Nobel Lecture

Two worlds

The world is always in movement. People have everywhere at some time been dispossessed. I suppose I was shocked by this discovery in 1967 about my birthplace because I had never had any idea about it. But that was the way most of us lived in the agricultural colony, blindly. There was no plot by the authorities to keep us in our darkness, says Sir VS Naipaul in his Nobel lecture

given readings and not lectures. I have told people who ask for lectures that I have no lecture to give. And that is true. It might seem strange that a man who has dealt in words and emotions and ideas for nearly 50 years shouldn't have a few to spare, so to speak. But everything of value about me is in my books. Whatever extra there is in me at any given moment isn't fully formed. I am hardly aware of it; it awaits the next book. It will - with luck - come to me during the actual writing, and it will take me by surprise. That element of surprise is what I look for when I am writing. It is my way of judging what I am doing which is never an easy thing to do.

Proust has written with great penetration of the difference between the writer as writer and the writer as a social being. You will find his thoughts in some of his essays in Against Sainte-Beuve, a book reconstituted from his early papers.

The nineteenth-century French critic Sainte-Beuve believed that to understand a writer it was necessary to know as much as possible about the exterior man, the details of his life. It is a beguiling method, using the man to illuminate the work. It might seem unassailable. But Proust is able very convincingly to pick it apart. "This method of Sainte-Beuve," Proust writes, "ignores what a very slight degree of selfacquaintance teaches us: that a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices. If we would try to understand that particular self, it is by searching our own bosoms, and trying to reconstruct it there, that we may arrive at

Those words of Proust should be with us whenever we are reading the biography of a writer - or the biography of anyone who depends on what can be called inspiration. All the details of the life and the quirks and the friendships can be laid out for us, but the mystery of the writing will remain. No amount of documentation, however fascinating, can take us there. The biography of a writer - or even the autobiography will always have this incomplete-

Proust is a master of happy amplification, and I would like to go back to Against Sainte-Beuve just for a little. "In fact," Proust writes, "it is the secretions of one's innermost self, written in solitude and for oneself alone that one gives to the public. What one bestows on private life - in conversation... or in those drawing-room essays that are scarcely more than conversation in print - is the product of a quite superficial self. not of the innermost self which one can only recover by putting aside the world and the self that frequents the world.

When he wrote that, Proust had not yet found the subject that was to

great literary labour. And you can tell from what I have quoted that he was a man trusting to his intuition and waiting for luck. I have quoted these words before in other places. The reason is that they define how I have gone about my business. I have trusted to intuition. I did it at the beginning. I do it even now. I have no idea how things might turn out, where in my writing I might go next. I have trusted to my intuition to find the subjects, and I have written intuitively. I have an idea when I start, I have a shape; but I will fully understand what I have written only after some years

said earlier that everything of value about me is in my books. I will go further now. I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book, intuitively sensed and, in the case of fiction, intuitively worked out, stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all

It's been like this because of my background. My background is at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused. I was born in Trinidad. It is a small island in the mouth of the great Orinoco river of Venezuela. So Trinidad is not strictly of South America, and not strictly of the Caribbean. It was developed as a New World plantation colony, and when I was born in 1932 it had a population of about 400,000. Of this, about 150,000 were Indians, Hindus and Muslims, nearly all of peasant origin, and nearly all from the Gangetic plain. This was my very small commu-

nity. The bulk of this migration from India occurred after 1880. The deal was like this. People indentured themselves for five years to serve on the estates. At the end of this time they were given a small piece of land, perhaps five acres, or a passage back to India. In 1917, because of agitation by Gandhi and others, the indenture system was abolished. And perhaps because of this, or for some other reason, the pledge of land or repatriation was dishonoured for many of the later arrivals. These people were absolutely destitute. They slept in the streets of Port of Spain, the capital. When I was a child I saw them. I suppose I didn't know they were destitute - I suppose that idea came much later - and they made no impression on me. This was part of the cruelty of the plantation colony.

I was born in a small country town called Chaquanas, two or three miles inland from the Gulf of Paria. Chaquanas was a strange name, in spelling and pronunciation, and many of the Indian people - they were in the majority in the area preferred to call it by the Indian caste name of Chauhan.

I was 34 when I found out about the name of my birthplace. I was living in London, had been living in lead him to the happiness of his England for 16 years. I was writing

my ninth book. This was a history of Trinidad, a human history, trying to re-create people and their stories. I used to go to the British Museum to read the Spanish documents about the region. These documents recovered from the Spanish archives - were copied out for the British government in the 1890s at the time of a nasty boundary dispute with Venezuela. The documents begin in 1530 and end with the disappearance of the Spanish

I was reading about the foolish search for El Dorado, and the murderous interloping of the English hero, Sir Walter Raleigh. In 1595 he raided Trinidad, killed all the Spaniards he could, and went up the Orinoco looking for El Dorado. He found nothing, but when he went back to England he said he had. He had a piece of gold and some sand to show. He said he had hacked the gold out of a cliff on the bank of the Orinoco. The Royal Mint said that the sand he asked them to assay was worthless, and other people said that he had bought the gold beforehand from North Africa. He then published a book to prove his point, and for four centuries people have believed that Raleigh had found something. The magic of Raleigh's book, which is really quite difficult to read, lay in its very long title: The Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana, with a relation of the great and golden city of Manoa (which the Spaniards call El Dorado) and the provinces of Emeria, Aromaia, Amapaia, and other countries, with their rivers adjoining. How real it sounds! And he had hardly been on the main Orinoco.

And then, as sometimes happens with confidence men, Raleigh was caught by his own fantasies. Twenty-one years later, old and ill, he was let out of his London prison to go to Guiana and find the gold mines he said he had found. In this fraudulent venture his son died. The father, for the sake of his reputation, for the sake of his lies, had sent his son to his death. And then Raleigh, full of grief, with nothing left to live for, went back to London to be executed

The story should have ended there. But Spanish memories were long - no doubt because their imperial correspondence was so slow: it might take up to two years for a letter from Trinidad to be read in Spain. Eight years afterwards the Spaniards of Trinidad and Guiana were still settling their scores with the Gulf Indians. One day in the British Museum I read a letter from the King of Spain to the governor of Trinidad. It was dated 12 October 1625.

'I asked you." the King wrote. "to give me some information about a certain nation of Indians called Chaquanes, who you say number above one thousand, and are of such bad disposition that it was they who led the English when they



British literature laureate Sir V.S. Naipaul flanked by his wife Nadira displays his medal after receiving it from the Swedish king at the Concert Hall in

captured the town. Their crime hasn't been punished because forces were not available for this purpose and because the Indians acknowledge no master save their own will. You have decided to give them a punishment. Follow the rules I have given you; and let me know how you get on.' What the governor did I don't

know. I could find no further reference to the Chaguanes in the documents in the Museum. Perhaps there were other documents about the Chaguanes in the mountain of paper in the Spanish archives in Seville which the British government scholars missed or didn't think important enough to copy out. What is true is that the little tribe of over a thousand - who would have been living on both sides of the Gulf of Paria - disappeared so completely that no one in the town of Chaquanas or Chauhan knew anything about them. And the thought came to me in the Museum that I was the first person since 1625 to whom that letter of the king of Spain had a real meaning. And that letter had been dug out of the archives only in 1896 or 1897. A disappearance, and then the silence of centuries.

We lived on the Chaguanes' land. Every day in term time - I was just beginning to go to school - I walked from my grandmother's house - past the two or three main-road stores, the Chinese parlour, the Jubilee Theatre, and the high-smelling little Portuguese factory that made cheap blue soap and cheap yellow

soap in long bars that were put out to dry and harden in the mornings every day I walked past these eternal-seeming things - to the Chaguanas Government School. Beyond the school was sugar-cane, estate land, going up to the Gulf of Paria. The people who had been dispossessed would have had their own kind of agriculture, their own calendar, their own codes, their own sacred sites. They would have understood the Orinoco-fed currents in the Gulf of Paria. Now all their skills and everything else about

them had been obliterated.

The world is always in movement. People have everywhere at some time been dispossessed. I suppose I was shocked by this discovery in 1967 about my birthplace because I had never had any idea about it. But that was the way most of us lived in the agricultural colony, blindly. There was no plot by the authorities to keep us in our darkness. I think it was more simply that the knowledge wasn't there. The kind of knowledge about the Chaquanes would not have been considered important, and it would not have been easy to recover. They were a small tribe, and they were aboriginal. Such people - on the mainland, in what was called B.G., British Guiana - were known to us. and were a kind of joke. People who were loud and ill-behaved were known, to all groups in Trinidad, I think, as warrahoons. I used to think it was a made-up word, made up to suggest wildness. It was only when I began to travel in Venezuela, in my

40s, that I understood that a word like that was the name of a rather large aboriginal tribe there.

There was a vague story when I was a child - and to me now it is an unbearably affecting story - that at certain times aboriginal people came across in canoes from the mainland, walked through the forest in the south of the island, and at a certain spot picked some kind of fruit or made some kind of offering, and then went back across the Gulf of Paria to the sodden estuary of the Orinoco. The rite must have been of enormous importance to have survived the upheavals of 400 years, and the extinction of the aborigines in Trinidad. Or perhaps though Trinidad and Venezuela have a common flora - they had come only to pick a particular kind of fruit. I don't know. I can't remember anyone inquiring. And now the memory is all lost; and that sacred site, if it existed, has become common ground.

What was past was past. I suppose that was the general attitude. And we Indians, immigrants from India, had that attitude to the island. We lived for the most part ritualised lives, and were not yet capable of self-assessment, which is where learning begins. Half of us on this land of the Chaguanes were pretending - perhaps not pretending, perhaps only feeling, never formulating it as an idea - that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land.

My grandmother's house in Chaguanas was in two parts. The front part, of bricks and plaster, was painted white. It was like a kind of Indian house, with a grand balustraded terrace on the upper floor, and a prayer-room on the floor above that. It was ambitious in its decorative detail, with lotus capitals on pillars, and sculptures of Hindu deities, all done by people working only from a memory of things in India. In Trinidad it was an architectural oddity. At the back of this house, and joined to it by an upper bridge room, was a timber building in the French Caribbean style. The entrance gate was at the side, between the two houses. It was a tall gate of corrugated iron on a wooden frame. It made for a fierce kind of

So as a child I had this sense of two worlds, the world outside that tall corrugated-iron gate, and the world at home - or, at any rate, the world of my grandmother's house. It was a remnant of our caste sense, the thing that excluded and shut out. In Trinidad, where as new arrivals we were a disadvantaged community, that excluding idea was a kind of protection: it enabled us - for the time being, and only for the time being - to live in our own way and according to our own rules, to live in our own fading India. It made for an extraordinary self-centredness. We looked inwards: we lived out our

days; the world outside existed in a kind of darkness; we inquired about nothing

There was a Muslim shop next door. The little loggia of my grandmother's shop ended against his blank wall. The man's name was Mian. That was all that we knew of him and his family. I suppose we must have seen him, but I have no mental picture of him now. We knew nothing of Muslims. This idea of strangeness, of the thing to be kept outside, extended even to other Hindus. For example, we ate rice in the middle of the day, and wheat in the evenings. There were some extraordinary people who reversed this natural order and ate rice in the evenings. I thought of these people as strangers - you must imagine me at this time as under seven, because when I was seven all this life of my grandmother's house in Chaquanas came to an end for me. We moved to the capital, and then to the hills to the northwest. But the habits of mind engen-

dered by this shut-in and shutting-

out life lingered for quite a while. If it were not for the short stories my father wrote I would have known almost nothing about the general life of our Indian community. Those stories gave me more than knowledge. They gave me a kind of solidity. They gave me something to stand on in the world. I cannot imagine what my mental picture would have been without those stories. The world outside existed in a kind of darkness; and we inquired about nothing. I was just old enough to have some idea of the Indian epics, the Ramayana in particular. The children who came five years or so after me in our extended family didn't have this luck. No one taught us Hindi. Sometimes someone wrote out the alphabet for us to learn, and that was that; we were expected to do the rest ourselves. So, as English penetrated, we began to lose our language. My grandmother's house was full of religion; there were many ceremonies and readings, some of which went on for days. But no one explained or translated for us who could no longer follow the language. So our ancestral faith receded, became mysterious, not pertinent to our day-to-day life.

We made no inquiries about India or about the families people had left behind. When our ways of thinking had changed, and we wished to know, it was too late. I know nothing of the people on my father's side; I know only that some of them came from Nepal. Two years ago a kind Nepalese who liked my name sent me a copy of some pages from an 1872 gazetteer-like British work about India. Hindu Castes and Tribes as Represented in Benares: the pages listed - among a multitude of names -those groups of Nepalese in the holy city of Banaras who carried the name Naipal. That is all that I have.

grandmother's house, where we ate rice in the middle of the day and wheat in the evenings, there was the great unknown - in this island of only 400,000 people. There were the African or African-derived people who were the majority. They were policemen; they were teachers. One of them was my very first teacher at the Chaguanas Government School; I remembered her with adoration for years. There was the capital, where very soon we would all have to go for education and jobs, and where we would settle permanently, among strangers. There were the white people, not all of them English; and the Portuguese and the Chinese, at one time also immigrants like us. And, more mysterious than these, were the

people we called Spanish, pagnols,

mixed people of warm brown com-

plexions who came from the Span-

ish time, before the island was

detached from Venezuela and the

Spanish Empire - a kind of history

absolutely beyond my child's com-

Away from this world of my

To give you this idea of my background, I have had to call on knowledge and ideas that came to me much later, principally from my writing. As a child I knew almost nothing, nothing beyond what I had picked up in my grandmother's house. All children, I suppose, come into the world like that, not knowing who they are. But for the French child, say, that knowledge is waiting. That knowledge will be all around them. It will come indirectly from the conversation of their elders. It will be in the newspapers and on the radio. And at school the work of generations of scholars, scaled down for school texts, will provide some idea of France and the French.

In Trinidad, bright boy though I

was, I was surrounded by areas of darkness. School elucidated nothing for me. I was crammed with facts and formulas. Everything had to be learned by heart; everything was abstract for me. Again, I do not believe there was a plan or plot to make our courses like that. What we were getting was standard school learning. In another setting it would have made sense. And at least some of the failing would have lain in me. With my limited social background it was hard for me imaginatively to enter into other societies or societies that were far away. I loved the idea of books, but I found it hard to read them. I got on best with things like Andersen and Aeson. timeless, placeless, not excluding. And when at last in the sixth form. the highest form in the college. I got to like some of our literature texts -Moliere, Cyrano de Bergerac - I suppose it was because they had the quality of the fairytale

To be concluded next week

POEMS

The Tall Man AFSAN CHOWDHURY

He is a tall man With a beard like dirty snow after the winter's harvest is over.

The tall man. He hangs loose Like long trousers Flapping in the wind. The tall man

He is just a tall man.

The tall man Curls himself around a chair Like a coat thrown away With withered buttons and footloose threads. The tall man

The tall man Eats a short lunch And rests long limbs He is a tentatively happy man The tall man

The tall man He is no taller than his salary. The tall man

1. The Unbreakable Law ANEEK RASHED KHAN

You hold the flower of love

And.. Knock! Knock! Her face appears, Appears. As you place your eye In front of that

You swallow pain Boom! Boom! You see Guns roaring And a bullet Twists and turns to make A small pause in your mind.

Tiny peephole of your door.

The bullet Enters its next scene. You scream. The scream climbs Its way up the ladder Till the red clock Stops ticking And explodes.

You blow dust of happiness in the air Hee hee! Ha Ha! Ho Ho! Approaches With a sweet smile The soul of innocent children Blends into yours.

Do you remember? Sir Isaac Newton's Law "Every action has equal And opposite reaction."

I say... One word, one soul And a God. Different colored eyes, different tongues, Leads to schisms But wise man believes And knows:

That light, sound heat, magnetism, each Got different waves And meaning of its own But all end up as energy.

2. Life=Death=Life

House of Death Homeland of souls. They gather, A celebration, occasion unknown.

On a different plateau On a different horizon, Our shadow meet. They are about to melt and mix.

Unseen along The railroad between An invisible train Making its trips.

The souls glide On the synchronized waves. Do you comprehend What has been just said?

I say... Death is peace. Death brings a life, Wait like me To see the new light.

I see. The end of the body, Beginning of a beauty. With time we see. With time we feel.

Souls step into a new life As they get free I wait in the queue As I see them leave. The result of this feeling The only conclusion: "Life brings death Death brings life."

3. Demons are born to betray

The rats came into Lodz To spread the plague.

The prisoners of disease Got no way to escape. I hear the humans cry, As I close my eye Suffocation, Then a miserable death. Rumkowski. One helpless doctor. Looked for medicine To cure the plague.

No way to contact angels Nor any help, Demons surround the gate. He decided To call demons his friend.

He gave the demons few treasures To save his life and others

But Demons live on blood

So fate led to his Death. He could not escape Being their prey without mistake. History repeats Not only in books But in life itself. And in every case You learn a lesson.

I ask my inner eye What did he see From this history?

The inner eye replies... Demons are to be faced, Not fed. Not to be a called a friend, Because at the end They always betray.

Blue and Green Poems RUBAYIAT SHAHRIAR

Inertia

I'm tired and I'm weary I can sleep for a thousand years A thousand dreams that would awake me Different colors made of tears. --Lou Reed (from "Venus in Furs")

The horse ran through the park as white and pure as light past the kids playing Hop

cot c h the young girl with lilies in her hair and an awkward first kiss (the way you can only kiss once)

White as a funeral shroud, the horse cuts through the wind a ferocious gust that disturbs

the golden blue cloud of flies over a rotten fruit and an old man' toupee; a boy stands enchanted, his eyes held captive by the beautiful stallion as the ice-cream, sticky sweet, drips down his fingers.

I stand below the naked willow tree the steaming concrete stinging my feet, watch the horse like cold driven snow disappear into the sea of green. I feel my inside fill up with blood, as I wonder, "what if I die in this dream, before I can make up and another, and another, and another . . .

Requiem for the Green

The stars set the sky on fire tonight their spectral light falls to earth like a fallen angel; a broken angel with glass wings. In a flat field he lies now, happy and bleeding, in the form of a boy, a melancholic dream, the wings of a lonely young girl's desire to hold a shooting star.

The night wind, like ancient Shalimar, profuse with the rogue mystic of lilies and bees, the somnambulist ballads of young lovers and the sound of a single heartbeat scattering like the light, infatuates him.

like a lost traveler high inside a gypsy's kiss. He casts down his halo, now full of thorns and he adorns himself anew with a feathered cap and a wooden sword like the man when he was boy, and his smiles

were innocent, and wonders if this feeling will last a little while.

Sky over Blue

She is a star newly emerging the twilight that feeds my soul, only to dissolve into the morning sky. Without her to guide me, I'm a volcano of white

a violin with broken strings, waiting for the sun to go down behind the porcelain

only the whisper of a blue moon can set her free,

she dances among the shadows. helpless, I hold my vigil, as her sweet melancholy falls like a tear on my hand. But one day I'll take her down from the sky,

spread her out on my sheets like the wings of a

until I'm lost in her scorching heat and I'm alive only within her.

Blue Opaque The salt on your skin

brings back memories of when inside me bloomed a velvet garden and the air was heavy with summer's breath. The moonlight would murmur to the wind sonnets of a lost poet, and the stars would shiver like autumn leaves. Your footprints are strewn over my lonely beach like the vague past memories reincarnate. Memories of wet skies and thrashing oceans,

the long gone days of playing freeze tag in the the hollow at the base of a woman's neck, and a string of teeth-marks on an ebony shoul-

hidden behind the midnight curtain of your hair.

With my mouth against my knees, I'm circular, like a god a small blue round thing, made of glass,

and I'm on a downward spiral; waiting for you to catch me. But now, in the middle of the afternoon, the spider's lullaby grows closer; and we only get to stay so long before we've to get back to real lives because stars have their moments and then they too die.

But before the end. I wonder if we'll remember how it feels to be this alive.