. There is a fundamental difference between the two courses of psychological action that were open to him (that is, whether to turn his grief outwards or inwards) that explains his decision to be loyal to England. By turning his grief inwards, he could remain in London and still pursue a writing career of sorts — the psychological implications being that while he must always feel the pressure of encroaching abjection, he has at least the writer's nobility with which to resist it. There is a price to be paid for his decision though, and it is here we negotiate between Kristeva's theory of abjection and Freud's theory of melancholia.

Firstly, I wish to restate from a Freudian perspective just how important it has been for Naipaul to pursue his desire to be a writer. Freud explains it like this:

The development of the ego consists in a departure from the primary narcissism and results in a vigorous attempt to recover it. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido to an ego-ideal imposed from without, while gratification is derived from the attainment of this ideal. (Freud 1952 410)

Freud makes it clear that once an ego-ideal has been formed, healthy development of the ego requires the attainment of that ideal. I have demonstrated that Naipaul's particular ideal was formed as a result of the influences of his colonial circumstances — the disruption of Indian tradition juxtaposed against both his father's love and his colonial education that privileged the English text. It follows that attainment of his ambition to be a writer is crucial for his psychological health. Naipaul is in no confusion about this. Doubts that he can attain his ambition initially arise when he arrives in London where he is confronted by his sense of alienation from the Oxford literary tradition and his feelings of inadequacy as a writer in that tradition. Sensing that he has been 'tricked' by England, Naipaul is confronted by a threat to his ego-ideal. England, no longer his trusted ally, has become a

'confidence trickster'. He cannot be angry at England because even if he creates a writing niche for himself (and he does), he cannot risk alienating the publishing industry and the audience that England provides. If he cannot be angry then he cannot grieve the betrayal.

Freud also makes it clear that the sufferer of an intangible loss needs to grieve as he or she would for a tangible loss, in order to release the ego from its libidinal attachment. If the work of grief is delayed or obstructed, however, the sufferer becomes trapped in a state of melancholia. Some of the more salient features of melancholia will be addressed here in turn. The first is the turning of blame away from the perpetrator of the betrayal onto the sufferer's own ego — or, in Naipaul's case, the disinclination to call attention to England's faults and instead draw attention to the faults of Trinidad. As his melancholia deepens, however, he looks beyond his ego and finds fault with India, which, as his id, is the very core of his being. Naipaul is not blind to England's faults, neither is he blind to the benefits it has reaped as an imperial power at the expense of its colonial territories. He simply does not censure them. Rob Nixon observes that 'when Naipaul finds occasion to criticise England, he does so not to tax it with the imperial past or with abuses of metropolitan power, but to lodge contrary complaints: that the democratic ambitions of the postimperial welfare state betray the best English values and hasten national decline toward a third world level of degeneracy' (Nixon 23). Note the following passage from *The Enigma of Arrival*:

> To see the possibility of, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament. Those nerves had been given me as a child in Trinidad partly by our family circumstances: the half-ruined or broken-down houses we lived in, our many moves, our general uncertainty. Possibly, too, this mode of feeling went deeper, and was an ancestral inheritance, something that came with the history that had made me: not only India, with its ideas of a world outside men's control, but also the colonial plantations or estates in Trinidad, to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century — estates of which this Wiltshire estate had been the apotheosis.
>
> Fifty years ago there would have been no room for me on the estate; even now my presence was a little unlikely. But more than accident had brought me here. Or rather, in the series of accidents that had brought me to the manor cottage, with a view of the restored church, there was a clear historical line. The migration, within the British Empire, from India to Trinidad had given me the English language as my own, and a particular kind of education. This had partly seeded my wish to be a writer in a particular mode, and had committed me to the literary career I had been following in England for twenty years. (Naipaul 1987 52)

It is clear that Naipaul has a good grasp of England's role in his own history, and it is clear that he understands that the Wiltshire estate is one of many that made its fortune out of the West Indies, but he is content to make observations about England's imperial wealth without passing moral judgment — something few other postcolonial intellectuals, if any, can condone. As noted earlier, Naipaul does not exercise anywhere near the same restraint when it comes to India. He

feels free to use such adjectives as 'weak', 'absurd', 'dark', 'wounded', 'sick' and 'inadequate' in relation to its culture and society. If, as it is suggested, he is turning his blame inwards, then his self-abasement is truly frightful. One can see the spiral that he is in, for in order to 'save' himself from abjection, he needs to write, but when he writes, he can only write of what he knows — and so he must constantly look at what he is running away from.

There is another aspect of melancholia, however, that asserts itself as both a symptom and a precondition. Freud explains that loss in a relationship is an opportunity for ambivalence about the relationship to come into the open. The internal conflict created by the ambivalence in the mourner is dealt with, as we know, by the turning of blame away onto the sufferer's own ego as if he or she is responsible for the loss, thereby protecting the relationship, and it is this that distinguishes mourning from melancholia. The ambivalence towards the lost love continues to exert itself by tormenting the lover with the illness of the sufferer's self-debasement (Freud 1957 160). As I understand Freud's thesis, the person to whom the ambivalence is directed may or may not be aware that they have created suffering because they are not being held accountable. They are, however, generally within range of the melancholic's actions — that is, they can be affected by what the melancholic may or may not do. The melancholic will use this advantage to create difficulty and discomfort in the life of the lost love in indirect ways. Perhaps the sufferer will endlessly draw attention to their dependence and victimhood; perhaps they may even attempt suicide. Some may be inclined to feel that Naipaul's attacks on the Third World are a form of identity suicide; Naipaul's victimhood as a homeless person is well documented but what I particularly wish to draw attention to is the way in which Naipaul resists the textual authority of England even while he defers to its traditional magnificence.

Naipaul's texts contest English textual authority in subtle ways, one of them apparent in the way he begins to hybridise the genres of autobiography, fiction and travel narrative. Elleke Boehmer observes that 'the hybridity of a migrant's art may well signify a freeing of voices, a technique for dismantling authority' (Boehmer 238–39). Homi Bhabha has described a 'space of the adversarial' within which pressure can be exerted along the boundaries of authorisation (Bhabha 1985 152). This space develops as the result of the ambivalence that is inherent in colonialist discourse:

> If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the *production* of a hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (154)

In regard to Naipaul, I am suggesting that in allowing or producing a space for intervention, the ambivalence of colonial authority provides an opportunity for

Naipaul to display his own melancholic ambivalence in a manner that does not put his career at risk. He does not use the space to exert pressure on the legitimacy of colonial power as such, but he does exert pressure 'along the boundary' of the authority of the English text — not the authority of its content, but the authority of its form. Naipaul's ambivalence becomes apparent in aesthetics.

Bhabha proposes elsewhere that the most effective forms of resistance to established power structures are those that slightly alter the language of authority. He speaks of engaging in 'sly civility' and splitting the language of authority to return it in a 'just-slightly-altered-state' (Mitchell 81). I am not proposing that Naipaul is consciously engaging in 'sly civility', but I am suggesting that in slightly altering established genres of writing he is engaged in a subtle form of textual subversion, consciously or not.

Naipaul is conscious that in finding his own voice as a writer, he has had to depart from the traditional narrative form. The novel, he agrees, is the most suitable literary form for dealing with emotions, impulses and moral anxieties, but it 'works best within a confined moral and cultural area, where the rules are generally known' (Naipaul 2000 49). His difficulty has been that a successful novel is based on an assumption of a shared history and a shared understanding of society between writer and audience. From the very beginning in London, Naipaul has been acutely aware of the restrictions that this has imposed on him: 'It is an odd, suspicious situation: an Indian writer writing in English for an English audience about non-English characters who talk their own sort of English' (Naipaul 1979b 8).

It is not that his English audience is a stranger to fiction about the orient — 'people have been used to reading about non-Europeans through European eyes. India, with the vision of Kipling or Forster, of J.R. Ackerley or John Masters, is best-selling territory' (8) — but that notwithstanding his colonial education, he is a foreigner with a colonial-Hindu background (134) and a colonial-Hindu set of cultural references. The problem of being 'almost the same but not quite' or 'almost the same but not white' (Bhabha 1984 130) has been real enough to put limitations on his subject matter, and for this reason he feels that he has exhausted the novel form quickly.

Naipaul has decided that travel and writing of travel will solve his dilemma — perhaps in the travel book he can more easily instruct his audience; perhaps he is freed from the tedium of constructing plots for an English audience in incongruous settings; perhaps, as he has intimated, he is lured by the glamour of travel (Naipaul 2000 29). Most certainly, as a deject and a stray, he has no alternative but to travel. However, he has struggled to find his voice within this genre as well.

Part of this struggle has been because of his uncertainty of how to proceed in a genre that has not provided him with role models — that is, he is not a traveller like other travellers before him. These others, Huxley, Lawrence and

Waugh, wrote at a time of empire with the assurance of imperialism, 'using the accidents of travel to define their metropolitan personalities against a foreign background' (Naipaul 2000 29). Naipaul has discovered that even though he starts from Europe and returns to London to write, when he travels he is visiting areas of the world that are similar to his own background, or, he is travelling to his 'un-English' fantasy of India and thus his view, unlike the others, is of the 'insider'. Again, as he finds when he writes novels, he is writing from 'inside' his own experience to an audience that he is 'outside' of. He is plainly nervous about being a trailblazer, unhappy about the 'rawness of [his] nerves as a colonial travelling among colonials' (Naipaul 1979b 140–41). He would, quite simply, rather be an Englishman. Things would be so much easier:

> in many practical ways, things are harder for the writer who comes from an undeveloped society. Apart from the sheer difficulty of getting away, in order to get started at all. I can't help thinking that I might have had much greater success, been much better understood as a writer, if I had been born in England. As it is, one has no cultural attaches [sic] in a hundred countries pushing one's work. (Rowe-Evans 61)

As far as Naipaul is concerned, it is England that has misunderstood him and England that has failed to embrace him as its own.

Naipaul expresses another difficulty with writing travel literature that I believe is linked to his insecurity about his 'place' in the writing world and that is to do with his narrative presence in the text: 'I had trouble with the "I" of the travel writer; I thought that as traveller and narrator he was in unchallenged command and had to make big judgments' (Naipaul 2000 31). He is confused about the degree of authority he should assume and of how visible he should be in the text. He is nervous of displaying too much of his colonial incompleteness, but as his texts are compulsively more about the internal Naipaul than they are about external matters, he is uncertain of how to proceed. He has no role models. He cannot hide behind fictional characters. He feels unwanted, but he needs England. What can he do? He can redesign the rules of genre and use them in his own unique way: he can assert a certain amount of travel writer's authority and glamour, he can retreat into fiction, and he can continue in his journey of self-discovery, all within one book. His fiction and nonfiction also inform each other, as Peggy Nightingale points out:

> Naipaul's fictional and nonfictional writings are closely interrelated, complementing and enhancing one another. Interestingly, much of the time the novelist Naipaul continues to work towards the conclusions which are explored in subsequent fiction, while the journalist Naipaul observes the scenes, characters, and situations which provide the raw material of the fiction. (58)

By resisting the 'rules' of genre, Naipaul is using the 'adversarial space' of which Bhabha theorises; the place opened up by the ambiguity of colonialism. Naipaul, as he admits himself, is an incongruous figure in England. He is a writer in England because of colonialism's own ambiguity about educating and then

containing its own colonial subjects. He has been given the opportunity to write, but no sense of belonging to a writing community. In his attempt to resist the constrictions, he has found a 'weak spot' in textual authority that has given him some room to move as a writer.

Naipaul's blending of genres is particularly evident in *The Enigma of Arrival*. It is undisguisedly autobiographical, although to what degree it is difficult to say simply because it has been officially designated a novel. Certainly there are many passages that bear a striking resemblance to Naipaul's own life and circumstances, and as they are spoken in the first person there is the feeling of slippage between fiction and non-fiction that one does not expect in a novel. It is apparent, however, that he is his own subject: 'I had as it were — and as had happened often before — become one of my own characters' (Naipaul 1987 151).

There is something else that is noteworthy in *The Enigma of Arrival*. Naipaul is an observer in this book, of an unfamiliar environment and unfamiliar people, and even self-consciously an observer of his own observations — as he is in all his books. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, however, his gaze is directed at the English, in a part of England that still retains some vestiges of imperial glory. As he details, he settles into a cottage on a Wiltshire estate in order to write, within the grounds of a grand house, in which resides a Lord who is descended from those who made their fortune in the West Indies. Naipaul reflects that the very processes that enabled the establishment of this estate also gave him the language and education that brought him here. His presence in the cottage is unlikely, but one gets the feeling from his writing that he spends a rather delicious time quietly observing the seasonal activities of the staff and the neighbours. By writing about them in this book, and simply by being present in the valley, he is upsetting the established order of imperial England:

> a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a half neglected estate, an estate full of reminders of its Edwardian past, with few connections with the present. An oddity among the estates and big houses of the valley, and I a further oddity in its grounds. I felt unanchored and strange. Everything I saw in those early days, as I took my surroundings in, everything I saw on my daily walk, beside the windbreak or along the wide grassy way, made that feeling more acute. I felt that my presence in the old valley was part of something like an upheaval, a change in the course of the history of the country. (19)

He is also upsetting imperial order by studying the English in their own setting, and reporting back to his readership in much the same way that travel writers and anthropologists of Empire did about the Orient. Boehmer explains that in the 'scrutiny of the colonised by the coloniser, there was much the attitude of the voyeur as well as of the map-maker' (Boehmer 71), and what we see in *The Enigma of Arrival* is Naipaul returning the imperial gaze. He risks being perceived as impertinent but he finds the role of voyeur irresistible. Accordingly, he speaks of his landlord with deference, somehow managing simultaneously to draw attention to the decrepitude of the estate and its inhabitants. This is indeed

a subtle display of ambivalence. Whether Naipaul is or is not cognisant of his psychological or textual ambivalence towards England, he has created a unique niche for himself a writer, slightly altering and sometimes reversing the textual traditions of the nation that seduced him and betrayed him, without creating a rift in the relationship between them.

Naipaul remains an enigmatic literary figure. Conscious of his colonial marginality, he has struggled with England's 'betrayal' and the consequent threat to promised nobility. Without it, innate abjection has threatened to overwhelm him. In a situation such as this, Freud proposes that if the sufferer of loss cannot direct his or her grief outwards by placing blame onto the source of the loss, whether it is because the loss is unconscious, or because blame must be withheld for pragmatic reasons, then blame will be directed inwards. It is evident from Naipaul's texts that this is precisely the behaviour that he has engaged in subsequent to his initial disappointment in London. Unable to abandon his ego-ideal of writing, he has created a writing niche for himself through sustained and concerted effort but, dependent on the metropolitan centre for its publishing industry and its readership, and conditioned to privilege English culture through his formal and informal education, he turns inwards any criticism he is inclined to make, blaming his imperfect colonial origins on innate Indian abjection. On England's contribution to his distress he remains coy.

The 'Indian trilogy' demonstrates Naipaul's continued fascination with his own distant past, for India is the place he is drawn to visit repeatedly and yet flee from in distaste, notwithstanding his attempts at objectivity in *A Million Mutinies Now*. His incessant travel in order to find writing material is a symptom of his concern with where he should be and what he should know in order to avoid the ever-present danger of abjection. He must travel, and he must write, chasing the elusive nobility that will save him from abjection but, always turning inwards and backwards in order to protect his relationship with England, and able only to write about the colonial worlds from which he comes, he is caught in a predicament: in order to hold abjection at bay, he must continually bear witness to his own abjectness.

What could be regarded as a miserable situation is somewhat relieved by Naipaul's flair for manipulating textual genre to suit his own needs, and in this way he exerts pressure on the traditional authority of English text in a subtle and creative way. Bhabha has provided a useful model for understanding the space in which Naipaul can express his ambivalence about England in slight, artful alterations of textual tradition. Bhabha explains an 'adversarial space' opened up by the ambiguity inherent in colonialism's practice of educating colonial subjects. Neither wholly of England's textual tradition, nor wholly outside of it, Naipaul has occupied this space in order to express his own ambiguity. The ambiguity is perhaps most poignantly expressed in his elegiac *The Enigma of Arrival*, in which, in the midst of nostalgic expressions of lost empire, he returns the colonial gaze.

The purpose of this reading is not to suggest that Naipaul is an imperial victim who is to be excused from holding Indians wholly accountable for their

own colonial subjection, but to suggest that although Naipaul appears to absolve England of imperial culpability, his texts demonstrate the destabilising effects of colonial projects in the lives of indentured Indians in Trinidad; that his texts are a lingering legacy of England's intrusion into India.

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