

The ESSE Messenger



Vol. 27-1 Summer 2018
ISSN 2518-3567

In this Issue:

- Journal Articles on Multi/Inter-culturalism and identity negotiation
- Echoes on Towards Common European English
- Book Reviews

The ESSE Messenger

A Publication of ESSE
(The European Society for
the Study of English)

Vol. 27-1 Summer 2018
ISSN 2518-3567

All material published in the *ESSE Messenger* is © **Copyright of ESSE and of individual contributors**, unless otherwise stated. Requests for permissions to reproduce such material should be addressed to the Editor.

Editor:

Dr. Adrian Radu
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Faculty of Letters
Department of English
Str. Horea nr. 31
400202 Cluj-Napoca
Romania
Email address: esse.messenger@outlook.com

Cover picture:

The Immigrants (Battery Park, New York)
by Maria Eklind
Wikimedia Commons:
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Immigrants_\(15319752949\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Immigrants_(15319752949).jpg)

Contents

Multi/Inter-culturalism and identity negotiation	5
Rationale	5
Negotiation of identity in Scotland's multicultural model	
Wafa El Fekih Said	6
Afro hair as a signifier of racial identity in African American children's literature	
Ewa Kleczaj-Siara	18
Traces of Transnationalism and Multiculturalism in a Literary Context	
Alessia Polatti	30
Man (not) fitting the landscape	
Eleonora Ravizza	45
Echoes	58
Minority Languages between Scylla and Charybdis	
Dalibor Kesić	58
Reviews	71
Mark Nixon. <i>Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937</i> . London and New York: Continuum, 2011.	
Benjamin Keatinge	71
George O'Brien. <i>The Irish Novel 1960-2010</i> , Cork: Cork University Press.	
Aidan O'Malley	74
Shaun Regan, ed. <i>Reading 1759: Literary Culture in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain and France</i> . Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.	
Eoghan Smith	76
Julian Murphet and Mark Steven, eds. <i>Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy's The Road</i> London: Continuum.	
Diletta De Cristofaro	79
Julia Novak, <i>Live Poetry. An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance</i> . Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2011.	
Anita Szikszai	81
Notes on Contributors	84

Man (not) fitting the landscape

The cross-cultural mediations of otherness in V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*

Eleonora Ravizza
University of Bergamo (Italy)

Abstract: The main purpose of this essay is to investigate how V.S. Naipaul's autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival* describes the ways in which a transcultural, hybrid subjectivity is performed in the form of a series of multiple linguistic acts in which the narrator positions himself within an ever-changing reality. The dynamic pattern through which the protagonist's subjectivity comes into being will be analysed in the light of the multiple relations with otherness that the novel stages at different levels. Also, the essay deals with issues of self-reflexivity, since *The Enigma of Arrival* deals with the development Naipaul's relationship to writing and also with the composition of the novel itself.

Key words: identity, otherness, hybridity, mediation, writing, self-reflexivity

The noblest impulse of all – the wish to be a writer, the wish that ruled my life – was the impulse that was the most imprisoning, the most insidious, and in some ways the most corrupting, because, refined by my half-English half-education and ceasing then to be a pure impulse, it had given me a false idea of the activity of the mind. The noble impulse, in that colonial setting, had been the most hobbling. To be what I wanted to be, I had to cease to be or to grow out of what I was. To become a writer, it was necessary to shed many of the early ideas that went with the ambition and the concept my half-education had given me of the writer. (Naipaul 245).

“Noble”, but also “imprisoning”, “insidious” and “corrupting”: this is how V.S. Naipaul describes his desire to become a writer in his widely acclaimed, autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), from which the above-quoted extract is taken. As it articulates the contradictions that shape the author's ambitions, the text also establishes an interesting equation between writing and identity. Naipaul's claim that “[t]o be what [he] wanted to be, [he] had to cease to be or to grow out of what [he] was” (ibid.), suggests that becoming a writer should be regarded as much more than just learning to tell stories and convey content. Writing is certainly linked to an increasing self-awareness and maturation, as well as with the development of a personal style and an individual voice that make a writer's text unique. Even more significantly, writing has to do with assuming a point of view, a subject-position that will allow writers to insert themselves within a schema of relations with an imaginary *you* (the implied reader of the text), as well within the culture in which the text will be composed and received. The quotation above intimates that this *positioning* is even more crucial and problematic in the case of writers who, like Naipaul, are caught among different

cultures and different worlds, and decide to explore the conflictual nature of their *inbetweenness* in writing. Born in Trinidad in 1932 to a family of Indian descent, Naipaul emigrated in the UK at the age of eighteen to pursue his literary career. In his writings, the tension between expectation and experience, the desire to belong and the feelings of alienation derived from his colonial background become the starting point for a quest for identity that also engages with issues of difference and alterity. Not only does Naipaul's migratory experience figure in the text as a theme, it also informs the structure of the narrative and allows the reader to get valuable insights into the multiple negotiations that give shape to the textual performance of the writer's hybrid self.

The Enigma of Arrival may well be regarded as an extraordinary *mise-en-abyme* of the coming into being of a subject never fully coinciding with himself, struggling to assign himself an unstable residence in the world as well as in writing. The text deals the author's settling in Wiltshire, a place in which his presence, as the product of a history of displacement and colonial relations, is somewhat at odd with the apparently peaceful, unblemished reality of rural England. As it describes the progressive mutation of a world that slowly opens up to change and otherness, it also depicts Naipaul's growth from what he refers to as the product of a "half-English half education" (ibid.) into a more complex, sophisticated self. Yet this maturation is not presented as the result of a set of life experiences (as it would be expected, for example, in a *Bildungsroman*) but rather through the description of a series of mediations that happen in language, literature and culture. *The Enigma of Arrival*, in other words, stages the transformation of the narrator from a passive recipient of colonial discourse – especially of the colonial discourse carried through literature – to that of an active producer of a cross-cultural counter-discourse. Reading/interpreting and writing emerge as interconnected activities in which the self-writing subject develops a way of feeling and perceiving, as well as a sense of home. The narrator represents himself both as a reader of the reality around him – which he accesses through discourse and representation – and as a writer.

The main purpose of this essay will be precisely to chart the ways in which a transcultural, hybrid subjectivity is performed in the form of a series of multiple linguistic acts in which the narrator positions himself within an ever-changing reality. In his collection of essays *The return of Eva Perón and The Killings in Trinidad* (1980), Naipaul wrote that "[a]n autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies. It reveals the writer totally", (67). As a matter of fact, *The Enigma of Arrival* is subtitled "A Novel" despite dealing with highly autobiographical subject-matter, such as the author's journey from Trinidad to England, and his relocation to Wiltshire, an area to which he seems to be attracted because of its apparent remoteness from his hybrid, cosmopolitan existence. Paradoxically enough, the authenticity of Naipaul's self-representation starts from a declaration of inauthenticity. What will be shown here is that, by exposing the fictionality of his book, Naipaul also exposes the provisional quality of the identity performances that are achieved in the text. In other words, the truthfulness of the episodes narrated – some of which may already be known or recognizable to the reader who is familiar with Naipaul's previous writings or with the literature produced about him: interviews, essays, monographs and so on – is not to be found in their correspondence with real-life events but rather through

the textual enactment of the self.¹ Rather than focussing on the self as a centre of experience, Naipaul accounts for how language, literature and cultural expectations construct his perceptions of the world and of the roles he plays in the society in which he is looking for inclusion.

The relational pattern through which the protagonist's subjectivity comes into being will be analysed in the light of the multiple relations with otherness that the novel stages at different levels. As it refers to the desire to become a writer as "corrupting" and "imprisoning", the epigraph that introduces this essays hints at the author's conflict with the dominating, disciplinizing gaze of the colonizer. The essay will show that Naipaul's novel may be indeed read in the light of Homi Bhabha's concept of *mimicry*, i.e. the formation of identity through imitation of and identification with the image of the Other, but it also multiplies and diffracts the very idea of *otherness*. Bhabha draws the idea of *mimicry* from Lacanian psychology to describe how, with the support of strategies of reform and discipline, colonial subjects come into being in relations to their colonizers in such a way that they are "*subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*" (Bhabha 122; italics in original). Imitation does not involve the harmonization or repression of contrasts, but it is rather a form of resemblance which entails a difference that colonial discourses also wish not to erase. Mimicry is therefore the sign for an identification which can never be completed, but always produces its slippages, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (ibid.) who nonetheless cannot and should not be completely assimilated. "Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask", claims Bhabha, referring both to the colonizers and the colonized (Bhabha 127.). Also, identity does not pre-exist the relational identification with the Other for either of them, and emerges as the product of a disciplinizing gaze which can, nonetheless, "shatter the unity of man's being through which [it] extends [its] sovereignty" (ibid.). *The Enigma of Arrival* certainly relies on similar relational, unstable conceptions of identity. Yet the *Other* takes multiple forms and is not only associated with the duality of the colonizer/colonized relationship. Naipaul constructs "otherness" as a series of rival spaces, or "heterotopies", to refer to Michel de Foucault's terminology, i.e. spaces that may simultaneously be material or abstract, in which discrepancies, difference, and even conflicts are articulated and made visible.

¹ In this sense, *The Enigma of Arrival* significantly distances itself from the "pact of truth" which characterizes autobiographical writing, and which Philip Lejeune described in his influential *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975). For Lejeune, the *truth* of an autobiography is the result of an implicit pact established between the author and the reader, the latter accepting that the author, the narrator and the character are to be identified as the same person. The identity of the narrator is guaranteed not only by the "honored signature" reported on the cover jacket of the book, but also by the necessary premise of the identification of the self with the self. This premise of ipseity is considered by Lejeune as the product of an historical narrative (he defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative that a real person creates about his own existence when he emphasizes individual life, particularly the history of his personality", Lejeune 14, quoted and translated in Regard 4)

The location of *Otherness*

The idea of *heterotopy* may transversally be read also in the very title of the novel. The Enigma of Arrival is an oxymoronic expression which combines the idea of relative safety and accomplishment usually associated the word *arrival* with the eerie quality of the word *enigma*. An *enigma*, in fact, exists only insofar as it is not solved. As a matter of fact, the text makes it clear that, however hard Naipaul tries to make his cottage in Wiltshire his home, the centre of his emotional life, he is *not there yet* but he is, simultaneously, also *somewhere else*. Naipaul's real-life uprootedness and transcultural background, emerge in the text as the forces that bring about the displacement of a subject from himself, from his fantasies and from his conceptions of the world, and that makes him observe and interpret the reality around him from an estranged perspective. This translates into the fact that the first-person narrator is always presented as a foreigner, someone not perfectly in tune with his surroundings. In the first chapter of the book, for example, he claims that "[f]ifty years ago, there would have been no room for me in the estate; even now my presence was a little unlikely. But more than accident had brought me here. Or, rather, in the series of accidents that had brought me to the manor cottage, with a view of the restored church, there was a clear historical line" (Naipaul 52). Along with that, the narrator's alienation is not only personal, but also historical, and connected to wider, historical processes: "The migration, within the British Empire, from India to Trinidad had given me the English language as my own, and a particular kind of education. This had partly seeded my wish to be a writer in a particular mode, and had committed me to the literary career I had been following in England for twenty years" (52-53). Naipaul ascribes his wish to become a writer to larger movements of people, which determined the circumstances of his language and education. Also, he implies that the link between his writing and his alienation is even deeper, and that his being in the world is always connected to the psychic disjunction that derives from his British-Trinidadian identity

Another interesting way in which the concept of *heterotopy* can be applied to the book is that the very idea of selfhood goes much beyond the individual. Not only does Naipaul consider himself a fragment a broad diasporic process, sometimes his autobiographical writing is not about himself, but about other people. Although he is the undisputed protagonist of the novel, and also its main focalizer, sometimes his story is not his own, and the narrating "I" fades into the background in order to leave space to other narrative threads. Differently put, the story of the writer's move from Trinidad to England at the age of eighteen and the later development of his literary career is only narrated in occasional flashbacks. Most of the novel is occupied with the writer's reflections, observations and growing familiarity with the place he has chosen as his residence, as well as with the stories of other people – neither real friends nor people playing a significant role in the life of the protagonist – but rather casual acquaintances whom the writer meets in his otherwise rather isolated life. Accidents happening to other people are sometimes reported, but in an almost causal way. None of the characters Naipaul meets occupies a central role in the plot, and none of their stories figure prominently as a central narrative core. What is more, the author seems quite uninvolved with them and he usually points out not his possible

identification with them but rather his difference, his alienation from them. Nonetheless, while at the level of the chronology of the personal development of the author these characters seem quite irrelevant, they become central in the cultural operation of positioning him within a certain landscape – geographical, cultural and, above all, linguistic. They become part of a narrative whose structure is not linear at all, but it includes multiple digressions or and represents subjectivity in a highly relational way.

It is, nonetheless, in the very description of the narrator's perceptions of the world around him that it is possible to observe the construction of heterotopies. For example, the novel begins with a retrospective micronarrative that summarizes the processes of personal growth and maturation that will be told in the following pages. In the first lines, the narrative describes Naipaul's arrival in the English countryside not in terms of a series of actions, but rather in terms of the writer's ability to decipher the alien world that he has elected as his new residence:

For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was. Then it stopped raining and beyond the lawn and outbuildings in front of my cottage I saw fields with stripped trees on the boundaries of each field; and far away, depending on the light, glints of a little river, glints which sometimes appeared, oddly, to be above the level of the land.

The river was called the Avon; not the one connected with Shakespeare. Later – when the land had more meaning, when it had absorbed more of my life than the tropical street where I had grown up – I was able to think of the flat wet fields with the ditches as “water meadows” or “wet meadows”, and the low smooth hills in the background, beyond the river, as “downs”. But just then, after the rain, all that I saw – though I had been living in England for twenty years – were flat fields and a narrow river. (Naipaul 5)

First, the passage overlaps more than one temporality: the time of the narrator's arrival in Wiltshire and his perspective as an older, wiser self. Secondly, the passage introduces the very idea of the mediation of the *other* in the process of self-construction. In order to make the place his home, Naipaul has to start to see like the other Wiltshirians and, most significantly, he has to use *their* words. The idea of not being able the vernacular properly, as locals would do (i.e., when the narrator confesses to not being able to conceptualize the ditches” as “water meadows” or “wet meadows” or to call the hills “downs” even though he had been living in England for two decades) is strictly associated with the idea of blindness. Naipaul incapacity of seeing, which is initially attributed to the heavy rain, is later revealed as a cognitive problem. The author is not able to conceptualize the landscape in which he has moved because he lacks the right terminology, and therefore the right competence. The second paragraph instead synthesises a successful process of homing, of establishing a bond between the narrator and the landscape, in terms of a translation accomplished both in language and in the self.

The linguistic passage from “ditches” to “water meadows” is a passage which the narrator justifies with the expansion of his horizon of experience, as he claims that it became possible “when the land had more meaning, when it had absorbed more of my life than the tropical street where I had grown up” (EA: 5). The use of the verb “absorb” is extremely significant, because it implies the reciprocity of the development of the self and of his linguistic capacities. Differently put, the

paragraph shows that language is not just a mirror of the widening of the horizon of experience of the narrator, but also the very site in which his own experience of the world comes into being. Progressively, the novel reveals that it is not the narrator who attributes meaning to the landscape, but rather that meaning as an external, shared construct takes in the narrator and allows for him certain new possibilities of existence. Naipaul, in other words, does not speak English, but he is spoken by English; his capacity to produce utterances that are able to conform with someone else's expectations and definition of the place make him a different kind of subject, a subject who is aware of his previous lack, and that might even feel threatened by his old ignorance.

Language therefore also figures in the novel as a site of *otherness*. Language is an historical, material phenomenon, something that goes beyond the individual speaker, and which is rather linked with communities of speakers who share cultural values and expectations. Despite being Naipaul's native language, English figures in the text almost as a second, acquired language. The knowledge of English is often explicitly mentioned as an indirect knowledge, a knowledge that the speaker has acquired from afar and embedded in a very different experience of the world than the one required to inhabit his cottage in Wiltshire. The narrator mentions that in his native island he could only imagine what words like "winter" could mean, and that when he could have his first-hand experience of them they turned out quite different from what he had expected ("The idea of winter and snow had always excited me; but in England the word had lost some of its romance for me, because the winters I had found in England had seldom been as extreme as I had imagined they would be when I was far away in my tropical island", EA: 5). Most significantly, the narrator gets acquainted with the English spoken in the countryside through the philological expertise he acquired through books and research, but still somehow disconnected from his experience, creating a horizon of expectation which proves somehow unfitting: "I knew that 'avon' originally meant only river, just as 'hound' originally meant a dog, any kind of dog. And I knew that both elements of Waldenshaw – the name of the village and the manor in whose ground I was – I knew that both 'walden' and 'shaw' meant wood. One further reason why, apart from the fairy tale feel of the snow and the rabbits, I thought I saw a forest", EA: 7).

Interestingly, the very fact of speaking is presented as a form of an inauthenticity and as a potential threat to the landscape he has decided to inhabit. At the opposite end of the spectrum of the narrator's odd presence in the English countryside, and of his sophisticated verbal awareness, is the figure of Jack. Jack, a middle-aged English farmer and a gardener whom Naipaul occasionally meets on his walks in the countryside, is a character apparently perfectly integrated in his social, cultural and geographical context, an image of plenitude whose perfection will be questioned, deconstructed and re-signified throughout the narration: "Jack himself, however, I considered to be part of the view. I saw his life as genuine, rooted, fitting; man fitting the landscape. I saw him as a remnant of the past (the undoing of which my own presence portended)" (EA: 15). Jack's integration with the landscape is initially configured as an idealized absence of the mediation between him and language. The empathy between the farmer and the narrator is not formed through words, but rather through gestures. It is after Jack becomes acquainted with the odd presence of the narrator – who tries to

imagine himself from the viewpoint of the old man working in the garden as “a stranger, a walker, someone exercising an old public right of way in what was now private land” (EA: 28) – that they start exchanging some extra-linguistic, and yet extremely meaningful signs of sympathy and recognition: “But after some time, after many weeks, when he felt perhaps that the effort wouldn’t be wasted, he adopted me. And from a great distance, as soon as he saw me, he would boom out a greeting, which came over less as defined words than as a deliberate making of noise in the silence” (EA: 28). Jack never speaks, the only direct utterances about him are those produced by his wife after his death, words which by their unexpected change of viewpoint will reveal a completely different aspect of Jack to the narrator.

The Enigma of Arrival therefore reveals the inconsistency of an identity which had been initially described as *full*, perfectly integrated with its surrounding and untouched by otherness. Just like the narrator himself, Jack is someone whose “[m]imicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask”, as Bhabha would put it (127). He too experienced conflicts with his own surrounding and with other people (it is suggested that Jack “[p]erhaps in his own way had been tyrant, imposing, in addition to the long hair and the bun, a style and way of life that had been irksome to his wife”, 94). Jack’s idealized, non-linguistic identity is unveiled as an illusion: he is also embedded in social interactions, historical and material. His presence as a speaking being had real consequences onto the life of those around him, who had, in turn, to negotiate their needs and actions with him. Language did make him, like Naipaul himself, a man (not) fitting the landscape.

Translating the self. The mediation of otherness and the narrator’s assignation of residence in writing

“[T]he only way we have of understanding another man’s condition is through ourselves, our experiences and emotions”, says the narrator as he explains the cognitive processes that he enacts in order to feel at home in his new community (244). It has already been argued that what the narrator calls “ourselves, our experiences and emotions” (ibid.) is not a pre-existing entity, but rather the result of external dynamics of identifications with multiple Others. The inner-life of the narrator, his conscience, his feelings, his perceptions are, in other words, always-already embedded in a social, external relations. The book highlights the linguistic components of these processes of identification. This section of the essay will deal with the process in which the hybrid identity of the narrator comes into being through a process of *self-translation* that allows him to project the multicultural components of his existence onto a world that he initially perceives as alien. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the narrator’s symbolic *assignation of residence*, i.e. the learning of the vernacular of the English countryside, is made possible through a process of multiple linguistic mediations because the narrator already speaks a second language, the language of literature, art, and representation. The starting point of the process of the narrator’s self-translation onto the rural landscape of his surroundings is therefore a process already taking place based on a highly mediated and estranged experience: “But knowledge came

slowly to me. It was not like the almost instinctive knowledge that had come to me as a child of the plants and flowers of Trinidad; it was like learning a second language” (EA: 30),

The Enigma of Arrival deals with the writing process also as a form of interpretative process: being a writer is strictly connected with being a reader and an interpreter of languages, texts, and even of reality. Interpretation emerges from *The Enigma of Arrival* as a process at the centre of which there is not the deciphering of something unknown, but rather a pragmatics in which the text acts as a prop for a language-game and in which the author and the reader are produced as places within what, in his essay *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (1999), the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle described as a *structure of interpellation*. A term that he draws from Louis Althusser, *interpellation* is the process through which ideology addresses the individual and produces him or her as a subject. In Lecercle's view, interpretation is to be understood as a form of translation and intervention. The reader is not just a passive recipient of the presumed meaning produced by the author; he or she actively contributes not just to the construction of the meaning of a text, but also to the creation of a fiction of an author. Jean-Jacques Lecercle's formulation of the theory of interpretation goes beyond even Iser and Jauss' reception theories insofar as it reads interpretation as a process taking place within a structure which comprehends the following five elements, the initial letters of which significantly compose the word ALTER: Author, Language, Text, Encyclopedia, Reader. What circulates within this structure is not meaning, but rather interpellation. Both the author and the reader are captured as places within this structure, but this capture is not a static one, as it involves a continuity of counter-responses.

A highly meta-reflexive passage, which deals with the composition of the novel itself, may cast some light on how interpretation works in Naipaul's text. This episode, which is narrated in the second chapter of the novel (“The Journey”), describes the narrator's retrieval of a reproduction of the painting by the Italian surrealist artist Giorgio de Chirico titled precisely *The Enigma of Arrival* (“The cottage at that time still had the books and some of the furniture of the people who had been there before. Among the books was one that was very small, a paperback booklet, smaller in format than the average small paperback and with only a few pages. The booklet, from a series called the Little Library of Art, was about the early paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. There were about a dozen reproductions of his early surrealist paintings”, 97). The translation of the visual artefact into words (*ekphrasis*) gives way to further interpretations which develops into a series of stories that develop into other stories, converging then into Naipaul's autobiographical narrative:

Technically, in these very small reproductions, the paintings did not seem interesting; they seemed flat, facile. And their content was not profound either; arbitrary assemblages, in semi-classical, semi-modern settings, of unrelated motifs – aqueducts, trains, arcades, gloves, fruit, statues – with an occasional applied touch of easy mystery: in one painting, for instance, an overlarge shadow of a hidden figure approaching from round a corner. But among these paintings there was one which, perhaps because of its title, caught my attention: *The Enigma of Arrival*. I felt that in an indirect, poetical way the title referred to

something in my own experience; and later I was to learn that the title of this surrealist painting of Chirico's hadn't been given by the painter, but by the poet Apollinaire, who died young in 1918, from influenza following a wound, to the great grief of Picasso and others. (97-98)

The text shows that the verbal rendition of the painting is also mediated by another verbal interpretation before being brought back to the author's personal circumstances. The title that Apollinaire gave to the painting becomes, in fact, a second text that will support the narrator's interpretation of the image.

In a subsequent paragraph, dealing with the ekphrasis of the painting, the narrator establishes a new connection between the de Chirico's painting and Apollinaire, himself and the painting, himself and Apollinaire:

What was interesting about the painting itself, *The Enigma of Arrival*, was that – again perhaps because of its title – it changed in my memory. The original (or the reproduction in the Little Library of Art booklet) was always a surprise. A classical scene, Mediterranean, ancient-Roman – or so I saw it. A wharf; in the background, beyond walls and gateways (like cutouts), there is the top of the mast of an antique vessel; on an otherwise deserted street in the foreground there are two figures, both muffled, one perhaps the person who had arrived, the other perhaps a native of the port. The scene is of desolation and mystery: it speaks of the mystery of arrival. It spoke to me of that, as it had spoken to Apollinaire. (98)

In claiming that “it [the painting] spoke to me of that [the enigma of arrival], as it had spoken to Apollinaire” (ibid.), the narrator performs at least three important functions. First, he postulates, years after Apollinaire had given a title to the painting, what Lecercle calls “a constructed mythical moment of origin” (1999: 22), which is, in fact, a double moment. Naipaul imagines that the painting is the bearer of an original meaning which de Chirico gave to the painting, and which emerged verbally through the title that Apollinaire gave to it. Secondly, by claiming that he knows what the French poet had meant by ‘*The Enigma of Arrival*’, he produces a representation of the author Apollinaire. Thirdly, the narrator usurps the role of the author Apollinaire by proclaiming his own identification with the French poet. The identification with Apollinaire emerges as much more significant than any possible identification with de Chirico not only because both the narrator and Apollinaire are writers, working with language rather than with image, but also because their production is revealed as a form of reading and interpreting someone else's artefact.

In other words, Naipaul thus becomes the writer that he is meant to be by identifying with the Other – two producers of visual or verbal narratives (de Chirico and Apollinaire), which are in turn produced by him through the structures of language, in what Lecercle would identify as a form of interpellation. As he tries to interpret the meaning of the painting and its title, Naipaul constitutes Apollinaire and de Chirico as subject, but he does so in a way that is clearly influenced by his own personal perspective. Interpretation is described by Lecercle as a form of translation and intervention happening through re-contextualization: the text is de-contextualized and re-contextualized by every act of reading. This, on the one hand, implies that the story of the de Chirico painting that “[m]eaning varies (increases and multiplies, or wilts and wanes) with every link in the chain of the serial arrangement” (Lecercle 1999: 78). The narrator later

claims: “What was interesting about the painting itself, The Enigma of Arrival, was that – again perhaps of the title – it changed in my memory. The original (or the reproduction in the Little Library of Art booklet) was always a surprise” (EA: 98). When the narrator says that “[t]he scene is of desolation and mystery: it speaks of the mystery of arrival” (ibid.), what is implied is that this “desolation” and mystery” also change according to the different scene in which the story is re-contextualized.

Subsequently, many versions of the story of the De Chirico painting emerge as a result of *différance* – the separation between the author and text as well as reader and text as formulated by Jacques Derrida. As Lecercle puts it “writing belongs to the realm of the different (there is no iteration without alteration), of differing and deferring (the contact between speaker and hearer occurs in praesentia; the absence of contact between author and reader is due, in the first instance, to a temporal gap), and of differends (the type of 'dialogue' that will ensue is agonistic, made up of verbal struggle and games rather than cooperative and irenic)” (1999: 78). Naipaul not only displaces the temporality of the action, but also intervenes and translates it onto different contexts which he refers to his own life. Each of these translations depends then on specific conjunctures, determined by the moment in which the reading of the De Chirico painting is performed:

My story was to be set in classical times, in the Mediterranean. My narrator would write plainly, without any attempt at period style as historical explanation of his period. He would arrive – for a reason I had yet to work out – at a classical port with the walls and gateways like cutouts. He would walk past that muffled figure on the quayside. He would move from that silence and desolation, that blankness, to a gateway or door. He would enter there and be swallowed by the life and noise of a crowded city (I imagined something like an Indian bazaar scene). The mission he had come on – family business, study, religious initiation – would give him encounters and adventures. He would enter interiors, of houses and temples. Gradually there would come to him a feeling that he was getting nowhere; he would lose his sense of mission; he would begin to know only that he was lost. His feeling of adventure would give way to panic. He would want to escape, to get back to the quayside and his ship. But he wouldn't know how. I imagined some religious ritual in which, led on by kindly people, he would unwittingly take part and find himself the intended victim. At the moment of crisis he would come upon a door, open it, and find himself back at the quayside of arrival. He has been saved; the world is as he remembered it. Only one thing is missing now. Above the cutout walls and buildings there is no mast, no sail. The antique ship has gone. The traveler has lived out his life. (98-99).

The story should be linked to the painting in an *ut pictura poesis* way: the pictorial techniques utilized by de Chirico should be reproduced in the text (“My narrator would write plainly, without any attempt at period style as historical explanation”, ibid.). The image is translated into words in a way that reveals a transformation of a static image into a recontextualized narrative. The characters are not precisely identifiable; the reason why the traveller finds himself in a foreign city are unknown or omitted; the incidents that occur on his way remain untold. These new elements added to the image are a production of the narrator/ interpreter's

experience as well as of the specific conjunctures in which his reading and interpreting takes place.

The vagueness of this account of an uncanny arrival in a dangerous city and of the impossibility of departure constitutes the basis for a model that repeats itself in several variations and in different contexts in the chapter. First the narrator tells of a book he is writing about an African colony, a story in which he recognizes the same narrative pattern of “a sunlit journey ending in a dangerous classical city” (99) to the point that he is not able to recollect which of the two stories comes before the other. Then he realizes that the same story is the version of a recurring dream (“Nor did it occur to me that it was also an attempt to find a story for, to give coherence to, a dream or a nightmare which for a year or so had been unsettling me”, 100). Afterwards, the narration shifts to a story which he had been trying to write and which did not come out as expected, an episode in which Robert Hamner (44) recognizes the author's breakdown after his rejection of the manuscript of *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969). Then, the narrator relates his own uncanny experience of arrivals, first in New York – a short stop-over in the journey of migration that brought him, as a student, to England – and then to London.

The most significant reiteration of the story appears nonetheless at the end of the novel. As his novel draws to a close, Naipaul reminisces again the episode of the retrieval of the painting and endows it with new, additional meaning:

I had thought for years about a book like *The Enigma of Arrival*. The Mediterranean fantasy that had come to me a day or so after I had arrived in the valley – the story of the traveler, the strange city, the spent life – had been modified over the years. The fantasy and the ancient-world setting had been dropped. The story had become more personal: my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing, rather than by 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 awareness of death that I began at last to write. Death was the motif; it had been the motif all along. Death and the way of handling it – that was the motif of the story of Jack. (343)

This final reinterpretation of the story is particularly relevant because it reinforces the multiple identifications that have been described before and connects them to what could be described as a *metalepsis*.¹ Metalepsis is a figure of speech which disrupts the distinction between the different levels of the narration, for example, by allowing the extra-diegetic narrator to intrude in the diegetic word. Metalepsis plays a fundamental role in *The Enigma of Arrival* insofar as the narrator, through his acts of interpretation, transgresses not only different narrative levels, but also his role as reader, author, narrator, and character. The narrator depicts

¹ In *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, with the word *metalepsis* Lecercle refers both to Austin's theory of the speech-act – claiming that a text is a multi-layered, extended speech-act in which several different speech-acts may take place at the same time (for example both illocutionary and perlocutionary) and to Genette's theory of metalepsis as a contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told.

himself simultaneously as the observer of a painting, he identifies with the interpreter who gives it a title (Apollinaire), he becomes the author of a story which “speaks out” (the word “ekphrasis” etymologically means precisely “speaking out” or “telling in full”, Heffernan 1991: 302) the events depicted in the painting as well as of a novel whose story is later revealed to him as another version of *The Enigma of Arrival*. Metalepsis, as Lecercle claims, “inscribes within the text, in a paradoxical form, the possibility of interpellating more than one set of actors, of projecting from the same text more than one structure of actants” (1999: 81). In this case, metalepsis, which is embedded in the act of interpretation of the painting, in the version of the story that the narrator tells also becomes the means through which the extra-diegetic enters the diegesis, in which the narrator transforms what is subtitled as “a novel” into an autobiography, and which re-creates, in a completely new way, the pact of truth which Philip Lejeune considers to be the basis of autobiography.

Conclusion

Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* deals with writing and with the construction of the hybrid identity of the narrator in parallel ways. The main theme of the novel is not only the process of personal growth that the author undergoes during his lifetime spent in the alien space of Wiltshire, it is also the development of his relationship to writing. What is more, writing is treated as a way to perform identity through a constant mediation with otherness. Conflicts and difference have emerged as central concepts in this analysis, as Naipaul's novel describes the coming into being of an autobiographic subject through a process of self-translations into the context of a foreign, elusive landscape. Yet, this self-translation, in fact, passes through a series of imperfect meditations – it is marked, so to say, by the stain of untranslatability, of the impossibility of completely conflating the self and the other. Indeed, Naipaul utilizes his own condition of exile to maintain a sort of detachment that does not allow him to be assimilated – or completely and exclusively spoken by – the language of his new home.

By traversing the space of the diegetics and the extra-diegetic, the novel certainly casts new lights on the complexity of literary texts. It provides new insights in how literature elaborates and redefines the experiences of societies that are currently dealing with the societal challenges posed by ever-growing global interdependencies and newly formed cultural and semiotic contexts. As a matter of fact, literature does not only reflect, it also triggers off processes through which individual and collective subjects relate to a world that is ever more composite, hybrid and transcultural. In this perspective, subjectivity can be understood as a continuous self-reinvention on the part of speakers who express themselves with different languages and styles. The peculiar feature of literature, as well as its ethical challenge, is precisely that of constantly elaborating new ways to give voice to otherness.

References

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Hammer
- Heffernan, James A. W. "Ekphrasis and Representation". *New Literary History*, 22.2 (1991): 297-316.
- Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *Interpretation as Pragmatics*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1975.
- Naipaul, V. S. *The Enigma of Arrival*. London Vintage Books, 1987.
- Naipaul The Return of Eva Peron with The Killings in Trinidad. London: Penguin, 1981.
- Regard, Frédéric. "Autobiography and Geography. A Self-Arranging Question". In *Reconstruction: An Interdisciplinary Culture Studies Community*, Vol 2, 3 (Summer 2002) <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/regard.htm>