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"My second life, so far away from my first": Cultural Capital and the Postcolonial Outsider in *The Enigma of Arrival*

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Abstract: This essay reads V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* against the theory of cultural capital articulated in Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*. Based heavily on Naipaul's own life, the novel is typically read as an elegy for English rural experience in the postwar period, narrated by a figure almost identical to Naipaul himself; this narrator appears to grow into maturity by venerating the ordinary English subjects who dwell in the same countryside that he inhabits as an outsider. However, I argue that *The Enigma of Arrival* manipulates narrative structure—specifically, the juxtaposition of the older, wiser narrator with his supposedly younger, less cultured self—to transcend the postcolonial subject's marginal class position. The apparently provisional paths that lead to maturity, I suggest, are carefully curated in both the novel's narrative structure and its representation of physical space. In this way, the narrator can look back on a representation of outsiderness that he has already surmounted, paying lip service to the challenges of being an outsider but ultimately foregrounding his culturally sophisticated perception. Naipaul's novel thus challenges Bourdieu's formulation that cultural capital replicates statically across generations in a single family unit; the novel uses the postcolonial outsider to reinvigorate English culture's moribund "inside."

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul, Pierre Bourdieu, class, postcolonial, cultural capital

For the Trinidad-born narrator of V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), the ascent to Stonehenge is magnificent but desolate, a disorienting trek along dry riverbeds and abandoned machinery beneath Wiltshire's winter sky. On the approach, the narrator drinks in a countryside that feels "ancient": pines suggest a forest beyond, the land is absent of houses, and the scenery implies "space, unoccupied land, the beginning of things" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 10). Once at the top, though, the feeling of grandeur dissipates. Stonehenge, from this vantage point, is not solitary and remote but actually quite close to civilization, flanked by firing ranges, roads, cars, and "the many little neat houses of West Amesbury" (10). The narrator's impression of endless space turns out to be false, but the novel affords readers only a fleeting sense of his mistake. Looking back at his younger self, the narrator shades virtually every instance of cognitive error with penetrating reflections on the countryside he later comes to know in intimate detail. Before describing his initial view of the pines, for example, he wastes no time revealing that they "falsely" imply "deep country" (10); his disappointment at the summit swiftly yields to a meditation on the origins of the broken-down machinery and unused farmsteads dotting the landscape (11). What saturates the scene, in other words, is not the uncultured naïveté of the postcolonial *arrivant* but a sophisticated knowledge of British history. Naipaul has effectively doubled back over narrative terrain to represent postcolonial outsiderness without conceding the uniqueness of the postcolonial subject's position.

The Enigma of Arrival remains unusual in postcolonial literature for its adoption of the British countryside, rather than the metropolis, as its cultural center. Naipaul has, "unlike most of his fellow migrants[,] . . . chosen to inhabit a pastoral England, an England of manor and stream" (Loh 151), creating an elegy for a bygone era in which the inhabitants of the countryside are dispossessed by the social and economic changes wrought in the postwar period.[1] Yet Naipaul has also faced widespread criticism as a writer who dearly wants to move from postcolonial margin to metropolitan center. If Naipaul is the author for whom colonial clarity always trumps peripheral ambiguity (Meis), his willingness to embrace England has made him the target of critics who "mock what

they regard as an unquestioning deference to English upper-class rural manners" (Loh 151). Ambalavaner Sivanandan openly expresses disdain for Naipaul's worldview, charging that his "imagination is English, of England—of its woods, trees, birds, seas, seasons, stories, lives, loves, poets, kings" (33), while Derek Walcott famously accused Naipaul of displaying "contempt" for his country of origin, casting Naipaul as a slavish Anglophile whose fondest wish was to join England's "squirearchy" (28).

For these and other critics, Naipaul's reverence for Britain borders on uncritical homage, a position that makes the colonial center unavailable as an object of legitimate critique in even his most expansive and self-reflexive fiction.[2] I have no wish to rehearse the extensive list of critics who take exception to Naipaul's characterization of the postcolony; nor do I dispute the assertion that staking a claim to Britain's cultural center has always been important to Naipaul. Instead, I want to challenge the idea that Naipaul's relationship to England is one of unreflective veneration. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979), I argue that *The Enigma of Arrival* recodes English cultural capital as a degenerative form of insiderness that is revitalized by the postcolonial outsider's mobility, cultural sophistication, and keenness of perception.

In the opening chapter of *Distinction*, "The Aristocracy of Culture," Bourdieu links cultural capital intrinsically to taste. It is a "self-evident fact," he contends, that there is "a clear relation between taste and education, between culture as the state of that which is cultivated and culture as the process of cultivating" (11). Out of this relation emerges a system in which those whose education has permitted them to acquire more cultural capital become the recipients of ennobling titles, which can include academic degrees. By contrast, those further down on the hierarchy of cultural capital receive disabling or negative titles that reflect the stigma of their status (23). These titles are not aristocratic or hereditary titles, but rather rooted in a class hierarchy that reflects the transmission of culture by education and family. One's position within this hierarchy determines, for the most part, one's social capital—that is, the benefits one receives from the lattice of personal and cultural connections that constitute a community.

However, in *The Enigma of Arrival*, British culture has decayed into pathology and nostalgia, which is reflected in the physical ruins and sad histories that the white citizens of Wiltshire inhabit without profit. As Philip Dickinson suggests,

> The landlord's vista of picturesque natural ruin appears anomalously free of signs of historical ruination: the landlord can perhaps see the ivy and the forest debris . . . but not the hedges made up of nineteenth-century household rubbish by which the labourers established their claim to the land, asserting their ancient squatters' rights (202). This is an important history of workers' resistance given the political and economic reality of Britain in the 1970s (when most of the events in the novel take place), symptomized by the three-day week and the recession (briefly mentioned in the novel (71)), and later intensified by [Margaret] Thatcher's assault on the trade unions in the 1980s and her racist policy programme (including the changes made to the British Nationality Act in 1981, reflective of a political atmosphere surely informing Naipaul's sense of post-imperial out-of-placeness). (Dickinson 88)

Shadowing this postwar moment is the end of Britain's direct colonial power, as Trinidad and many other British colonies gained independence in the decades following the Second World War. The connections between the end of colonial Britain abroad and ruin at home permeate the novel on many levels: the disrepair of the manor, the growing unemployment in the countryside, the abiding signs of physical and social decay. Stagnation has entered the closed circuit of postwar family relations, stunting the acquisition of social capital and robbing the people of Waldenshaw of vitality, mobility, and perspective. So matters remain until the narrator's arrival.

I use Bourdieu to read *The Enigma of Arrival* because of the implicit cultural and social hierarchies built into the narrator's perception of Britain. These hierarchies include the familiar postcolonial position of outsiderness—the narrator is an Indian-Trinidadian inhabiting the country that, until relatively recently, exercised direct colonial control

over his place of origin. However, the novel's nuanced relationship to class complicates Bourdieu's assessment of cultural experience. The narrator's ascent turns on a double movement: exposing and minimizing the follies of his younger, raw self through the lens of an older narrator who has already transcended the constraints of postcolonial outsiderness. Moreover, this double movement troubles the neatness of Bourdieu's framework by highlighting the geographical and social dislocations that both limit and enable the postcolonial subject. In other words, surviving the debilitating effects of colonialism during his childhood in Trinidad gives Naipaul's narrator the imaginative capacity to assess the decline of the colonial center. The novel exemplifies many of the tenets of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital but punctures that theory at its most tensive point: the revelation, advanced by contemporary sociologists such as John H. Goldthorpe and Paul DiMaggio, that even "disadvantaged" classes have access to leveling institutions (such as school) that provide different forms of cultural capital. Postcoloniality, then, becomes the aperture through which the novel tacitly demonstrates its contestation of cultural capital in the former imperial center.

I. Bourdieu and His Critics

To frame my analysis of the postcolonial outsider, I will trace both the possibilities and limitations of Bourdieu's work. To do so, I turn to a contemporary debate between Goldthorpe and DiMaggio on the question of Bourdieu's ongoing relevance in the field of sociology. At the time of its publication, Bourdieu's *Distinction* was groundbreaking and revolved around the central contention that the social reproduction of class privilege was strong enough within families in France that it overdetermined access to education and success in educational institutions. In short, Bourdieu argued that if a family had access to what he perceived to be high culture—typically a grounding in the arts and humanities—subsequent generations of the same family were virtually assured of enjoying that access, and of success more broadly.

Goldthorpe's criticisms of Bourdieu, as they appear in "Cultural Capital: Some Critical Observations" (2007), are blunt to the point of derision. The opening salvo of his rebuttal characterizes Bourdieu's

oeuvre thus: "There is much in this paper that is original and sound: the difficulty is that what is sound is not original and what is original is not sound" (1). Bourdieu's theory, Goldthorpe suggests, contains "serious inherent weaknesses" that hinge primarily on the absence of convincing empirical evidence (2). Citing multiple studies that add up to a strong "factual case" against Bourdieu, Goldthorpe argues that as secondary education grew in Britain, "substantial and predominantly upward educational mobility . . . did in fact occur between generations," with a corresponding ascension in class status (8). Accordingly, what Goldthorpe sees as the unqualified and uncritical adoption of Bourdieu's theories has led to "the true significance of the research findings that are reported being misconstrued, at least so far as the evaluation of Bourdieu's work is concerned" (12).

DiMaggio, himself a passing target of Goldthorpe's criticisms, resists a wholesale dismissal of Bourdieu by noting the enduring validity of one of his central claims—that "the educational system rewards families and students capable of appropriating prestigious culture" (DiMaggio 4). DiMaggio asserts that Bourdieu's work has acquired persuasiveness and influence for three main reasons: the degree to which he situates education within fields of historical contingency (innovative for the time in which he was writing); his ability to frame cultural capital as the individual's control over certain cultural "goods"; and his view of culture "as a resource over which groups struggled (both to define certain cultural resources as valuable and to monopolize those resources that were so defined)" (2). The flaw in Bourdieu's thought, DiMaggio concedes, is that "the link between family background and cultural capital [is] weak, especially for young men, who seemed to benefit from engagement with high culture only if they were upwardly mobile" (4). However, despite the flaw, DiMaggio values Bourdieu's theories for the way they reemphasize a Weberian sense of "status as process, and status groups as entities that employ culture as a source of solidarity and means of claims-making" (5). In other words, he suggests that Bourdieu's most persuasive insight is his recognition that status and culture are contestable within historical and cultural fields that are constantly in the process of transforming.

DiMaggio's vigorous and even-handed appraisal of Bourdieu provides a useful reference for my application of Bourdieu to *The Enigma of Arrival*. In his walks through the lanes and fields of Wiltshire, Naipaul's narrator transgresses spatial and cultural boundaries, weaving an extended meditation on the decline of rural postwar Britain into memories of his childhood in Trinidad. These walks mirror the novel's narrative strategy, wherein an apparently rambling trajectory conceals the premeditation of fractal recursion: an indefinite repetition whose "shape" remains constant at every scale. Doubling back, Naipaul's postcolonial narrator acquires cultural capital in the former colonial center by displacing the British experience from its "proper" parochial context. The narrator's pursuit of cultural capital, I argue, partakes of the same seemingly haphazard but actually calculated strategy. By concealing the postcolonial migrant's cultural ascension, Naipaul offers keen insights into the limited opportunities afforded to writers of color in Britain's cultural and literary centers. If white writers are allowed the luxury of self-deprecating scrutiny, which rarely reduces them to any kind of ethnic or racial typology, postcolonial writers, who are constantly called upon to be cultural ambassadors, must approach the presentation of their literary and cultural growth with more caution.

II. The Enigma of the Outsider

The narrator's *sub rosa* quest to achieve literary recognition foregrounds the impact of British culture's hegemonic norms on literary maturity as a concept. It also sheds light on Naipaul's own trajectory from postcolonial emigrant to literary insider. Having first gained attention as the author of sensitive, often comedic portrayals of postcolonial Trinidad—most notably *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961)—Naipaul never shied away from indicting his culture of ethnic origin (India) or his birth country (Trinidad) in his subsequent fiction and nonfiction. *The Enigma of Arrival*, published well after Naipaul had already established himself as a preeminent literary name, draws heavily on his own experience. The novel offers a series of reflections on the decline of the semi-fictional village of Waldenshaw, based loosely on Wilford, the village where Naipaul stayed for many

years in a manor of the same name that was within walking distance of a view of Stonehenge. The name Waldenshaw evokes the solitary reflection of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; the novel's narrator is almost identical to Naipaul himself. The narrator describes the slow passage of years during his stay in Waldenshaw, beginning at the end by recounting the life and subsequent death of Jack, a taciturn farm worker whose garden becomes a memorable landmark for the narrator as he ranges across field and down.

Recursion deepens as the narrator circles outward from the opening section, "Jack's Garden," drifting back in time to chronicle his younger self's voyage from Trinidad to England in the late 1950s. Following the narrator's account of this journey, the novel returns to Waldenshaw to describe the progressive decline of the village's inhabitants: the gardener Pitton, laid off because his landlord cannot afford to maintain the grounds; Brenda, murdered by her husband after a brief tryst with a lover in Italy; Alan, a dilettante writer-turned-radio personality who takes his own life; and the narrator's landlord, who is afflicted by a decades-long case of melancholia. Later, the narrator's own physical illness forces him to leave the valley. The novel culminates with the unexpected death of the narrator's sister, Sati, which spurs the narrator to begin writing what will eventually become *The Enigma of Arrival*.

Divided into thirteen brief vignettes, "Jack's Garden" traces the recursive spatial and narrative path by which the narrator, the Indian-Trinadian outsider, discovers the rural British countryside.[3] His initial feeling is one of sensory bewilderment:

> 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, *Enigma* 5)

The narrator's position is one of self-professed outsiderness: recently arrived from Trinidad, bereft of the "immediate knowledge or grounded memory" that might help orient him, he flashes forward to a time when the land is more comprehensible, when he can put proper names to aspects of a countryside that is currently "dense with apparently indecipherable signs" (Radovic 110). At one level, this opening evokes "the colonial experience that makes every colonial subject, in one way or another, an internal exile in his or her own environment" (109).

However, read through the lens of class, this same opening illustrates one of the novel's pivotal narrative strategies: outside movement is the concealed precondition for the acquisition of cultural insiderness. As the narrator describes the process of learning to refer to "flat wet fields with ditches" as "water meadows" and to "the low smooth hills in the background, beyond the river, as 'downs,'" he performs the swiftness and the surreptitiousness of Naipaul's own cultural acquisition. In the same paragraph, the narrator notes the name of the river, the Avon, observing that it is "not the one connected with Shakespeare" and thereby deflecting attention to his prior association with emblematic elements of "high" British culture. Once learned, these terms—water, meadow, down—fade seamlessly into his narrative, never again visible as evidence of the narrator's prior untutored state. The representation of a lack of knowledge—masked and then effaced by an elite cultural formation—is one of the novel's canniest strategies for maintaining the narrator's social capital, a way to domesticate and minimize his professed "nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response" (8).

While the narrator's nerves shape the reader's sense of dislocation, they also convey the subtle prescription of the novel's narrative. Only a few pages into the novel, readers learn that the narrator is in "the other man's country" (8): new to Britain and therefore to the cultural and social traditions that, we presume, will constitute the focus of the narrative to come. What frames this "rawness of response," though, is the narrator's account of his physical trajectory toward Jack's garden, which is accessible by two routes. These two paths establish the narrator's ascendancy by an ingenious sleight of hand: different trajectories that end in the same place, just as the artifice of recursion ends by confirming

the narrator's cultural authority. The paths dominate the opening scene, which ends with the narrator appraising an old metal barn near the best spot to view both Stonehenge and Jack's dwelling:

> I noticed: a small old house of brick and flint with a fine portico; and on the riverbank, very close to the water, a low, white-walled thatched cottage that was being "done up." (Years later that cottage was still being done up; half-used sacks of cement were still to be seen through the dusty windows.) Here, in this settlement, you turned off into the old way to Jack's cottage. (8)

The first path is a shorter, newer way devised primarily for vehicles, while the second path is an older, circuitous route that runs parallel to the Avon and passes a series of small houses and dwellings. Along both paths, though, narrative thought predates and anticipates the narrator's sensory perception. While readers are directed, on the surface, to focus on his initial sensory experience, the walk itself swiftly slips into the shadow of post hoc commentary. Work belies its appearance: despite the continual state of being "done up," there is no true progress, only an arresting visual, to be appreciated for its symbolic resonance, not its physical function. The parenthetical comment, apparently insignificant, is actually a striking example of how Naipaul uses cognitive lag to shift focus from reader time to narrative time. Through this steady recursion, Naipaul minimizes the younger narrator's naïveté by juxtaposing his half-formed impressions with the more mature reflections of his older, wiser self. The young man's "rawness" never appears without the older man's poise, which both undergirds and effaces the uncultured perspective of youth.

I move now to the problem of perspective, in which the novel presents cultural ascent as a process that involves seeing holistically and subordinating personal pathos to perceptual breadth. In the opening chapter, the narrator contrasts his physical encounter with Salisbury Cathedral with the "reproduction of the Constable painting of Salisbury Cathedral in [his] third-standard reader" (7). Here, the novel ironizes what Bourdieu refers to as "the hidden conditions of the miracle of the

unequal class distribution of the capacity for inspired encounters with works of art and high culture in general" (29). Only pathetic "reproductions" of British culture are available to the postcolonial subject in childhood, a reality of the economic and social deprivations of colonialism. The narrator, then, is driven to escape the tyranny of colonial relations and reject his position as a faded copy of the white English original. In this drive, he also displays a vitality that propels him out of Trinidad and toward Britain, leaving his family behind as he "continually rediscovers Trinidad in other geographical locations and defines other environments by evoking Trinidad" (Radovic 109). By making connections between "the material histories that form the nexus between his indentured Indian ancestors, the agricultural landscape that they farmed and the profits of their labour manifested in the crumbling manor estate in Wiltshire" (Loh 158), the narrator elevates and accentuates his ability to see larger patterns of history and colonialism. The narrator's dynamism, perceptiveness, and self-awareness link smoothly to his breadth of cultural knowledge, allowing him to master the very British subjects to whom he appears to be subservient. However, the narrator never openly discloses this knowledge or connects this memory to his willingness to luxuriate in the free play of literary and cultural allusion, a willingness that establishes his uniqueness throughout the novel.

Implicit in the narrator's reflections is the idea of culture as something that invites claims-making—that is, something constantly in the process of being contested. For Goldthorpe, this view of culture remains one of Bourdieu's central insights, even though he acknowledges Bourdieu's failure to account for the possibility of moving up within a given cultural field. Bourdieu's focus on the family as the arbiter of cultural capital, besides being empirically disproven, depends on circumscribing the discussion to a bounded national unit without reference to immigration, a social and cultural flow that breaks open cultural hierarchies. Enter the postcolonial outsider, a figure often shorn of direct contact with a supportive family structure but who nonetheless challenges the idea that cultural capital reproduces only within a static family unit.

A curated set of post hoc reflections laid down along a physical trajectory, the narrator's walk represents his cultural formation: freedom of

movement depends on being a cultural outsider, a person with no roots in the community and no ties to family or place. Through this rootlessness, the narrator is free to make connections that his rooted neighbors cannot. The narrator, for example, writes that Jack "didn't see his setting as a whole," although he did perceive "its components very clearly" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 18). According to the narrator, every aspect of Jack's garden "answered the special idea he had of that thing," elements existing in and of themselves without reference to the "whole" (18). This is an intriguing claim, not least because of its quiet audacity. In no part of this lengthy section does Jack's apparent tendency to compartmentalize appear except through this assertion, which carries the day only because the narrator permits no one else to connect parts to wholes in any broader context. After describing the two walks to Jack's cottage, the narrator reflects on the displaced origins of objects in the countryside: "There was a similar antique fixture in the town of Salisbury, at the upper level of what had been a well-known old grocery shop. It had survived or been allowed to live on as an antique, a trade mark, something suited to an old town careful of its past. But what was antique in the town was rubbish at the bottom of the hill" (13–14). Though a modern shed has replaced the barn near Jack's cottage, the old barn persists as "rubbish" that has likely been preserved because "planning regulations allowed new buildings to go up only where buildings existed" (14). The old barn, then, is ruin preserved to mark the spot of a future building, the contrast with its kitsch cousin in town apparent to no one but the narrator. One barn is rubbish, while the other is fetishized for its nostalgic evocation of prewar Britain. Here and throughout the novel, the narrator is positioned as uniquely capable of tracing the connections between cultural modalities—between rubbish and antique, and so on—that provide a wider sense of Britain's history.

Robert Hamner frames the narrator's trajectory as an "escape from a derelict homeland to the imperial center [that is] marred by the fact that the bucolic old England he had imagined since his youth is beyond its prime" (46). But this decline also affords the narrator an opportunity to assess both its decline and its possibility, to draw out meaning from ruin in the rural countryside. The narrator's characterization of Jack and his

treatment of found objects in Wiltshire form part of a larger tapestry in which he masterfully effaces the cultural privilege of British subjects while appearing to cater to them. In other words, the narrator consistently understands and articulates the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of his white British neighbors better than they do themselves.[4]

The Enigma of Arrival mobilizes memory to describe the narrator's passage into maturity: the guiding symbols of his growth (his appreciation for Jack's garden, his journey to England, and so on) appear in non-chronological order and culminate in the enlightenment he experiences at the wake for his dead sister. "Jack's Garden," in this ostensible passage into maturity, is both the novel's opening and its coda—a circular indication of the writer's dilemma, "a way of affirming the circularity of existence not as a hopeless return to the same but as the concession of a second chance, the certainty that every death will be followed by a rebirth" (Hamner 50). However, the text's continuous display of cultural and social capital drives its structure: a recursive, fractal pattern of understanding that displays the same essential shape at different narrative "scales" and maintains an aura of cultural authority around the narrator (and thus Naipaul). Contingency, then, masks continuity, an adroit narrative strategy for representing postcolonial experience.

III. The Writer's "Second Life"

As noted earlier, *The Enigma of Arrival* presents the narrator's progression from cultural ignorance to maturity as a function of its narrative circularity. However, I argue that this progression is actually driven by a sophisticated authorial presence that remains firmly and continuously in control. At the start of the novel's second section, "The Journey," the narrator explicitly ties his growth to Jack: "To write about Jack and his cottage and his garden it was necessary for me to have lived a second life in the valley and to have had a second awakening to the natural world there" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 97). Jack, "long dead" but still extant as an exemplar of rootedness in the British landscape (99), is positioned as the guiding image for postcolonial ascension. The narrator mentions his own rebirth, his "second life," twice in the space of a few sentences, juxtaposing Jack's stasis—a dead figure tied to

a bygone era—with his own awakening to the richness of experience in Wiltshire. His "second life" finds its expression only through the invocation of someone whose attachment to one plot of land limits his perspective. In this role, Jack loses narrative pride of place in order to elevate the narrator, who plunges into a second life markedly more "natural" than the first (97). However, the narrator's second life requires its own narrative cultivation, even as the paragraph doubles back to a version of the story from before Jack's passing, returning the reader to the start of the novel—to arrival, cottage, and manor. The fractal shape of this recursion demonstrates Naipaul's control: gaining ascendancy, the narrator leaves Jack behind both socially—as his superior, the man capable of seeing farther—and narratively, since this new section is a break from "Jack's Garden."

To be sure, I am not suggesting that the narrator (or Naipaul) treats the people around him with any contempt, implicit or explicit. The narrator, in fact, displays a tremendous amount of sensitivity to the reduced postwar circumstances of Wiltshire's inhabitants. For example, he draws connections between Jack and indentured servants he remembers from Trinidad, contrasting Jack's artistic sensibilities with the labor of gardening he is obliged to deliver (Krishnan 614). However, instead of genuflecting to British culture, as critics have accused him of doing, Naipaul delicately traces a narrative in which the postcolonial outsider is the necessary engine for revitalizing a British culture that has become moribund and begun to fold in on itself. Through this critical lens, the novel's British subjects move from Jack's garden to what we might call Naipaul's garden: a natural phenomenon that nonetheless requires cultivation, not wild nature. Moreover, the reader also receives the proper cultivation, to use Bourdieu's term, to be able to recognize and appreciate the literary quality of Naipaul's fiction.

Recall the debates on cultural capital from earlier. According to DiMaggio, Bourdieu rightly focuses on the contested nature of acquiring cultural capital but wrongly claims that access to this culture is statically reproduced within a family over generations. Correspondingly, Naipaul's narrator constitutes a penetrating literary representation of the challenge that postwar immigration poses to the conventional tenets

of sociology. Having laid Jack to rest within a portion of narrative terrain in which Jack's limited vision becomes his defining characteristic, the narrator reveals the literary origin of the novel's title, which in turn requires an educated appreciation of culture. In other words, the narrator partakes in what Bourdieu refers to as "aesthetic distancing": through distance and detachment, the narrator shifts focus from the "content" (character or plot) to the "form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given" (Bourdieu 34). The novel takes its title from Giorgio de Chirico's "The Enigma of Arrival and the Afternoon," a painting whose title, the narrator notes, was given posthumously by another artist (the poet Guillaume Apollinaire) and not by the painter himself (Naipaul, *Enigma* 98). This collaborative effort, and the recognition that "a second hand had supplied the title" (Hamner 39), allows Naipaul to insinuate himself into the colonial space of artistic creation. A disquieting portrayal of arrival to a lonely, deserted coastal town, the painting is the focus of the narrator's imagined novel. This same deserted town will "swallow up" the protagonist, stealthily consuming his life until the day he tries to return to the pier, at which point he will realize that the ship on which he came to the town has long since sailed away and that his life is essentially over.

Consumption, here, acquires several layers of meaning: being swallowed up is at once the desired relationship between the narrator and his writing, the symbolic fate of so many of the countryside dwellers, and the means by which the narrator seeks to shed his status as a postcolonial emigrant from the cultural margins and absorb the stories of his neighbors. Being swallowed up means effortlessly navigating a complex web of cultural and literary references that establishes the aesthetic distance between the narrator, the white inhabitants of Wiltshire, and the passengers on the boat during his initial journey from Trinidad to New York and then England. This aesthetic distance does not represent the narrator's arrogance or willingness to mock those in less fortunate positions than him. Rather, his position dramatizes the postcolonial subject's importance in a postwar landscape marked by

nostalgia, melancholia, pathos, and violence (as Brenda's murder and Alan's suicide demonstrate). The outsider, in other words, productively shapes and changes his surroundings, even as he scrupulously avoids the appearance of doing so.

Not fixed within a stable white family, the narrator leverages the seemingly harmful condition of outsiderness—his painful lack of direct access to "high" European art and culture in Trinidad, for instance—into a sophisticated awareness of British culture. The patterns of their lives are visible to him in ways they are not to the inhabitants of Wiltshire themselves. In this particular novel, the reader soon comes to understand that no one but the Trinidadian narrator can compare the clouds to lines from a Tennyson poem (Naipaul, *Enigma* 105). Contingency and cultural outsiderness, the missing elements in Bourdieu's framework, become points of strength for the postcolonial narrator.

Kara Donnelly argues that the narrator's "capacity to describe and narrate" his passage into literary maturity "reveals hard-won knowledge about the psychological effects of migration and attempts to integrate into world literary markets," allowing him to "comment on his entry into the metropolitan world of literary publishing" (69). Donnelly's analysis demonstrates the connection between the narrator's development and Naipaul's own literary trajectory and highlights "the process by which [the narrator] moves from a marginality that is alienating and disempowering to one that is highly marketable and psychologically whole" (70). However, I argue that the worldliness of publishing is part of what the novel minimizes, even as it trades on Naipaul's reputation as a published author. The text displays little interest in the world market and more concern for the author's ability to make meaning out of apparently disparate people and objects. Yet tangible recognition from the world market is the status to which the narrator's younger self aspires—what underwrites the older narrator's credibility while permitting Naipaul, the real-life author, to use the postcolonial migrant to evaluate the rural white subjects of postwar Britain. The relationship between these two positions is fraught: the world of prestige and publishing is both the desired outcome of the cultured subject's exalted inner life and the thing that the narrator must disavow.

Naipaul's postcolonial narrator, I suggest, becomes the hidden lever that disrupts the cleanness of Bourdieu's theory of the social reproduction of cultural capital, each instance of his younger self's naïveté suffused with cultural references that his older self will later understand. On the trip back to London, he encounters a black man who complains that they have been placed together on the boat because of their shared nonwhite status. This man, to the narrator, is a ridiculous figure, a "restricted" person who cannot transcend his "racial passions" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 126) and about whom the older narrator remembers nothing, even after others on the boat express admiration for this man and the narrator is forced to admit the discomfort he feels at the possibility of being a racialized subject (126–27). But Naipaul carefully frames even this admission as a past lapse in his narrator's judgment, safely tucked away from the narrator's present. The technique of selective memory demonstrates the postcolonial figure's quiet incursion into Britain's cultural center, his transgressions always securely in the past and softened by reflection.

By using the aesthetic mode to frame the narrator's past experiences, Naipaul demonstrates his "deliberate adoption of the imperious persona of the writer," marking his turn "away from the referential and toward the performative" (Beecroft 75). The gaps that allow the narrator to remember nothing about the black man but his "racial passions" are also what permit him to frame, at a distance, his shame-filled memory of consuming chicken over the wastebasket in his hotel room "like a man reverting to his origins, eating secretively in a dark room, and then wondering how to hide the high-smelling evidence of his meal" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 113). At this point, the narrator has established his class bona fides through his sustained examination of Jack's life, which elevates the narrator into the proper mode of aesthetic distance, and through his wry identification and dismissal of his uncultured younger self. When he wakes the next morning, he remembers nothing of the night before, and wonders if "[p]erhaps, then, some embarrassment obliterated the memory" (114). Instead of evaluating the narrator, the novel directs readers to appreciate postcolonial subjectivity as an aesthetic effect by using a single equivocate ("[p]erhaps");

coolly glossing over an event, the shame of which has overwhelmed his younger self just a few lines before; and swiftly moving from shame to the quest for "romance" (114). As a section, "The Journey" is ostensibly devoted to the narrator ridiculing his younger self's self-important and naïve sense of being a writer: "My 'I' was aloof, a man who took notes, and knew" (127). However, the same pattern underwrites the commentary of the older narrator, who is no less knowing in his manipulation of narrative. The difference is that the older narrator occupies a position of cultural authority, as a successful writer whose notes and knowledge reflect a nuanced and empathic engagement with the subjects of his stories.

Of course, on one level, this engagement might be read as merely another aspect of aesthetic distancing: the luxury of disregarding material exigencies that might otherwise constrain the subject's capacity to engage in aesthetic contemplation. For Bourdieu, a truly "aesthetic disposition" originates from "an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art" (54). In other words, only those in the upper echelon, with appropriate amounts of cultural capital, have the time, space, and personal freedom to see the world in an aesthetic mode. In this rather uncharitable reading, the narrator could be accused of creating and reveling in a labyrinthine web of literary analogies and cultural references, "each answering and reinforcing all the others," and thereby fostering "the enchantment of artistic contemplation" (Bourdieu 53).

I have no intention of neatly rebutting this critique of Naipaul's oeuvre. Indeed, there is much about this characterization of Naipaul that is, to my mind, incontrovertible. Ian Strachan, for example, observes with undeniable accuracy that Naipaul's views on "issues of labor, cultural value, nature, history, order, and progress bear an unmistakable resemblance to the language of the Victorian travel writers whose world and work he prized" (180). The narrator's recollections of the black man's "racial passions" are particularly resonant with Naipaul's often-professed and deeply problematic views on race and anti-racist activism, as well as his depiction of the Caribbean as nothing

but the sad detritus of empire (Strachan 179), a cultural and geographical "nonentity" (180) to be forgotten in intellectual thought, or else ruthlessly critiqued in novels such as *The Mimic Men* (159). However, the novel's narrator, so close to Naipaul and yet not identical to him, cannot help but open up a space for comparison that exceeds any colonial attempt to map sophistication onto Britain and raw lack of culture onto Trinidad. For the narrator, Sanjay Krishnan notes, "[f]alsehood is not opposed to truth; it is the means by which truth of a limited, fragile sort is produced" (614) and which enables the flourishing of associations between England and Trinidad. These associations, found throughout the novel, disrupt any stable mapping of colonial backwardness onto Trinidad. Himself a "racialized body whose presence . . . marks a post-imperial history of supposed decline," the narrator reveals the landscape's own "historicity" and thereby situates an apparently neutral setting "within the post-imperial, postcolonial history of Britain and the world" (Dickinson 84).

The Enigma of Arrival, then, challenges the conceptual integrity of Bourdieu's aesthetic distancing through the figure of the postcolonial author, for whom aesthetic contemplation is necessarily an empathic mode of understanding. The novel's whimsical anti-trajectory—what Philip Dickinson calls "an agitated visual aesthetic defined by the proliferation of [contradictory] views" (91)—announces its author's supreme achievement: artistic contemplation evokes literary vitality, not degeneracy, but only in the hands of the postcolonial author. Aesthetic distancing, then, allows the narrator to survive "the material and sociopolitical limitations of the colonial subject" (Radovic 110), infusing his relationship to literary culture with a depth not afforded to the white subjects at the colonial center. His landlord, a self-described artist burdened by melancholia, languishes in the privacy of his manor, leading a life of "morbid, lasting depression . . . with nothing left to the imagination" (Naipaul, *Enigma* 190). The art that he inflicts on the narrator is only poignant insofar as it reflects his cultural impoverishment: his "pampered" and "protected" childhood (190) has stunted whatever artistic potential he may have had in the past. Only in the hands of the narrator does the landlord's story acquire any gravitas:

> I was his opposite in every way, social, artistic, sexual. And considering that his family's fortune had grown, but enormously, with the spread of the empire in the nineteenth century, it might be said that an empire lay between us. This empire at the same time linked us. This empire explained my birth in the New World, the language I used, the vocation and ambition I had; this empire in the end explained my presence there in the valley, in the cottage, in the grounds of the manor. But we were—or had started—at opposite ends of wealth, privilege, and in the hearts of different cultures. (191)

If the landlord's childhood anticipates and hastens his detachment from the world, the narrator skillfully renders his own childhood a distant and long-dead memory, shunting it away in order to put the white British subject under the microscope. The landlord has the luxury of contemplation but lacks the cultural capital to be a legitimate artist; Naipaul's narrator fills that gap by gesturing to his own childhood in Trinidad, itself shaped by British colonialism. However, in so doing, he also directs the reader's gaze away from his origin and toward the keenness of his literary perception. We are drawn not to the narrator's status as a postcolonial emigrant dependent on the charity of Britain but to his ability to see, with empathic sensibility, the larger pattern of colonial and postcolonial history that his landlord represents. The postcolonial subject is triumphant by virtue of his ability to chronicle the decline of the colonial center, even as he remains compassionately aware of the cross-cultural economic and social forces that have hastened that decline.

IV. Disembodiment and the Transposable Disposition

Just as "Jack's Garden" dramatizes recursion as a literary strategy, its narrative placement demonstrates the canniness of Naipaul's engagement with the topic of artistic growth. Naipaul does not begin the novel with a humble account of the narrator's own cultural origin in a postcolonial country that he will later leave behind. Rather, he begins with Britain, the cultural center, after both he and the narrator have already established their literary reputations. Origin is displaced from the teleology

of progression. "Jack's Garden" establishes the postcolonial author's credentials, both for Naipaul and for the narrator; only later does the novel chronicle the younger narrator's initial voyage to Britain. In other words, readers arrive at this second life or second story in non-linear time that allows the postcolonial author to access the "writer's calling, with its dream of handling and controlling the imaginary," and transcend "predetermined colonial and postcolonial binaries (colonial mimicry v. postcolonial authenticity)" (Radovic 110).

By embracing his "bifurcated position," at once within the English canon and outside it, Naipaul treats writing as an inherently performative act of "intervention" (Radovic 110), offering another productive complication of Bourdieu's critical framework. For Bourdieu, ascending the ladder of cultural capital requires what he calls a "transposable disposition," which gives the subject "a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes that are available for general application" and "inclines its owner towards other cultural experiences and enables him to perceive, classify and memorize them differently" (28). In his conception, the ideal cultured citizen is a disembodied subject who carries a portable, universal framework for assessing culture in different locations. On first glance, Naipaul's narrator appears to fit this description. Readers receive no details about his appearance, clothing, "or even mention of his wife with whom he shared the cottage" (Beecroft 78); nothing physical clouds the presentation of the writer-persona. Crucially, though, the novel continually asks readers to interrogate the process by which objects and subjects disappear from the narrator's gaze. While his physical ailments, such as his experience of England's cold weather, are evidence of being able to leave behind the embodied experience of Trinidad, his experience of this process is always available to the reader as an object of scrutiny.

The "general application" of the narrator's perception allows him to function as an "eye from nowhere," a reversal of the Enlightenment position of the European subject observing and judging the fertile territory of the colonized. This reversal, of course, is not structurally radical in that it does not rupture the class structures of British society. There is no break with class status, no critique of the act of acquiring cultural capital. However, by displaying the process by which the

postcolonial subject acquires a transposable disposition, the novel foregrounds the historical forces that limit the availability of cultural capital for white British subjects. This is a profoundly compassionate maneuver that finds heightened expression in the novel's treatment of the gardener Pitton, laid off because there is no longer enough money to maintain the manor grounds on which he works:

> Pitton, in this last decade of active life, grew out of what he had been. He got to know more people, at work and on the council estate where he lived. Where he had feared anonymity, he found community and a little strength. He saw his former life as if from a distance. He had always sought—in his clothes, his pride in his wife's looks, his odd poor-man's pretense about the other source of income—to maintain this distance from what he was. Now there was no need. Gradually he stopped acknowledging me from the laundry van. One day in Salisbury, in that pedestrian shopping street where he had tried to fill me with his own panic, one day he saw me. And then—the new man—he didn't "see" me. (Naipaul, *Enigma* 283–84)

This section, "Ivy," ends with Pitton, now months removed from his firing, having become "the new man" who fails to see Naipaul. However, the text's gesture to racialized non-presence is undone by perspective. While the narrator has spent a considerable amount of time exposing and contextualizing his own feelings of cultural shame, Pitton does not acknowledge his own "poor-man's pretense" about money. Instead, he adopts a new identity marked chiefly by annihilation, a willful forgetting of the past that sharply contrasts with the narrator's carefully curated reflections on his younger self. It is Pitton who disappears from cognition and story in a sentence that suggests the opposite: "And then—the new man—he didn't 'see' me." By contrast, the narrator disappears from social objectification but asserts his presence as a figure of cultural authority.

Though this representation may appear mean-spirited, I argue that it speaks a real and recognizable truth about the complex interdependencies of the postwar experience. For the newly arrived

person of color, passing from object of curiosity to unremarkable subject is no mean feat. Conversely, Pitton's disappearance also affords him a recuperation of sorts: growth, a community, "a little strength." By using the transposable disposition made possible by his own background, the narrator weaves Pitton's pathos into a moving vignette of the rural struggle for self-definition in the face of postwar economic uncertainty. Although Pitton's attachment to the manor's feudal upkeep brings him nothing but shame and uncertainty, he gains dignity through the narrator's aesthetic sensibility, which is not rarified and removed from material exigency but deeply engaged with lived experience. Moreover, the text's persistent connections between England and Trinidad, which are refracted through the narrator's memory, provide "a miniaturization of broad historical questions, allowing us to consider colonialism itself on a smaller scale, as a radical denial of 'smallness' in the face of a vast colonial transformation of the world" (Radovic 109). Drawn to smallness throughout, the novel urges readers to consider what the scale of colonialism has erased in other parts of the world.

If *The Enigma of Arrival* foregrounds the importance of the postcolonial figure in shaping the postwar British experience, it also puts paid to the notion that class ascendancy is a static transaction carried out within generations of white families. Culture, the novel suggests, is always contestable, just as status within a given culture is a matter of historical contingency. The supposedly disabling condition of postcolonial outsiderness gives way to the meaning that the narrator fashions out of postwar England's rural detritus. By putting Britain under careful scrutiny, Naipaul shrewdly elevates the postcolonial outsider's perception and reinvigorates the Wiltshire locale in the process. Having achieved this goal, he is then free to conclude the novel with an event that is not centered on parochial British experience: the death of the narrator's sister Sati, which causes him to experience "a real grief" that reveals "the true religion of men" (354) and spurs him to begin writing about Jack and his garden. The moment's resonance with other paradoxical moments in Naipaul's oeuvre—such as *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which the father's deprivation and anxiety lead to the son becoming a writer (Kortenaar 110)—is keenly felt. As it turns out, the

postcolonial outsider is the person best suited to narrate the complexity of postwar British experience. The narrator's "second life" is not as far away from the first as it may initially seem.

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Notes

1 For Krishnan, Naipaul's oeuvre contains "the unshakable conviction that the ability to depict one's historical condition with directness and clarity is the first step toward remaking attitudes and dispositions for peoples who have been 'broken' into modern society" (610).

2 See Nixon's *London Calling* and Cudjoe's *V. S. Naipaul*.

3 Jain characterizes the "fairy-tale" sense of wonder of the section's opening pages, which culminates in the narrator's trip to Stonehenge, as "a journey back to Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*" (117).

4 Assessing the relationship between the narrator and the novel's characters, Beecroft notes that "[i]n contrast to the rather proud verbosity and measured reflection of the writer it is apparent that few other major characters are able to speak with success (if at all). . . . Characters such as the landlord, Jack, Pitton and Bray do not exist as individual speaking subjects, but only through the writer's perception and in terms of how they participate in the writer's self-constitution" (83).

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