

Writing home: autobiography in Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul

Anderson Bastos Martins

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Av. Antônio Carlos, 6627, 31270-901, Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil.
E-mail: anderbas@uol.com.br

ABSTRACT. This essay looks into two different approaches to autobiography as an instrument of critical reading of literary texts. Firstly, one will examine how the typology of autofiction established by Vincent Colonna may be of use in an analysis of the way Salman Rushdie has brought his own biography into his novel *Midnight's Children* in an attempt to address both his Indian-based readers and the community of diasporic Indians and postcolonial critics living overseas. Secondly, the concept of the literary self-portrait, developed by Michel Beaujour, will be employed as a reading tool in an analysis of how V. S. Naipaul's autobiography has served the writer as a starting point in his metafictionalization of his own writing career.

Key words: autobiography, autofiction, literary self-portrait, diaspora, exile.

RESUMO. Escrevendo para casa: autobiografia em Salman Rushdie e V. S. Naipaul. Este ensaio investiga duas abordagens diferentes de autobiografia, enquanto instrumento para leitura crítica de textos literários. Em primeiro lugar, será examinado como a tipologia da autoficção estabelecida por Vincent Colonna pode ser útil à análise da forma com que Salman Rushdie carregou sua própria biografia para o interior de seu romance *Midnight's Children* numa tentativa de dirigir-se tanto a seus leitores, em território indiano, como à comunidade de indianos diaspóricos e críticos pós-coloniais que vivem no exterior. Em segundo lugar, o conceito de auto-retrato literário, desenvolvido por Michel Beaujour, será empregado como instrumento de leitura numa análise de como a autobiografia de V. S. Naipaul serviu a este escritor como ponto de partida para a metafictionalização de sua própria carreira literária.

Palavras-chave: autobiografia, autoficção, auto-retrato literário, diáspora, exílio.

Introduction

The history of literary theory is permeated by certain debates which seem to have served as keystones to the building of its established body of concepts and methods. One of these fundamental discussions is that which seeks to treat the presence of the writer within his or her text. The figure of the "author" has been both extolled and savaged, convicted and acquitted, foregrounded and effaced, by different theoreticians at different periods in literary studies.

As recently as the mid-fifties/sixties of the last century, structuralism was responsible for much of the disenfranchisement experienced by the author in his long existence. A couple of decades later, new developments in the field of literary criticism rendered it necessary to reinstall the author, since the surge of many interconnected manners of reading and writing, such as postmodernism, gender studies, postcolonialism, cultural studies etc., brought experience and subjectivity back to the stage of textualization and interpretation. Naturally, this

did not mean literary studies were being revisited by more of the same, but rather by a new, less self-centered approach to the subject. The large number of testimonials produced in the eighties and nineties, along with the ever increasing presence of the biography and the autobiography in the bookshelves, are a clear sign of this resurgence in an interest for subjectivity.

Interestingly, this move has been accompanied by a significant tendency to "suspect" the text, that is, to remove from writing the unchallenged claim to truthfulness it had experienced through some periods of its history. This contribution of post-structuralism and deconstruction theories has paved the way for the arising of new genres of writing that aim to enmesh such previously incompatible territories as fiction and non-fiction, presence and representation, truth and verisimilitude. In more practical terms, soon there were books being published with descriptions in terms like "fictional journalism" or "non-fictional novels". Moreover, the field of autobiography was elevated from the

category of genre to that of concept, which has made it possible to discuss the presence of the author in the work of fiction with much more sophistication and theoretical ambition than before.

This article departs from this rich critical vein, with the purpose of analyzing certain autobiographical effects of writing fiction from the perspective of the migrant or diasporic experience. In order to do so, two concepts will be of use – namely, *autofiction*, specifically in the way it has been theorized by Vincent Colonna; and *self-portrait*, as discussed by Michel Beaujour.

The above mention of the term *diaspora* opens this text to a second, equally powerful body of thinking. Diaspora has been extensively elaborated on by a multitude of writers and artists, due, in large part, to the intense level at which displacement and migration have been taking place in the world since the end of World War II and with the subsequent dismantling of the European Empires in Africa, Southern Asia and Central America. Pertaining broadly to the immense field known as postcolonialism, diaspora treats more specifically the condition of those whose lives have been punctuated by geographical dislocations and the marks such experiences bring about both at an individual and at a collective level. Whatever the case, the inscription of the subject has proved essential in much of the writing produced in a state of diaspora.

In the case of Salman Rushdie, our focus here will be on his novel *Midnight's Children*. Published in the early eighties, this book is narrated by a young man who claims the narrative to be his autobiography. Because the text is purely fictional, one must choose very carefully the instruments with which to read it. And this is where the concept of *autofiction* becomes convenient, since it derives from the analysis of works that succeed in receiving the subjectivity of their respective authors without having to forgo the features of fiction.

On the other hand, V. S. Naipaul will have to be approached via a different concept. His novel *The Enigma of Arrival* will be studied by means of Michel Beaujour's reflections on what he has called the *literary self-portrait*. The reasons why Naipaul calls for other reading tools will be clarified later in this text. So far, it must be advanced that, unlike Rushdie, Naipaul transforms the text into his home and struggles to inhabit it. It will be seen that this act of creating a textual space which prevails upon empirical/biographical space constitutes one of the touchstones of the literary self-portrait.

“One is not born every day”

Saleem Sinai is the owner of a pickle factory in Bombay, India, and cohabits with Padma, one of the women laborers of his business. Born to an affluent Muslim Indian family in 1947, Sinai was orphaned during the 1965 war with Pakistan over the now independent state of Bangladesh, then Eastern Pakistan. Lost in the midst of the violence of war, Saleem was wounded in the head by shrapnel from the crossfire and, having lost his memory, was eventually enlisted in the Pakistani army to serve at the battlefield – his sister, one of his few surviving kin, unable to cope with the task of caring for him. Brutalized by the debasing conditions of the barracks, Saleem manages to escape the front and, despite being declared a defector, works his way back to the home of some relations. From there, he returns to his beloved Bombay, where he is apprenticed as a pickle maker at the very factory he now runs.

Thus far, this could be the story of a very ordinary man from a war-torn period of his country. But there is more to Saleem than the above. He is a man of powers, which, we shall see, does not mean he is a man of power. The precise date of his birth is August 15, 1947: a day like any other, were it not for the fact that this was when the British Raj came to an end in India. As for the time of his birth, by a quirk of fate, Saleem was born at the very stroke of midnight. In the whole of the country, only a second boy was born at exactly the same time as Saleem Sinai.

The convergence of such factors gave the boy the powers mentioned previously. Saleem is endowed with phenomenal telepathic abilities, which allow him to “fumble” through people's minds and learn their innermost secrets. Initially, he gave himself a good time of it by, for instance, “tuning in” to his class's wizard and performing brilliantly at school. The passage of time, though, brought home to him the pain of memory, as he attempted to reach deeper into people's motivations. But the climax to his all-encompassing talents was only to come when, at a critical moment in his childhood, the boy discovered that he was able to “congregate” inside his brain all the other kids born within the first hour of August 15, 1947, who, oddly enough, were equally gifted, albeit with different specialties. To use some modern-day phraseology, Saleem's mind was similar to an internet-served meeting hall, or, to stick to his own words, an “all-India radio”.

One is understandably not supposed to take the above at face value. Saleem cannot possess biological

existence. And that is indeed the case. He is actually the narrator in Salman Rushdie's highly- (and rightly so) acclaimed masterpiece *Midnight's Children*, a book which is purportedly Saleem's autobiography.

The term "autobiography" is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the biography of a person narrated by himself". The book in question, however, was written by Rushdie, rather than any Saleem Sinai, but the dictionary definition above contains the term "narrated", which cannot be conflated with "written". And this is where a key distinction must be operated if one is to successfully approach a work of literature: a writer need not be taken to be a narrator. In fact, mostly they are not the same, despite the shady areas that challenge any surgical dissociation between the two.

Before inserting a few details of Rushdie's biography, it must be stated that the purpose for this is not to prove the narrator to be the alter ego of the author, but to investigate the intrinsic, rather than incestuous or even schizophrenic, relationship between the two.

With this word of caution, it seems safer to advance that, like Saleem, Rushdie, too, was born in Bombay in 1947, except that his birth date was June 19, and no record mentions a midnight-hour birth. Besides, Rushdie's ancestors come from Kashmir, one of the most fundamental spatial tropes in *Midnight's Children*, which opens with Saleem's description of how his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, saw the solidity of his Islamic faith melt down as a consequence of a minor knock on his nose as he bent down to pray on his return from Europe to his native Kashmir. Another interesting point to make is that Salman Rushdie, again like the narrator of his book, went to live in Pakistan at the age of 17. Finally, a quick search through websites specialized in the etymologies of names will point to a strong synonymy between "Salman" and "Saleem/Salim". One source¹ will translate the former as "safe" and the latter as "safe, whole, flawless". A second source² will confirm this, adding only that "Saleem" is the Indian variant for "Salim", which, like "Salman", stems from the Arabic verb "*salima*" or "to be safe".

The above will allow us to return to the territory of the autobiography, bearing in mind, however, that the narrative under scrutiny here is a novel that shares a good deal with the technique of the so-called magic-realists. In other words, it should be as remote as possible from the classic definition of an autobiography. Nevertheless, Saleem attempts to

resolve this apparent contradiction by stating that

[...] in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe (Rushdie, 1991, p. 310).

The key phrase here is "as in all literature", which places both autobiography and fiction, or even all of writing, for that matter, on the same plane. This seems to clarify the approach to autobiography employed in the novel, one that brings it closer to the concept of "autofiction", as elaborated by Vincent Colonna.

In his recent book on autofiction, entitled *Autofiction & Autres Mythomanies Littéraires*, Colonna draws from Latin Antiquity the driving force for his thesis. His passionate analysis of the works by Lucian of Samosata (c.125-c.180), particularly the tales from *True Story*, will serve as the prototype for any subsequent autofiction, according to the author. *True Story* can arguably be categorized as a travel book, if one is inclined to accept as valid the content of a sentence that appears in the prologue to the text. As the narrator describes how he and other sailors departed on their long voyage, he states, in a rather off-hand style, that he

[...] will then say things [he has] never seen or heard, or even more, things that are not and cannot be; this is why one should hold one's guard before believing them (Colonna, 2004, p. 26).

Lucian states clearly that his model is Ulysses-turned-narrator in the *Odyssey*, and the descriptions of sirens and cyclops and hippogryphs, along with all that pertains to the realm of

[...] the monstrous, the terrible, the terrifying, the unbearable, within every domain, be it corporeal, intersubjective, sexual, or social; the inhuman, to sum it up (Colonna, 2004, p. 29-30).

A third feature of autofiction, as established by Vincent Colonna, is the identification, at differing levels of literalness, between the author and the narrator. This identification is normally made clear by the narrator sharing his/her name with the author, which need not be exactly the same name but one that points to its "counterpart". In an attempt to consolidate the basic marks of autofiction, one can take them to be an alliance with the fantastical and the inhuman, along with a first-person narrative which operates an identification between the writer and the writing subject. However, probably the most important thing to say about Colonna's view on autofiction is that it does not constitute a genre, but rather a "nebula whose

¹ www.louchensaustralia.com/names/middleeast.htm.

² www.behindthename.com.

incandescent heart is the fantastical fabulation” (Colonna, 2004, p. 34).

Later in his book, Colonna identifies a typology for autofiction, establishing four basic types of such self-fabulation. The first one is called *fantastical autofiction*, and is defined as a narrative where “the writer is at the centre of the text (like in an autobiography), but they transfigure their existence and identity into an unreal story, regardless of the constraints of verisimilitude”. As for this “projected double” of the writer, Vincent Colonna claims they “become ‘out of the norm’ [in its most literal sense], a pure hero of fiction nobody would ever bother to read as an image of the writer” (Colonna, 2004, p. 75).

Secondly, the author identifies what he calls *biographical autofiction*, where

[...] the writer is always the hero of his story, the centre around which the narrative matter gravitates, but he fictionalizes his existence from real facts [and] remains as near as possible to verisimilitude (Colonna, 2004, p. 93).

Colonna goes on to say that in biographical autofiction, writers “remain plausible, avoid the fantastical [so that] the reader will understand that they are faced with ‘true-lying’, a twist at the service of veracity” (Colonna, 2004, p. 93). This type is associated with a rather narcissistic “mythology of the self”.

Following on from this, the third type of autofiction is the *specular* one, in which the mirror metaphor is justified by the presence of “the book within the book”. In more ways than one, this attitude is described as “reflecting/reflective” and implies that

[...] the text’s realism [...] takes a secondary role and the author ceases to occupy the central position in the book [...] and places himself on a corner of the work, which reflects his presence like a mirror” (Colonna, 2004, p. 119).

The author mentions Velásquez’s *The Maids of Honour* as the classic reference to this type of autofiction.

Finally, Vincent Colonna chooses the adjectives *intrusive* or *authorial* to designate his fourth type of autofiction, which he explains in the following terms:

In such a posture, if it may be thus considered, the writer’s transformation does not take place by means of a character, their interpreter does not belong in the intrigue as such. The writer’s avatar is a reciter, a storyteller or a commentator, that is, an “author/narrator” on the margins of the intrigue. [...] [This posture] presupposes a third-person novel with a voice external to the subject, [...] a solitary, disembodied voice, running parallel to the story (Colonna, 2004, p. 135).

From this typology, which Colonna himself, faithful to his approach to autofiction as a nebula instead of a genre, guards from being taken too strictly as impregnable conceits, one can gather that, much as Saleem Sinai wants the reader to regard him as the writer of an autobiography, *Midnight’s Children* may be viewed as autofiction if one concentrates on the position of Salman Rushdie, the writer, before his work. The novel is a first-person narrative which opens its doors freely to the fantastical and the inhuman, and whose narrator holds both biographical and identitarian resemblances to his author.

In order to elaborate on the above, an investigation is needed into the nature and structure of the narrative process in the book. To start with, the mirror metaphor can be of further use here. Saleem as Rushdie’s specular image has been posited already, but a second *reflecting/reflective* relationship must be studied. *Midnight’s Children* must be approached by the reader as if s/he were actually witnessing its very writing, as if it were an incomplete book, one that might actually not be completed, given the narrator’s constant insistence that he is rushing against time, against his very body’s bursting at the seams. And how does Rushdie create this feeling for the reader? By means of a listening character, who is no other than Padma, Saleem’s lover-cum-nurse-cum-employee. The writing of the novel intends to enact Saleem’s telling of the story to Padma and gives it an orality character typical of Indian storytelling. And Padma interferes with the telling of the tale, by insisting on being given details before the right time, by passing increasingly judgmental remarks on the events described to her, and even by walking out on Saleem in a moment of fury, which renders him feverish and delirious, unable to keep control over his own narrative. In this respect, Padma has apparently enabled Rushdie to construct a powerful mirror for the reader. Michael Gorra (1997), in his *After Empire*, prefers to see in Padma a reflection of Rushdie’s impossible audience: the Indian masses to whom English is inaccessible, although the tone and style of the narrative, which borrows much from the Bollywood ethos, would be dear to the Indian population. In fact, nothing precludes a reading of Padma as a reflected image of the reader along with Gorra’s interpretation of her, for one can safely assert that Rushdie’s insertion of Padma in the story obliges the educated Western reader, arguably Rushdie’s major audience, to metamorphose, through the act of reading the novel, into the Indian reader ever so distant from the intellectual

formation required by such complex, at times evasive, writing machines as Salman Rushdie's. In other words, the very reading of *Midnight's Children* belongs to the realm of fiction, or the performative acts, for that matter.

A second element in this assessment of the narrative technique employed by the author is the prevalence of the future tense over the past, the latter being the verb tense of choice for classical autobiography. An illuminating moment in the novel is that when Padma, still uninformed about Saleem's father's identity, and becoming ever more confused about the emergence of more and more characters in the narration, asks him, in the most savory ignorance of technique or form: "Is that him? [...] That fat, soft, cowardly plumpie? *Is he going to be your father?*" (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 52). What is revealed by this fragment is that Padma's reception of Saleem's "autobiography" is tinted by a feeling that Saleem has absolute control over his tale, which is not too far away from common-sense views on authorship. In reality, Saleem does attempt to keep at the helm of his narration, and he even compares himself to an "incompetent puppeteer [...] [who] reveal[s] the hands holding the strings" (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 70). Nevertheless, this is no more than an act of self-delusion, since the tragedy in *Midnight's Children* resides in the fact that Saleem Sinai was born, in his own words, "mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 3).

This language of imprisonment, along with the narrator's insistence that he himself and India are but mirrors of each other, has led many critics to approach this novel as an allegory to the history of post-independence India. This is a perfectly plausible interpretation, one that has, in fact, gained textbook status in the literary world. In this essay, however, my utilisation of the concept of *autofiction*, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, reveals my search, through the pages of this mind-boggling novel, for traces of the condition of the subject in a state of diaspora.

The term *diaspora* is a tempting one, but like all temptations, it is not without risks. The body of theory and critical thinking around this concept is just too large to be duly acknowledged in an article of such a limited scope as this one. To compound the difficulty, *diaspora* is used, more often than not, as a synonym for *exile*, even in very serious, well-researched texts. To help me steer clear of this risk, I shall refer to an illustrative article by John Durham Peters entitled "Exile, Nomadism and Diaspora", whose distinction between the two concepts is of use here.

The key contrast with exile lies in diaspora's emphasis on lateral and decentered relationships among the dispersed. *Exile* suggests pining for home; *diaspora* suggests networks among compatriots. Exile may be solitary, but diaspora is always collective. Diaspora suggests real or imagined relationships among scattered fellows, whose sense of community is sustained by forms of communication and contact such as kinship, pilgrimage, trade, travel, and scattered culture (language, ritual, scripture, or print and electronic media). Some communities in diaspora may agitate for return, but the normative force that return is desirable or even possible is not a necessary part of diaspora today [...] (Peters, 1999, p. 20).

One of the most poignant passages in *Midnight's Children* is Saleem's realization that "most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence", which is also one of the moments when he most vocally suspects the writing of his story has not been faithful to his history. This may be what he confesses at by writing that "perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin" (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 491).

Salman Rushdie has been living away from his native India since the mid-1960s and is currently a New York City resident, which means he has written the bulk of his work away from his country of birth. This fact leads one to categorize him as an Indian diasporic writer, at least if one is to give credit to Peters's formulation above, which postulates that diaspora, as a characteristic state of "the dispersed", is more strongly defined as a set of "lateral and decentered relationships" between them. And Rushdie's instrument for relating with the dispersed is naturally his writing. As we have seen above, most of Rushdie's readers are Western-based, but not precisely Western-born. Like him, many face the daily conflicts and incongruities of a life that seeks to take root in a foreign land. The use of the "centered" phrase "to take root" is not a slip but, rather, a premeditated way of pointing to what constitutes the conflicts – but also the gains – of diaspora: in the impossibility of actually "rehomeing" oneself, one resorts to the symbolic in order to constitute a collective sense of self in territories that cannot always be described as welcoming to the foreign-born. And the work of such pre-eminent figures as Rushdie and a myriad others is fundamental in the establishment of this sense of belonging. Besides, these writers' works represent a conscious effort to counterbalance biased articulations of the non-Western, and they prove invaluable in these times of increasing animosity and misunderstanding between clashing community values.

Now returning to Saleem's assertion that "what

matters takes place in our absence”, we cannot help associating the narrator’s claim with Rushdie’s own condition as a deracinated citizen and artist. This is not to say that Rushdie sounds at all despondent as a result of his state. In fact, Peters’s conceptualization of diaspora has been chosen here precisely for the optimistic colors he paints it in. The point being made is that one’s home country cannot be “lived out”, and writing fiction is the way many have chosen to come to terms with that. Take Rushdie himself in the introduction to his famous *Imaginary Homelands*:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge [...] that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie, 1991a, p. 10).

The point being made here is that these “Indias of the mind” are Rushdie’s filling in the void created by those things that matter but take place away from us. Besides, by stating that most things that matter take place in our absence, Rushdie endorses Saleem’s resigned conclusion, as he nears the end of his “search for meaning”, that “I am the sum total of everything that went before me [...]” (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 440).

By way of a conclusion, a return is necessary to Vincent Colonna’s formulations on autofiction. Of the four types compiled by the author, *Midnight’s Children* cozily exemplifies at least two of them, namely the *fantastical* and the *specular* variants. Indeed, the novel belongs to the field of the fantastical. The implausibility of its plot is justified by Rushdie as a direct consequence of the kind of mindset he and his fellow countrymen grew up in, surrounded by India’s millennia-old tradition of storytelling and religious mythology. It is also explained by Saleem, who, in his insistence that what he has written “is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother’s-head truth” (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 230), feels baffled that anyone might disbelieve his account of facts and accept the State’s version of reality, which, to him, sounds no less fantastical. (Saleem/Salman’s bitterness towards the Indian State, in particular of Indira Gandhi, is a remarkable undercurrent in the book, which requires special treatment elsewhere.)

The reason why the *biographical* and the *authorial*

types are not quite fruitful to analyze this novel is given, predominantly, by the fact that Rushdie, unable to avoid writing himself into his book, does so in such a way as to make the text feel like a hall of mirrors, where each new entrant has his sight now distorted, now set right, according to the angles they place themselves at with the array of mirrors at their disposal. In his autofiction, Rushdie is superbly successful at writing himself into his India, as well as at speaking to/for a multitude of other people who seek to read themselves out of his books. In so doing, he acts in a remarkably unobtrusive way, which means that his biography and his *authority* are sidelined.

Secondly, one cannot fail to see in the following passage the deep respect Rushdie has for his audience along with his acceptance that, as a writer, he will not make himself without a readership. The passage in question reads: “human beings, like nations and fictional characters, can simply run out of steam, and then there’s nothing for it but to finish with them” (Rushdie, 1991b, p. 374). After reading this, there is no room for surprise or disappointment that Saleem Sinai is destroyed at the end of the novel, and this “writing off” of the narrator passes on to the reader or the critic the responsibility of bringing “fresh air” to him (Saleem) and what he has been/will be infinitely made to represent in the literary world.

Midnight’s Children is one of those frustratingly unforgettable experiences. A book you can never read enough, but one that may be read too much.

“But that might have been only my way of looking”

It is not uncommon to see Salman Rushdie being compared to V. S. Naipaul, the famous, sometimes notorious, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2002. Like Rushdie, Naipaul was born in an English colony, in his case Trinidad, except that his birth took place years before actual independence. Besides, Naipaul is third-generation Indian, his grandparents having emigrated to the Caribbean as indentured laborers in the dying hours of black slavery. Barely eighteen years of age, V. S. Naipaul left his home island to obtain a British education, and has lived in England ever since, where he produced the whole of his vast work in fiction and non-fiction. Again like Rushdie, Naipaul’s writing has not left his native Trinidad behind. In fact, as we shall see, his writing as a whole is heavily dependent on space, not least the Caribbean.

But the style of the two, as well as their attitudes to their postcoloniality, could not be more

divergent, as the following reading of some aspects of Naipaul's 1987 novel *The Enigma of Arrival* should demonstrate.

The book opens with the nameless narrator carefully painting a picture of his removal to a cottage located in the grounds of a once-wealthy country manor in the county of Wiltshire in the south of England. From very early on in the book, one feature of its writing stands out: the meticulous, almost obsessive, treatment conferred on space, both natural and man-made. The reader unfamiliar with the sites being described can feel exasperatingly at a loss in some parts of the book. Nonetheless, past this initial stage of *settling*, rather than *sitting*, down to read, a comfortable sense of accommodation takes hold. The reader has moved to Wiltshire and now inhabits the narrator's cottage. But the comfort with the landscape is not untainted, as this narrator is too contagious a figure to allow you to follow him without partaking of his discomfort in the world, his "raw nerves", as he puts it time and again.

I would have been nervous to meet people. After all my time in England I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man's country, felt my strangeness, my solitude. And every excursion into a new part of the country – what for others might have been an adventure – was for me like a tearing at an old scab (Naipaul, 1988, p. 7-8).

One might understandably ask what this "old scab" stands for exactly. And it is through the signs of *pain* and *hurt* that *The Enigma of Arrival* will be read here.

As the narrator falls into a routine of daily walks along the several pathways that crisscross the region he has moved to, the different features of the land and the people who inhabit it kick-start a series of recollections and associations that serve to help the reader learn more about the subject who is writing the book. This is how we are told that, years before the narrative present, the narrator took a flight from his native island of Trinidad to New York, where he boarded a ship bound for the English port of Southampton. In England, he went to Oxford University and graduated to become a writer of major significance. And this is where the reader meets the narrator back in his cottage, now established as a professional author.

What, however, is most striking about his emigration is the fact that he left for England with the express purpose of *becoming* a writer. Why would he consider this move fundamental to his literary aspirations? Out of the many different answers to this absolutely pivotal question, at least two are

worth mentioning here. First, the narrator received his formal education in a British colony, which, as has been amply documented, meant he was inculcated with the notion that Europe, and England in particular, was the site of true culture and the horizon for those striving to have a say in it. Secondly, the abstractness of this education, continually revolving around far away landscapes and experiences, left the narrator with a sense that reality was to be encountered elsewhere. In other words, in order to become a writer, his homegrown "material", as he puts it, would not suffice. He would only be able to "flesh it out" through a life abroad. In fact, this is the focus of much angry criticism leveled at Naipaul by those who interpret this stance of his not so much as an attempt to make sense of his colonial upbringing as an outright surrender to imperial values.

To become a writer, one needs material in more ways than one: pen and paper is also writing material. Our then-young narrator purchases

[...] a cheap little lined pad with a front cover that holds envelopes in a pocket [...] [and] an 'indelible' mauve pencil, of the sort that serious people [...] used in those days (Naipaul, 1988, p. 106).

His idea of a writer was that of someone who takes notes and subsequently turns those into serious, insightful literature. The note-taking writer-in-the-making must be an observant character, and the reader is treated to absolutely delicious recollections of his diligent sense of urgency. Taxi drivers, fellow passengers, guesthouse workers, college friends, meetings of different sorts, all of these are "noted down" and later on will be accordingly "written". But artists are also beings prone to the disconcerting experience of epiphany, and the narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* is no different. Remembering a group of acquaintances he had made during his years as an undergraduate, all of whom had been emigrants to England during the migration bubble of the 1950s, he realizes what fault there was with his writing, which rendered it so unfulfilling in his view.

It wasn't only that I was unformed at the age of eighteen or had no idea what I was going to write about. It was that the idea given me by my education [...] was that the writer was a person possessed of sensibility; that the writer was someone who recorded or displayed an inward development. So, in an unlikely way, the ideas of the aesthetic movement of the end of the nineteenth century and the ideas of Bloomsbury, ideas bred essentially out of empire, wealth and imperial security, had been transmitted to me in Trinidad. To be that kind of writer (as I

interpreted it) I had to be false; I had to pretend to be other than what a man of my background could be. *Concealing this colonial-Hindu self below the writing personality, I did both my material and myself much damage* (Naipaul, 1988, p. 146).

This revelation contains the inescapable truth that must be faced by all so-called postcolonial writers: that the empire has been a given in their lives and, as such, cannot be left unacknowledged in their work, at the risk of rendering it “false” to itself.

The above should leave no doubt that Naipaul’s novel was written with the express purpose of creating in the reader a sense of coalescence between the figure of the narrator and that of V. S. Naipaul himself. In a review of *The Enigma of Arrival*, Salman Rushdie says:

It’s a strange book, more meditation than novel, autobiographical in the sense that it offers a portrait of the intellectual landscape of one who has long elevated ‘the life of the mind’ above all other forms of life. Its subject is the narrator’s consciousness, its reformation by the act of migration, of ‘arrival’, and its gradual turning towards James’s ‘distinguished thing’, death (Rushdie, 1987, s/p).

Further on in his review, commenting on the centrality occupied by the “narrator’s conscience” in the book, Rushdie writes: “Exhaustion [...]; when the strength for fiction fails the writer, what remains is autobiography” (Rushdie, 1987, s/p).

It is true that, despite the fact that the book was published as a novel, it is indisputably autobiographical. But is it autobiography, as suggested by Rushdie? To work on this question, the clue is to be found in a word used, perhaps with fewer implications in mind, by Rushdie himself: *portrait*. Common usage tells us that a portrait is closer to invention than to an aspiration to encapsulate the real. Besides, the presence of such a word in an authoritative analysis of Naipaul’s book serves as a stepping-stone to the concept of the literary *self-portrait*, as developed by Michel Beaujour in his extensive reflection on the issue published in English under the title *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait*. There is no room here to look into the genesis of the concept, which Beaujour traces back to two important phases of the art of rhetoric, one in Antiquity, the other during the Renaissance. Suffice it to say that the concept of the literary self-portrait is deeply associated with that of space, as a consequence of its historical links to mnemonics, which employed the metaphor of the home or the palace as a prop for memorization of information and texts. Besides, it must be remembered that the primary purpose of rhetoric was persuasion, which

weakens its alliance with absolute truthfulness. In Beaujour’s words, the self-portrait differs from the traditional autobiography in that the latter insists on answering the question “Who am I?”, an attempt that invariably connects it to the past and to memorialism. The self-portrait, however, opts for the question “What am I?”, to which the answer should be:

‘I am this appearance’; I am [...] my ‘styles’, my ‘writing’, my ‘text’; or even, more radically, I am style, writing, text; I am a textual and stylistic histrion, wild in my dispersal (Beaujour, 1991, p. 338).

This is what connects the self-portrait to the present, more precisely, to the present of the act of writing. To make this point even clearer, the following passage should be of aid:

Autobiographers and memorialists want to be remembered for the life they have led, for the greater or lesser deeds of which they tell. The memorialist is, first of all, *somebody*, someone of importance who recalls his part in certain affairs. The self-portraitist on the other hand is nothing but his text: he will survive through it, or not at all (Beaujour, 1991, p. 343).

The above is borne out by Rushdie’s reference to Naipaul as “one who has long elevated ‘the life of the mind’ above all other forms of life”.

Interestingly, however, Beaujour claims that the self-portrait, as the present-day avatar of rhetoric, is devoid of the purpose to persuade, which brings to it a certain intransitivity, a “free-standingness” uncommon in writing, which presupposes the existence of a recipient. One can read this as a contradiction, as any claim to intransitivity on the part of a text must be taken as rhetorical. Those who seriously lay claim to intransitivity will never write.

To return to the beginning, one must recall that Beaujour drew a line connecting the ancient art of rhetoric and today’s practice of the self-portrait. A key element in classical rhetoric was the *backgrounds*, spatial objects which would be associated to *images* and *concepts* by the practitioner. This intrinsic relationship to space rendered the rhetorician, like the self-portraitist, a “stroller”. And what better word to characterize Naipaul’s wanderings over the manor grounds in Wiltshire, or, for that matter, his much further-out travels that culminated in his being recognized both as a writer of fiction and of travel books?

Beaujour expands on his point through a study of Michel Butor’s *Portrait de l’Artiste en Jeune Singe* (*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Monkey*). In this book, Butor departs from a “library-chateau-museum and

strange adjoining manors” and embarks through associations and imaginary displacements on a trip to ancient Egypt, where he is immersed in a world of signs and hieroglyphs which will constitute the very essence of his work: the writing of the book itself and the birth of the writer within the book. Egypt is appropriated by the narrator as his “second birth” and Beaujour sees in it the

[...] prima materia for a self-portrait: it is a “treasure-house” from which the author might draw images and the technique of *mise en abyme* (where, for example, the text reproduces itself [...]) to invent a self-portrait. Yet, this is not a work torn by a conflict, since it comes from before (the second) birth and swims too happily in the amniotic fluid of universal analogy for loss, the fall into multiplicity, dereliction, and nonsense, to be inscribed in it (Beaujour, 1991, p. 82-83).

Like Butor, Naipaul picks his way around “strange adjoining manors” and observes more than he interacts with the places and people around him. Initially, perhaps haunted by the now inspiring, now eerie sight of Stonehenge, he sees around himself either “ruins” of a once whole past, or “emanations” of “literature and antiquity”, which lead him to believe all he has been left with is memory, loss, death. This atmosphere awakens in him the recollections described above of his departure from Trinidad and the notes he took while he awaited the call of talent before staking his ground in the literary world. Here it seems important to inquire why these notes return so intensely in his text.

An answer may be found in the self-portrait’s indulgence in the *mise en abyme* technique, which is also elaborated by Beaujour in the terms of “intratextual memory”. A clear moment of *mise en abyme* in *The Enigma of Arrival* is the narrator’s account of how he had originally thought up a story that came to him when he had been leafing through an arts book with a few prints of De Chirico paintings, one of which was entitled precisely *The Enigma of Arrival*. He draws a sketch of his idea for a narrative and this sketch eventually turns out to be a mirror image of the self-portrait he ends up writing.

However, it is to another instance of *mise en abyme* that I would like to turn to in the present reading of Naipaul’s book. Actually, I prefer to concentrate on how his narrative attempts to make up for those original notes he never actually succeeded in properly turning into satisfying literature. Paradoxically, this coming to terms with the fiction he had set out to write produces no fiction, but a self-portrait, as if those innocently scattered notes had been but a disguise to his unconfessed anxiety over departure. Later on, then,

while thoroughly narrativizing a process of “arrival”, he is indeed exorcising a painful process of “departure”, the break from his native Trinidad and his peasant upbringing within the confines of a deeply clannish community.

The key to approaching this book as an attempt to fill a gap between the writer he thought he would be and the writer he actually became is offered by this illuminating passage: “Man and writer [are] the same person. But that is a writer’s greatest discovery. It took time – and how much writing! – to arrive at that synthesis” (Naipaul, 1988, p. 110). And this synthesis cannot come without Naipaul’s formulation of his removal to Wiltshire as a “second childhood”, a phrase that will recur throughout the book. The temptation is too strong to resist, and one cannot help reading this as an urge to return to an origin, a beginning that was not altogether understood by him at the time of its actual occurrence. Unlike Butor, however, this return through writing to before a (second) birth is not without pain, as Naipaul finds himself increasingly immersed in a network of displacement upon displacement. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, the grimness of the ruins is slowly dispelled by the narrator’s wilful decision to reinterpret his initial impressions and replace a dreary climate of decay with the more promising concept of change. *Change* rather than *loss* soothes over the task of returning. But there’s no *place* to return to. Not that Trinidad is not there, but the time-space one strives to come back to has become an eternally deferred beforeness, before culture, before history, before empire, before departure, before birth: a “somewhere-over-the-rainbow” horizon that predates pain. Nevertheless, Naipaul is too cultured a man to take these cravings seriously. He knows better than this. Consequently, comfort is only to be experienced in books, first through reading, later through writing them. And this is what *The Enigma of Arrival* turns out to be: a home, not a Utopia unperturbed by contradiction, but a home for change, where it feels safer to go through the many cycles of one’s life.

Finally, it is important to refer back to Beaujour’s earlier formulation that the self-portrait allows the writer to survive through his text or not at all. Death is present in Naipaul’s book from its inception. First, there is a murder; then Jack, a farmhand much admired by the narrator, falls ill and eventually dies. A fellow writer that flits in and out of the book takes his own life. And the narrator himself, during a walking excursion, is taken seriously ill and realizes he is becoming old and, perhaps, approaching his own death.

The major difficulty in dealing with death within a text is precisely death's intransitivity, which is not a feature of writing, as has been claimed above. So, writing death into a text represents the author's effort to make it (death) transitive. Rushdie was very successful in this operation through the annihilation of Saleem, who, despite his insistence that he had died because the new State of India had killed hope, the hope engendered at that glorious midnight hour of Independence, had also required that future commentators interpret him. His success is well documented, as every person involved in literary studies knows. The same is true of Naipaul's treatment of the idea of death in *The Enigma of Arrival*. In the self-portrait, dying paves the way for renewal and rebirth, as the writer is solely concerned with the text and comes to being through his text. As a consequence, it is the text, not the narrator, or even the writer, that cannot die.

It is undeniable that V. S. Naipaul is a highly controversial author, and much of that controversy was kick-started by himself, who cannot always be defined as a measured, equidistant critic of our times. But it is also true that he remains a writer whose work is continuously misread and at whom a fierce ideological machine is targeted day and night.

The Enigma of Arrival reveals a sincerely solitary persona. Without doubt, it is a novel. I would suggest it is Naipaul's "Novel", his attempt to re-enact a late realization that the writer and the man are one. It may not be his most brilliant piece of writing, but its coming to light renders it impossible to tackle Naipaul's enigma without Naipaul's *Enigma*.

Conclusion

In the case of Salman Rushdie, the resource to autobiography in *Midnight's Children* served for the writer to inscribe his experience of migration and "homelessness" in the most unobtrusive of ways. It also justifies his assertion, through the voice of Saleem, that "most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence", which has been read as the cord that unites Rushdie's experience as a diasporic writer to Saleem's experience of rootlessness.

This explains the choice of Vincent Colonna's conceptualization of "autofiction" to analyze Rushdie's experiment with experience from a distance. In Colonna's work, autofiction is understood as a self-fabulation on the part of the writer, and, as such, permits the author to write himself into his book without necessarily having to remain faithful to reality or even to verisimilitude. His elaboration on the mirror metaphor, along with his advocacy of the fantastical and the inhuman in autofictional writing, has proved

particularly instrumental.

This openness is upheld by the way in which Saleem requires that his autobiography be read and interpreted by posterity, which allows him to literally die in peace, assured that his death will be followed by intense critical energy being expended by readers eager to make sense of his tale. With this, Rushdie voices his optimism towards the experience of dispersal and migrancy, which seems to be permanently calling for the interaction between the self and the other, East and West, the writer and the reader/critic.

V. S. Naipaul is well-known for the controversy he causes. A number of fellow writers and critics identify in his work a layer of alignment with colonial and even neo-colonial ideology. Besides, he has a long history of fierce criticism of many projects from Third-World countries as well as of identity and minority militancy.

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, we have encountered a narrative whose storyline coincides with the biography of its writer, which permits us to read the book as an attempt to render the real into a trope of itself. The line adopted here suggests this should be taken as a rewriting of the author's own beginnings as a writer, during which process he realizes his subject was himself, not so much in that his productions had gravitated around his own limited world and experience, as that his writing *was* his autobiography and vice-versa. This explains the approach to the real as fiction employed by Naipaul.

In order to implement this interpretation on firmer grounds, Michel Beaujour's work on the concept of the literary self-portrait has proved extremely helpful. One significant distinction between autobiography and the self-portrait resides in Beaujour's insistence that the latter lays no claim to the transitivity of the text. In other words, the self-portrait has no other target than itself.

This has been demonstrated in this essay in regard to Naipaul's *Enigma*, which he rightly designates as a novel, one that paces back down his career in search of his origins and beginnings as a writer. His realization that the man and the writer are but one bolsters the thesis being defended here.

Moreover, this possibility of intransitivity runs parallel to Naipaul's desire to detach himself from the political scenario and his declared belief that his contribution and interest are to be found solely in his writing rather than in any ideological affiliation on the part of Naipaul the citizen or the biographical man. The single hurdle Naipaul must face in his attempt is in the very impossibility that a text should be intransitive. *The Enigma of Arrival* cannot subsist

simply and independently as a text. Like Saleem's autobiography, it, too, will be investigated, and Naipaul's particular condition as a diasporic writer will be assessed in full view of the light he has shed on it by writing a self-portrait.

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