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‘The Horizon Conquerors’: Lessing and Naipaul in Post-War London.

By Gillian Dooley

In 1949, Doris Lessing, aged 30, arrived in London from Southern Rhodesia, with a young child and the manuscript of her first novel, impoverished but determined to conquer England on her own terms. The next year, from the other direction, came the 18-year-old V.S. Naipaul, similarly ambitious and equally poor, with the added baggage of his Trinidad-Hindu background, on his way to Oxford to become a writer. As far as we know they did not meet.

With the recent publication of Naipaul’s family correspondence of the 1950s, we now have contemporary, or near-contemporary, accounts from both authors of their first impressions of the metropolis – in Lessing’s case, a memoir titled *In Pursuit of the English*. The myths of empire and metropolis absorbed in their colonial home countries affected not only their expectations but also their perceptions of London in those first years. Later retrospective accounts, in fiction and autobiography, add other perspectives and reveal much about these two very different post-colonial writers.

In 1960, having lived in England for a decade, Lessing recalled her view of England before leaving Southern Rhodesia:

England was for me a grail. And in a very narrowly-defined way. Not long ago people set foot for the colonies – the right sort of people, that is – in a spirit of risking everything and damning the cost. These days, a reverse immigration is in progress. The horizon conquerors now set sail

or take wing for England, which in this sense means London, determined to conquer it, but on their own terms. (*In Pursuit* 9)

In spite of her ironic tone, Lessing is describing here the genuine attraction of the Centre for a colonial. Naipaul, with less irony, a clever but inexperienced teenager, was in the same immediate post-war period longing in his Trinidad home to 'go away never to come back', 'to see something of life' (*Letters* 8-9). Looking back to that time decades later, they both say that they saw the journey to London as the beginning of a life for which their existence up to that point had been nothing but preparation. Naipaul arrived in London in August 1950, en route for Oxford, and stayed in a boarding house in Westbere Road for a few weeks before term began. He has written extensively about this time in *The Enigma of Arrival*. Despite the fact that *Enigma* is labelled 'a novel', he has made it clear that we can take it more or less at face value as an autobiographical work: 'the writer, the observer ... is scrupulously myself. The minute other people are in the picture, that is where the fictive element comes in' ('Enigma of V.S.'). Accordingly, while one needs to retain a certain amount of readerly scepticism, the usual caution about conflating author and narrator is not necessary in this case. He recounts how he

had, for many months during the past worrying year been denying myself things, at one stage even (secretly) denying myself food, out of a wish not to lose my scholarship, the scholarship that was to take me to England and Oxford, which was not a wish so much to go to Oxford as a wish to get out of Trinidad and see the great world and make myself a writer. (*Enigma* 106)

Lessing is thirteen years Naipaul's senior, but even so in her autobiography she describes her arrival in London in 1949 as 'the beginning of my real life A clean slate, a new page – everything still to come.' She goes on, 'Is this an adolescent I am describing? No, I was nearly thirty. I had two marriages behind me, but I did not feel I had been *really* married' (*Walking* 3). Life in the colonies was not experienced by either of them as 'real' in relation to their ambitions and expectations of what life had to offer them.

The pull of the metropolis was, of course, conditioned by the consciousness of being 'colonial'. Naipaul has said, 'one of the terrible things about being a Colonial ... is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know, outside the society you've grown up in' ('V.S. Naipaul' 27). The colonial condition was for both of them partly defined by literature. For Lessing, 'Colonials, the children or grandchildren of the far-flung Empire, arrived in England with expectations created by literature' (*Walking* 22). When newly in London, she says,

I was returned to a child's way of seeing and feeling, every person, building, bus, street, striking my senses with the shocking immediacy of a child's life, everything oversized, very bright, very dark, smelly, noisy. I do not experience London like that now. That was a city of Dickensian exaggeration. I am not saying I saw London through a veil of Dickens, but rather that I was sharing the grotesque vision of Dickens, on the verge of the surreal. (*Walking* 4)

Naipaul, too, discusses the child-like vision of Dickens. He writes in *Enigma*,

The London I knew or imaginatively possessed was the London I had got from Dickens. ... It was his genius to describe it, when he was an adult, as a child might have described it. Not displaying architectural knowledge or taste; not using technical words, using only simple words like 'old-fashioned' to describe whole streets; using no words that might disturb or unsettle an unskilled or unknowledgeable reader. Using no words to unsettle a child far away, in the tropics. (*Enigma* 122-3)

However, while Lessing could share Dickens' 'grotesque vision', Naipaul found that his preparation had been inadequate:

I had come to London as to a place I knew very well. I found a city that was strange and unknown – in its style of houses, and even in the names of its districts; as strange as my boarding house, which was quite unexpected ... The disturbance in me, faced with this strangeness, was very great. (*Enigma* 123)

Nevertheless, this disturbance did not prevent him, once in London, from feeling as he explored his boarding house 'like a man entering the world of a novel, a book; entering the real world' (*Enigma* 119). His whole education had taught him that the 'real' world was not to be found in his Trinidad home, and he describes the background to his feeling that reality resided elsewhere and was constantly eluding him:

The older people in our Asian-Indian community in Trinidad – especially the poor ones, who could never manage English or get used to the strange races – looked back to an India that became more and more golden in their memory. They were living in Trinidad and were going to die there; but for them it was the wrong place. Something of that feeling

was passed down to me. I didn't look back to India, couldn't do so; my ambition caused me to look ahead and outwards, to England; but it led to a similar feeling of wrongness. (*Enigma* 120)

His letters show that after a short time in London this feeling began to transmute itself: although in letters from London in September 1950 he claimed (not entirely convincingly) to be 'absolutely happy' (*Letters* 11), two months later he was once again postponing the beginning of his life: 'My future – such as it is – is a full four years away' (*Letters* 37). In *Enigma* he describes a nostalgia for London similar to his colonial attitude to Trinidad:

I was ready to imagine that the world in which I found myself in London was something less than the perfect world I had striven towards. As a child in Trinidad I had put this world at a far distance, in London perhaps. In London now I was able to put this perfect world at another time, an earlier time. The mental or emotional processes were the same. (121)

He felt that his Earl's Court boarding house 'had come down in the world. Such was my tenderness towards London, or my idea of London' (*Enigma* 119). Once again, 'reality' was eluding his grasp.

For Lessing, the tenderness for London came later, after a few months, as she began to see the city through the eyes of Londoners she had met. She describes in *The Four-Gated City*, for example, how Martha, still at this early stage of the novel a semi-autobiographical figure, 'walked in a double vision, as if she were two people: herself and Iris, one eye stating, denying, warding off the total hideousness of the whole area, the other, with Iris, knowing it in love' (20). She admitted in *In Pursuit* 'that for the whole of the first year, London

seemed to me a city of such appalling ugliness that I wanted only to leave it' (28). She saw ugliness everywhere, in the clothes, the streets, the buildings, the interior décor, the river; and her aesthetic judgment of the city became a moral judgment of its citizens: 'what race was this that filled their river with garbage and excrement and let it run smelling so evilly between the buildings that crystallized their pride, their history?' (*Four-Gated City* 27). This conflation of aesthetics and morality is a lifelong habit of Lessing's, one that she seems not to be aware of.

Older and more experienced than Naipaul, she had the confidence to make such judgments, though she was also conscious of the 'half-buried, half-childish, myth-bred emotions' of words like 'Piccadilly Circus, Eros, Hub, Centre, London, England ... each tapped underground rivers where the Lord only knew what fabulous creatures swam!' (*Four-Gated City* 34). Naipaul, still almost a child on his arrival in London, with no experience of large cities, wrote 37 years later that

I had no eye for architecture; there had been nothing at home to train my eye. ... On my tourist excursions I went looking for size. It was one of the things I had travelled to find, coming from my small island. I found size, power, in the area around Holborn Viaduct, the Embankment, Trafalgar Square. ... I grew to feel that the grandeur belonged to the past; that I had come to England at the wrong time; that I had come too late to find the England, the heart of empire, which (like a provincial, from a far corner of the empire) I had created in my fantasy. (*Enigma* 119-120)

At the time he could not admit his disappointment either to his family or, one suspects, to himself: he wrote home in December 1950, ‘there is so much more romance here. It gets dark at about half past three and all the lights go on’ (*Letters* 43). Back in Oxford, he wrote that he was homesick for London.

London is a city for people who have grown up in cities. If you want noise without boisterousness, and crowds without crush, you should like it. Of course, its neon signs appear adolescent besides those of New York but about London there is a reserved, austere beauty. I don’t see how I could live anywhere else but in London. Everything is at hand. (*Letters* 54)

The affectation of this knowing, cosmopolitan air – comparing New York to London, even though the letter’s readers have never seen either, is unwittingly comic in an inexperienced 18-year-old, and in spite of the raw, bumptious tone of many of his letters, he did not yet have the experience to criticise what he believed he should revere.

To define oneself as colonial, one needs to be able to identify the metropolitans: but who were the English? In her 1960 memoir Lessing points out that ‘while the word *English* is tricky and elusive enough in England, this is nothing to the variety of meanings it might bear in a Colony’ (*In Pursuit* 2). She expands humourously on the difficulty of defining, or finding, a quintessentially English person; and describes, tongue in cheek, how, having found a man who seemed ‘the real thing – tall, asthenic, withdrawn; but above all, he bore all the outward signs of the inward, intestine-twisting prideful melancholy,’ she is then disappointed: “‘I am not,” he said, with a blunt but basically forgiving hauteur, “English. I have a Welsh grandmother.”” She goes on,

The sad truth is that the English are the most persecuted minority on earth. It has been so dinned into them that their cooking, their heating arrangements, their love-making, their behaviour abroad and their manners at home are beneath even contempt, though certainly not comment, that like Bushmen in the Kalahari, that doomed race, they vanish into camouflage at the first sign of a stranger. (*In Pursuit* 3)

As she got to know people in her boarding house in the East End, she found further intricacies in the use of the word 'English'. Her friend Rose, for example, regarded her landlady as a foreigner because she had an Italian grandmother, the landlord as unEnglish because he came from Newcastle, and said of herself: 'I'm from London ... That's what I mean when I say I'm not English. Not really. When I talk of English, what I mean is, my grandad and grandma. That's English. The country' (*In Pursuit*).

In spite of these confusions, Lessing already had an idea of Englishness formed from her own family and other English settlers in Rhodesia. She describes in *Under My Skin* her parents' struggle to maintain English manners and customs in the African bush: this is also a continuing theme in her African novels and stories, beginning with *The Grass is Singing*. Naipaul, on the other hand, claims in *Enigma* that he had known only one Englishwoman when he sat next to another on the plane from Trinidad to New York: he 'had no means of reading her character or intelligence or education' (*Enigma* 102). He recalls his delight in the 'Englishness' of his London boarding-house manager at a lunch party soon after he arrived, dazzled by his manner and his jokes, which were 'just the kind of thing I had travelled to London to find, just the kind of material which would help to define me as a writer. ... Though I had no social

knowledge to set it off" (*Enigma* 127). In his 1958 essay, 'London', he seems to confirm this memory, and offers an explanation for his continuing lack of social knowledge:

In England everything goes on behind closed doors. The man from the warm country automatically leaves the door open behind him. The man from the cold country closes it: it has become a point of etiquette. ... The privacy of the big city depresses me. There are no communal pleasures in London. ('London' 14-15)

This passage is a response to 'people who have wished me well [who] have urged me ... to write about England' ('London' 14), explaining why it was difficult for him to do so. A little later, in 1962, he did write a book about England, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, but as recently as 1992 he found himself still tormented by what he called its 'errors': 'to write a book as though you were this third-person omniscient narrator who didn't identify himself was in a way to be fraudulent to the material, which was obtained by me, a colonial, living precariously in London' ('Delivering' 156). Looking back at his first months in London, he recognises that,

two weeks away from home, when I had thought there was little for me to record as a writer, and just eighteen, I had found, if only I had had the eyes to see, a great subject. Great subjects are illuminated best by small dramas; and in the Earls Court boarding house ... there were at least ten or twelve drifters from many countries of Europe and North Africa, who were offering themselves for my inspection, men and women, some of whom had seen terrible things during the war and were now becalmed and quiet in London, solitary, foreign, sometimes idle, sometimes half-

criminal. These people's principal possessions were their stories, and their stories spilled easily out of them. But I noted nothing down. I asked no questions. (*Enigma* 130)

The reason for his blindness, he says, was that he 'continued to think of myself as a writer and, as a writer, was still looking for suitable metropolitan material' (*Enigma* 124) – with only a 'vague idea' of what he meant by 'metropolitan' – defined by writers such as J.R. Ackerley, Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. His gradual realisation of his difference from these writers, and his identification of his own great subject – people in motion, the exiled, the dispossessed, the casualties of empire – became something of an obsession in later works such as *Finding the Centre*, *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, and for a time almost became in itself his major theme. Naipaul has developed a habit of reviewing his life, and seeing each stage he has passed through as part of a necessary, albeit painful, process of perfecting himself as a writer. His early time in England, especially London, was a period of loneliness and disorientation, but he found at that early stage of his career that London was the best place for him, as a writer, to live, even though 'it is not a place I can write about' ('London' 16). In his recent novel *Half a Life* he has once again revisited the London of the 1950s. In a significant departure from his other fiction over the past 20 years or more, there is no explicit identification of himself with the novel's main character, Willy. The date of his arrival in England, also, is set six years later than his own, at the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956. However, Willy's early experiences of London are very reminiscent of Naipaul's recollections in *Enigma*:

He knew that London was a great city. His idea of a great city was of a fairyland of splendour and dazzle, and when he got to London and began walking about its streets he felt let down. He didn't know what he was looking at. The little booklets and folders he picked up or bought at Underground stations didn't help; they assumed that the local sights they were writing about were famous and well understood; and really Willie knew little more of London than the name. ... He was disappointed by Buckingham Palace. He thought the maharaja's palace in his own state was far grander, more like a palace, and this made him feel, in a small part of his heart, that the kings and queens of England were impostors, and the country a little bit of a sham.' (*Half a Life* 52)

Perhaps the reason for Naipaul's return to the novel as most would define it in *Half a Life*, after more than twenty years of writing what were frankly autobiographical novels and his own brand of travel books, was the centrality of the exploration of his main character's difficult and delayed sexual awakening, and a diffidence or delicacy about writing about these matters without the protection afforded by a fictional persona. Willy feels himself very much at a disadvantage in London because he has not learnt to seduce women as boys from less ritualised societies have, and consequently can only make clumsy, though frequently successful, passes at his friends' girlfriends. A similar theme appears in Naipaul's youthful letters to his sister Kamla. Within weeks of arriving in London, he was telling her that he had met two girls, one 'has packed me up. She wants to be faithful to her boyfriend' (*Letters* 14). Even on the boat trip from New York he boasts of receiving sexual encouragement from a married woman. London for both the young Naipaul and his character Willy

was a place for education in sexual matters as well as other aspects of culture – architecture, food, manners, dress.

Lessing says in her autobiography *Walking in the Shade* that, until she had come to London, it hadn't occurred to her 'that my early life had been extraordinary and would make a novel' (14), and although her first novel *The Grass is Singing* and her early stories did focus on Africa, the semi-autobiographical novel *Martha Quest* was not written until she had been in England for some time and had made this discovery about the value of her own past as subject matter. However, unlike Naipaul, she had no qualms about setting stories in England as well: her background allowed her to assume a more ready understanding of the society she discovered when she arrived in London. She described in *In Pursuit of the English* her early reactions to Londoners:

Here was the face, which comes as a shock to a colonial, used to broad, filled-in, sunburned faces. It is a face that is not pale so much as drained, peaked rather than thin, with an unfinished look, a jut in the bones of the jaw or the forehead. People were smaller. ... I had brought the colonial attitude to class with me. That it does not exist. (66-7)

This 'colonial attitude' had its uses: being outside the class system, 'the colonial could ask personal questions a fellow Englander could not' (*Four-Gated City* 113). Also, she found, 'When I first arrived, my Rhodesian accent enabled me to talk to the natives – that is, the working class – for I was seen as someone outside their taboos, but this became impossible as soon as I began talking middle-class standard English ... A curtain came down – slam' (*Walking* 54). The war was a constant backdrop to English life still: 'In 1950 in London, everybody I met had come out of the army from battlefields in Burma,

Europe, Italy, Yugoslavia, had been present when the concentration camps were opened, had fought in the Spanish war or was a refugee and had survived horrors' (*Walking* 38), and Lessing, unlike Naipaul, could see the novelistic potential in their stories. Even those who had stayed in England during the war inspired in Lessing 'the sense of guilt which accompanied all colonials to England in 1949', and she found to her annoyance that she responded automatically with gifts of cigarettes or nylons when her landlady complained, 'We had such a hard time during the war, dear, you wouldn't believe it' (*In Pursuit*). But for the Londoners, nostalgia for the war was also strong. Her friend Rose

talked about the war all the time. At this distance ... those six years of hardship meant to her warmth, comradeship, a feeling of belonging and being wanted, a feeling she had never been given before or since. She could talk about the war for hours and never mention death, fear, food, shortages or danger. (*In Pursuit* 113)

Naipaul's description in the essay 'London' of the lack of a public social life is confirmed by Lessing's memories of London in the late 1940s and early 1950s, related in her autobiography:

That London of the late 1940s, the early 1950s, has vanished, and now it is hard to believe it existed. It was unpainted, buildings were stained and cracked and dull and grey; it was war-damaged, some areas all ruins, and under them holes full of dirty water, once cellars, and it was subject to sudden dark fogs – that was before the Clean Air Act. ... No cafés. No good restaurants. Clothes were still 'austerity' from the war, dismal and ugly. Everyone was indoors by ten, and the streets were empty. ...

Rationing was still on. The war still lingered, not only in the bombed places but in people's minds and behaviour. Any conversation tended to drift towards the war, like an animal licking a sore place. There was a wariness, a weariness. (*Walking* 4-5)

In *The Four-Gated City* she talks about the freedom Martha felt in the first few months in London – freedom from friendships, freedom to inhabit other identities for a few hours if she chose: London's 'real gift to her' was her 'condition of being so alien. Of walking always as a watchful critic' (47). One of the major differences between Lessing and her character Martha in this novel is the practical one that Lessing had a small child when she arrived in London, and was not so free to indulge her yen for avoiding responsibilities. *In Pursuit*, which is a more straightforwardly factual memoir, describes London as 'this terrible frightening city' (94), but only in passing. The principal difficulty Lessing faced was finding affordable accommodation for herself and her child in the bomb-damaged east end. Loneliness, homesickness and fear loom larger in Naipaul's narratives. Even in his letter home in December 1950, he admitted that he was 'so much alone' and 'thinking of home' (*Letters* 43). In *Enigma* he recalls encountering a man from his ship voyage to England, and wanting 'to be as he was at that moment, a man on the move. I passionately wanted, though hardly arrived in London, to be free of London. ... I wanted that day to feel that England was temporary for me too' (158). Both he and Lessing had so much invested in this journey – ambition, new beginnings, new-found freedom – that there was bound to be some barely admitted fear and disappointment.

How do these various books compare as sources for information about London in the eyes of the newly-arrived colonial? Naipaul's novel *The Enigma*

of Arrival is very detailed in its description of the expectations and reactions of his youthful self, from a standpoint some 35 years later. The only early sources we can compare it with are a few of the letters home which have now been published, and some essays from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The letters, of course, fulfil a very specific purpose – partly bravado and partly reassurance. Thus, ‘England is proving very pleasant’ (*Letters* 13) might be designed to convince both himself and his family of that fact, and ‘I was thinking of home. I could visualise every detail of everything I knew’ (43) might be intended to reassure his family that he was missing them. The letters belie, to some extent, the famous hatred of Trinidad he has expressed in statements like,

When I was in the fourth form I wrote a vow on the endpaper of my ‘Kennedy’s Revised Latin Primer’ to leave within five years. I left after six; and for many years afterward in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad. (‘Dark Visions’ 64)

My belief is that the distaste for Trinidad is genuine, but so was his homesickness for the close family life which was all he had ever known, and the letters are invaluable for showing a soft underbelly which existed – and no doubt still does – under the fierce carapace which has been Naipaul’s public image for many years. The early essays have a slightly petulant tone which betrays the discontent of unmet expectations, not yet refined into the consistent world-view of the later work. *Enigma* also meticulously deconstructs the remembered point of view of that 18-year-old, sifting through memories to uncover some which had been repressed through humiliation or embarrassment, and *Half a Life* reveals, behind the translucent veil of fiction, his early sexual

experiences in England. Like everything he writes, the letters, the essays and the novels are revealing even when they are intended to be otherwise.

Lessing's three works dealing with this time are equally problematic in their way. *In Pursuit of the English* is a delightful book, funny in a way she has rarely allowed her writing to be since. She mentions it in *Walking in the Shade*, written over 35 years later:

A little book called *In Pursuit of the English*, written when I was still close to that time, will add depth and detail to those first months in London. At once, problems – literary problems. What I say in it is true enough. ... But there is no doubt that while 'true', the book is not as true as what I would write now. It is a question of tone, and that is no simple matter. That little book is more like a novel; it has the shape and the pace of one. It is too well shaped for life. (4)

Once again, the purposes of these two books affect their authenticity. The earlier memoir, shaped 'like a novel', cannot, according to Lessing, be as 'true' as what she is writing nearly 40 years later. On the other hand, when writing the first volume of her autobiography, she says she reread *The Golden Notebook* and concluded 'there is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth' (*Under* 314). If we turn to *The Four-Gated City*, whose protagonist, Martha, has been in the four previous *Children of Violence* novels more or less a version of Lessing – she told an interviewer in 1980 that the character of Martha, 'this pugnacious intolerant character, yes absolutely, of course, that's me' ('Writing') – we can discover something of Lessing's reactions to the city on her first arrival. This novel, however, departs from autobiography fairly soon, and the absence of the child from Martha's life must have made a significant difference

between her early London experiences and Lessing's own. Nevertheless, Martha's reactions – to the ubiquitous ugliness, to the insolence of waiters in the 'good' middle-class restaurants – are obviously based on personal recollections, and are consistent throughout all the sources. A striking difference between Lessing's accounts and Naipaul's is that her perceptions have changed very little since that time. Writing in her late seventies, she is sometimes a little ironic about her younger self, but there is no sustained interrogation of her assumptions at the time. There is a quality in much of Lessing's writing of finding what she expects to find, and it seems that at the age of 30 she had already made up her mind about the world: new experiences will always interest her, but often the interest seems to be a reflection of herself, rather than an open-minded investigation which may result in surprise or new knowledge. These two horizon conquerors may have shared some attributes upon first arriving, but one cannot help feeling that though they each carried their own horizons with them to some extent when they arrived in England, finding what they expected to find, Naipaul soon learnt to reject his early way of seeing and to see the world anew in a way which Lessing has never even suspected is possible.

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