

essay

A House For Mr Chaudhuri

by Fakrul Alam

On the surface, Nirad Chaudhuri seems intent on impressing everyone with the comfort and elegance in which he lives in England. Duncan Fallowell's 1991 piece "Nirad C Chaudhuri: At Home in Oxford" seems aptly titled and describes a man obviously in his elements: the timeless Britain that surrounds him in north Oxford — "landscape, country houses, claret, Shakespeare, cathedral towns, bespoke tailors, Oxford bells" (242) — obviously sustains and energizes this centurion.

In his first visit to the country, recorded in *A Passage to England* (1959), Chaudhuri, immediately saw England and the English as embodiments of the land and the people created in his mind by his embrace of English culture in his reading:

I thought today's England was very much like the history of England and perfectly consistent with it.

In no case was the idea of England I had gained from books contradicted by anything I saw, it was on the contrary completed, and that is why I can no longer recover the original bookish idea.

Chaudhuri apparently feels no sense of difference, no misgivings about his presence in the English landscape. Chaudhuri indeed goes out of his way to tell us that "the traditional aspects of English life and civilisation" are the "only ones that deserve attention in their own right" and that these had given "a sort of monumentality" to the English people (*Passage*, 186).

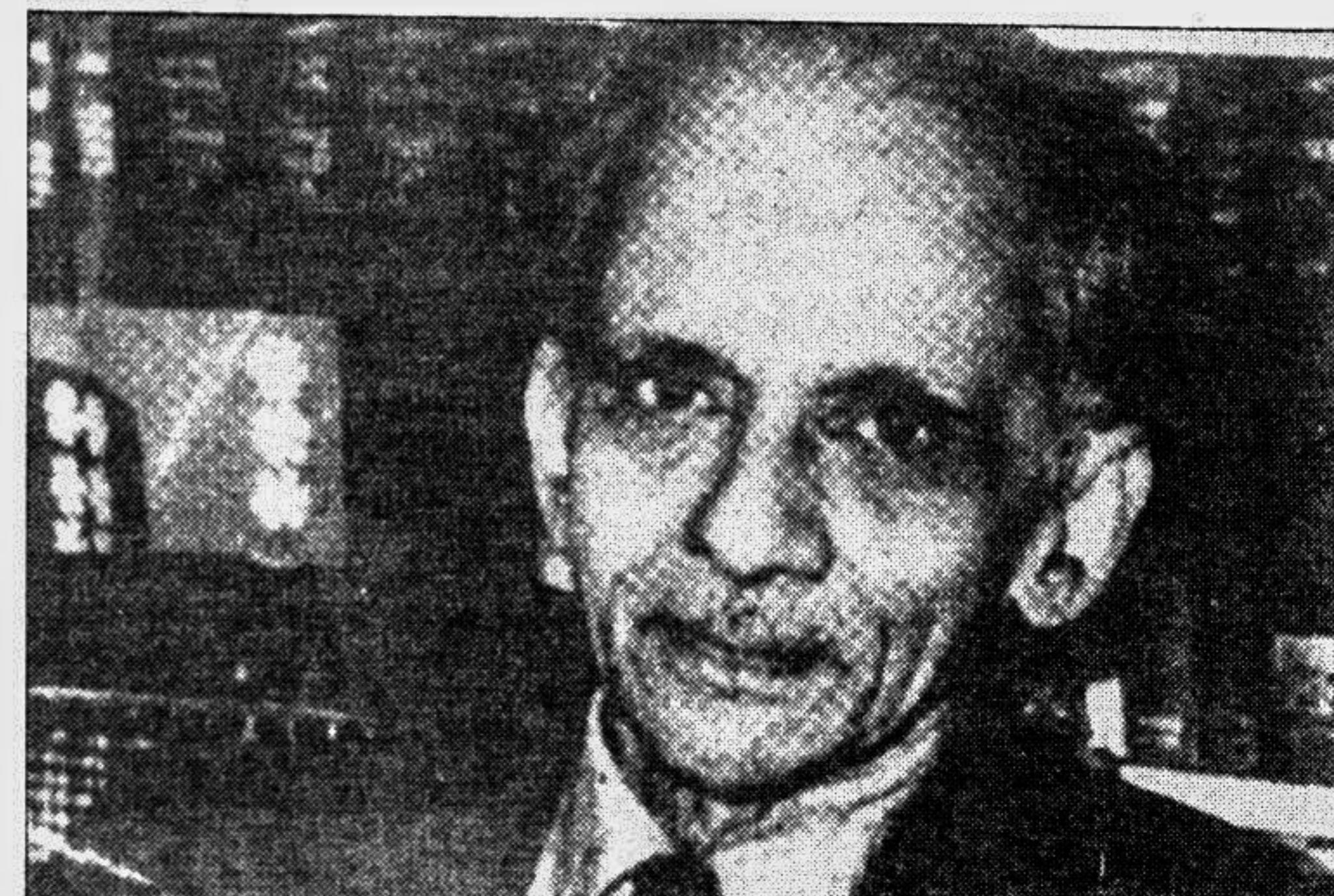
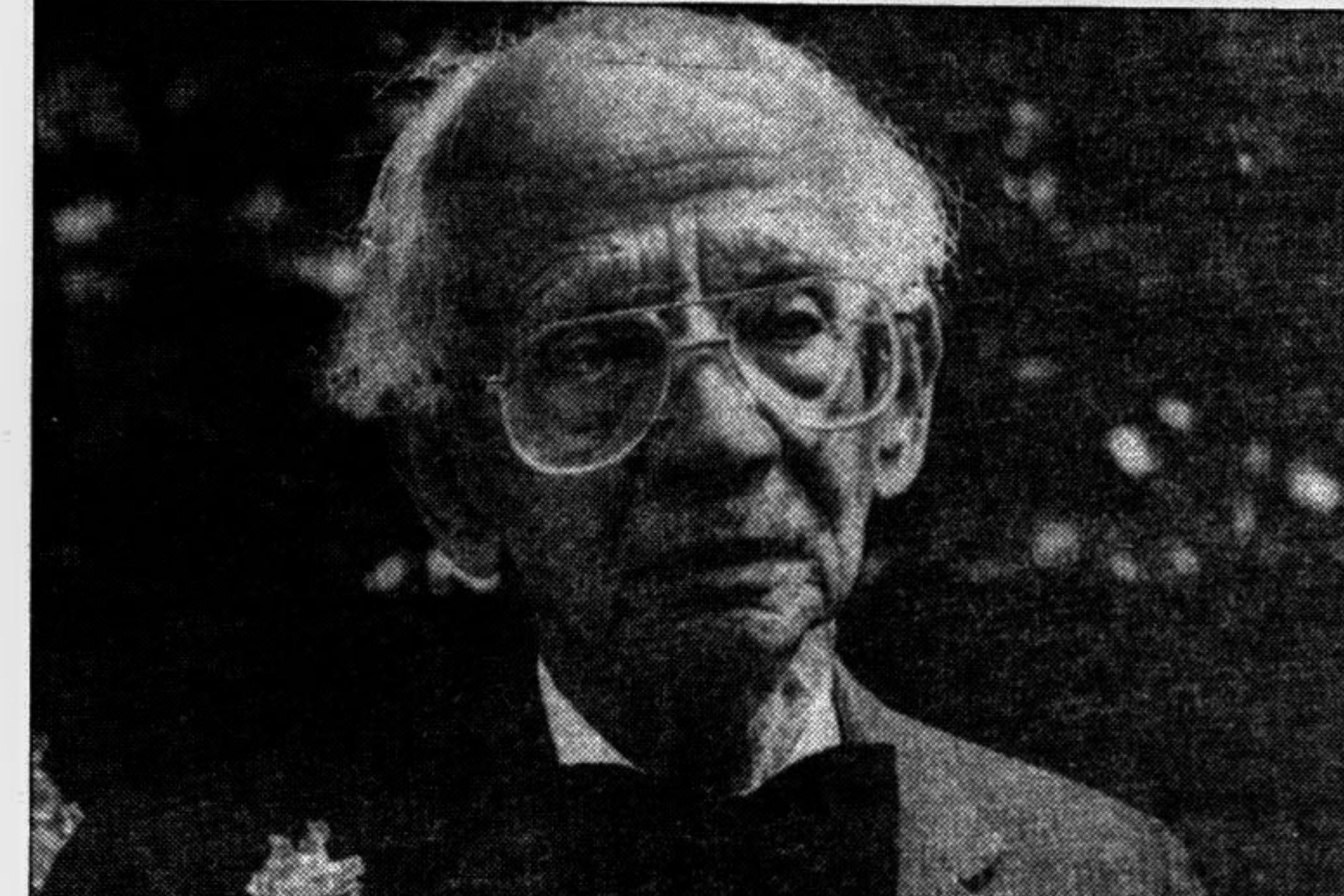
Nevertheless, Chaudhuri will admit from time to time that all is not well in England (Naipaul, 127). Even his first visit to England in 1955, Chaudhuri noted the diffidence with which the English reacted to praise of their land, but dismissed this by observing, "If I did not know how proud they were of the appearance of their country I should have thought that they were interested only in finding fault with it" (*Passage*, 89). At one point in the trip he had to acknowledge the existence of an English working-class, the hardships of whose life he can sense, but he did not want to dwell on them or focus on their problems: "to go out to study the English workers, between whom and me flowed a wide river of class-consciousness, would have been too much like social research or visiting for my taste" (131).

In 1955, it was easy for Chaudhuri the wide-eyed and enthusiastic tourist to avoid looking at England negatively; by the 1980s it was impossible for the resident to ignore the tell-tale signs of decay in a country which is very different from the timeless England created by his reading. *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* (1987) reflects fully Chaudhuri's disquiet at the way things were going in the land that he had by then irreversibly committed himself to as his home. Although this mammoth book is about what its subtitle details — 1921-1952 — in the context in which he is writing it, he realises with some misgivings that the "decadence" he had attempted to evade by quitting India was now all around him. In fact, the whole West is to him now a "moral swamp" (xxv), and England, too, a prey to that foul fiend, Anarch. No longer could he pretend to ignore the working class, for in the country in which he had opted to end his life "class hatred" had become a fact of life. *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, then, is not only what it purports to be — an elegy for the decline of India with the demise of the British Raj; it is, implicitly, a lament for "the passing away of the greatness of the British people" (753) with the collapse of the British Empire. Everywhere in contemporary England Chaudhuri sees signs of defeatism and corruption of the will. The abandonment of the Puritan virtues that had built an empire troubles him as much as the way the English have given themselves up to popular, American, "pop" culture.

Nirad Chaudhuri, then, may be at home in Oxford, but he is not completely at ease in contemporary England. The persistent elegiac strain in Chaudhuri's writing, first heard in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) and almost a refrain in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* (1987), is no doubt due to his sense that the values he treasures are doomed to obsolescence despite his efforts to revive them. This idea and the idea that there is an indissoluble link between arrival and disappointment, give a special flavour to Chaudhuri's prose.

II

If Chaudhuri's arrival (and residence) in England has its share of enigmas, he knows that there is no going back for him to the country of his birth. This is because Chaudhuri is aware that a man's upbringing, especially when



based on the values of another culture and imbibed from its books, can make him ultimately unfit for his own country. This situation is particularly galling for Chaudhuri because these values once seemed to have been taking root in Bengal and had given him the hope of becoming a fixture in it. What spoiled the show, of course, was nationalism, for in the end it made sure that the seeds of western civilisation which once seemed to have been implanted in the minds of all educated Bengalis (and by extension, Indians) would come to naught in freedom-drunk India. That is to say, Chaudhuri had gone through a cycle of arrival and disappointment once before, for he, like many others in his generation, had felt himself set on the course of enlightenment laid out in the canonical texts of Western literature. The values they had absorbed from their reading of authors such as Shakespeare had noticeably fertilised the Bengali mind and led to the Bengal Renaissance of the second half of the nineteenth century. As far as Chaudhuri was concerned, these values seemed to have undergone a naturalisation process in his homeland but the good that had come from the movement toward enlightenment had been undone in the twentieth century by the nationalists who were agitating for the freedom from what they — unlike Chaudhuri — perceived as the imperial yoke.

What Chaudhuri will only half-admit, however, is that he had been carrying the germ of disappointment in him even when he seemed to be secure in his native land. From the moment his parents' generation of Indians embarked on a path of westernisation through a regime of reading, they had begun to alienate themselves from their fellow Indians.

It is in a section of the *Autobiography* where Chaudhuri is discussing the religious culture into which he was born and the devotional songs that he had absorbed in his childhood that we can first intuit a key source of Chaudhuri's lifelong sense of difference. A song that he had learned from his mother, "certainly a very unusual song for a boy of six or seven to like," is one of a group of songs that will come to haunt him in later life with a feeling of estrangement from the material world (208). The opening lines of this traditional Bengali song (in Chaudhuri's translation) are:

"What has thou done by illusions drawn? — strayed from home to dark, deep woods; o'er foreign countries roamed."

It is only when we remember the epilogue to *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* in which Chaudhuri describes himself as "an apostate to Hinduism" (940) and offers us his secular faith that we can grasp the anguish of abandonment induced by his pursuit of enlightenment ideals. Surely, it is the pain of irreversible separation from one's native religious culture that gives the passage in the *Autobiography* in which Chaudhuri describes the impact of these devotional songs such pathos and an epiphany-like quality.

Two recent critiques, Cynthia Abrioux's "A Slow Alienation: Nirad Chaudhuri's Bengali Childhood in The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian" (1951) and Margery Sabin's "The Beast in Nirad Chaudhuri's Garden", have attempted to deconstruct his early work to show how even Kishoreganj — where Chaudhuri was born and grew up, a town which he often describes as if it were paradise, was doomed to be lost to him because of his upbringing. As Abrioux points out, the enlightenment ideals of Chaudhuri's father ensured that Nirad would be gradually alienated from his fellow Bengalis, even when he seems to be bonded to the physical elements in Bengal. What Chaudhuri will not directly acknowledge, Sabin im-

pplies, is that his family's reformist orientation had made him "eclectic and hybrid" (29). In Sabin's incisive reading, the *Autobiography* is rife with "conflicts and ambiguities" (43) caused by Chaudhuri's increasing uncertainty about his location in the world in which he is born, a world where there is a "beast" in the "garden", no matter how dimly Chaudhuri perceives it at first.

Chaudhuri's first book is thus really a narrative of a double disappointment: He and the family are first estranged from the Kishoreganj that they had rooted themselves in and then he finds himself alienated from his Calcutta setting. The immediate cause of the first uprooting is the hysteria induced in his mother by a series of catastrophes and is, Chaudhuri would like us to think, the decisive one, even though there is a whole complex of causes traceable to the ambivalence created in the family's psyche by their embrace of reformist ideals. In any case, while leaving his ancestral home, the autobiographer as a young man already has the feeling that he was destined "for ever to trudge for ever along a public road" (*Autobiography*, 251).

The Calcutta sections of the *Autobiography* are dotted with accounts of his feeling of homesickness and even *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, mainly an account of his adult years in Calcutta, would have us believe that he kept pinning for Kishoreganj in the imperial city and never felt at home in it. But while there is no reason to doubt the sincerity or the depth of his feelings about his lost Eden, it should also be emphasized that in Calcutta, too, Chaudhuri went through what to the reader is by then a familiar cycle of excitement and joy upon arrival and ultimate disappointment.

Chaudhuri and his family's great expectations from Calcutta thrilled them as they prepared for the city: "The prospect of coming away from a small and rustic place like Kishoreganj to live in Calcutta seemed to open out endless vistas of ambition before us" (*Autobiography*, 250). Once in Calcutta, Chaudhuri relishes the city, takes pride in its monumentality, and is smug in the belief that "to belong to Calcutta is not to be just anybody" (255). Chaudhuri confesses at this juncture of his *autobiography* that it was only after twenty years of residence in it that "the city began to lose hold" over him, for he had gloried in its intellectual culture and delighted in the sights and sounds created for "the Second City of the British Empire". However it is obvious that Chaudhuri protests too much about the level of his estrangement from the city. Indeed, on occasions, he even identifies himself with "the men to whom Calcutta belonged by birthright" (267)!

The fact is that both Kishoreganj and Calcutta put Chaudhuri in a similar bind. Margery Sabin's deconstruction of his account of Kishoreganj makes it a story not only of bliss but also "of tainted inheritance, confused identity, and impotent anxiety in the face of ancient malice" (45). Likewise, his pages on Calcutta too can be seen as split between his celebration of its heritage and his conviction that the city itself was in the viselike grip of the evil forces of nationalism.

Chaudhuri himself became part of the Hindu Bengali Diaspora in 1942 when he left Calcutta for Delhi. He would live in the city until 1970, the year when he finally left India for England. From the time Chaudhuri moved to Delhi, he knew there would be no going back for him to Bengal. He had finally come off unhinged, and on this occasion there could no longer be any excitement of arrival. He connects to the Delhi landscape, nor work up any enthusiasm for anything in it except its ruins and monuments.

Not surprisingly, it is in Delhi that

Chaudhuri discovers his true vocation, that of a prophet in print warning Bengalis of the hole they had been digging for themselves by their rejection of their enlightenment heritage. It was in this city that Chaudhuri's bitterness and disillusionment at the road taken by his fellow Bengalis grew and made him Job-like in his pronouncements. The last straw for Chaudhuri was the partition of Bengal in 1947. That division meant that Chaudhuri's entry into independent India would also be the moment of the utmost frustration for him. Now the only acts of arrival he could find solace in were those stored in his memory: the remembrances of scenes past stored in his consciousness would console him during this period and help him get through it. These scenes he would recreate imaginatively in his description of Kishoreganj in the opening pages of the *Autobiography*. The act of writing was thus absolutely crucial for him, like Eliot he could almost say, "these fragments I have shored against my ruins."

III

The narratives of Chaudhuri's life, the *Autobiography* and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, make clear that except when in prelapsarian Kishoreganj and completely fallen Delhi, Chaudhuri's life has followed a similar pattern: initial joy felt on arriving at a place followed by gradual alienation from it. The Kishoreganj that he is born into in 1897 is not the same town that his family abandons in 1910 soon after the advent of nationalism; the Calcutta he becomes a part of that year is nothing like the city he finds himself so estranged from in 1942. To Delhi, he can connect only as a sojourner, externally, he will be in the city but will never be part of it. As we have seen, in England, too, he will go through the cycle of initial enthusiasm for the country created in his memory by his reading to a kind of recoil from its present.

And yet Chaudhuri is at home in Oxford and eager to impress this on anyone who has read his work or has talked to him in recent years. In an essay that he wrote in Desh, a few years ago, a piece which in English can be titled "Why I Am Living in England", Chaudhuri offers some cogent reasons for his adoption of Oxford as a home: the climate suits him, he likes English food, he can use the libraries of the city for his work, he has easy access to his publishers, and England's system of health and social welfare makes life easier for someone in his nineties and gives him the leisure to write as he wishes. England may be in a state of decline and most things in contemporary England may disgust him, but Oxford can provide him mental and physical comforts which he would not have in India. He could have easily added to his list what we have gleaned from *A Passage to England*: living in Oxford, he is as close to "timeless England" as he can be.

On either side the rive lie
Long fields of barely and of rye
That clothe the world and meet the sky ...

That is really what I saw. (107)

The vicinity of Oxford can be Chaudhuri's dwelling because his mind and body finds repose here and he knows that here he is amidst scenes he had made part of himself through his childhood reading. Here, also he can begin to look at the world with equanimity, the serenity of the surroundings making it possible for him to feel tranquil. All of Chaudhuri's autobiographical works are to some extent versions of the pastoral in the sense that they "represent withdrawal from ordinary life to a place apart that is close to the elemental rhythms of nature, where the protagonist achieves a new perspective on a former mode of life amid the complexities and conflicts of the social world" (Abrams, 142).

Chaudhuri, however, ignores totally the effect his presence — real or symbolic — has on England and the English. Far from noting the phenomenon of disparate populations in Britain, Chaudhuri is not interested in registering his impact on the English landscape but on influencing his Indian readers with the unity of his vision. The crucial point about the view from the bridge on the River Charwell that inspires him in his Oxford walks, he would like his readers to understand, is that it grips him so because it reminds him of the Kishoreganj river scenes of his childhood, of his Eden before his family exiled itself from it. It is important also to remember that he is communicating the effect the scene has on him to his readers in Bengali; unlike Naipaul, he has not ceased to write in his mother tongue and for his fellow Bengalis. He may be describing Oxford and its environs, but there is a specific point he wants, to make to his Bengal readers about the appropriateness of his scenic location.

Oxford has allowed him to go back to prelapsarian Kishoreganj and he would like them to appreciate this fact as much as the other reasons he offers for living in England in his essay in Bengali on that subject. In other words, Chaudhuri has decided to house himself in Oxford because it allows him to relive his past and to recapture the feeling of love and peace and oneness with nature that was lost when nationalism reared its ugly head in Kishoreganj. He is at home in Oxford if not at ease in England because he can get back to the world of lost innocence, to the pre-Fall paradise life when he blended harmoniously with his environment.

One remembers here how in the *Autobiography*'s splendid opening book, Kishoreganj and the other places in Bengal where Chaudhuri spent his childhood are "interwoven" with the England of his imagination (257). One also remembers the section in Chaudhuri's second book about his first visit to the continent, *A Passage to England*, in which he describes how in England and France he would forget "the immediate past in a fit of amnesia" and go "back to the waters" of his childhood, as when standing on one of the Seine bridges at dusk, as on the Charwell river bridge, he "recovered, across the decades that had come in between, the peace" he "used to feel only by the rivers of East Bengal" (33). In Chaudhuri's imagination, then, this prelapsarian Kishoreganj and the timeless England (and France) epitomised in Oxford have a metonymic relationship — to someone who has read his works carefully the one will inevitably evoke the other.

It is evident that Chaudhuri's way of seeing Kishoreganj itself was shaped very early by his exposure to English culture. Thus if the Charwell (or Seine) river scene makes his mind wander to Kishoreganj, he remembers the last sunset he witnessed in Kishoreganj in terms of a Constable landscape. Even though he had at that time no firsthand experience of the English scene, he "confirmed the impression after seeing the Constable country" later in his life (*Thy Hand*, 210). The enlightenment ideals which ensured that his education would have a large dose of English literature in it also ensured that he would forever view natural scenery in terms of the images he had picked up from his excursions into English romanticism.

Indeed, the passage in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* in which Chaudhuri compares the Kishoreganj sunset to a Constable one is in its larger context a discussion of how when educated Bengalis "acquired a feeling for the beauties of nature they showed it by a vicarious enjoyment of those described in the source of their new feeling, namely English literature" (*Thy Hand*, 207-8). The reason Chaudhuri can appreciate the beauties of the Kishoreganj sunset, he

suddenly realizes, is because of his enjoyment of the Constable one. The reason why this and other Kishoreganj scenes can continue to sustain him in his exilic state is the one which allows Wordsworth to find even "mid the din/Of Towns and Cities" and in times of stress "sensations sweet/Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart" stimulated by the remembrances of the "beauteous forms" of the Tintern Abbey landscape (*Thy Hand*, 214-15). In other words, finding a home in Oxford has allowed Chaudhuri to complete a circle: if he had first learned to appreciate Kishoreganj because of his feel for English landscape, he can now find peace in an English landscape because it evokes Kishoreganj for him.

IV

Nirad Chaudhuri, then, has ample reason for feeling at home in Oxford. But now in his late nineties, he still finds himself bothered by the morass he has always felt his fellow Bengalis put themselves into by abandoning their enlightenment heritage and succumbing to the spirit of nationalism. The author as a centurion feels compelled to address them and explain in essay after essay written in Bengali why he has chosen to have his house in England and how he can still led the life of a Bengali there. Chaudhuri would like to keep a lifeline to the country of his origin through his writing. Moreover, some instinct in him seems to drive him even now to defend himself against imputations by betrayal by Bengali readers. Far from being guilty of disloyalty, he implies, the good health and the leisure and the means to write that have resulted from his residence in England have allowed him to carry out his mission of telling them that they are still capable of getting out of their stupor and renewing their fallen light.

As Chaudhuri sees it, being in Oxford actually allows him to fulfill his destiny — a destiny he first intuited from his reading of Matthew Arnold's poem, "The Scholar Gipsy." As he puts it in his first book: "I...fell so headlong in love with the idea of being a scholar gipsy after reading Matthew Arnold's poem that this love marked its trail on all my subsequent worldly career" (*Autobiography*, 143). In the second part of his autobiography, Chaudhuri acknowledges that it was this poem that helped him find his vocation in life at a critical juncture in his career (*Thy Hand*, 76). Reading it then, he decided that he would give up a permanent job rather than sacrifice his instinct to write and project his ideas about himself and his world to his readers.

Arnold's celebrated poem is, of course, about an Oxford scholar who, because of poverty leaves his studies and joins a band of gypsies because he is "tired of knocking at preferment's door." One day, years later, he meets some of his college friends and tells them that he intends to communicate the secret of the art of the gypsies to them after he has mastered it. The finest aspects of the poem, most readers have agreed, are Arnold's description of the Oxfordshire environs which had supposedly become the scholar-gipsy's haunt and the elegiac tone with which he evokes a vanished life, "with its sick hurry, its divided aims," where he can roam freely in the country side nourishing his "project in unclouded joy/And every doubt long blown by time away," and is seen "Still nursing the unconquerable hope,/Still clutching the inviolable shade." To the admiring narrator of the poem, the scholar-gipsy's decision of flee "the feverish contact" of his contemporaries and to continue to seek a life of calm and solitude while becoming an absent presence is particularly exemplary. The scholar-gipsy might have decided to elude them physically, but from his haunt in Oxford he will offer them, from time to time, the fruits of his experience. The "dark Iberians" with whom he has chosen to deal in his retirement are "shy traffickers" and this is why for them "on the beach (he still) undid his corded bales."

Viewed now and in the overall context of Nirad Chaudhuri's life, it is easy to see how he has become the scholar-gipsy and how the poem has become an allegory of his life. Of the many reasons he has chosen to have his house in Oxford, surely the most cogent, even if the most allusively stated one, is this: forced to seek refuge in Oxford after being disappointed and exhausted by his experience in his native land, he can still nurture his favorite project — to remind Bengalis of the success they once had because of their enlightenment — without coming into direct and debilitating contact with them. Like the "grave Tyrian trader" of Arnold's concluding simile, he can use his elusive position to deposit his wares for his Bengal readers, without having to see them anymore!