V. S. Naipaul has a tendency to enrage some of his readers. Antiguan expatriate writer Jamaica Kincaid says, for example, ‘he just annoys me so much, all my thoughts are intemperate and violent … I think probably the only people who’ll say good things about him are Western people, right-wing people’ (Winokur 121). She implies that, if the response to him is political, he himself has a conservative political bias. However, he says his forthright expressions of his opinions have nothing to do with politics and arise from his interest in the truth:

Certain subjects are so holy that it becomes an act of virtue to lie … never say ‘bush people’, never say ‘backward country’, never say ‘boring people’, never say ‘uneducated’. But turn away from what is disagreeable and what happens in the end is that you encourage the chaps there to start lying about themselves too. So they lie because it’s what is expected of them. Soon everyone begins to lie. (Kakutani)

There may be no political ideology involved, but there is certainly a personal bias, which he admits later in the same interview: ‘I do not have the tenderness more secure people can have towards bush people … I feel threatened by them. My attitude and the attitude of people like me is quite different from people who live outside the bush or who just go camping in the bush on weekends.’

His editor, Diana Athill, says that ‘he was born with a skin or two too few’ (Schiff 141); but his fear of the enemies of civilization, and his fastidiousness, which can easily turn to disgust, is the other side of the coin from a fascination with the minute details of people’s lives, and a passion for accurate observation, which make him such an interesting writer. Asked by Adrian Rowe-Evans about the ‘conflict between the loving approach and what one might call the surgical approach to character’, he replied:
Interesting question. One can’t be entirely sympathetic; one must have views; one must do more that merely respond emotionally. I can get angry, impatient, like anyone else; I can be irritated, bored – but you can’t turn any of that into writing. So you have to make a conscious effort to render your emotions into something which is more logical, which makes more sense, but which is more, and not less, true. … I long to find what is good and hopeful and really do hope that by the most brutal sort of analysis one is possibly opening up the situation to some sort of action; an action which is not based on self-deception. (30)

To gloss tactfully over the truth is, as he sees it, neither helpful nor kind, and would betray his ethical standards.

The story of how he became a writer has been related by Naipaul many times, in interviews and essays, in the ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’ (part 1 of Finding the Centre), in The Enigma of Arrival and A Way in the World, and most recently in two articles in the New York Review of Books. Again and again he describes his lack of talent and preparation – ‘my school essays weren’t exceptional: they were only a crammer’s work. In spite of my father’s example I hadn’t begun to think in any concrete way about what I might write’ (‘Reading and Writing’ 14) – and the ‘romantic vision of the writer as a free, gifted, talented, creative, admired person’ which he had developed, ‘without pausing to consider what went before – and during – the writing of these fabulous things’ (Shenker 51). Having committed himself to the vision, having left Trinidad for Oxford, there were years of waiting for the time when ‘his talent would somehow be revealed, and the books would start writing themselves’ (Finding the Centre 38), until in 1955, ‘in a BBC room in London, on an old BBC typewriter, and on smooth “non-rustle” BBC script paper, I wrote the first sentence of my first publishable book’ (Finding the Centre 15); the book being Miguel Street. In retrospect, he sees his lack of talent as having worked to his advantage: ‘I think the body of work exists because there was no
natural gift. I think if I had had a natural gift it would have been for mimicry. I would have been mimicking other people’s forms. No, I really had to work. I had to learn it. Having to learn it, I became my own man’ (Schiff 153). What forced him to learn the art, to overcome the problems, is what he describes as ‘the element of panic’ (Schiff 153), which is

a feeling you can’t communicate, explain to other people; you can assuage it only by starting to write, even though your mind is as blank as the next man’s …. And then, given the panic, the next thing you need is a certain fortitude, a tenacity, to carry on through all the ups and downs. (Rowe-Evans 33)

The panic arises from the inability to envisage any other career: ‘I am nothing but my vocation,’ he told Linda Blandford in 1979 (56); and in 1983, he said ‘I think if I hadn’t succeeded in being a writer I probably would not have been around; I would have done away with myself in some way’ (Levin 94). Even then, his ambition is not merely to write, or even to be published, it is to be the best writer possible: ‘This may shock you,’ he said to Charles Michener in 1981, ‘but I feel that I don’t want to be a writer unless I am at the very top’ (65). In The Enigma of Arrival he describes the

special anguish attached to the career: whatever the labour of any piece of writing, whatever its creative challenges and satisfactions, time had always taken me away from it. And, with time passing, I felt mocked by what I had already done; it seemed to belong to a time of vigour, now past for good. (94)

He told Shenker in 1971,

The thought of writing for the rest of one’s life is a nightmare … I’d be delighted to stop – now. Some years ago I remember thinking, if someone said to you, ‘I’ll give you a million pounds, you must stop writing, never write another word,’ I would have said no, quite seriously, without any regrets. Today I would probably do it for much less. (53)

He has, however, continued; but Stephen Schiff wrote in 1994,
after every book, he complains of profound fatigue. ‘I have no more than one hundred months left,’ he told me one evening. ‘One hundred months, I mean, of productive life. Yes. Yes. It’s an immense relief to feel that you’re near the end of things.’ He stared gravely into the middle distance. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I recalled his announcing the very same thing – a hundred more months of productive life – to a British interviewer in 1979, when he was forty-seven years old. (141)

This fatigue and dissatisfaction, however, are part of a creative cycle. The feelings of anguish described in *The Enigma of Arrival*, the sense of being mocked by past achievements, feed into the creation of the next book:

‘Emptiness, restlessness built up again; and it was necessary once more, out of my internal resources alone, to start on another book, to commit myself to that consuming process again’ (94). The creative process is still something of a mystery to him, as he told Mel Gussow in 1994:

> To this day, if you ask me how I became a writer, I cannot give you an answer. To this day, if you ask me how a book is written, I cannot answer. For long periods, if I didn’t know that somehow in the past I had written a book, I would have given up. The idea of sitting down and ‘invoking the muse’ is so artificial. Writing a book is not like writing a poem. Prose narrative is quite different from the inspiration of a moment. One has to go on and on, and then, with luck, one day something happens, and you are transported into a state of exaltation. (‘V. S. Naipaul’ 30)

In *Finding the Centre* he writes again about luck – that ‘for everything that seemed right I felt I had only been a vessel’, although ‘for everything that was false or didn’t work and had to be discarded, I felt that I alone was responsible’. But he goes on to say, ‘this element of luck isn’t so mysterious to me now. As diarists and letter-writers repeatedly prove, any attempt at narrative can give value to an experience which might otherwise evaporate away’ (26). The element of surprise still exists, however, as he said in 1994: ‘I would say this is one of the beauties of imaginative writing; you have two or three things you want to do consciously, but if, in the writing, you arrive at a
certain degree of intensity, all kinds of other things occur which you’re not aware of” (Hussein 155). Part of this process is the refining of the emotions which provide the initial urge to write. He gives *In a Free State* as an example, in his 1971 interview with Adrian Rowe-Evans:

> I began my recent book on Africa with a great hatred of everyone, of the entire continent; and that had to be refined away, giving place to comprehension. If one wasn’t angry, wasn’t upset, one wouldn’t want to write. On the other hand it isn’t possible to get anything down until you’ve made sense of it, made a whole of it. (30)

This refinement is necessary, not only for the writer to ‘get anything down’, but for the work to communicate with its readers: ‘One can’t write out of contempt. If you try to do that, the book won’t survive and won’t irritate. Contempt can be ignored’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 90).

The capacity of a book to irritate is, obviously, part of his intention as a writer. He feels that, for him, ‘a true communication with a society is non-existent and impossible’, but he still aspires to ‘the communication of ideas … a simple desire to help – to serve’ (Rowe-Evans 35); and giving offence is an unavoidable aspect of this communication. Asked whether the reactions of Indians to his books about India, ‘their readiness to take offence, their deep feelings about foreign criticism’, inhibited him, he replied:

> No, it doesn’t inhibit me, for several reasons. One is that I think unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one’s done some writing one has not really done much. That is my gauge of whether I have hit something true. Also, in India, I find that people who respond violently usually haven’t read the books. And I no longer forgive this. (Wheeler 44)

He has, however, become increasingly conscious of the need to help his readers interpret his work, and the societies in which it is set. Bharati Mukherjee raised as an example a passage in one of the early novels which described a man beating his wife:
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B.M.: How did you, in the early novels, get across to the foreign audience the necessary sense of a wife-beating hero coming from a wife-beating culture? Your audience really couldn’t know how to respond to a hero who is also a wife-beater. In a Cheever novel, if a character beats his wife, we know he is a bad guy. For you the situation had to be very different. … there’s an easy assumption there about the couple’s having fallen into their roles. Everything was comfortable, you suggest, the wife had been beaten, and each of them had fulfilled his assigned roles. I think that that kind of easy assumption … is no longer possible in your fiction.

VSN: Not at all. Absolutely. You can no longer do that. Everybody, everything has to be explained very carefully. … These things can be very funny, but you can’t always be sure your reader will take them in as you’d like. (85)

On the whole, though, he tries not to concern himself with the reception of his work:

I never argue … I loathe argument. I observe, and I think for a long time. My words are always well chosen. I’m not a debater. How can I be concerned about people who don’t like my work? No, I can’t cope with that. I can’t cope with that. I don’t read these things. I don’t even read when people tell me nice reviews [sic]. I’m nervous of being made self-conscious. I’ve got to remain pure. You’ve got to move on to remain pure. … The books have to look after themselves, and they will be around as long as people find that they are illuminating. (Schiff 137-8)

He commented to Kakutani, ‘I can’t be interested in people who don’t like what I write because if you don’t like what I write, you’re disliking me.’

Nevertheless, he does recognise that reading can be idiosyncratic, and he is willing to allow his readers a wide range of interpretations as long as they read without prejudice. Of A Way in the World he says, ‘with this form everyone will read his own book, depending on his nature, depending on his need. Some people might pick up certain half-buried associations and not see others that are more prominent’ (Hussein 155), but some of the reactions to In a Free State he found more worrying: ‘I think … that what is wrong about the running down of this independent vision is that people seldom stay with the story. They feel that they’re [sic] principles are being violated by what the writer is saying. And
then they stop listening’ (Siegel). It is interesting that the question of readers’ interpretations and their relationship to his intentions hardly seems to concern him in all his analysis of why and how he writes; it is only referred to at all in response to interviewers’ questions.

One reason that this preoccupation, so marked in a writer like Lessing, is lacking in Naipaul may be that he decided, early in his career, that he could not expect a large readership:

You write in London and you don’t have an audience – you are just hanging in the air and being an artist in a vacuum, which is nonsensical. My reputation is dry, without dialogue, it stands by itself, without comprehension or feedback. But an artist needs to be nourished, needs an audience and a response. A writer must be supported by the knowledge that he comes from a society with which he is in dialogue. A writer like myself has no society, because one comes from a very small island which hardly provides an audience. (Shenker 50)

Ten years later, in 1981, Mukherjee asked him if he still felt the same way, and he replied, ‘I think I’ve got a kind of audience now. At least I’m read by other writers’ (75), but still, ‘I am an exotic to people who read my work’ (76).

However, although ‘it’s nice to think that there are readers who feel they can see their experience in what I’ve written, … finally the writer who thinks it’s his business to get across the specificity of his material is making a great mistake’ (77).

He is ambivalent towards his audience. He ‘will always be dependent on outside opinion and encouragement’ (Rowe-Evans 34), but is afraid of compromising his ‘purity’ by reading reviews, even if they are favourable. He has made few explicit comments on the qualities his ideal reader would possess. Only in a couple of recent interviews has he considered the question in any detail. ‘A good critic,’ he told Hussein in 1994, ‘is someone who reads a text with a clear mind; most people are merely reading to find out what they
already know’ (160), and he uses various techniques to break these
preconceptions and get the reader’s full attention:

In my writing there’s no self-consciousness, there’s no beauty. 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
cases. You’ve got to stop and think. (Schiff 149)

He does not, however, expect or even wish to be universally esteemed and
respected by his readers. Mel Gussow reports his satisfaction with a comment
by critic Christopher Hope which he passed on to him, to the effect that ‘his
writing is always unexpected, and it’s never entirely respectable’ (‘V. S.
Naipaul’ 29).

Unexpectedness is, according to Naipaul, a quality all good writing
shares: ‘what is good is always what is new, in both form and content. What is
good forgets whatever models it might have had, and is unexpected; we have to
catch it on the wing’ (‘Writer and India’ 14). He is not happy with the word
‘novel’: he originally sub-titled his 1994 book A Way in the World ‘A
Sequence’, but changed it to ‘Novel’ at the request of his publisher. He
preferred not to use ‘novel’ because, “‘if a novel is something that a person in
public life does to show how much he or she knows about sex or shopping’,
then the word is “tainted”’ (Gussow, ‘V.S. Naipaul’ 29). Earlier in his career
he had regarded ‘the novel writing as engaging the truer part of me’ (Wheeler
43), but he has come to feel that the novel is an outdated form:

There was a time when fiction provided … discoveries about the nature
of society, about states, so those works of fiction had a validity over and
above the narrative element. I feel that those most important works of
fiction were done in the 19th century … I feel that all that has followed
since have been versions of those works. (Rashid, ‘Last Lion’ 167)
As a form, it cannot, he believes, be applied to all societies:

If you take some literary form without fully understanding its origins and apply it to your own culture, it wouldn’t necessarily work. You can’t apply George Eliot country society to Burma, or India, for example, but people do try. It’s one of the many falsities of the literary novel today. I can’t help feeling that the form has done its work. (Hussein 161)

What he writes does not need to be classified: ‘This idea of categories is slightly bogus’ (Rashid, ‘Last Lion’166). At any rate, whatever he chooses to call them, there are certain qualities necessary to good books: ‘literary art … must have’ a moral sense (Michener 69); they should be ‘fun … I’m willing to believe that the element of pleasure is almost invariably paramount’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 92); and of course they must be original. There should, also, be an element of instability: ‘most interesting books have a certain instability about them which I don’t find in current English fiction. … I much prefer writers who can carry in their writing some sense of what is, wasn’t always, has been made, and is about to change again and become something else’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 81-2). Too great a concern with plot, as opposed to narrative, is a danger:

Narrative is something large going on around you all the time. Plot is something so trivial – people want it for television plays. Plot assumes that the world has been explored and now this thing, plot, has to be added on. Whereas I am still exploring the world. And there is narrative there, in every exploration. The writers of plots know the world. I don’t know the world yet. (Schiff 148)

Part of his professed ignorance of ‘the world’ is his refusal to be enlisted on behalf of causes, social, political or nationalist. ‘A writer,’ as he told Adrian Rowe-Evans,

should have a dialogue with his own society, and to have writers who have got one eye on an exterior world is to use writers as a tourist trade, as a cultural or political weapon … . To write honestly about one’s
own undeveloped society would offend it; ten years ago in Trinidad, if you called an African black, the man was mortally offended. In those days many people were offended by my writings. Now, I get letters from tourist boards asking if my work can be used, and so forth. What future can there be for a kind of writing which can be treated, or used, like that? … A man must write to report his whole response to the world; not because it would be nice to do something for the prestige of his country. (27, 29)

In order to ‘report his whole response to the world’ it is necessary to be receptive, whereas ‘people with causes inevitably turn themselves off intellectually’ (Michener 71). Marxism is a prime example:

People love making simple distinctions – left, right, colonialist, anti-colonialist – and if they have trouble fitting you in, they do so just the same. People love clichés. It’s sign of being grown up to be able to use a cliché with authority … Marxism is a very big and happy cliché to discover, manipulate and master. (Behr 38)

The simple economic view is a dangerous reduction: ‘unless you understand that everyone has cause for self-esteem, you make a terrible political error. The marxists tend to reduce people to their distress, or to their economic position’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 91). In The Enigma of Arrival he admits that this is not merely an intellectual position; there is an emotional origin to these beliefs: ‘the fear of extinction which I had developed as a child had partly to do with this: this fear of being swallowed up or extinguished by the simplicity of one side or the other, my side or the side that wasn’t mine’ (140). But there is also the question of what could happen to one’s political beliefs when the creative process takes hold, as he said to Derek Walcott in 1965:

Writing, I think, is a very fraudulent thing. When you start writing about something it changes. It becomes distorted. It is extremely hard for a writer to know what is going to happen when he starts writing about a particular thing. A well-known English writer went to Kenya during the Mau-Mau emergency. His sympathies were with the Kikuyu; and it was for this reason that he couldn’t write a novel about the emergency. He didn’t know what would have come out. … in the process of writing
one might discover deeper truths about oneself which might be slightly different from the day to day truth about one’s reaction. (‘Interview’ 8)

The implication here is, of course, not so much that political beliefs distort one’s creative response, but the creative response cannot be constrained by preconceived political ideas, and writers who value their beliefs and want them to remain intact had better not subject them to the stress of writing fiction about them.

His overriding aim in writing is ‘to achieve a writing which is perfectly transparent’ (Rowe-Evans 34). In order to do this, there are various temptations that need to be fought. For one, there is the danger of ‘applying a type of dramatic pattern to what I am portraying, so that I falsify the situation as I really perceive it. Or I might be seduced by the rhythm of the words themselves to say something which isn’t really what I see’ (Rowe-Evans 24).

By 1981, he felt he had ‘sat out the Forster thing about relationships and a great many other temptations. You know how easy it would have been for me to subscribe to the pretentious stuff. How many people would have liked me to take as my slogan “only connect”, that sort of thing’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 79). He rejects satire, preferring to be thought of as an ironist: ‘Satire comes out of a tremendous impulse of optimism. One simply does not indulge in satire when one is awaiting death. Satire is a type of anger. Irony and comedy, I think, come out of a sense of acceptance’ (Walcott, ‘Interview’ 8). He does not need satire, because ‘I fear no one. … I think it is … fear which underlies a good deal of what is called satire, or the attempt to be contemptuous of what you fear. That can’t be done; rather you will be contemptuous of what you love, and exalt what you fear’ (Rowe-Evans 31). Comedy has its place,
though, to sugar the pill of the disturbing truths he presents to the reader as a result of his method of ‘direct looking’:

When I am writing, I always feel that to come to some comprehension or acceptance of what is true is itself a kind of liberation. Then I thought that perhaps that wasn’t enough. Because when we read fiction we’re like children to some extent. The strong instinct is for everyone to live happily ever afterwards. So then I thought, in addition to the truth, there was a way to combat the dissatisfaction the reader will feel at something that appears to end without solace for men … Comedy. I thought, that is it. That all one could offer is comedy, real comedy.

(Medwick 61)

He is not happy, however, to ‘beguile, to provide a respite from the constant anguish of reality’ in the way of some metafictional and post-modern writers whom he sees as ‘mystifiers’: ‘there is too much that needs to be said, he insists’ (Winokur 117-8). Neither does he feel the need of experiment and innovation for its own sake: ‘What I am doing is sufficiently painful and novel to have no need of structural deformations’ (Hardwick 46). He has no objection to shocking his readers. He believes the success of Guerrillas is partly because it is so shocking: ‘I know it’s offended a lot of people. … But you see, the terror of that book is inevitable. It’s a book about lies and self deception and people inhabiting different worlds or cultures’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 86). Other, less confrontational techniques he has used include repetition to create an ‘illusion of knowledge’ in the reader which ‘makes it easier to approach unfamiliar material’ (Hussein 160); for example, in A Way in the World he repeated the story of Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco Miranda four times, in different ways, throughout the book. It is also a moral consideration that has led him to reject the use of a fictional narrator: none of his books since A Bend in the River (1979) has been in a voice not identifiably his own. In 1994, he was still tormented by the ‘errors’ he made in his 1962
novel *Mr Stone and the Knight’s Companion*: ‘I like the excellent material, still, but I felt it was thrown away by my suppression of the narrator, the observer who was an essential part of the story’ (Hussein 156). He uses Graham Greene as another example of this problem:

He always has someone who is like Graham Greene in other part [sic] of the world. And there’s always someone … with doubts and a tormented soul in the Greene book … and it makes the work a little … false, really, because the world isn’t like that. You don’t always have a man and a tormented soul appearing in all these places. You have a writer who visits them there. (Siegel)

As long as the narrator is himself, the other characters may be fictional, ‘because you can’t use real people to hang philosophical ideas about flux and change’ (Niven 163): this was at any rate his technique when writing about his life in England in *The Enigma of Arrival* in 1987. Earlier, however, in 1971, he told Ian Hamilton that it was difficult to write about his experience as an immigrant in England:

I think the difficulty about that is that probably every time you try to devise a story to get some kind of symbol for your experience the whole apparatus of invention that you’d have to bring to bear would be so fraudulent. How do you ceaselessly introduce the foreign character into a setting? You just can’t go on doing that. That is very tedious and boring. (17)

Symbolism clearly interests him little: he wrote in 1961 one that he could ‘enjoy *Moby Dick* without being too deeply concerned about the symbolism of the white whale’ (*Little More*’ 15); and in 1971 the antagonism is greater:

I can no longer, at a time of crisis, in Bengal, take an interest in plays which don’t have a proper setting, where people are in a way symbols, where incidents are always symbolic, where people are endlessly looking for their doubles, or acting out old myths, or where plays are set in madhouses. (Hamilton 19)

Symbols, for him, need to arise more naturally: ‘The world abrades one, one comes to certain resolutions and then one devises by instinct and through
Chapter Thirteen

dreams and all kinds of senses a story that is a symbol for all this. But one can’t do it all the time’ (Bryden, ‘The Novelist V.S. Naipaul’ 4).

Justice for Naipaul is a dangerous mirage:

From the earliest stories and bits of stories my father had read to me … I had arrived at the conviction – the conviction that is at the root of so much human anguish and passion, and corrupts so many lives – that there was justice in the world. The wish to be a writer was a development of that. To be a writer as O. Henry was, to die in mid-sentence, was to triumph over darkness. And like a wild religious faith that hardens in adversity, this wish to be a writer, this refusal to be extinguished, this wish to seek at some future time for justice, strengthened as our conditions grew worse. (Finding the Centre 38)

As he matured, he realised that justice was not a useful concept for him: ‘As you get older and understand more, you no longer have the flat view of the world – flat and sometimes cruel. As you grow older you understand people a lot more; you have greater sympathy with people’ (Shenker 53); but this does not mean not noticing their shortcomings: ‘I’m not interested in attributing fault … I’m interested in civilizations. If Arabs piss on my doorstep in South Kensington, I can’t not notice’ (Michener 64). Even the truth, his own ultimate aim, is not sacred:

There probably are certain circumstances in which the only way you can be human and proclaim your humanity is by lying about yourself. I mean, having such regard for yourself that you can create a lie for yourself. It’s very odd, but – because the truth is wonderful in certain societies. But, you know, in some places it probably isn’t wonderful. I mean, why tell the truth in a work camp, in a gulag. (Siegel)

Ideas of freedom do not preoccupy him a great deal, either. Clearly the concept is subjected to a certain amount of ironic treatment in In a Free State, but personally he regards his own career as having been benefited, even perhaps made possible, by his freedom:

I have never had to work for hire; I made a vow at an early age never to work, never to become involved with people in that way. That has given me a freedom from people, from entanglements, from rivalries,
from competition. I have no enemies, no rivals, no masters; I fear no one. (Rowe-Evans 31)

In 1994, he told Mel Gussow, ‘I’m very content. I’ve been a free man’ (‘V.S. Naipaul’ 30).

The relationship between Naipaul and his narrative voice is one of which he is acutely conscious, and as a reader he prefers works where the writer does not hide behind his prose: ‘I don’t like things where the writer is not to be there. The writer has to take me, rather like Pepys’ (Schiff 149). He does not mind being thought of as elitist, or snobbish; but prides himself on the honesty with which he records his admittedly subjective view of the world.

Charles Michener comments:

There is ‘charity’ in even his darkest books – the charity of seeing. He refuses not to see.

His determination has not come easily. In Naipaul’s books, as in his company, there is the sense of an opposing pull – into that withdrawal from the fray. Perhaps it is fear of giving in that brings such steel. (73)

The fear of giving in to the qualities he criticises in others, the temptations to be corrupted by causes, to be bewitched by the beauty of language, to be lulled by its rhythms into saying what he knows to be untrue; to escape into the comfort of oblivion, to stop writing and become a ‘monkey’: these are the tensions which seem to impel Naipaul in his career, and which give him the necessary impulses to get started on the next project, even while he comforts himself with visions of sudden death – in 1990, he told Andrew Robinson, ‘nowadays I sleep with the idea of a bullet being put in the back of my head … it comforts me’ (112).

In the following three chapters I look at three of Naipaul’s major works of fiction. Firstly, I discuss *A House for Mr Biswas* in the light of Naipaul’s
later comments about the superiority of non-fiction over fictional forms, and consider its use of comedy, its autobiographical elements, and its relationship to the influence of his father’s life and writing on his career. Secondly, I examine *In a Free State* as an example of Naipaul’s belief in the importance of finding the appropriate form for the subject that interests him – in this case, the break up of empires and the people who are set adrift in the new post-colonial world. Thirdly, I take *The Enigma of Arrival*, and show how its rather gloomy themes of decay, death, flux, morbidity and withdrawal are counteracted by a joy in language and an almost caressing tenderness for his characters; and also the unusual verisimilitude he achieves in this novel by his scrupulous use of his own persona as a narrator of fictional events and lives.
Chapter Fourteen

Fiction Versus Non-Fiction: *A House for Mr Biswas*

In an interview in 1995, V.S. Naipaul said, in response to the question, ‘Do you think you will ever go back to writing a pure novel or imaginative fiction again?’

I do write imaginative work, but I must say that I hate the word ‘novel’. I can no longer understand why it is important to write or read invented stories. I myself don’t need that stimulation. I don’t need those extravaganzas. There is so much reading, so much understanding of the world that I still have to do. We are living at an extraordinary moment when so much knowledge is available to us that was not available 100 years ago. We can read books about Indian art, Indian history, Southeast Asian cultural history, Chinese art … I don’t see reading as an act of drugging oneself with a narrative. I don’t need that. This other kind of reading is immensely exciting for me and there is so much of it to do. (Rashid, ‘The Last Lion’ 166)

As novelist Ian McEwan commented in response to an edited version of this interview published in *The Observer* and provocatively titled ‘The Death of the Novel’, ‘it’s all very well’ for the author of *A House for Mr Biswas* to spurn the novel: having accomplished a ‘comic masterpiece’ before the age of thirty, he may feel that the pleasures of fictional narrative have been exhausted for him, now he is in his mid-sixties; and at any rate, ‘I think he’s giving an interview out of his current preoccupations and we writers tend to do that – we push out in manifesto mode and … say, well, because I’m not reading any fiction at the moment, the whole thing’s dead’ (D.S.). Naipaul’s narrative style has never been the drugging variety anyway: even in *A House for Mr Biswas* he deliberately avoids suspense and relies instead on his sharp, perceptive insights into character and the dynamics of human relationships, and his fine eye for detail, to stimulate and sustain his readers’ interest.

In any case, fiction imparts a different type of information from non-fiction. A social history of the Hindu community in rural Trinidad may be generally more informative than a novel, but it is likely to be dry reading matter beside *Mr Biswas*. Even Naipaul’s *The Loss of El Dorado*, a historical
book about Trinidad written within a few years after this novel, maintains, by its nature as an account of facts ascertainable in documents and archives, a far greater distance from its characters than any reader could sustain from Mohun Biswas and his children. Good fiction, with its subjective point of view and concern for the apparently trivial details of a life, a community, or a society, and its absence of an objectively testable corresponding reality, offers its readers the opportunity to enter imaginatively into the setting and the lives of people they could otherwise understand only in a theoretical way. As Iser says, ‘literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it’ (Indeterminacy 44).

Naipaul became a writer because of a childhood expectation of his father’s, and in spite of, he claims, having demonstrated no talent. In *Finding The Centre* (1982) he speaks of the fear of extinction that his father ‘so accurately transmitted’ to him ‘without saying anything about it’, which was linked with the writer’s vocation, and which ‘could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation’ (72). For Seepersad Naipaul, and for his son after him, ‘to be a writer … was to triumph over darkness’ (38). Imagery of darkness and light is strong in *Mr Biswas*. He is born, his grandmother and the midwife assume, at ‘midnight, the inauspicious hour’, and dire predictions are made for his future, but the next day in the morning’s ‘bright light it seemed that all evil spirits had surely left the earth’ (16). The dark continues to hold terrors, however. The night his father dies, diving in search of him in the dark pond, he finds himself ‘alone in the dark hut, and frightened’ (29). His first sight of the private sections of Hanuman House is described in terms of darkness, blackness, dimness (87), and when, after his illness, which involves among other things a ‘billowing black cloud’ which he feels, ‘unless he was careful … would funnel into his head’ (266), he is recovering in Hanuman
House, the darkness nearly overcomes him, though in this case it is not
menacing so much as tempting: ‘The darkness, the silence, the absence of the
world enveloped and comforted him: at some far-off time he had suffered
great anguish. He had fought against it. Now he had surrendered, and this
surrender had brought peace’ (299). Mr Biswas’ temptation by the peace and
comfort of the dark and the void echoes Naipaul’s temptation, as a young
writer, to give up his vocation:

unless I had been driven by great necessity, something even like panic,
I might never have written. The idea of laying aside the ambition was
very restful and tempting – the way sleep was said to be tempting to
Napoleon’s soldiers on the retreat from Moscow. (‘On Being a Writer’)

This surrender, however comfortable, is dangerous. In a 1983 essay, Naipaul
writes of his twenties, the period before his writing career got under way:

Thirty years later, I can easily make present to myself again the anxiety
of that time: to have found no talent, to have written no book, to be null
and unprotected in the busy world. It is that anxiety – the fear of
destitution in all its forms, the vision of the abyss – that lies below the
comedy of the book. (‘Writing A House for Mr Biswas’ 22)

The temptation of the void is, however, outweighed by the terror it inspires, in
both Naipaul and Mohun Biswas. For Naipaul, not being a writer would mean
a life of displacement: in Trinidad, ‘that society was such a simple one that I
don’t think there would have been room for me’, while in England, although ‘I
tried very hard … to get a job – to fit myself in’, he found ‘there was nothing I
could do’ (Henry 23). For Biswas, it would mean the capitulation of the
individual to the suffocating system of conformity and repression that is the
Tulsi clan; for although it is in the shelter of Hanuman House that he is able to
recover from the panic and anxiety brought on by his experiences at Green
Vale, and while there, in the secluded Blue Room, he feels ‘secure to be only a
part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power
to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it’ (302), he nevertheless knows that he must go ‘out into the world, to test it for its power to frighten’ (305).

If Mr Biswas represents anything, he represents the rebellion of the individual against the mass of nameless conformists. When he marries Shama and becomes aware of the way the household is organised, he finds that the Tulsi husbands’ ‘names were forgotten – they became Tulsis’ (97). Naipaul counteracts this by calling him ‘Mr Biswas’ throughout the novel – even as a new-born baby. The effect of this is at once absurd and respectful. No one but the narrator calls him Mr Biswas. In dialogue, he is usually addressed by his first name, if a name is mentioned at all. The respect implied by addressing a low-status individual by formal title and surname is revisited in *The Enigma of Arrival*, where the narrator makes a point of addressing the gardener as Mr Pitton. The other characters in the novel are commonly referred to by the names Mr Biswas uses: the carpenter who builds his house at Green Vale is Mr Maclean, his mother-in-law is Mrs Tulsi, his public service boss is Miss Logie, but the brother-in-law whose library consists of the works of American western writer W.C. Tuttle becomes W.C. Tuttle, his wife becomes Mrs Tuttle and his children the little Tuttles: the narrative is so focalised through Biswas that no other names are given for these characters, even though no-one but he and his family know them by these names.

One critic has seen the Tulsi family as a symbol of imperialist organisation, with the husbands as the colonised subjects:

> There is something archetypal in the organization of Hanuman House. Mrs Tulsi is a powerful mother-figure, and rules through an understanding of the psychology of slavery. … Mrs Tulsi, good colonizer as she is, justifies her exploitation with the explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Her argument is that which ex-colonial peoples most bitterly resent, and also the one which gives them pause. (Rohlehr 87-8)

This theory works well: the constant harping on the fact that before Mr Biswas
married Shama he had nothing but what he could hang on a nail; the
suppression of his identity; the accusations of ingratitude, all support it. But
Naipaul consistently denies any political purposes in his writing. In 1964 he
wrote:

Mr Achebe says that his purpose is ‘to help my society regain its belief
in itself... ’. Such a drive might produce good novels. But the attitude
is political and one’s sympathy with it can only be political. In the end
it is the writer and the writing that matter. ... We cannot share other
people’s obsession with their images. ... a country is ennobled by its
writers only if these writers are good. Propagandists help little in the
end. (‘Images’ 29)

He has consistently stated that in his writing he is ‘not a spokesman for
anything’ (Kakutani): it is a personal vocation of his own, ‘to explore the
many sides of his past’ (Gussow, ‘Travel’). He has even described writing as
‘a sort of disease, a sickness ... a form of incompleteness ... a form of anguish,
... despair’ (Shenker 51). His strength as a writer comes from his ability to
control and channel his emotions in the production of narrative. Gordon Burn
expressed surprise that his ‘distilled, simple prose’ could be compatible ‘with
what he regards as his genetically inherited tendency toward hysteria and
panic’, to which Naipaul replied, ‘Panic is there. Not in the writing. But panic
is there in the writer.’ Even when he was young, he says, he ‘was always
amazed that out of such profound rage, one could end by writing quite calmly.
One reacts rather strongly, but, as a writer, one distills that down. If those
responses were not strong, probably one would not be a writer’ (Gussow,
‘Enigma’).

The assurance with which he wrote *A House for Mr Biswas* is sustained
by the subdued ironic tone. The distance he maintains between his narrator
and the characters has led some readers to see this novel as principally a comic
achievement, but in this he has taken his father’s advice: ‘be realistic,
humorous when this comes in pat, but don't make it deliberately so. If you are
at a loss for a theme, take me for it’ (*Letters* 177). The early scenes of *A House
for Mr Biswas* are, indeed, adapted from one of his father’s short stories, ‘They
Named Him Mohun’, ‘the only piece of autobiography my father permitted himself, if autobiography can be used of a story which more or less ends with the birth of the writer’ (S. Naipaul, Foreword 8). The pathos in the story, is, however, undercut in the novel by an ironic, sceptical narrator who points out that the ‘unseemly hour of midnight’ (S. Naipaul, ‘They Named Him Mohun’ 125) could only have been a superstitious guess on the part of the midwife and Bipti’s mother; and who relates that the child’s sixth finger, in the story a sign of ‘an incarnation of evil’ (125), fell off undramatically ‘before he was nine days old’ (House 18). The story’s pathos and superstition add up to ‘a tale of pure romance, in which … old ritual, lovingly described, can only lead to reconciliation’ (S. Naipaul, Foreword 16). In the novel, however, the story continues after the reconciliation between Mohun’s parents, telling the life story the father ‘could never take any further’ although ‘he often spoke of doing an autobiographical novel’ (S. Naipaul, Foreword 16). Naipaul makes it clear that the novel is not a literal biography:

> For me to write the story of a man like my father was, in the beginning at any rate, to attempt pure fiction, if only because I was writing of things before my time. … I knew little about the Trinidad Indian village way of life. I was a town boy; I had grown up in Port-of-Spain. I had memories of my father’s conversation; I also had his short stories … So the present novel begins with events twice removed, in an antique, ‘pastoral’ time, and almost in a land of the imagination. The real world gradually defines itself, but it is still for the writer an imagined world. The novel is well established, its tone set, when my own wide-awake memories take over. (‘Writing A House for Mr Biswas’ 22)

Even once his ‘wide-awake memories’ took over, he still felt

> that I didn’t even really belong in the exotic world I was born into and felt I had to write about. That life I wrote about in Biswas couldn’t be the true nature of my life because I hadn’t grown up in it feeling that it was mine. And that world itself was in fact turning when I entered it. How could one avoid the feeling of floating around? (Mukherjee and Boyers 78)

Along with the feeling of disorientation and displacement, there was the anger of the child, exploding in all directions, which the adult writer looks back upon
and channels in his writing. Mr Biswas’ anger is an uncertain lostness, never sure of its justification, and sometimes becomes mere petulance. In his teens, he returns to his mother in her impoverished hovel, having been beaten by his uncle Bhandat, the rum-shop manager he was living with and working for. He tries to look for a job, but after a short time he announces his intention to kill himself, and his mother’s reply, ‘that would be the best thing for you. And for me’ (69) sends him into a ‘great rage’. He is, however, soon mollified by the respect with which his low-caste brother-in-law Ramchand treats him. Mr Biswas’ moods are changeable: as Rohlehr points out, Mrs Tulsi and Seth, the main antagonists in his life, frequently claim that they are only trying to help him, and while he resents this argument, it also ‘gives [him] pause’ (88).

When his son Anand is old enough to take a part in the action, however, we begin to see his anger as well, explosive, but purer and more powerful because it is without the adult’s compulsion to register the enemy’s point of view.

Humour is inherent in much of the novel’s action, but it is rarely without a serious undercurrent. The description of Mr Biswas’ father’s funeral, with the photographer trying to arrange the bereaved family around the propped-up coffin, is hilarious – until the reader is reminded of their deprivation and poverty: the scene is immediately followed by a description of the photograph as seen for the first time years later:

Mr Biswas was astonished by his own smallness. The scabs of sores and the marks of eczema showed clearly on his knobbly knees and along his very thin arms and legs. Everyone in the photograph had unnaturally large, staring eyes which seemed to have been outlined in black. (34)

Sometimes Naipaul sets up deliberately comic scenes, only to shock the reader into awareness of the painful situation which lies beneath. When Shama discovers Mr Biswas’ attempts at stories, for example, the scene is set in a
Forgetting that in his strictness, and as part of her training he had ordered Shama to file all his papers, he thought that these stories were as secret at home as his marriage and four children were at the office. And one Friday, when he found Shama puzzling over her accounts and had scoffed as usual, she said, ‘Leave me alone, Mr John Lubbard.’ That was one of the names of his thirty-three-year-old hero. ‘Go and take Sybil to the pictures.’ That was from another story. He had got the name from a novel by Warwick Deeping. ‘Leave Ratni alone.’ That was the Hindi name he had given to the mother of four in another story. Ratni walked heavily, ‘as though perpetually pregnant’; her arms filled the sleeves of her bodice and seemed about to burst them; she sucked in her breath through her teeth while she worked at her accounts, the only reading and writing she did. Mr Biswas recalled with horror and shame the descriptions of the small tender breasts of his barren heroines. Shama sucked her teeth loudly. If she had laughed, he would have hit her. (345-6)

The comic tone allows him to explore the complex emotional life of his main characters without lapsing into sentimentality. It makes the most painful situations bearable, but stops short of ridicule.

Mr Biswas is both insignificant and profoundly important. Naipaul’s narrative has endowed this unheroic figure with an unlikely heroism. His struggles and achievements seem to echo the struggles and achievements of all individuals who refuse to conform, in whatever setting and circumstances.

Rohlehr notes that

the purity of motive and truth to instinct and necessity which marked Biswas’ struggle against an apparently indestructible system make his rebellion an affirmation of universal values; transform it from being a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of the group. Biswas doesn’t know this, engaged as he is in the fight for a house; the Tulsis don’t know it, engaged as they are in teaching their children to conform and mock at the rebel. (92)

Naipaul apparently doesn’t know it either: he rejects the suggestion that he intends to write universally. In 1965, reviewing a book of essays on Commonwealth writing, he wrote that one paper ‘sees my work, and that of
others, demonstrating the “essential kinship of various peoples”. I can see what is meant, but if I thought that this was to be the only effect of my work I might be tempted to be perverse the next time’ (‘Images’ 26). But Mr Biswas, with his vividly portrayed inner life and minutely described circumstances, arouses the reader’s empathy, and becomes real to the reader in a way that allows him to be taken as representative, if the reader chooses. A non-fiction account does not have the same impact. The following passage comes from Finding the Centre, describing Seepersad Naipaul’s experience when an anonymous letter – possibly from members of his wife’s family – threatened him with poisoning if he failed to perform a sacrifice to the goddess Kali to atone for a critical article he wrote in the newspaper about ‘amazing superstitious practices’ among the Hindu rural community:

In the week that followed my father existed on three planes. He was the reporter who had becomes his own very big front page story: ‘Next Sunday I am doomed to die’. He was the reformer who wasn’t going to yield to ‘ju-jus’: ‘I won’t sacrifice a goat’. At the same time, a man of feud-ridden Chaguanas, he was terrified of what he saw as a murder threat, and he was preparing to submit. Each role made nonsense of the other. And my father must have known it. (69)

This describes adequately, but at some distance, the fear and humiliation of the time. It even enters into the feelings to some extent, but the last sentence shows it for what it is – a non-fictional account: he cannot say ‘my father knew it’, because that would be presuming beyond the boundaries of non-fiction, and entering into realms of fiction. In contrast, a passage from the novel makes bold, unqualified statements about Mr Biswas’ state of mind when Anand and he are alone in the half-built house at Green Vale:

He said he had another touch of malaria. He wrapped himself in the floursack sheet and rocked in his chair. Tarzan had his tail crushed; he leapt up with a yell, and went out of the room.

‘Say Rama Rama Sita Rama, and nothing will happen to you,’ Mr Biswas said.
Anand repeated the words, faster and faster.
‘You don’t want to leave me?’
Anand didn’t reply.
This had become one of Mr Biswas’s fears. By concentrating on it – a power he had in his state – he managed to make it the most oppressive of all his fears: that Anand would leave him and he would be left alone. (283)

Naipaul says his father’s stories first gave him an appreciation of ‘the distorting, distilling power of the writer’s art’. English novels, he said, could not provide him with a tradition, but his father’s Trinidad stories could help him: ‘Where I had seen a drab haphazardness, they found order; where I would have attempted to romanticise, to render my subject equal with what I had read, they accepted’ (‘Jasmine’ 27). He insists that ‘all literatures are regional; perhaps it is only the placelessness of a Shakespeare or the blunt communication of “gross” experience as in Dickens that makes them appear less so’ (30). But the sympathy which Mr Biswas inspires in the reader encourages the reader to extrapolate from the novels and to be aware of ‘the essential kinship of various peoples’. Naipaul is no doubt right when he says that ‘every time you try to devise a story to get some kind of symbol for your experience, the whole apparatus of invention that you have to bring to bear would be fraudulent’ (Hamilton 17). Naipaul’s method is more instinctive: even though he still claims that it is an artificial act to sit down to compose a narrative, he then finds that, with imaginative writing, ‘when it catches fire, it takes you to unexpected places’ (Gussow, ‘Enigma’). In Finding the Centre, he writes that ‘true, and saving, knowledge of my subject ... always seemed to come during the writing’ (26). So with the writer’s gift for seeing the world through the eyes of others – ‘I could meet dreadful people and end up seeing the world through their eyes, seeing their frailties, their needs’ (Gussow, ‘Enigma’) – and the power of narrative itself to distill experience into
something valuable, Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas* transforms ‘the life of someone like my father’ into a modern-day Everyman’s journey. He wrote in 1983 of his memories of writing the novel:

> Nothing had prepared me for the liberation and absorption of this extended literary labor, the joy of allowing fantasy to play on stored experience, the joy of the comedy that so naturally offered itself, the joy of language. The right words seemed to dance above my head; I plucked them down at will. I took chances with language. Before this, out of my beginner’s caution, I had been strict with myself. (‘Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*’ 23)

The joy in language he discovered at that time has obviously stayed with him, or at least revisited him when he wrote *The Enigma of Arrival*. The pleasure he clearly has in wrapping, or fixing, in words experiences ‘which might otherwise evaporate away’ is never more happily displayed than in the later novel.

When he was writing *Mr Biswas*, Naipaul says ‘I was writing about things I didn't know’ (*Finding* 60). This belies the assurance, and the profound understanding of the complexity of human relationships, that characterise the novel. He remembers how, writing the novel, he regarded ‘with wonder what he had drawn out of himself, the unsuspected truths turned up by the imagination’ (‘Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*’ 23). He claims that turning real life into narrative is an matter of simplification: where in real life, acts and events may be (or at least appear) random, in fiction they must have an internal logic, an explicable cause, in order that the reader’s imagination may be engaged (Bragg). This may be true, in that characteristic incidents and figures are selected or created in order to serve the needs of the narrative, but there is certainly little simplification of the feelings and relationships of the principal characters, which are so varied and convincingly inconsistent that they resist the reductions of political analysis or sentimentality, or even of rational cause
and effect. Mr Biswas' attitude to his wife Shama, for example, fluctuates wildly, although he comes at the time of his death ‘to accept her judgement and to respect her optimism’ (8), as we are told in the Prologue. This comfortable reliance is hard-won, however. At the first sight of her, ‘though he disliked her voice, he was enchanted by her smile’ (82), and his rash love-letter catapults him into marriage and the large, powerful machine that is the Tulsi family enterprise. Shama then becomes alternately a focus for his resentment of her family, and an ally. These contradictory roles mean that his attitude towards her is confused. Romance has no place at all in their marriage, but there are moments when happiness, or at least contentment, seem possible. On their first day at the derelict shop the family has assigned them to at the Chase,

he was astonished at the change in Shama. Till the last she had protested at leaving Hanuman House, but now she behaved as though she moved into a derelict house every day. Her actions were assertive, wasteful and unnecessarily noisy. They filled shop and house; they banished silence and loneliness. (146)

And ‘feeling grateful to her, he felt tender towards her coffee-set’. Mentioning the coffee-set brings in a note of absurdity, and resists the hint of sentiment – Swinden notes that ‘the commonplace … commands its share of love and the author does not withhold it’ (152) – and the fact that her noisiness and activity, and her tactful silence about their new situation, are exactly what he needs for comfort, rather than a shaming acknowledgement of their plight, or an embarrassing display of affection, endows this scene with complete authenticity. When she brings her first child, born at Hanuman House, back to the Chase,

he immediately began complaining of the very things that pleased him most. Savi cried, and he spoke as though she were one of Shama’s indulgences. Meals were late, and he exhibited an annoyance which concealed the joy he felt that there was someone to cook meals with him in mind. To these outbursts Shama didn’t reply, as she would have done before. She was morose herself, as though she preferred this bond to the bond of sentimentality. (169)
Later, however, when she returns to Green Vale after one of their many separations, pregnant with their fourth child, he stays in bed for a week, ‘observing Shama closely, with suspicion, hatred and nausea. … One morning she came and placed her palm, then the back of her hand, on his forehead. The action offended him, flattered him, and made him uneasy’ (274-5). They begin an argument: ‘he was violently angry, never before had he been so disgusted by her. Yet he wished her to remain there’ (275). In his deranged state, he decides that she wishes him dead, and in his panicky, irrational struggle to escape from her out the window, he kicks her, seeing, ‘too late, that he had kicked her on the belly’ (277). From this low point, his marriage very gradually recovers, and becomes the respectful partnership described in the Prologue, but even when they have a house of their own, and the threat of being engulfed by the Tulsis has diminished, arguments continue, because this is the way they have learnt to live together.

Relationships with his own family, and his children, are equally ambivalent. At his mother’s funeral, ‘he longed to feel grief. He was surprised only by jealousy’ (480) of those who had known her better. He manages to actualise his grief, however, through writing; firstly a letter of complaint to the doctor who behaved rudely and impatiently towards his brothers when certifying her death, and then a poem – ‘in prose’ – to her memory.

Naipaul is in no doubt about what he owes his father: ‘his love was extremely important to me. It was a curious kind of love. I felt responsible for him, even as a child’ (Winokur 116). Fittingly, Anand’s first major independent act in the novel is to decide to stay with his father, after the frightening scene at Green Vale. But he refuses the offer of a box of crayons, and Mr Biswas is puzzled:

‘Why did you stay then?’
Anand looked exasperated.
‘Why?’
‘Because – ’ The word came out thin, explosive, charged with anger, at himself and his father. ‘Because they was going to leave you
alone.’

For the rest of the day they hardly spoke. (279)

Anand’s story develops very much as Naipaul’s own biography did. The feelings ascribed to him are the anger, the satirical sense, the self-awareness, the detachment of the observer, which Naipaul admits were his own in childhood. The complexity of his feelings is nowhere more evident than in the ‘ducking’ incident. Shama’s two brothers, Mr Biswas and Anand go swimming at the harbour extension at Docksite. Clowning with his brothers-in-law, he fails to notice that Anand has disappeared into the water. Shekhar acts quickly enough to pull Anand from the water, and resuscitates him:

Anand spluttered. His expression was one of anger. He said, ‘I was walking to the boat.’
‘I told you to stay where you were,’ Mr Biswas said, angry too. ‘And the bottom of the sea drop away.’
‘The dredging,’ Shekhar said. He had not lost his look of alarm. ‘The sea just drop away,’ Anand cried, lying on his back, covering his face with a crooked arm. He spoke as one insulted.
Owad said, ‘Anyway, you’ve got the record for ducking, Shompo.’
‘Shut up!’ Anand screamed. He began to cry, rubbing his legs on the hard, cracked ground, then turning over on his belly.
Mr Biswas took up the shirt with the safetypin and handed it to Anand.
Anand snatched the shirt and said, ‘Leave me.’
‘We shoulda leave you,’ Mr Biswas said, ‘when you was there, ducking.’ As soon as he spoke the last word he regretted it. (355)

Typically, it is Shekhar, the person with the least significant relationship with Anand, who expresses the most concern for him in this passage. On the next day, Anand writes an essay about this incident which gains him ‘twelve marks out of ten’ at school. Mr Biswas is proud of his son, and wishes ‘to be close to him. He would have done anything to make up for the solitude of the previous day’ (357), but Anand is impatient and already ashamed of his composition, and the scene ends in a flogging. It also, however, results in the recognition of Anand’s academic aptitude, and he is started on a programme of private lessons, milk and prunes – the regime which the Tulsis believe gives best
results in the scholarship stakes.

Naipaul was genuinely grief-stricken when his father died, but realised that without his death, he would not have written *A House for Mr Biswas*:

If my father was alive, clearly, I wouldn’t have been able to write it. I wouldn’t have want to do it. I probably wouldn’t have even seen the material, the way you don’t see things in front of your face. … My talent wouldn’t have been stretched at that early stage by this literary labor. You have the talent, but you have to develop it. I don’t know whether his death wasn’t a kind of creative liberation for me. No one was looking over my shoulder. (Winokur 128)

In other words, without the closure his father’s death provided in his own life, the retrospective urge would not have existed.

In writing the life story of ‘someone like my father’, Naipaul had no political or didactic purpose. If he had intended simply to commemorate the father he felt he had disappointed in some ways, he would have succeeded: Mr Biswas, despite all his weakness and ineptitude, and his occasional bad behaviour, commands the reader’s respect and sympathy – James Wood names Mr Biswas as ‘one of the few enduring characters in postwar British fiction’ (‘Tell Me What You Talked’ 25) – and one can only be moved by the dispassionate way in which Anand’s difficult relationship with his father is portrayed, when we know that he is in essence an autobiographical figure. But Naipaul has transcended the personal, and without the intention of doing so, has created a novel in which political, psychological and social situations are shrewdly observed and analysed, in an imaginative and evocative way which would not be possible in a non-fictional form.

*A House for Mr Biswas* is formally a traditional novel. Swinden comments that to read the novel ‘is to respond to something most unusual in modern fiction … to be aware of the persistence, in a writer of so vastly different experience, of some of the best features of Victorian and Edwardian
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fiction’ (157). As Naipaul’s career progressed, he came to feel that his subject matter would not continue to be served by this form, and in the next chapter I examine his first major variation on the conventional novel, designed to deal with themes of exile and alienation in the post-colonial world.
You have to be very clear about the material that possesses you, and you’ve got to find the correct form for it. ... One narrative goes with a particular kind of life, a particular moment in history; another narrative comes at another time, and you have to find the correct one. The one that feels true to you. (Burn 4)

The form of *In a Free State* is so unlike that of a novel, so discontinuous in all the usual aspects of character, setting and plot, that critics have developed ingenious explanations for its thematic continuity. Walsh sees ‘the image of the journey’ and ‘the victimisation, the being alien and lost, the significance of the passage between departure and arrival’ as the ‘embodiment and commentary on the deepest theme’ (64) of the novel. Certainly each story contains an important journey, but only in the title story is the journey itself the central image. For Kamra, the thematic unity lies in ‘the latent relationship between absurdity and freedom’ (149); others, for example Bruce King, interpret the three fictional stories as ‘a display of entering other minds, accommodating to other subjectivities and uses of English’ (90); and Hughes notes that

the counterpoising of two kinds of narrative accounts for the unusual structures of *In a Free State*. The opening and closing journal entries present from without, observed by the writer as a recorder of his times, the abandonment expressed from within, from out of the depths, (*V.S. Naipaul* 50)

by the first-person narrators of the two short stories.

John Rothfork infers that Naipaul sees the state of exile to be universal: ‘In the twentieth century man has entered “a free state”, a state without values or direction. Man is in exile, lost in the desert’ (185). But in a world where everyone is in a state of exile, the concept would lose its meaning. Each of
Naipaul’s characters is, as Kamra suggests, ‘an orphan, unrelated, in a world of relationships, of which he is keenly aware’ (22). Naipaul’s world in *In a Free State* is peopled by displaced persons and perpetual travellers, to whom the security of home is a concept hopelessly out of reach for one reason or another, either as something that they have thoughtlessly chosen to abandon, as in the case of Santosh, or that they have never valued, as with Bobby, or that was itself a place of desolation, as with Dayo’s brother. However, these characters are all conscious of their individuality, their freedom, as an exclusion from a society they believe exists, even though it may not; and their attitudes to it are complex and various. In a television interview with Melvyn Bragg he described *In a Free State* as being about ‘loss, fear and independence – personal themes’. What was it about these themes that produced the peculiar form of this novel?

Naipaul talks rather dismissively about other writers, who prefer to write novels about ‘ordered societies’ (Rowe-Evans 36), or ‘enclosed societies: …to write about a world which is much more shattered, and exploding, and varied, write about it in fiction, is very difficult’ (Levin 98). *In a Free State*, in form as well as content, is shattered, and varied, and its explosiveness – its violence – varies in intensity through the course of the book.

What is shattered, however, has first been whole, and does not preclude wholeness elsewhere and at another time. As he said in 1994, ‘one narrative goes with a particular kind of life, a particular moment in history’ (Burn 4). To know what has been lost is not granted to all Naipaul’s characters, and those who lack this knowledge are finally the more deprived: their freedom is of even less use to them.
Santosh, as we see at the beginning of his tale, ‘One out of Many’, is well aware of the happiness and security he has lost. In his regret for the life he left behind in Bombay, and his alienation in his new, free life in Washington, he is able to be calm, and his narrative voice communicates that calmness. His narrative style is Narayanesque, rather like the dialogue Naipaul uses in his Trinidad novels when his characters are speaking in Hindi; a clear, rather pedantic and formal use of English, with its own undramatic, regular rhythm, which refuses to panic. He attempts to account for his new circumstances – ‘the particular moment in my life, the particular action, that had brought me to that room. ... I could find no one moment; every moment seemed important. An endless chain of action had brought me to that room. It was frightening; it was burdensome’ (55). He is not happy, but he understands, and takes responsibility for himself and does not try to deflect the blame onto other people, institutions or abstractions. The ‘endless chain of action’ clearly implicates himself as an actor, although it would have been open to him to blame his employer, or the government that sent his employer to Washington, or the accident of his birth in a poor country, or the imperial system. Naipaul believes the colonial state of mind is one which does not accept responsibility:

One 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, outside the society you’ve grown up in. That can only be repaired by a sense of responsibility, which is what the colonial doesn’t have. (Rowe-Evans 27)

He gives Santosh, with his background of a secure and stable world, the most profound understanding of his lot, and of his own part in bringing it about, of the protagonists of the three central stories of this novel. Santosh is not a ‘colonial’. He is materially richer in Washington than he was in Bombay, but
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he has lost the feeling of belonging to a society. Having made his decision, even though it was made in ignorance, he knows he must accept his new life, its emptiness and its unpalatable mysteries: ‘it is as though I have had several lives. I do not wish to add to these’ (57). Thus the form of ‘One out of Many’, its resigned first person narration – in what Hughes calls his ‘lapidary prose and stoical tones’ which ‘transforms his life into fate’ (V.S. Naipaul 33) – and its acknowledgment of responsibility, its consciousness of cause and effect, makes it the least ‘explosive’ of the three stories, and lulls the reader into a calm melancholy before shattering that calm with the next story.

The nameless narrator-protagonist of ‘Tell me who to Kill’ is a more bereft and shattered individual than Santosh. He goes to England from his West Indian home to help his younger brother Dayo, whose ‘studies’ he is financing; but although he is able to earn well in London, when he buys his own shop his life goes seriously wrong. Once again, material security is beside the point. He has paid for his colonial status with insanity, the fate Naipaul himself feels he narrowly missed by becoming a writer:

One must make a pattern of one’s observations, one’s daily distress; one’s daily knowledge of homelessness, placelessness; one’s lack of representation in the world; one’s lack of status. ... If daily one lives with this, then daily one has to incorporate the experience into something bigger. Because one doesn’t have a side, doesn’t have a country, doesn’t have a community; one is entirely an individual. A person in this position risks going mad. (Rowe-Evans 31)

Dayo’s brother has not been able to ‘make a pattern’; he does not know whom to blame for the wreck of his life – and being a colonial, he does not take responsibility for himself; therefore he has gone mad. His madness makes him a chaotic narrator; the fractured form of his story reflects the state of his mind.
Freedom here is truly terrifying, and all the more so because we cannot fully grasp the events which have led him to this situation.

Santosh tells his story in the past tense, as one might when one can look back on one’s troubles and ‘make a pattern’. ‘Tell me who to Kill’ is narrated in a modified form of Trinidad dialect, and in the present tense whether past or present events are being described. Indeterminacy is built into the story, which is, in form, a stream-of-consciousness narrative, where the line between past and present, between fact and dream or fantasy, is blurred. The present tense increases the feeling of panic and desolation, the incapacity to stand back and detach oneself from one’s experience, ‘to incorporate the experience into something bigger’. The narrator is confused and the reader remains confused with him. Several times he refers to an incident:

... it is like a dream. I see myself in this old English house ... No weather. I am there with my brother, and we are strangers in the house. My brother is at college or school in England, pursuing his studies, and he is visiting this college friend and he is staying with the boy’s family. And then in a corridor, just outside a door, something happen. A quarrel, a friendly argument, a scuffle. They are only playing, but the knife go in the boy easy, and he drop without making a noise. I just see his face surprised. I don’t see any blood, and I don’t want to stoop to look. I see my brother opening his mouth to scream, but no scream coming. (62)

The incident, it seems, is imaginary. It is a projection of the narrator’s fear: ‘I know at that moment that the love and the danger I carry all my life burst. My life finish. It spoil, it spoil’ (62). This vision is an image of a panic that causes trouble of itself: ‘it is as though because you are frightened of something it is bound to come’ (62). From what the reader is able to piece together, however, a real act of violence has taken place in the narrator’s roti shop in London as, provoked beyond endurance by the ‘white boys who come in the shop’, he
locks himself in with his tormentors and says, “I am taking one of you today. Two of us going today.” I hear nothing else’ (96). His mind is taken over by the nightmare of the imaginary accident with his brother; ‘it is like a dream, when you can’t move, and you want to wake up quick. Then noise come back, and I know that something bad happen to my right eye. But I can’t even move my hand to feel it’ (97). The reader is not given enough information to reconstruct the train of events reliably, and the imagination is thus activated to fill in the gaps. The time of the narrative is three years after the narrator last saw his brother Dayo, so presumably three years after the ‘trouble’ caused by the incident in the roti shop, but the reader can infer that he is, or perhaps has been, in an institution, and that his ‘friend’ Frank, who travels with him to his brother’s wedding, is some kind of professional carer. Landeg White, with no justification, refers to their relationship as ‘apparently homosexual’ (205).

Andrew Gurr calls the narrator an ‘asylum inmate’ (12) and sees Frank as ‘his keeper, the male nurse, the warder of his prison’ (12), which is nearer to what is suggested. The relationship includes the inevitable resentment of a dependent, which shows the irrelevance of stock politico-social analyses:

Frank will never understand. … He is only querying and probing me about foremen who insult me at the factory, about people who fight with me at the restaurant. He is forever worrying me with his discrimination inquiries. He is my friend, the only friend I have. I alone know how much he help me, from how far he bring me back. But he is digging me all the time because he prefer to see me weak. He like opening up manholes for me to fall in; he is anxious to push me down in the darkness. (86)

The important thing about this story is the madness of the narrator, his torment, and its link to his inability to find someone or something to blame. Unlike John Rothfork, he cannot say, ‘the colonial system is undeniably responsible
for the tragedy of the narrator’s life’ (187). His situation is an illustration of the impossibility of laying blame on anyone; the chain of cause and effect is too complicated. Gorra points out that Naipaul’s

interest lies less in imperialism per se – in its formal structures, as in Paul Scott’s work, or in the process of conquest that Chinua Achebe describes – than in the restlessness it has left behind. The original sin of empire is implicit in everything he writes, but for him its ‘wound’, in Mr Biswas’s words, remains ‘too deep for anger or thoughts of retribution’, (*A House for Mr Biswas* 483) and his analysis is symptomatic, not causal. (71)

The symptom that Dayo’s brother personifies is the reverse side of the success stories of other postcolonial lives, such as that of Naipaul himself. Fawzia Mustafa claims that ‘the story’s dark irony is that Dayo’s tale corresponds to the norm of the theme of migration, and that the narrator’s casualty is the sacrifice migration often entails’ (116). With reservations about its ‘normality’, this has some truth. Dayo himself has made a life in England; he has found a job, is marrying an English woman, he ‘make his own way’ (97), and although he is in England principally owing to the efforts of his brother, he has grown distant and does not show any gratitude or reciprocal responsibility. ‘He do better without me; he don’t need me’ (97), the narrator says, bitter but resigned; and in the end, although through the story he tries out several scapegoats, he cannot identify anyone as the cause of his misfortunes. The reason he is more lost than Santosh is that he is unable to accept not blame, but any responsibility at all, for the mess of his life. He feels that forces far beyond his understanding and control have conspired against him, and he can only thrash about blindly and dangerously, looking for someone on whom to wreak revenge – someone ‘to kill’. The narrative ends with the recurring nightmare
of his brother’s childhood illness in their Caribbean village, and the soundless scream, ‘like in Rope’ (102).

After the taut horror of this ending, the title story begins with a fable-like simplicity: ‘In this country in Africa there was a president and there was also a king. They belonged to different tribes’ (103). The change of pace, tense, and point of view provides some relief for the reader, able now to be led by a disengaged third person narrator through the ironies of this mordant story.

The focalisation stays almost entirely with Bobby, an English expatriate government worker with a taste for uncomplicated sexual adventures with Africans. The only deviation is a short description of the life of a young Zulu Bobby tries to pick up in a bar, and who, after leading him on, spits in his face (107). Apart from this short passage – less than half a page – early in the story, we have no knowledge of events or other people’s thoughts that is not, or at least could not be, available to Bobby. However, the narrator’s voice is not Bobby’s, and is able to present with ample irony the inconsistencies between his words and his behaviour. Bobby does evoke some sympathy in the reader for the difficult position in which he has found himself, but of the three protagonists in the three stories he is the least sympathetic. The stark contrast between his use of power in sexual transactions, his exploitation of ‘the other Africans, boys built like men. … Sweet infantilism, almost without language’ (109), and his liberal aversion to Linda’s settler attitudes and her ‘expatriate gossip’ (112) is far more compromising than Santosh’s Hindu-based racism, or Dayo’s brother’s pathological confusion. The choice Naipaul made to write this story in the third person and the others in the first person is vital in making these distinctions. Bobby is also more ridiculous than either of the others –
more truly laughable than Santosh who makes comical mistakes but is not hypocritical. The tiny defensive moves he makes minute by minute are mercilessly noted: ‘Bobby set his face. He decided to be sombre, to give nothing away’ (112). ‘He had spoken too much; in the morning he would be full of regret; Linda would be another of those people from whom he would have to hide. He set his face, the silent man’ (162). He says, ‘I am here to serve, ... People who don’t want to serve have no business here. That sounds brutal, but that’s how I see it’ (118). But his priorities truly lie with self-protection and saving face, meanwhile enjoying Africa and Africans, in the most superficial sense, as much as he can. He prides himself on his liberal relationship with his houseboy Luke, but in the end he sees him as a threat, and decides to sack him. He will stay in Africa, in the compound which ‘was safe; the soldiers guarded the gate’ (238); he has nowhere else to go. He is not wanted back in England, and asserts, ‘My life is here’ (126). Any sympathy the reader does feel is on account of the restrictions that life in the new regime is beginning to involve, which, it seems, will increase significantly, and for which Bobby is not personally responsible. But, as Bruce King says,

*In a Free State* explores the nature and illusions of commitment. ... It is impossible to transcend the self through larger causes, the appearance of doing so is a luxury of the economically and racially secure who use others to feel a purposefulness they themselves lack or to overcome their failures in their own society. (85)

Cudjoe and others have attacked the bias implicit in Naipaul’s decision to represent white settlers in Africa, but it is clear that his sympathies, as far as he shows them, in the novel as a whole are principally with the two less self-conscious and hypocritical narrator-protagonists, who are not white. Morris points out, with some justice, that when the African soldiers attack Bobby,
‘what is done to him is no more or no less than what any colonial power throughout its tenure has done to others’ (102). Cudjoe says, discounting (as he often does) any nuances of irony or ambiguity, that ‘clearly the narrator has a great aversion for African society’ (154). Calder comments that, although ‘I still admire the story enormously … his vision excludes elements of growth and hope which are, palpably, there’ in East Africa (483), as it has every right to do, since it is a fictional narrative of a personal response to the political conditions, not an analysis of them. Kamra, in an interesting examination of Naipaul’s work, claims that ‘Naipaul’s vision is not an eternal truth about life, death or love or other universal constants arrived at intuitively. It is a moment of individual existential despair which extends its jaundiced understanding to cover the world’ (148) and

coherence, in Naipaul’s fiction, does not reside in the consistent use of a single point of view either first or third person. ... [It is] a function of bias. The bias of his protagonists and narrators is presented as a limitation of vision suggested by the limits of their experience, ambition, and power of expression. (159)

The narrator can never simply be identified with Naipaul, however similar their language and attitudes seem on the surface. Only a very shallow reading would interpret the two first person stories as representing their values straightforwardly through their narrators,¹ but in this story, with its seemingly detached narrator, more care must be taken to make the distinction. For example, the following passage is full of irony:

And Bobby understood that the barboy was trying to start a conversation. It was what some young Africans did. They tried to start conversations with people they thought were visitors and kindly; they hoped not only to practise their English but also to acquire manners and knowledge. It moved Bobby to be singled out in this way; it moved him that, after all that had happened, the boy should show such trust; and it distressed him that he had allowed himself to be influenced by
the colonel and had so far not looked at the boy, had seen only an African in uniform, one of the colonel’s employees, part of the hateful hotel. (190)

The reader does not need to be told that Bobby’s response to this boy is not disinterested. Bobby realises that he has a chance to take advantage of yet another young African’s desire for education and money, by paying for sexual favours; so his distress at not having ‘looked at the boy, seen only an African in uniform’ is not an objective statement on the state of Bobby’s mind, but another hint at his capacity, by now well known to the perceptive reader, for self-deception.

Words and phrases used by the narrator also reflect Bobby’s changeable attitude, for example, to Linda. When she holds up her shirt to display an insect bite, he sees ‘the thin yellow folds of the moist skin, the fragile ribs, the brassiere, put on for the day’s adventure, enclosing those poor little breasts’ (151), and he kisses the insect bite out of pity. Later, at dinner, irritated by her ‘casual feminine demand’ (175) that he investigate a mysterious presence in his own hotel room, he goes into her room and finds a ‘vaginal deodorant with an appalling name’ (176), which he uses to insult her the next day when the tension between them breaks into open conflict. The ‘poor little breasts’ and the ‘appalling name’ represent the extremes, of pity and fellow-feeling on one hand, and revulsion on the other, of his feelings towards Linda during their eventful journey, and the evaluative words, although not attributed to Bobby, are his words, not the narrator’s.

The relationship between Naipaul and the narrator of the Prologue and Epilogue is even more difficult to disentangle. They are both described as ‘from a journal’, but even Naipaul’s journals would hardly be so polished and
well-constructed in their original form. It is not important whether these
incidents occurred. Their significance lies in the adoption of this particular
Naipaul-like narrator – a ‘reliable’ voice – and the behaviour of the witnesses
to these episodes of persecution. Both incidents are staged for the benefit of an
audience, and once the audience loses interest, the persecution ceases. The title
of the Epilogue, ‘The Circus at Luxor’, seems initially to refer to the Chinese
circus, the members of which the narrator sees at Milan and then at Luxor; but
the Egyptian with the whip is directly involved in providing a kind of circus
entertainment for the visitors. The Chinese circus people, in contrast, are a
model of civilised behaviour: ‘so self-contained, so handsome and healthy, so
silently content with one another: it was hard to think of them as sightseers’
(245). Sightseers, ‘travelling only for the sights’ (8), it is implied, are apt to
behave badly, and will demean others less powerful than themselves in order to
engineer the ‘sights’ they wish to see, like the Italians at Luxor, and the
Lebanese, Egyptian and Austrian travellers on the steamer to Alexandria in the
Prologue, ‘The Tramp at Piraeus’.

Both the incidents are described as games, with rules. The game on the
steamer, in the Prologue, ‘was to be like a tiger-hunt, where the bait is laid out
and the hunter and the spectators watch from the security of a platform. ...
Hans smiled and explained the rules of the game as often as he was asked’
(15). The tramp is attacked, according to the rules of the game (of which
presumably he has not been informed), but then he revenges himself by locking
himself in the cabin he shares with his persecutors, denying them entry so they
have to sleep in the dining room. But the game loses its interest, except as a
tired, private joke; and when the tramp reappears to disembark at Alexandria,
‘he was of less interest than he thought’ (20). The other passengers have the last word by ignoring him.

The narrator’s part in this episode is that of an observer, a first-hand witness, taking an anthropological interest in the proceedings. The narrator’s character is only lightly sketched; he is disconcerted by the crowding on the steamer, and later, seeking solitude, comes upon the tramp, but ‘I didn’t disturb him. I feared to be involved with him’ (12). Apart from these suggestions of a fastidious nature, we see the narrator only as a neutral observer of the other passengers and their diversions.

The narrator in the Epilogue is identifiably the ‘I’ of the Prologue, but is different in one respect: he does act, once. The game this time involves an Egyptian waiter at a tourist rest house using his camel-whip on the desert children: ‘this was an Egyptian game with Egyptian rules’ (242), played for the benefit of the Italian tourists who collaborate by continuing to bait the children with food scraps, and then by photographing the results, as Calder says, ‘which figures the role of many modern artists, conniving in the creation of foulness which they then exploit’ (483). Other tourists in the rest house take no notice, but the narrator is provoked into action:

I saw that my hand was trembling. I put down the sandwich I was eating on the metal table; it was my last decision. Lucidity, and anxiety, came to me only when I was almost on the man with the camel-whip. I was shouting. I took the whip away, threw it on the sand. He was astonished, relieved. I said, ‘I will report this to Cairo.’ He was frightened; he began to plead in Arabic. The children were puzzled; they ran off a little way and stood up to watch. The two Italians, fingerling cameras, looked quite calm behind their sunglasses. The women in the party leaned back in their chairs to consider me. I felt exposed, futile, and wanted only to be back at my table.

(243-4)
Having acted, he expects ‘some gesture, some sign of approval’ from his Egyptian driver, but ‘I couldn’t tell what he thought. He was as correct as before, he looked as bored’ (244).

Critical reactions to the narrator’s intervention have ranged from Fawzia Mustafa’s interpretation of it as a ‘parable of despair’ at the ‘almost immediate erasure of the narrator’s intervention’ (119), to Morris’s rather grandiose, ‘seldom can we find a novelist so openly linking arms with his protagonists nor converting poetic justice into a current truth about the human condition’ (104). Is it despair or solidarity, or perhaps both, that Naipaul is illustrating here? His final remarks put the whole book into context. The penultimate paragraph refers to an ancient Egyptian tomb painting depicting ‘the pleasures of that life’ (241), speculating on the purity of that time; but ‘it was hard to believe that there had ever been such innocence’ (246). Rob Nixon writes, ‘Naipaul does not admit any remedial, purer realm outside the west in space or time and is unable to harbor dreams of an idealized organic society’ (54), implying that this is a fault, but it is in fact a strength. Chauhan writes, of Naipaul’s vision, ‘its heartlessness is but the measure of Naipaul’s honesty and of his artistic integrity. He deliberately refuses to hold out any sentimental salves’ (22-23). Naipaul himself has said:

in Africa you can get a profound refusal to acknowledge the realities of the situation; people just push aside the real problems as if they had all been settled. As though the whole history of human deficiencies was entirely explained by an interlude of oppression and prejudice, which have now been removed; any remaining criticism being merely recurrence of prejudice and therefore to be dismissed. (Rowe-Evans 26)

He sees colonialism as an example of a fundamental aspect of the human condition, rather than something which has occurred within the past few
centuries, which is now in its final stages, and after which the world will return to some ‘purer realm’. Rothfork criticises him for refusing ‘to accept the Marxist position that the corrupt colonial system must be destroyed. … Naipaul refuses to accept political solutions, even though he himself has described the political causes of injustice and tragedy in colonialism’ (187).

This is, in fact, Naipaul’s point. Colonialism is unjust and has tragic consequences, but it does not follow that he should accept ‘the Marxist position’ that destroying it will immediately and automatically lead to Utopia, and he is ‘not interested in attributing fault’ (Michener 64). He sees the ‘true forces of history’ as ‘dreams, lies, lusts, and rages’ (Schiff 150), and these are decidedly not specific to any one civilisation. He explains his predilection for ‘Western civilisation’ to an interviewer:

Growing up in Trinidad, Naipaul came to appreciate that beyond his rooted-in-the-past family and his little island, there was something broader, a ‘universal civilization’ based on individualism, personal responsibility and the right to pursue one’s own vocation. While we loosely call this ‘Western’ civilization, it has that universal application that the older cultures lacked. …

While the universal civilization flourished in the West, it is not specifically European or Anglo-Saxon. Naipaul: ‘We all in a way – even when we violate the rules – know that there are certain good ideas of public behavior. We can’t torture people; people have human rights; people must have access to the rule of law. This is comparatively new to have these principles honored across the globe. (Morais)

And as to being prejudiced, he does not deny it. He says, ‘for works to last, they must have a certain clear-sightedness. And to achieve that, one perhaps needs a few prejudices’ (Hardwick 47). He will not, in a bogus attempt at objectivity, suppress his own point of view, and it has become more and more important to him, in the years since In a Free State, that his narrators are scrupulously himself.
The form of this work allows Naipaul to give a number of examples of ‘casualties of freedom’ (8) (as he describes Egyptian Greek refugees on the steamer) and they are not always the examples the reader might expect. He shows that the English are not immune to suffering from the new freedoms of the postcolonial world along with the Indians, Egyptians, West Indians and Africans of the nations they formerly subjected. The subjection, also, is only part of the story. He said, talking to Ian Hamilton in 1971,

one of the things that struck me, and has struck me for many years, is that even at the height of imperial power, even when people make the most fantastic assumptions about their place in the world, they still have these enormous personal problems, problems that can make their power seem meaningless to them, make it merely the background to their own anguish. (20)

Reading these stories in sequence, one is reminded constantly of the variety of resonances in the word ‘free’ – and one realises that freedom is always relative, and freedom from one subjection will, almost inevitably, lead to another.

Santosh, in Washington, is ‘a free man’;

I could do anything I wanted. I could, if it were possible for me to turn back, go to the apartment and beg my old employer for forgiveness. I could if it were possible for me to become again what I once was, go to the police and say, ‘I am an illegal immigrant here. Please deport me to Bombay.’ I could run away, hang myself, surrender, confess, hide. It didn’t matter what I did, because I was alone. And I didn’t know what I wanted to do. It was like the time when I felt my senses revive and I wanted to go out and enjoy and I found there was nothing to enjoy. (54-5)

‘Freedom’ for Dayo’s brother comes when he discovers Dayo is not studying but hanging aimlessly around London:

I have nowhere to go and I walk now, like Dayo, where the tourists walk. The roti-shop: that noose I put my neck in. I think how nice it would be if I could just leave it, leave it just like that. Let the curry from yesterday go stale and rotten and turn red like poison, let the dust fall from the ceiling and settle. Take Dayo home before he get foolish …
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The life is over. I am like a man who is giving up. I come with nothing. I have nothing. I will leave with nothing.

All afternoon as I walk I feel like a free man. I scorn everything I see, and when I tire myself out with walking, and the afternoon gone, I still scorn. I scorn the bus, the conductor, the street. (95-6)

It is this freedom – the feeling of release from all responsibilities – which gives him the courage and desperation to turn on his tormentors in the roti-shop, and leads to the greater bondage he is now subject to. And the ‘free state’ in the title story is full of captives – imprisoned by their ‘liberal’ beliefs, like Bobby, or their knee-jerk ‘settler’ attitudes, like Linda and the Colonel; or by the exigencies of civil conflict, like the Africans in their newly independent, ‘liberated’ states. Freedom as a political concept is virtually meaningless, as is its related term ‘liberalism’; Naipaul’s ‘free state’ is more dangerous, implying lostness, irresponsibility and desperation.

Hughes writes,

his vision of disorder and decline has often been considered a kind of malice, especially by those subjects of past or passing empires, British or American, French or even Belgian, who have felt themselves mocked; or by believers who find themselves attacked as superstitious. But that overlooks the obsessed origins and literary development of his visions. (V.S. Naipaul 10-11)

In the next chapter, I consider a work which places in the foreground the process of Naipaul’s construction of himself as a writer, precisely situated in his own historical and geographical surroundings.

1Cudjoe, nevertheless, calls ‘One out of Many’ ‘an intensely racist story’, based on Santosh’s attitudes to African Americans! (146).
Chapter Sixteen

A Definition of the Writing Self: *The Enigma of Arrival*

In an article published a year after finishing *The Enigma of Arrival*, a book in itself concerned in a large part with the process of its own creation, Naipaul refers to James Joyce’s difficulty with the English language – his feeling that it did not belong to him. He goes on to say:

the James Joyce point about language is not the one I am making. I never felt that problem with the English language – language as language. The point that worried me was one of vocabulary, of the differing meanings or associations of words. *Garden, house, plantation, gardener, estate*: these words mean one thing in England and mean something quite different to a man from Trinidad, an agricultural colony, a colony settled for the purpose of plantation agriculture. How, then, could I write honestly or fairly if the very words I used, with private meanings for me, were yet for the reader outside shot through with the associations of the older literature? I felt that truly to render what I saw, I had to define myself as writer or narrator; I had to reinterpret things … and after two years’ work, I have just finished a book in which at last, as I think, I have managed to integrate this business of reinterpreting with my narrative.

My aim was truth, truth to a particular experience, containing a definition of the writing self. (‘On Being a Writer’)

Finding his own voice is only a part of this almost obsessive interest in language in this novel. Some of this interest is explicit, some is not, but the writing constantly draws attention to itself, in many different ways. The novel starts with literal obscurity: ‘For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was’ (11). As his time in the valley passes, he learns to see where he is, to understand and interpret, visually and verbally, and the two modes are inextricably linked:

I had slowly learned the names of shrubs and trees. That knowledge, helping me visually to disentangle one plant from another in a mass of vegetation, quickly becoming more than a knowledge of names, had added to my appreciation. It was like learning a language, after living among its sounds. (299-300)
When he first arrives at the cottage in Wiltshire, his attitude is still – at least in the hindsight of the rhetorical position of the novel – structured by his knowledge of English language and literature; his ‘half-English half-education’ (221). He knows facts about the meanings of geographical names that the local people would probably not know – words are ‘shot through with associations of an older literature’ that, in this case, he knows and they do not. He knows that “‘avon” originally meant only river’ (12) and ‘that both elements of Waldenshaw – the name of the village and the manor in whose grounds I was – I knew that both “walden” and “shaw” meant wood’ (13). But even his theoretical knowledge is incomplete: it takes some time before he is ‘able to think of the flat wet fields with ditches as “water meadows” or “wet meadows”, and the low smooth hills in the background, beyond the river, as “downs”’ (11). This passage, from the second paragraph of the novel, gives prominence to Naipaul’s preoccupation with language and the part it plays in perception which, together with change, decay, flux, death and the passage of time, are deep themes in this novel.

His urge to explain and clarify differences in the meaning of words, and also social concepts, is pervasive. A discussion of the words ‘garden’ and ‘gardener’, for example, occupy several pages in the novel, to explain why the Waldenshaw gardener, Pitton, ‘wasn’t my idea of a gardener’ (203). A potted history of gardening in Trinidad follows, emphasising the low status of gardeners, an occupation for unskilled East Indians stranded in Trinidad after their periods of indentured labour had expired: ‘the gardener belonged to the plantation or estate past’ (205). Even his ideas of English gardeners, picked up from P.G. Wodehouse and Shakespeare, failed to prepare him for the reality of
Chapter Sixteen

Pitton, ‘the carefully dressed, paunchy, staid figure’, who ‘turned out to be only the gardener’ (206).

The very fact that words have different associations in different societies, something he was no doubt aware of when reading English books as a child, may have given Naipaul his abiding interest in words, etymologies, catachreses, local usages. He loves language; he delights in words, and his delight takes him beyond the mere urge to clarify possible misunderstandings. When he was mentally ill at Oxford in the early fifties, he says, ‘the only thing that gave me solace, which didn’t create pictures of human beings, was the intricacy of language. I lost myself in studies of the derivation of words, the design of the lettering’ (Michener 66-7). Some of the terms he introduces in Enigma are, no doubt, in common usage, like ‘water meadows’, but without any comment he calls the wide, flat way to Jack’s cottage which ‘would have been used for carts in the old days’ (13) the ‘droveway’, a term which does not appear in the Concise Oxford Dictionary: persistent research in the Oxford English Dictionary discovers that its last mentioned usage was in the Laws of Sewers, 1726. Whether in Wiltshire it is still in common use is not mentioned in the novel: none of the other characters uses the word, but then the novel does not contain very much dialogue. Another example is the word ‘accidia’, in the form Naipaul uses it. In the Concise Oxford it occurs as ‘acedia’ or ‘accidie’, and only in the OED is it listed as a headword in the original medieval Latin form which Naipaul uses. His use of the word for his landlord’s malaise, also, seems to be his own interpretation. He expresses his sorrow at Jack’s illness and impending death in an oddly linguistic way, as well: ‘His face was waxen. I knew the word, from books. But never till now,
seeing what it described on a white face, had I truly understood the word’ (43). This has the effect of quietly reminding the reader of Naipaul’s racial difference, the colour of his own face, the alien appearance of this erudite man, fully in control of the language of England, enjoying it and playing with its sounds and associations.

The delight he expresses when he learns a new usage could perhaps be seen as pedantry. His novel is peopled with Dogberries and Mrs Malaprops, and sometimes he does appear to be mocking them, affectionately, for their linguistic ineptitude. The language of these people – hard to think of them as fictional characters, although that is the correct way to view them – is as crucial to his portrayal of them as their dress and their habits and their behaviour *in extremis*. Pitton, especially, is unwittingly a mine of fascinating linguistic information, and is sometimes embarrassed by the narrator’s interest in his expressions; in the ‘new determinative use of the preposition “in’” in the phrase ‘to pick the pears *in* – I liked that *in*. I played with it, repeated it’ (60); and the ‘tying’ of the saw in the wet wood they were cutting together: ‘I liked the word. I had never heard it before; but it was suggestive and felt right. Pitton became embarrassed’ (238). Best of all, Naipaul loves the word ‘refuge’, meaning refuse or rubbish.

Refuse, refuge: two separate, unrelated words. But ‘refuge’, which Pitton used for ‘refuse’, did in the most remarkable way contain both words. Pitton’s ‘refuge’ not only stood for ‘refuse’; but had the additional idea or association, not at all inappropriate, of asylum, sanctuary, hiding, almost hide-and-seek, of things kept decently out of sight and mind. (182)

He is further enchanted to find that the word is used in a similar way, to mean rubbish collection, by several others in the valley. (It is, in fact, a usage listed
in the *OED* as obsolete or dialectal.) Despite his idiosyncratic, or dialectal, usages and vocabulary, however, Pitton is ‘without the gift of words. They [he and his wife] had trouble finding words for what they had to say, so it seemed that they had very little to say’ (207). Bray, the car hire man, is different. He is a confident talker, with his own set of catachrestic usages: “‘arrogant’ was primarily Bray’s version of “ignorant”, but it also had the meaning of “arrogant”, and this word, when used by Bray, with its two meanings and aggressive sound, was very strong’ (217). And “‘You know me,” he would say. “I’m a down-and-out Tory.” Running together “downright” and “out-and-out”’ (221). Old Mr Phillips, a gentle, sociable man, talks of ‘old wise tales’ (267). These people, in the heart of the English countryside, use English just as idiosyncratically as the Trinidadians among whom Naipaul grew up, and cannot aspire to the correctness and depth of knowledge of this alien in their midst, despite his ‘half-education’.

He is puzzled but sympathetic about people without ‘the gift of words’. Much as he loves words himself, he is conscious of the dangers of a glib tongue: in *The Mimic Men* Sandra has ‘the gift of the phrase’, and it lets ‘simple words harden into settled judgements and attitudes’ (65), making life in the tiny society of Isabella unpleasant for herself and others. But to be entirely without this gift is unimaginable. The new dairyman and his wife arrive in the valley, from an unnamed ‘rough time in a town somewhere’:

What terrors must there have been in the town for them! How could people like these, without words to put to their emotions and passions, manage? They could, at best, only suffer dumbly. Their pains and humiliations would work themselves out in their characters alone: like evil spirits possessing a body, so that the body itself might appear innocent of what it did. (36)
Often, though, those without the gift of words appear to greater advantage than those who use language confidently, like Bray, or the central heating contractor, Michael Allen, who was ‘a great boaster … in the short time we spoke he boasted about many things, he asked me nothing about myself’ (68). In contrast, the old farm workers, ‘after the solitude of their tractor cabs and the downs, were invariably ready for a wave and a smile. It was the limit of communication; there was really nothing to add to the wave, the smile, the human acknowledgement’ (31). Even when he meets Jack face to face, they ‘looked at each other, examined each other, made noises rather than talked’ (32). This is the way of the older generation of farm workers – few words or none, expressing much. Jack’s father-in-law, upon his only meeting with the narrator, manages only three words: ‘Dogs worry pheasants’, but into that gnomic utterance, he imparts a little impulse of authority, even bullying, with someone who was a stranger. … But it was the briefest impulse in the old man; and perhaps it was also a social impulse, a wish to exchange words with someone new, a wish to add one more human being to the tally of human beings he had encountered. (26)

No such impulses are to be witnessed when the farm is modernised. The new farm workers, driving to the new ‘milking parlour in brightly-coloured cars’ (54) are ‘tense young men, conscious of their style, their jeans and shirts, their moustaches and cars’ (55), without the ‘dumb friendliness’ (57) of the old farm workers. When addressed, one of these young men ‘seemed bemused … He mumbled something which I couldn’t understand – all his style breaking down at this moment of speech’ (56).
The semantics of the styles of dress, the vanities, of the characters is as revealing as their speech. He dwells in some detail on Bray’s mode of dress as a car hire man: the various combinations of peaked cap and cardigan:

A cardigan can be unbuttoned and buttoned in many ways; it can suggest formality, casualness, indifference … and the peaked cap – it could be set at many different angles: it could express regard or disregard … It would have been harder for him without the cap; he would have had to find words, set his face in different ways. … The peaked cap, with its many angles, together with the various ways of wearing the cardigan, enabled Bray to make (and make clear) a whole range of subtle judgements. (222-223)

But styles of dress, like those of Brenda and Les, can show a more damaging self-obsession, and the narrator sees in their self-conscious vanities the symptoms, if not the seeds, of their tragedy. Brenda returns from her brief affair with the central heating man, to Les, whom she taunts – ‘and it was hard not to feel that she didn’t have some idea of what she was provoking’ (71) – into stabbing her to death. And here is a question which, once again, sets the narrator at a distance from the society he inhabits – his feeling that this passion does not befit people who are servants:

It took some understanding, that people like Brenda and Les, who were so passionate, so concerned with their individuality, their style, the quality of their skin and hair, it took some understanding that people who were so proud and flaunting in one way should be prepared in another corner of their hearts or souls or minds to go down several notches and be servants. … Within that condition (which should have neutered them) all their passions were played out. (64)

A startling observation; it is, however, immediately qualified: ‘But that might have been my own special prejudice, my own raw nerves. I came from a colony, once a plantation society, where servitude was a more desperate condition’ (64). ‘Servant’ is another word he might have added to his list of words that ‘mean something quite different to a man from Trinidad’ (‘On
Being a Writer’), and not only the word, but its application to the situation.
The Phillipses and Les and Brenda would not use the word to describe themselves, although Bray shares the narrator’s prejudice: ‘his vocation was really to be a free man, not to be what his father had been, a man “in service”, a servant’ (219). For both men, this is a prejudice carried like a burden from a childhood hurt.

Sometimes the narrator’s use of figurative language can be startling as well. He describes, for example, Jack’s father-in-law’s routine as ‘animal-like’: ‘Like a rat, he seemed to have a “run”’ (26); but just a few pages later he includes himself and others in his animal metaphor, describing ‘the [farm] manager’s run, almost circular …’ which was ‘also Jack’s; and it was partly mine’ (30). The detachment with which he describes others he here, and elsewhere from time to time, extends to his younger self.

Some of the people he describes are foreign to him in every way, and he observes them with a detached, if compassionate, interest. Others he has, to a greater or lesser extent, fellow-feelings for. He can enter into Bray’s hurt about servitude in his past. The landlord also seems a kindred spirit:

coming to the manor at a time of disappointment and wounding, I felt an immense sympathy for my landlord, who, starting at the other end of the world, now wished to hide, like me. I felt a kinship with him. … I never thought his seclusion strange. It was what I wanted for myself at that time. (174)

He compares stages of his own life with those of his landlord’s, noting that ‘in 1949 or 1950 – 1950 being the year I had left my own home island … my landlord had withdrawn from the world’ (197). The landlord, too, is or was an artist of sorts, claiming a kinship with the narrator by sending copies of his poems and drawings as gifts, via Mrs Phillips, although they never actually
meet. More worrying to the narrator is Alan, the landlord’s cousin, whom he gets to know well. Alan is in himself a cautionary tale – a warning of what can happen to an artist without the self-discipline, or drive, to produce work of any significance. He describes

Alan the writer, the man with the childhood, the man with the sensibility. I understood this idea of the writer because it was so like my own when I had first come to England. … And that writer’s personality of Alan’s was partly genuine, and no more fraudulent than my own character, my idea of myself as a writer, had been in 1950. (259)

But Alan, unlike Naipaul, could produce

no novel or autobiographical novel (setting the record straight, showing the truth behind the shiny bright clothes and the clowning manner); no critical study of contemporary literature (which he sometimes spoke about); no Isherwood-like book about post-war Germany, which he spoke about at other times. (259)

He lets it be known he is making notes: his love of language and idiosyncratic behaviour is like the narrator’s. He reports with glee the landlord’s use of the expression ‘chafing dish’ (262), and his entertaining Pitton the gardener with pink champagne. The narrator is touched by his flattery: ‘It was hard, once Alan had told you he was making “notes” about you, to ignore him, hard not to start acting up (even like my landlord) to an intelligent, friendly man who might indeed be making notes about all the things you were saying’ (262).

Alan’s speech is as flamboyant as his dress. He refers to the landlord’s style as that of ‘before the deluge’, and sometimes refers to Mr Phillips (whom he usually calls Stan) as ‘Phillips’ in the old style as if he were a butler or a footman. But ‘his literary approach to his experience, the self-regard that would have gone with its “frankness” (on approved topics, no doubt – homosexuality, masturbation, social climbing), perhaps hid the cause of his
incompleteness from himself’ (260). One day Alan rings the narrator, after an absence of a year, in a drunken state:

hardly able to control his words, he was seeking only to send messages of love, to flatter, to speak to me about my work.

And he was asking nothing in return. For there was, as it were, no means of getting back to the person from whom all this issued. The person that wished to buy peace from the world was beyond the reach of the world, was hardly known, it might be said, to Alan himself. It didn’t matter how much one flattered back; it didn’t matter how much love one sent back, one could never touch the true person. (263-4)

The portrayal of Alan is the most poignant feature of a book filled with poignancy. Not long after this phone call, he takes an overdose of pills and dies. ‘It was a theatrical kind of death. Theatre would not have been far from Alan’s mind that evening’ (265). Theatricality, or the feeling of being in a play or a film or a novel, forms a constant theme in Naipaul’s description of his youth – the feeling that the world of literature is ‘the real world’ (119). Alan’s tragedy is that he never manages, as Naipaul has managed, to discover himself, to enter the actual real world outside literature, despite his frankness on ‘approved topics’.

His friendship with Alan is one of the most intimate relationships the narrator has with anyone in this novel, and this is a measure of the novel’s unusual nature, which reads like a prose poem, or an essay, or an autobiographical memoir. Critics have difficulty with the categorisation of the book, some rejecting altogether its definition as a novel. Robert Royal, for example, in *National Review*, writes, ‘the narrator’s story is to all appearances a memoir of Naipaul’s life’ (50); and Cudjoe mounts a political attack: ‘his studied act of refusal/defense in calling *The Enigma of Arrival* a novel can be described as nothing more than an attempt to deflect the painful consequences
of his decision: his inability to face up to the implications of his colonial origins’ (215). Cudjoe’s reading is very selective: the novel in several ways focuses directly on the very subject of his colonial origins. Naipaul himself says,

if he had called it an autobiography … ‘I think I would be run out of town, because there’s no autobiography there – no family, no wife, no friends, no infidelities, nothing. That whole bit of life is torn out. There’s nothing about me apart from my writing.’

He does not deny, though, that ‘the writer, the observer, … is scrupulously myself. The minute other people are in the picture, that is where the fictive element comes in’ (Gussow, ‘Enigma’). In another interview, he said,

I had to identify my narrator, my seeing eye, my feeling person. I didn’t want to invent a character and give him a bogus adventure to set him there [in the English countryside]. I thought I should make the writer be myself – let that be true and within that set the fictional composite picture because you can’t use real people to hang philosophical ideas about flux and change. (Niven 163)

So all the people of the novel, who seem to have such independent existences, are to be regarded as fictional. The characters are viewed from a distance: their actions, their comings and goings, their deaths and loves, all occur off-stage, as it were. The illusion of reality in this novel is, oddly, heightened by the scrupulous limitation of the narrator’s point of view. Everything that he finds out about other characters comes to him either via his own observation and speculation, or as hearsay through one of his informants – Bray, Mrs Phillips, Alan, Jack’s wife. The indeterminacy belongs to the narrator as well as the reader: any discussion of events outside his knowledge is clearly identified as speculation, like his contemplation of Brenda’s murder:

And it was hard not to feel that she didn’t have some idea of what she was provoking. And how, having started on the job of destruction – he had used a kitchen knife – having started on that, from which very
quickly there was no turning back, however much in a corner of his mind he might have been wishing it all undone, healed again, how he must have struck, until the madness and the life was over! All in that little thatched cottage with the ruined garden. (71)

Or his detailed imagining of the meeting between Bray and his ‘fancy woman’, in the setting of a ‘bed-and-breakfast place … run by a man supplementing his poor income from his original business, a picture-framing-junkshop-antique shop’ (277). The very expansive, digressive nature of the narrative is unlike a novel. People who hardly play a part in any action are described in some detail, like ‘the neat, well-dressed, anxious man who came to deal with the plague of mice’ (183), who is given a half a page, provides another example of the usage of the word ‘refuge’, and is never mentioned again – once again, his language being one of the most significant things about him. Brenda’s sister, too, coming to ‘collect Brenda’s things’ (72), is treated in the way a real person would be treated in a memoir of someone linguistically perceptive. She describes her father’s wartime dealings with ‘Ministry of Defence’, and the narrator comments, ‘I didn’t think she was romancing. Her use of the words “Ministry of Defence” without the definite article – the the that the average person would have wanted to add; was convincing’ (74). In a more conventional fiction, there would be no need for the narrator – or the author – to comment on the verisimilitude of the character’s vocabulary. The novel is a brilliant piece of fictional writing in its convincing, because so incomplete, portrayals of people who seem utterly real, and the muted reportage of the events, major and minor, in their lives. It is ultimately unprofitable, however seductive it might be, to try to sift the fiction from the reality. It is certainly not the point of the novel.
Naipaul writes slowly, and instructs his audience to read slowly:

‘You’ve got to rest after reading twenty good pages. You’ve got to stop and think. I read very slowly. It’s very natural. My paragraphs are very rich – they have to be read. Many things are happening in the paragraph. If you miss a paragraph – if you miss a page – it’s hard to get back into it’ (Schiff 149). He denounces conscious style, smoothness, and rhythm in prose, believing that these attributes lead to ‘the killing of sense’ (Schiff 149).

It is undeniable that there is a Naipaul style, although it varies from book to book; there is a dryness, a plainness, a hesitation to use adverbs, adjectives, or superlatives; there is sometimes a slightly unusual usage, or an archaic word; there is frequent repetition and echoing of words and phrases; and sometimes a ruminative exclamation. In *Enigma* there is a particular emphasis on repetition. Levy has written perceptively on the language of this work (in a way that sometimes echoes Naipaul’s discussion of the language of his characters). She draws attention to the ‘multiple effects’ of the repetitions within a paragraph, and the use of repeated nouns where pronouns might be expected. To her, for one thing,

they indicate a tendency towards a more concrete, and hence, in developmental terms, a more primitive level of expression. For another, they create a process of defamiliarization, a drawing attention to the sound of the word that creates a split between the apprehension of the objects and the language used. (111)

The repetitions give a rhetorical force – and, as he surely must realise, a rhythm – to the prose; but to break the trance this might produce in the reader, he will often digress in mid-sentence, referring to something distantly related to the theme in hand, which can result in very long, complex sentences. The effect is to slow down the reading, to force the reader to go back, let the sense sink in.
Often these digressions will refer to something already mentioned; occasionally they foreshadow something to come. He describes, for example, the gardens of the row of cottages of which Jack’s forms part: ‘Technically, the gardens were at the front of the cottages. In fact, by long use, the back of the cottages had become the front; and the front gardens had really become back gardens’ (21). Thereafter, when he mentions Jack’s garden, he will say, ‘the garden at the front (or back) of his cottage’ (31), or ‘at the back of his cottage – the back being where the true front now was’ (33), or ‘the back (really the front)’ (47). The roses that Mrs Phillips cut ‘right back’ (201) and which never bloomed again are mentioned several times, as are the various ways of storing hay from the different eras of the farm, and ‘the ancient Roman villa at Chedworth in Gloucestershire’ (242). These echoes contribute to the timeless, or cyclical, nature of the novel, especially the parts which describe the narrator’s time in Wiltshire: ‘Jack’s Garden’, ‘Ivy’, and ‘Rooks’. Part Two, ‘The Journey’, and Part Five, ‘The Ceremony of Farewell’, are more chronologically linear, while the other parts, because of the echoing and foreshadowing, the tendency to dwell on one theme, or tell one person’s story complete and then come back and tell another, have a nebulous or confused sense of time. This is in part a technique designed to emphasise considerations of the stages of human life: to see people as they change through time, rather than to show them as actors in dramatic events over which they have control. He meets the farm manager after his retirement, and is moved to contemplate: ‘How quickly his time had passed! How quickly a man’s time passed! So quickly, in fact, that it was possible within a normal span to witness, to comprehend, two or three active life-cycles in succession’ (78). But although
he describes them when he describes the encounter, these thoughts come to
him much later, he emphasises, after his time at the cottage and the manor is
over, and ‘middle age had come as abruptly to me as old age appeared to me to
have come to the old manager’ (78). The death of Jack is described early in the
novel, but ‘the way he had asserted, at the very end, the primacy not of what
was beyond life, but life itself’ (87) becomes emblematic, and his role as the
inspiration for this novel is referred to, in classic self-referential, metafictional
style, in the novel’s final sentence.

The narrator’s sense of history – where he is in his life, compared to
other people and events, as well as the relation of his lifetime to the course of
history – is constantly demonstrated by references to dates and inscriptions on
buildings, and the rhetoric of architecture itself. He notices makers’ names on
the new barn, on the shop blinds in London in 1950, the ‘ordinary little houses,
two or three of which carried – their only fanciful touch – the elaborate
monogram of the owner or builder or designer, with the date, which was,
surprisingly, a date from the war: 1944’ (14). He notes the sign outside
Amesbury which ‘celebrated the antiquity of the town: with a coat of arms and
a date, 979 A.D’ (50). He discusses the churches of the district: the Gothic
church with ‘a primitive painting of Doomsday’ (270), the former Victorian
Sunday School, the mission hut, the Wesleyan chapel, and the renovated
church near the manor:

This church was an age away from the religious anxiety of the
Doomsday painting of St Thomas’s in Salisbury: the sense of an
arbitrary world, full of terrors, where men were naked and helpless and
only God gave protection. The parish church had been renovated at the
time the great Victorian houses and manors of the region were being
built. And it was of that confident period: as much as a faith, it
celebrated a culture, a national pride, a power, men very much in control of their destinies.

... the very scantiness of the parish-church congregation ... supported the idea of an enclosed, excluding cultural celebration. (271)

This ‘celebration’ has no room for ‘Jack, who celebrated life where he lived’ (272), or Mr Phillips or Bray (or, presumably, Naipaul himself). These people, whom he sees as English ‘types’ when he first comes to the manor, he can now see do not belong to the smug security of English country life. Even the Infirmary which he enters for the first time, when serious illness strikes, ten years after he arrives, is described, with its ‘elegant Georgian letters ... stating the voluntary nature of the Infirmary and giving the date, 1767’ (298). Along with this attention to dates and buildings, and their place in history, he cultivates vagueness in quantifying his time at the manor cottage. It is clear that he spent ten years there, and that he arrived there about twenty years after his arrival in England in 1950. But within that stretch of years, time seems elastic, and although it may be possible to construct a chronology for the novel’s events during those ten years, the narrative deliberately discourages such attempts. It parallels the narrator’s difficulty dating events after the memorable first year:

Time altered for me. At first, as in childhood, it had stretched. The first spring had contained so much that was clear and sharp – the moss rose, the single blue iris, the peonies under my window. I had waited for the year to repeat. Then memories began to be jumbled; time began to race; the years began to stack together; it began to be hard for me to date things. (269)

Distances are rarely given exactly, or even quantities: ‘two or three houses’ (14), the ‘very big silage pit’ (57), the ‘very wide’ droveway (26). In Part Five, this reluctance to date events disappears, and we are encouraged to put a time scale against events, starting with ‘a journalistic assignment ... in August
1984’ (309). Itineraries of the travels of Naipaul and his brother, taking them to and from Trinidad on the occasion of their sister’s death, are given in some detail. With Part Five, the healing of the time in Wiltshire is completed, and it is time to re-enter the real world; not the ‘real world’ of literature, but the real world where close relatives die, where planes must be caught, arrangements made, schedules adhered to. The time in Wiltshire which is the true subject of the novel is to be considered whole, not broken down into quantities or time spans: just a magical decade of healing, for the narrator, and a procession of people to be observed, to exemplify ‘philosophical ideas about flux and change’ (Niven 163). His place in this world, which at the time he arrives seems ‘perfection’, he recognises, is a by-product of the empire, and cannot last, but he does not necessarily see this as a disadvantage to himself, compared to the ‘privilege’ of his landlord:

Whatever my spiritual state at the moment of arrival, I knew I would have to save myself and look for health; I knew I would have to act at some time. His privilege – his house, his staff, his income, the acres he could look down at every day and know to be his – this privilege could press him down into himself, into non-doing and nullity. (175)

His idea of his landlord is valuable to him, and he is nervous of undoing the magic of the place. If I had seen my landlord, heard his voice, heard his conversation, seen his face and expression, been constrained to make conversation back, to be polite, the impression would have been ineffaceable. He would have been endowed with a ‘character’, with vanities, irritations, absurdities; and this would have led me to make judgements – the judgements that, undoing acceptance, can also undo a relationship. (175)

This distance is somehow contained in his failure ever to use his name, although the term he always uses, ‘my landlord’, has an oddly intimate, proprietary ring. It is, perhaps, that ‘my landlord’ in the novel is just that – the concept the narrator has of the man, which belongs to him alone, and which he
does not want to destroy by meeting and getting to know the real man in the manor. The narrator himself never reveals his own name. The letter from Angela, his 1950 boarding house friend, is addressed to ‘Victor’, because this was the English name she had given him when they first met, his ‘Hindi or Sanskrit name [being] too hard for her’ (159). Since the narrator is so little an actor in the Wiltshire sections of the narrative, it never happens that another character speaks his name in dialogue, although Pitton once, in Salisbury, ‘came up behind me and called me by my name’ (254). The assumption is there to be made, therefore, that the narrator can be identified with Naipaul himself – even without the external evidence he has given of this intention. His presence in the novel is pervasive, and this provides a context for his judgements. The overall effect is of an eye that sees without condemning, but judgements, discriminations, even criticism, are certainly not absent. It is more that, seeing so clearly the frame with which the narrative is surrounded, the angle from which the narrator is seeing, it is not possible for the reader to interpret his judgements as anything but provisional. For example, when Bray, the car-hire man, begins to talk of religion,

it crept up on me, the talk. I wasn’t aware of how seriously he was speaking when he spoke of the ‘the good book’. I barely took it in, heard it simply as part of his chattering everyday irony. I sat beside him in his car, had a sideways glimpse of his peaked cap and the slope and slit of his eyes, eyes squinting at the road. The squint-and-slit, the set of his face, and what I knew of his temperament led me to feel that he was joking. … As soon as I understood that he was speaking in earnest, my vision of him changed. In the same features, the same way of speaking. I saw not the glibness of his cynicism but personal feeling and, soon, passion. (272)

The narrator, also, makes these judgements only in the sense that he measures people’s behaviour against his own explicitly personal, idiosyncratic value
system, then attempts to understand, compassionately, with a deep acceptance, how those values differ. In describing his relations with other characters in the novel the narrator is detached, an observer rather than an actor, even when he is personally involved. One friendship ends when Pitton, have lost his job as gardener at the manor, manages after a difficult period to begin a new life in Salisbury:

Pitton, in this last decade of active life, grew out of what he had been. He got to know more people, at work, and on the council estate where he lived. Where he had feared anonymity, he found community and a little strength. … Gradually he stopped acknowledging me from the laundry van. One day in Salisbury, in that pedestrian shopping street where he had tried to fill me with his own panic, one day he saw me. And then – the new man – he didn’t ‘see’ me. (255)

There is no reference to the pain this snub may have given to the narrator; the context is wholly that of Pitton’s recovery from a difficult period, his becoming a ‘new man’.

*The Enigma of Arrival* is about flux and decay, change, life cycles, and death; but it is also a meditation, an exercise, even a treatise, on language. Everything about it is artful, and our attention is constantly drawn to the fact.

Flouting Iser’s theory that ‘the literary text is characterized by the fact that it does not state its intention’ (‘Indeterminacy’ 43), Naipaul is happy to trace the development of his novel in Part 5:

I had thought for years about a book like *The Enigma of Arrival*. … The fantasy and the ancient-world setting had been dropped. The story had becomes more personal: my journey, the writer’s journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing, rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end.

My theme, the narrative to carry it, my characters – for some years I felt they were sitting on my shoulder, waiting to declare themselves and to possess me. But it was only out of this new
awareness of death that I began at last to write. Death was the motif; it had perhaps been the motif all along. (309)

Death is not an oppressive motif, but one which shows ‘life and man as the mystery’ (318), typified by the narrator’s imputation to Jack of an assertion, ‘at the very end, the primacy not of what was beyond life, but life itself’ (87).

Perhaps for Jack – with his ‘intellectual backwardness, his purely physical nature’ (211) – wordless happiness is possible, but for Naipaul, the joy of words is fundamental. Talking of his father, he said,

he was unhappy much of the time. But he had a tremendous gift for joy which I share. Happiness is a kind of passive animal state, isn’t it? Whereas joy is a positive sensation of delight in a particular thing – a joke, another person, a meal – and you can have it in the middle of deep gloom. (Michener 66)

In his best writing, whatever its subject, delight in words and language is one of Naipaul’s most attractive characteristics. He describes how, when writing *A House for Mr Biswas*, ‘the right words seemed to dance above my head; I plucked them down at will’ (‘Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*’ 23), and a similar assurance and ease characterises *The Enigma of Arrival*. *Memento mori* this book may be, but its gloom is suffused with the unquenchable joy in words that Naipaul evinces on every page; ‘that reawakened delight in language’ (310) which came with the acknowledgement of the experience which prompted the writing of the book. But the narrator of *Enigma*, who seems so transparently the author, is, of course, a creature made only of language. Hughes notes that ‘Naipaul’s “writing self” is a created or self-fashioned figure, and as such is in great part already deconstructed. This self is at once the origin of autobiographical discourse *and* the target of its referential
use of language’ (‘Tropics of Candor’ 210). John Bayley, in his review of the novel, also perceives a duality:

To such a writer as Naipaul, for the purpose of understanding himself and others, and for the purposes of fiction, it is clearly necessary to have a deep and imaginative sense of the dual nature of individuals, their existence in two worlds, both in different ways precarious. Naipaul thoroughly understands the romance of himself … the inner saga of himself and his destiny which each person secretly carries alongside the physical circumstances of his existence. His own sense of himself comes out in this book with a gentle, meticulous candor, wholly absorbing and illuminating. (3)

And putting this self in the foreground, focalising the narrative almost pedantically through it, is an ethical strategy designed to provide the context for his own vision. As Peggy Nightingale says,

the goal of all Naipaul’s writing, which arises from his personal need to explain his own dislocation and to triumph over its debilitating effects, is to order experience in such a way that readers discern the elements of fantasy which distort perception and understanding; (237)

and it is in The Enigma of Arrival that he has most perfectly achieved this goal.

John Bayley says, ‘no other writer today could produce anything like it’ (3), and this is not an empty truism but a recognition of the very essence of this novel.
Chapter Seventeen

V.S. Naipaul: Conclusion

Good writing, according to Naipaul, should be unexpected, unstable, and not entirely respectable. It must have a moral sense, while avoiding political and social simplifications, but should be fun to read. Above all, it should show the writer’s ‘whole response to the world’ (Rowe-Evans 29) honestly and with clarity, not hiding behind a false persona or consciously beautiful prose; and the content should be matched by the form which expresses it most clearly, without any regard for formal categories such as ‘novel’ or ‘essay’. The extent to which he has succeeded can be seen in a comment like that of Nan Doerksen: ‘perhaps where Naipaul’s genius lies in his ability to take an existing literary genre, or idea, and bend it to his own peculiar vision, finally creating something that is definitively his own as Shakespeare did’ (113).

Naipaul has retold the narrative of his own career many times: the early difficulties, the breakthroughs, the disappointments, the times of healing, the journeys and arrivals, the fear and the panic which have compelled him to keep going. His life as a writer has become his subject, and the writing self has become foregrounded to the extent that there is now no doubt that one is reading a subjective view of the world, sometimes tactless, never free from prejudice, but always candid and unblinking: the view of ‘an extraordinarily sensitive and extraordinarily self-conscious man who has chosen to travel through the chaotic, cruel, and yet elusive territory of darkness with the hope that he might, at some future time, triumph over it’ (Padhi 465); abraded by the world into creating patterns in his writing to explain it. Hughes notes that ‘the
reversion to overgrown and savage life of what was once trained and tamed has a special horror for Naipaul' (V. S. Naipaul 22): in *The Enigma of Arrival* he says he overcomes this horror by ‘meeting distress half-way’ and holding ‘on to the idea of a world in flux’ (53).

The need he has felt to make his own career and find the forms which best express ‘the material that possesses’ him (Burn 4) means that, despite a lack of overt ‘structural deformations’ (Hardwick 46), his work has always been idiosyncratic and has become more so throughout his career. The form of the early works is basically that of the novel or short story, but even so, *Miguel Street*, the first work he was able to sell for publication, was not published straight away because ‘the publisher required something less unconventional in form first, something more recognizable by the trade as a novel’ (*A Way in the World* 88). It is a series of linked short stories about characters living in a Port of Spain street, based on his childhood observations. The narrator is a boy who does well at school and in the end leaves Trinidad to study overseas; he is thus the prototype for a long line of Naipaul-like narrators which resumed, first with his travel writing, and later with parts of *In a Free State*, and came to full novelistic realisation in *The Enigma of Arrival*. In the early books it is not so much the form but the vision that is unique; the vision which never romanticises its subjects and finds in them a source of spontaneous comedy. His writing is certainly unexpected, and in unexpected ways. In *A House for Mr Biswas* he deliberately resists surprise and suspense in the narrative line, sketching the broad lines of Mr Biswas’ life in the first few pages of the novel, and beginning Part Two with the statement: ‘To the city of Port of Spain, where with one short break he was to spend the rest of his life, and where at
Sikkim Street he was to die fifteen years later, Mr Biswas came by accident’ (307). The unexpectedness resides in observations of relations between characters, such as the unsentimental but eventually respectful partnership of Mr Biswas and Shama, or the changed dynamics of the marriage of Chinta and Govind when the wife-beating began: ‘Her beatings gave Chinta a matriarchal dignity and, curiously, gained her a respect she had never had before’ (461); or in Mr Biswas’ own idiosyncratic characterisations. He has the impression, for example, whenever he sees his cousin Jagdat, that he ‘had just come from a funeral’. Sober, or tearful, or weighed down with grief, the reader might presume, but it continues:

Not only was his manner breezy; there was also his dress, which had never varied for many years: black shoes, black socks, dark blue serge trousers with a black leather belt, white shirt cuffs turned up above the wrist, and a gaudy tie: so that it seemed he had come back from a funeral, taken off his coat, undone his cuffs, replaced his black tie, and was generally making up for an afternoon of solemnity. (249)

This passage perfectly exemplifies Christopher Hope’s observation (quoted by Mel Gussow) that ‘his writing is always unexpected, and it’s never entirely respectable’ (‘V.S. Naipaul’ 29). It is not events that are unexpected, it is the reactions to them, the impulse to look below the surface to something that lies beneath, refusing to be content with political or social analyses which encourage simple answers. As his career progressed, Naipaul started to incorporate some of the unexpectedness into the form of his books. *In a Free State*, the first of his fictions to make clear formal innovations while still being called a novel, is in five sections, the central three not linked to the Prologue and Epilogue or each other by any continuities of character or setting; and the beginning of each part gives the reader a slight, unexpected jolt. *The Enigma of Arrival* once again has unexpectedness embedded in the narrative, in the
characterisations and observations, but also in its form and its denial of the reader’s expectations of something resembling a plot. Naipaul is, in his distrust of plots, an example of Brooks’ point about twentieth century writers’ ‘pervasive suspicion that plot falsifies more subtle kinds of interconnectedness’, but if plot is, as Brooks has defined it, ‘a structuring operation deployed by narratives, or activated in the reading of narratives: … the logic and syntax of those meanings that develop only through sequence and succession’, then it follows that Naipaul, like all writers, ‘cannot ultimately do without plotting insofar as [their novels] remain narrative structures that signify’ (113). Naipaul does his best to dispense with the mechanics of plot in *Enigma*, by blurring time and thus causing uncertainty in the logic of cause and effect which is basic to plotting, but he cannot avoid the emergence of plots from his narrative: the story of Brenda and Les, for example, becomes a small plot in the reader’s mind; how they come to live in the valley, become friendly with the Phillipses at the manor, enjoy a brief happy period which ends when Brenda runs away to Italy with the central heating man, who ‘kicked her out’, and on her return she taunts Les into killing her with a kitchen knife. Details are filled in later, of a phone message for Les from Brenda in Italy which was not passed on, the kind of petty accident which has large and unexpected effects, and which normal plots thrive on. The difference is that it is filtered through Naipaul’s mind – we only find out about each fact when he has learned it. But the reader is invited to reconstruct the *fabula*, as in all narrative, from the *syuzhet* constructed by the narrator from what he perceives. It is the point of view which makes *Enigma* an unusual book, rather than the lack of plot.
The need Naipaul has felt throughout his career ‘to make a pattern of one’s observations’ (Rowe-Evans 31) has led him to become an increasingly autobiographical writer. This can make him seem quite obsessed with various aspects of his life, particularly his writing career. He explains this impression when describing the origins of The Enigma of Arrival, from the period when his manuscript for The Loss of Eldorado was rejected, and he had to return to England and start again:

It was out of this grief, too deep for tears or rage … that I began to write my African story, which had come to me as a wisp of an idea in Africa three or four years before.

The African fear with which as a writer I was living day after day; the unknown Wiltshire; the cruelty of this return to England, the dread of a second failure; the mental fatigue. All of this, rolled into one, was what lay on the spirit of the man who went on the walks down to Jack’s cottage and past it. Not an observer merely, a man removed; but a man played on, worked on, by many things.

And it was out of that burden of emotions that there had come to the writer, as release, as an idyll, the ship story, the antique-quayside story, suggested by ‘The Enigma of Arrival’; an idea that came innocently, without the writer suspecting how much of his life, how many aspects of his life, that remote story … carried. But that is why certain stories or incidents suggest themselves to writers, or make an impression on them; that is why writers can appear to have obsessions. (Enigma 95-6)

He believes, as a writer, that he cannot avoid revealing himself and his preoccupations: this being so, the pretence of disinterest and objectivity is of no value and must be abandoned. As Padhi says,

it is only by easing himself into his problem – in Naipaul’s case, it is basically one of a deep-seated feeling of homelessness, an ominous sense of incompleteness at every level of human life and every point of human history – that the novelist can responsibly pursue his vocation and, at the same time, allow his sensibility to shine through his words. (464)

This has led him to what might seem the extreme of making his narrative persona, in his later work, indistinguishable from himself. However, in earlier works in which he used a third person narrator, or a fictional first person, there
was no impression of fraudulence. *A House for Mr Biswas* works superbly as a third person narrative, with the control of distance perfectly adjusted to keep the reader sympathetic but not uncritical of the main characters. *In a Free State* contains a mixture of narrative styles; and the two stories which are written in the fictional first person have an impact which could not be achieved in any other form. It is obvious that this is not the undisguised voice of Naipaul, but that does not prevent the reader from being convinced that the sensibilities dramatised in these stories are authentic. In reviewing the story ‘In a Free State’, Calder complains that, having ‘lived for three years in East Africa’ he ‘can see how Naipaul … has squeezed more intensity out this arena than can actually be found there’ (483) – precisely the point, surely, of writing imaginative fiction. However, his move towards an autobiographical narrator has precluded this type of fiction, since he remains reticent about areas of his life he would regard as private, such as his marriages and close friendships; and in his narrative persona, he cannot plausibly allow himself to indulge in the imaginative reconstruction of even fictional events. What this technique does achieve is that it makes explicit the framework of his judgements, and shows clearly that these judgements, whether expressed or implied, are his alone, not the decrees of a super-human being.

‘Compassion,’ he claims, ‘is a political word’ which ‘I take care not to use’ (Robinson 111). However, with its slight connotation of distance, it seems a more accurate term for his relation to many of the characters in his mature work than its Greek cognate, ‘sympathy’, while ‘pity’ is too condescending. In *A House for Mr Biswas* there is certainly sympathy, and sometimes empathy, for Biswas and his children – and here is an example, too, of a subjective view
which is prejudiced in order to see more clearly. It could be said that Shama, for example, could have been portrayed as more of a person in her own right: perhaps this was the motive behind Shiva Naipaul’s novel *Fireflies*, which tells the life story of a woman in some ways similar to their mother, in the same way his brother’s novel celebrates their father. But each novel makes its choice of where its sympathies will lie, and having done so, to retain clarity, must keep faith with its own vision. Mr Biswas is never presented as a moral paragon, and the negative attitudes to Shama are clearly his subjective views, even though they are narrated in the third person. *In a Free State* takes another step towards empathy, in the two shorter stories written in the first person. Moral judgement is held in abeyance in these stories: clearly no reader is expected to agree with Santosh in his views on black Americans, or with the attitude of Dayo’s brother to ‘the schoolgirls sitting young and indecent on the concrete kerb in their short blue skirts, laughing and talking loud to get people to look at them’ (95); but neither are the narrators judged for their beliefs and actions. These stories make it possible for the reader, temporarily, to empathise, genuinely to feel with, their narrators, to see English and American society from an unfamiliar point of view. With *The Enigma of Arrival*, the empathy ceases. Naipaul’s persona does not demand empathy for itself, and the most appropriate term for his attitude to the characters in the novel is compassion; in which is encompassed tolerance, understanding and a detached fascination with their affairs and way of life. In *Enigma*, everyone is interesting, and this fact is one of the things Naipaul discovers in the course of the novel, coming to realise what he failed to notice during his early years in London – displaced people from Europe, elderly people with memories of the previous century – thus
wasting valuable ‘material’. He does not withhold judgement on his characters in the later work, but he makes it clear that his judgements are provisional, and they are always tempered by his tendency to see through the eyes of others. ‘I could meet dreadful people and end up seeing the world through their eyes, seeing their frailties, their needs,’ he said to Mel Gussow in 1987 (‘Enigma’).

There is a more important truth about people than a political or economic view: as he said to Ian Hamilton, ‘even when people make the most fantastic assumptions about their place in the world, they still have these enormous personal problems’ (20).

It is a feature of the unexpectedness of his books that they constantly dramatise this kind of contradiction: the rich landlord driven into himself by his wealth in *Enigma*, the English expatriates caught in the aftermath of independence in ‘In a Free State’, Santosh, prosperous but bereft in ‘One out of Many’. It is insight into these apparently atypical situations, and exploration of personal relations which do not conform to narrative stereotypes – the refusal to romanticise or sentimentalise – which gives his writing its power to surprise, sometimes to shock, at other times delight. Hughes notes that at times his ‘poise and concision seem to contradict the disorder that is their argument’ (*V.S. Naipaul* 19): the contradictions pervade style and form as well as content.

*A House for Mr Biswas* is a comic novel. It is more, but that fact is undeniable. Most critics feel that after *Biswas* Naipaul abandoned comedy. Langran declares that ‘the comic mode has no place’ in the ‘new vision’ of *In a Free State* (135), and Pritchard believes that ‘even admirers of’ the novels of the 1970s ‘might admit that they’re not much fun to read’ (*Naipaul* 594). However, Naipaul says,
I think there is a good deal of comedy right through the work, a good deal of humour. It is contained in the actual tone of the writing, which probably comes over best during one’s reading of it. I write for the voice. … the early comedy was really hysteria, the hysteria of someone who was worried about his place as a writer and his place in the world. When one is stressed one makes a lot of jokes. … That’s not healthy. The profounder comedy comes from greater security. (Niven 164)

Describing a very early unpublished story in *A Way in the World*, he says, in criticism, that the humour depended ‘more on words than on observation or true feeling’ (27). Cleverness with words, facile wit, ‘the gift of the phrase’ which Sandra has in *The Mimic Men* (65), needed to be unlearned, in favour of ‘plain concrete statements, adding meaning to meaning in simple stages’ (*A Way in the World* 87), before he could begin to make his way as a writer. It would, of course, be fascinating to read some of his early unpublished fiction to see whether it was as unpromising and pretentious as he would have us believe: but certainly the style which he has developed by the avowed means of resisting style, rhythm, and poetry, has proved a very flexible and powerful instrument for him. As for humour, it does appear to have receded in the period between *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, but I observed, when giving a seminar paper on *In A Free State*, that quotations from the title story several times raised unexpected laughter from my listeners: the humour is embedded in the ironies of the situations characters have found themselves in, in their vanities and hypocrisies, and these are sketched economically in a few words which are easy to miss in silent reading. The dialogue, too, when spoken, betrays the characters’ comical attempts at self-promotion and self-defence.

Political ideologies have never attracted Naipaul. His distrust of ‘the corruption of causes’ (*Area of Darkness* 188) and the mind-numbing
propensities of political commitment is well-known, but he feels, too, that a
political world view would have seriously hampered him at the start of his
career. In *A Way in the World* he describes his feelings upon reading a
(fictional) article about his early work by a (fictional) West Indian
revolutionary figure:

> I had never read that kind of political literary criticism before. I was
glad that I hadn’t. Because if I had, I mightn’t have been able to write
what I had written. … I would have known too much before I had
begun to write, and there would have been less to discover with the
actual writing. (110)

Soviet writers, he says, ‘write most often about what is constant’, whereas ‘I
much prefer writers who can carry in their writing some sense of what is,
wasn’t always, has been made, and is about to change again and become
something else’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 82). There is rarely a feeling at the
end of a Naipaul novel of ‘a state of normality … devoid of interest, energy,
and the possibility for narration’ which Brooks believes is the usual post-
narrative state in the conventional nineteenth century novel (139): struggles as
difficult as his, or worse, may be in store for Mr Biswas’ widow and her
children after his death; Bobby’s troubles are only beginning at the end of ‘In a
Free State’; and even in *The Enigma of Arrival*, the narrator seems to be
bracing himself for a new future away from the serenity of his ‘house in the
woods’. Ideas of flux, decay, renewal, exchange are constant themes in both
his fiction and his non-fiction.

The texture of his prose has become denser with the years, but it is not
the density of difficulty. By the time of *A Bend in the River*, his chapters, or
parts, are quite long, but within each chapter there are many breaks, where the
reader is invited stop and think and rest. This is what makes this novel, which
is less than 300 pages, seem longer than it is. It was the last of his books which could be unambiguously called a novel; since then there have been several travel books and two works of fiction, mingled with autobiography and history. The compulsion which characterises the reading experience for most novels of a more conventional kind is deliberately resisted by Naipaul. He writes, as he says, to try and slow the reader down, and the new style of fiction which he has developed is designed with this purpose. The machinery of plot has been subdued in favour of an implicit demand to ponder the significance of what he has written. Factual indeterminacy plays its part: in *A Way in the World*, for example, the fictional character Foster Morris, an ageing author, is the subject of a discussion between Naipaul and Graham Greene. Did the discussion take place, but about someone different; did Naipaul ever talk to Greene; is the whole situation utterly imaginary, or is there a grain of truth? Through this kind of factual indeterminacy, the reader is led to consider larger philosophical questions of the relationship between fiction and history. According to Hughes,

Naipaul’s vision of the world … depends upon its power to translate one history or story into others, to show that the relation between fiction and history is not the difference between falsehood and truth, but rather a distinction between converging narratives with different origins. (V.S. Naipaul 24)

When his work is measured against his own stipulations for good writing, he has largely succeeded. He is a very self-aware writer, very conscious of his purpose, which is to be as true to his vision of the world as he can be. The form he has developed with *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World* is an adaptation peculiarly his own, meeting his own needs as an author, but not what he would recommend to any other writer: his advice is that
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every writer must ‘find the correct form’ for the ‘material that possesses you …
the one that feels true to you’ (Burn 4). Pritchard finds that his novels of the
1970s are ‘not much fun’: what Naipaul calls ‘the element of pleasure’ which
‘is almost inevitably paramount’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 92) in the reading of
fiction, has been played down, but it revives with The Enigma of Arrival,
where a subdued joy, in words, in characters, in the natural world and human
history, mingles easily with an unsentimental poignancy and a philosophical
melancholy. The moral sense which literature ‘must have’ (Michener 69) is
never lacking, although the vision has become broader and more tolerant as he
has matured. He claims never to have been a satirist, and that ‘laughing at
people … would be bad manners and pointless writing’ (Walcott, ‘Interview’
8). The most obvious candidates to be labeled satire are his two first published
novels, The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, of which the first
perhaps may be excused, because of its genial and ironic attitude to its
protagonist. Whether or not the early novels are categorised in that way,
however, the satirical impulse has long been replaced by a broader view, where
‘the most dreadful people’ can be understood, even while they are,
 provisionally, judged.

Fellow West Indian writers will perhaps never be happy with Naipaul:
George Lamming attacked him in 1962 for producing ‘castrated satire; and
although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work ... can
rest safely on satire alone. … it is too small a refuge for a writer who wishes to
be taken seriously’ (225); Derek Walcott, in his review of The Enigma of
Arrival, despite his admiration of ‘our finest writer of the English sentence’
abhors his ‘author’s lie’, objecting to the fact that he prefers the heat and light
of New York to that of Trinidad (‘Garden Path’ 29). Stella Swain, in The Dictionary of Literary Biography, however, notes that ‘his postcolonialism should be understood in the widest sense’; he is ‘not so much the voice of any particular newly independent or decolonized nation as … the chronicler of diverse global experiences of alienation and loss’, and, as P.S. Chauhan observes,

His critics, confining themselves to a biographical perspective or to occasional ideological forays, get into high dudgeon because Naipaul would not engage in either formulaic denunciations of the colonial masters or the self-righteous praise of the land of his ancestors, the two favorite tacks of colonial writers. An open reading of Naipaul’s work would suggest that if his critics, instead of imposing their expectations upon it, related his individual statements to the unifying philosophic outlook that underlies his writing, they might recognize that his work carries a more devastating judgment upon the dreams and deeds of the colonizer than would any wholesale ritualistic denunciation. (Chauhan 13-14)

Naipaul makes no apology for his views: they are his principal subject, and they are formed through the process of writing, which means that everything he writes is part of a progression towards understanding, rather than an exposition of views already held. His resistance to plots and the apparatus of fiction is important in this respect: plot, as he sees it, ‘assumes that the world has been explored and now this thing, plot, has to be added on. Whereas I am still exploring the world. And there is narrative there, in every exploration’ (Schiff 148). The narrative of this exploration, since Finding the Centre at least, has been his subject: his determination to face unpleasant truths unflinchingly, despite his fastidiousness, and his horror of mess and noise, causes the ‘creative abrasion’ (Enigma 254) which keeps him writing and prevents him
from succumbing to the temptations of idleness, which, however, tempting,
represents ‘death of the soul’ (*Enigma* 254).

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1 A painting by Giorgio de Chirico.