For the writer whose past work has been successful, the continuation of a literary career increasingly turns on the question of innovation and repetition. In *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Edward Said described this phase in a writer’s life as one characterized by a ‘delicate system of relationships’:

One is the relationship between the writer and his text, which he views as exerting pressure on him insofar as its volume and idiom dictate certain utterances; his text is thus a limitation on the innovation he aims to achieve.¹

The writer is also caught in the web of the reader’s expectations of his text based on past work, as well as his relationship to the literary institutions of publishing and criticism. It is as Said notes an ‘entirely fortunate phase in the career’²—a dilemma arising from the writer’s achievements that have made his style and idiom recognizable to the public and the critics—but a dilemma nonetheless, and one that can have unhappy consequences. Said makes this clear in his reading of Gerald Manley Hopkins’ late poems, in which ‘one theme recurs with frightening insistence: unproductive repetition is the poet’s lot. Tied to this is the certainty that what is being repeated is himself, sterile, uncreating, “widow of an insight”.’³

Said’s *On Late Style*⁴ would go on to offer a more buoyant vision of the kind of work that artists and writers can achieve in old age, including those whose careers have already been distinguished by great success. But the latter study is occupied with writers who are nearing the end of their lives, rather than with the position of the work in their career. In this essay I look in more detail at that particular phase of the literary career that may arrive at any age, where the writer is producing work

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in the shadow of significant critical and or popular success. ‘Late’ is thus employed here not with reference to the author’s age or impending mortality, but in reference to the author’s relationship with his past work and the expectations that work has engendered. The dilemma of this period in the literary career is compounded by the way in which the work of an author may be accorded a ‘retrospective status’ that emerges long after their publication. This means that the pressures exerted by ‘past’ work often come from the fact that the work is not past, that its (sometimes belated) success is very much in the present and contemporaneous with the writing that the author is now doing.

To explore this stage further, I look at recent novels by V.S. Naipaul (Magic Seeds, 2004) and Graham Swift (Wish You Were Here, 2011) alongside earlier work for which each author is better known (Naipaul’s A House for Mr Biswas, 1961; and Swift’s Waterland, 1983, and Last Orders, 1996). Despite the many differences that separate these two authors, their recent novels share a tendency to exploit the retrospection provoked by late stage writing in order to create work that is innovative through repetition, as the author revisits the forms, themes, and techniques of the earlier work for which he has been celebrated.

V.S. Naipaul’s fictional avatar

On first publication, Naipaul’s 1961 novel A House for Mr Biswas was a work on the periphery of the literary mainstream, coming as it did from the geographic and cultural ‘margins’. It has, however, been subsequently incorporated into a ‘canon’ of postcolonial works. The retrospective status that it enjoys means that it is more likely to feature on a school or university syllabus, to be borrowed from a library, or to be picked up by an interested general reader than many other works of postcolonial writing—including Naipaul’s own later work. For this reason, Naipaul’s more recent work must consciously bear the weight of the success of an earlier work trapped in an extended present: in 2015 Naipaul is our contemporary, but 1961 is not contemporaneous with us.

A House for Mr Biswas portrays in epic form many of the large themes in anti-colonial history: the conflict between private property and common ownership; privacy and the construction of the self; and a critique of western notions of the nuclear family. These things are expressed through the symbolism of the house that Biswas dreams of buying:

He thought of the house as his own, though for years it had been irrevocably mortgaged. And during these months of illness and