'A SENSE OF PLACE'
IN THE NOVELS OF V. S. NAIPAUL

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Graduate Studies in English

University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Stephen Campbell Park

February 1972

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I will walk with integrity of heart
within my house.

Psalm 101

'Yes,' he replied. 'The path of sympathy.'

The Plague

INTRODUCTION

When V. S. Naipaul went back to Trinidad in September 1960 for a brief visit, Dr. Eric Williams suggested that he write a non-fiction book about the West Indies. The fruit of his suggestion was The Middle Passage. There the writer described his childhood perception of his native island: "the threat of failure, the need to escape: this was the prompting of the society I knew."[1] And of course Naipaul has escaped, and has spent the past twenty-one years living in England. He has written six novels, four set in Trinidad, one set in England, and the last set in both islands: England and the fictional Isabella. His choice of settings indicates that he is still concerned with his society. The novel, he says, implies an interest in people. It is part of the Western concern with the condition of men, a response to the here and now.[2] Even in exile, he continues to explore the temporal and spiritual condition of his island people.

Thus, one may well imagine that his sense of place--his sense of a home land--lacks definition. The definition is made more tenuous by the fact that India was also in a special way the background of his childhood, for it was the country from which his grandfather had come, and which he

[1] V. S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962), p. 43, hereafter Passage.

[2] _____, An Area of Darkness (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), pp. 65 and 226, hereafter Area.

had transported practically whole.[3] The sense of place is, understandably, a sense of placelessness, and it is an awareness that underlies all of his novels, beginning with Miguel Street and concluding with The Mimic Men. After the publication of that, his last novel, V. S. Naipaul was interviewed by Francis Wyndham of The Sunday Times, and it was with regard to that particular theme that he began his article:

> The W. H. Smith award for the most outstanding contribution to English literature published during 1967 was presented last week to V. S. Naipaul for his novel, "The Mimic Men." Naipaul, who has already won four other literary prizes, was born in Trinidad of Indian parentage and has spent all his adult life in England: it is not surprising that the theme of placelessness, present to some extent in all his work, is dominant in "The Mimic Men."[4]

The prevalence of placelessness in the novels is the concern of this thesis. The phrase "a sense of place," the phrase that the writer himself uses in The Mimic Men, has been chosen as a title, as, while including the idea of placelessness, it has more extensive and vivid ramifications. Primarily it is more concrete and implies a degree of accommodation to, and acceptance of, the world. Placelessness is wholly negative. In so far as a sense of place is placelessness it too is negative: in the life of the writer Trinidad was a place which prompted him with the threat of failure, the need to escape. The threat is fourfold. First, it refers

[3] Area, p. 29.

[4] Francis Wyndham, "Writing is Magic," The Sunday Times, 10 Nov. 1968, p. 57, Col. 1.

to personal failure, not living up to one's own aspirations or to the expectations of other people.[5] In Trinidad when it came about that it was no longer a privilege of the rich to scoff at education, the proper career was the anomalous English grammar school and then either and only a position in the bank or a position in the civil service. The opportunities are as limited today as they were ten years ago. Of the main characters of the novels, the boy-narrator of Miguel Street, Ganesh of The Mystic Masseur, Mr. Biswas of A House for Mr. Biswas, and the boy-narrator of The Mimic Men attended such schools. One became a customs officer, one a teacher, one a reporter-welfare officer, and one a politician. Not one of them was content in his role, for all but the last were inherently artistic, and such jobs did not promise fulfilment. The figure which Naipaul uses to suggest their natural and growing selves is the sign-painter; by extension it is the figure of the writer.

The second threat is racial failure, the fear of contamination in a multi-racial society, a fear that is perhaps more terrible to a taboo-ridden Hindu society than to another. Such was the society of Naipaul's grandfather.[6] The narrator of The Mimic Men speaks of his Asiatic race as a doomed people: "We were an intermediate race, the genes passive, capable of disappearing in two generations into any of the

[5] A. C. Derrick states the predominance of the theme of personal failure in the novels in "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist," JCL, 7, July 1969, p. 32.

[6] Area, p. 81.

three races of men."[7] He himself had married an English girl while finishing his degree in London; the marriage did not last.

The threat refers as well to the failure of a whole society: the stillborn offspring of colonial rule, already grown mephitic. In the British islands of the Caribbean dependence produced weakness--the lack of responsibility or self-sufficiency. Subservience produced the attitude of defiance. Distance from the white mother produced a sense of having been flung off the real world. Independence, when it came, was a joke, and nationhood remains an impossibility. After his visit to Trinidad Naipaul wrote:

> Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad. In the colonial society every man had to be for himself: every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group.[8]

The individual remained insular and aggressive, covetous of wealth and power. All of V. S. Naipaul's "heroes" are weak, especially Herbert of The Suffrage of Elvira, and Mr. Biswas, but one feels that there are mitigating circumstances in their weakness.

[7] V. S. Naipaul, The Mimic Men (London: Andre Deutsch, 1967), p. 68.

[8] Passage, p. 72. In the following chapters, I to VI, all but initial citations of editions will be incorporated in the text.

Finally, the threat is the failure of the physical world--a perception that is perhaps peculiar to the temperament of the writer--a sense of the destructibility of the body, a fear for the ephemeral creation. A person is not inclined to assert himself when he sees that all hope of security is vain, but to spurn the physical world is to scorn the flesh that has begotten him and the world that accommodates him. To act in an extreme is unrealistic and ungenerous. On the other hand, to embrace the physical world wholeheartedly is to deceive oneself with the notion of permanence.

Thus, while place is basically a home land, it is compositely a person's role in society, with its sense either of frustration or fulfilment, a person's position with regard to his own race and to other races, a person's attitude towards the nature and the degree of advancement of his whole society and to such others as influenced the evolution of his society, and finally his attitude towards the familiar world of flesh and bone, of wood and steel. All in all, place prompted the writer to escape, and the idea of escape runs throughout the novels. The image that Naipaul uses most frequently to signify what a person escapes from--that which threatens--is the prison. The prison is always dark; escape is in the direction of the light. Light is rare in the novels, but it is sufficient that it is.

The plan of this thesis is a discrete examination of

each of the novels, though of course, as the writer's use of imagery is consistent, the chapters are continuous in that respect. Furthermore, in the thesis writer's method of approach to the imagery there is an impressionistic unity. Both narration of events and direct quotation are extensive, for the reason that V. S. Naipaul's novels are still unknown in Canada, and so that an overabundance of impressionism will not mislead where a dearth of general criticism cannot correct. Finally, the fourfold sense of place is the overall unity of the thesis. In particular, Miguel Street presents the tattered social fabric of a Trinidad street and a young boy's ambiguous involvement with it. The Mystic Masseur deals more particularly with the role of the writer in such a society, as to a greater extent do Mr. Biswas and The Mimic Men. The Suffrage of Elvira deals lightly with the political chaos of the island, and anticipates a more extensive presentation in The Mimic Men. Mr. Stone, while not set in the West Indies, maintains a colonial perspective, and comes to grips with the physical world. The central novel is A House for Mr. Biswas as it draws together all the images of place.

CHAPTER I

MIGUEL STREET

Miguel Street, Port of Spain, is one of several streets by that name. To the boy who lived there from his eighth to his eighteenth year it was a painful place and by his eighteenth year he wanted to run away. Prior to that, the street and its people, however mean and obscure, were the entirety of his existence and he could not help but feel a certain sympathetic loyalty. In Miguel Street[1] Naipaul displays the frail fabric of life on that Trinidad street, and the boy's changing involvement with it. Ostensibly he was ready to disengage himself completely: "How I Left Miguel Street" concludes the novel. But the degree of disengagement remains ambiguous, since the reader has known the boy as innocent and sympathetic, and would not gladly believe that he would cast his people aside. The ambiguity is not lessened for the reader who has Naipaul's own voluntary exile in the back of his mind, and who associates the Miguel Street boy with the Trinidadian novelist.

The present chapter discusses the book in three parts. The first introduces the boy as a prisoner--the prisoner of a stagnant and stifling society, the prisoner of his own sadness and self-disgust, and the prisoner of his dream of distant London. He yearns for activity, for a sense of

[1] V. S. Naipaul, Miguel Street (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1959).

personal involvement in everyday life, and for a richness of life through beauty. The second part describes the frail men of Miguel Street. Their frailty is of men who are imitators without selves of their own, of men who are selfish with no selves but their own, of men who are defiant, degenerate and irresponsible. The third part of the chapter presents, for as much as one can discern it in this novel, the writer's attitude towards his society: a genuinely sympathetic attitude made ambiguous by his voluntary departure from his homeland.

Miguel Street delineates incidental recollections from the writer's childhood between the time of his arrival in Port of Spain as a boy of about eight and his exodus from Miguel Street ten years later. And though the novel catches brief episodes in the lives of the other inhabitants of Miguel Street the reader is continuously aware of their conditioning effect upon the "I" of the story. It is the narrator's presence more than any other, as childhood observer and as fellow sufferer with the people of Miguel Street, that links the episodes together.

Only the last chapter of the book is devoted to any part of the writer's life and it describes how he left Miguel Street; all that precedes his departure is a prologue to that event. He has to (and wants to) escape from Miguel Street. To lament the necessity or the desire of his going is, in his own words, to cry over spilt milk. As he was about to leave the yard his mother placed a brass jar of milk in the middle

of the gateway; he describes its fate:

> I cannot understand, even now, how it happened. The gateway was wide, big enough for a car, and the jar, about four inches wide, was in the middle. I thought I was walking at the edge of the gateway, far away from the jar. And yet I kicked the jar over.
>
> My mother's face fell.
>
> I said, 'Is a bad sign?'
>
> She didn't answer.
>
> Bhakcu was blowing the horn.
>
> We got into the van, and Bhakcu drove away, down Miguel Street and up Wrightson Road to South Quay. I didn't look out of the windows.
>
> My mother was crying. She said, 'I know I not going to ever see you in Miguel Street again.'
>
> I said, 'Why? Because I knock the milk down?'
>
> She didn't reply, still crying for the spilt milk. (p. 221)

His going could not be prevented, for it was the result of an increasing disgust with himself and with the small world of his street, and of a lurking desire to escape to a remote land. The attitude that he held towards the people of his street when his disgust and desire were strongest is expressed in a reflection upon the years of Hat's imprisonment:

> I said, 'Yes. Was a long time.'
>
> A long time. But it was just three years, three years in which I had grown up and looked critically at the people around me. I no longer wanted to be like Eddoes. He was so weak and thin, and I hadn't realised that he was so small. Titus Hoyt was stupid and boring, and not funny at all. Everything had changed.
>
> When Hat went to jail, part of me had died. (pp.213-14)

Eddoes, the street aristocrat, with his blue garbage cart, fancy clothes and flashy watch, and Titus Hoyt, with his Inter Arts Degree from Cambridge, and all the people among whom his childhood days flourished, had fallen within a new perspective; a critical view saw them as small, weak,

stupid and boring. Such was the nature of the life of Miguel Street, of Trinidad life in general, and of his own life. His first job, as a custom's official, led him into the company of drunks and whores; it ended in self-disgust and a sense of insular oppression. Angry and frustrated he said to his mother, "'Is not my fault really. Is just Trinidad. What else anybody can do here except drink?'" (p.216) The island life was so monotonous that it became not only the sea-bound physical prison, but also a mental prison, where in time the mind might degenerate to the level, for example, of Toni:

> He used to sit on his front steps with a half bottle of rum in his hand. The dog was with him.
>
> He appeared to have lost touch with the world completely. He seemed to be without feeling. It was hard enough to imagine Mrs. Hereira, or Mrs. Christiana, in love with him. But it was impossible to imagine him being in love with anybody.
>
> I thought he was like an animal, like his dog. (p.143)

Miguel Street is not the habitation of the living but of those who exist in a small, dying world of their own, out of touch with the humane world. Nor did the street at that time detain the boy-narrator, for he imagined a large, bright world of his own. With the aid of Pundit Ganesh, his dead father's friend, he reached from the one world into the other: "To me Ganesh said, 'What you want to go abroad to study?' I said, 'I don't want to study anything really. I just want to go away, that's all.'" (p.217) Ganesh advised him that the Trinidad government was offering scholarships in law. He refused those, but considered one that was

available in "drugs":

> Ganesh said, 'Think. It mean going to London. It mean seeing snow and seeing the Thames and seeing the big Parliament.'
> I said, 'All right. I go study drugs.' (p.218)

The boy was willing to study almost anything as long as he could get away from Miguel Street. London was his city, and snow was his element: a city of activity and order, and an element of purity, far from "the empty rum bottles and the cigarette ends" that littered his familiar world.

Though the "I" of the story is never fully drawn, the lines that do appear present him, at least in his childhood, as timorous, withdrawn, observant, intelligent and painfully sympathetic with his neighbours. When his father died a couple of years before World War Two, the mother took the boy from Chaguanas to Miguel Street in Port of Spain, the capital city. Like his father he was a painter, a painter of signs. He painted a "tailor" shingle for Bogart, and a "carpenter" shingle for Popo:

> After I painted the tailoring sign for Bogart, Popo made me do one for him as well. . . . And I signed my name, as sign-writer, in the bottom right-hand corner. (p.18)

Moreover, he entertained a special liking for those whom he considered to be artistic, poetic, and creative--Popo, for example, and B. Wordsworth, Morgan, Uncle Bhakcu, Edward and Hat. He shared with Popo, the carpenter, a vague but compelling desire "to make":

> 'What you making, Mr. Popo?' I asked.
> Popo would always say, 'Ha, boy! That's the

> question. I making the thing without a name.'
> I liked Popo for that. I thought he was a poetic man.
> One day I said to Popo, 'Give me something to make.'
> 'What you want to make?' he said.
> It was hard to think of something I really wanted.
> 'You see,' Popo said. 'You thinking about the thing without a name!' (p.17)

The object of the desire remained amorphous and uncreated, but in the imagining was a certain joy. He felt that his Uncle Bhakcu, the mechanical genius of motor cars ("If I try to think of Bhakcu I never see his face. I can see only the soles of his feet as he worms his way under a car."(p.147) was, on account of his imaginative pre-occupation with his work, one of the happiest people on Miguel Street:

> The men on the street didn't like Bhakcu because they considered him a nuisance. But I liked him for the same reason that I liked Popo, the carpenter. For, thinking about it now, Bhakcu was also an artist. He interfered with motor-cars for the joy of the thing, and he never seemed worried about money. (p.157)

He discovered a similar private, unworldly happiness in Morgan, the prankster and "pyrotechnicist" of the street.

> Morgan was the first artist I ever met in my life. He spent nearly all his time, even when he was playing the fool, thinking about beauty. Morgan made fireworks. He loved fireworks, and he was full of theories about fireworks. Something about the Cosmic Dance or the Dance of Life. (p.80)

Likewise, both Hat and his brother Edward shared the same personal participation in the world around them. Edward was a painter, whose specialty was painting neckties that everyone refused to own, and morally ethnographic pictures:

> In this way he was never bored, and he had no big ambition to make him unhappy.
> Like Hat, Edward had a high regard for beauty. But Edward didn't collect birds of beautiful plumage as Hat did. Edward painted.

> His favourite subject was a brown hand clasping a black one. (p.179)

The boy's greatest admiration and sense of belonging was with Hat, who was a collector of beautifully plumed birds, and who seemed to animate the world around him. Hat loved to make a mystery of the smallest things, and his joyful response to the world was contagious. One day Hat mustered a dozen street boys and marched them off to the Oval for a cricket match. The memory which that day left in the mind of the boy-narrator was a rich one:

> Hat taught me many things that afternoon. From the way he pronounced them, I learned about the beauty of cricketers' names, and he gave me all his own excitement at watching a cricket match. (p.201)

To all occasions and undertakings Hat brought a similar apocalyptic excitement:

> I never knew a man who enjoyed life as much as Hat did. He did nothing new or spectacular--in fact, he did practically the same things every day--but he always enjoyed what he did. And every now and then he managed to give a fantastic twist to some very ordinary thing.
>
> He was a bit like his dog. This was the tamest Alsatian I have ever known. One of the things I noticed in Miguel Street was the way dogs resembled their owners. . . .Hat's dog was the only Alsatian I knew with a sense of humour. (pp.202-03)

One recalls by way of contrast Toni, and his terrifying dog--the "man" sprawling unconscious on a mattress among the rubbish of empty rum bottles and cigarette ends. Toni's life was a chaotic, selfish and joyless waste; Hat's struck the boy as organised and richly full. He seemed to be a man of settled habits: "He didn't appear to need any-

thing else. He was self-sufficient, and I didn't believe he even needed women." (p.207)

Other residents of Miguel Street could not recommend themselves so admirably when the narrator began to view his world critically. Titus Hoyt in particular reappeared as stupid and boring. Far from being self-sufficient, he was no more than an imitator in his dress and in his speech: he wore khaki shorts and always left company with an English "cheerio". His other remarkable characteristic was his shameless self-advertisement. The boy recalled his first encounter with Titus Hoyt, how on first moving to Miguel Street as a child he became lost. Titus came across him, took him home, and, after asking if the boy could write, set him to writing a letter to the Trinidad newspaper.

> I wrote:'. . .and in this state of despair I was rescued by a Mr. Titus Hoyt of Miguel Street. This only goes to show, dear Mr. Editor, that human kindness is a quality not yet extinct in this world.'
> The Guardian never printed the letter. (p.97)

Hoyt's Literary Club was a similar attempt at recognition; when the street boys broke away from it in disillusion he sought social prestige in another way:

> It wasn't long after that Titus Hoyt got his Inter Arts degree and set up a school of his own. He had a big sign placed in his garden:
>
> Titus Hoyt, I.A. (London, External)
> Passes in the Cambridge
> School Certificate Guaranteed (pp.104-05)

It is thus that one remembers him--as a big sign, a humbug, a fool. His most dextrous reach was a letter not unlike

the first; this time the Guardian printed it, with a little self-advertisement on its own behalf:

> The smallest and most touching response to our appeal to bring Yuletide cheer to the unfortunate has come in a letter from Mr. Titus Hoyt, I.A., a headmaster of Miguel Street, Port of Spain. The letter was sent to Mr. Hoyt by one of his pupils who wishes to remain anonymous. We have Mr. Hoyt's permission to print the letter in full.
>
> "Dear Mr. Hoyt, I am only eight and, as you doubtless know, I am a member of the Guardian Tinymites League. I read Aunt Juanita every Sunday. You, dear Mr. Hoyt, have always extolled the virtue of charity and you have spoken repeatedly of the fine work the Guardian Neediest Cases Fund is doing to bring Yuletide cheer to the unfortunate. I have decided to yield to your earnest entreaty. I have very little money to offer--a mere six cents, in fact, but take it, Mr. Hoyt, and send it to the Guardian Neediest Cases Fund. May it bring Yuletide cheer to some poor unfortunate! I know it is not much. But, like the widow, I give my mite. I remain, dear Mr. Hoyt, One of Your Pupils."
>
> And there was a large photograph of Titus Hoyt, smiling and pop-eyed in the flash of the camera. (pp.105-106)

Another of the inhabitants of Miguel Street, who was an even more deliberate imitator than Titus Hoyt, and with whose sketch the book opens, was Bogart. His real name is never known.

> It was something of a mystery why he was called Bogart; but I suspect that it was Hat who gave him the name. I don't know if you remember the year the film Casablanca was made. That was the year when Bogart's fame spread like fire through Port of Spain and hundreds of young men began adopting the hard-boiled Bogartian attitude. (p.9)

Bogart was more conscientious than the others in effecting the likeness, and after a brief disappearance from among the gang he returned with an unapproachable Bogartian impressiveness:

> But they were all worried. Bogart was hardly opening his lips when he spoke. His mouth was twisted a little, and his accent was getting slightly American.
>
> 'Sure, sure,' Bogart said, and he had got it right. He was just like an actor. (pp.13-14)

Gradually the imitation was complete; to the residents of Miguel Street he became a source of fear and also of pride:

> Bogart now became the most feared man in the street. Even Big Foot was said to be afraid of him. Bogart drank and swore and gambled with the best. He shouted rude remarks at girls walking by themselves in the street. He bought a hat, and pulled down the brim over his eyes. He became a regular sight, standing against the high concrete fence of his yard, hands in his pockets, one foot jammed against the wall, an eternal cigarette in his mouth.
>
> Then he disappeared again. . . .
>
> They didn't see him for four months.
>
> When he returned, he had grown a little fatter but he had become a little more aggressive. His accent was now pure American. To complete the imitation, he began being expansive towards children. He called out to them in the streets, and gave them money to buy gum and chocolate. He loved stroking their heads, and giving them good advice. (p.15)

In his own way he became as mean and insular as Toni, and as parasitic to the life around him. Instead of taking in hand several children as Hat did, and offering them memorable excitement, he offered trash--the money and the bad example.

Even Edward, in spite of his good qualities, became an imitator; "Edward," says the writer, "surrendered completely to the Americans." (p.185) America became his model, and within its aura of greatness Edward could scorn his native country:

> One Sunday he said, 'I was stupid to send in anything I paint with my own two hands for Trinidad people to judge. What they know about anything? Now, if I was in America, it woulda be different. The Americans is people. They know about things.'

> To hear Edward talk you felt that America was a gigantic country inhabited by giants. They lived in enormous houses and they drove in the biggest cars of the world. (p.186)

For the sake of a job and good wages he worked on the American army base in Trinidad, picked up the American jargon, married an American woman, and slowly cut himself off from his boyhood friends. One night the writer walked down to the Docksite army camp with Edward; they stopped at a sentry box.

> Edward used his best American accent and said, 'What's cooking, Joe?'
>
> To my surprise the sentry, looking fierce under his helmet, replied, and in no time at all Edward and the sentry were talking away, each trying to use more swear words than the other.
>
> When Edward came back to Miguel Street he began swaggering along and he said to me, 'Tell tham. Tell them how good I does get on with the Americans.' (p.187)

As time passed, proud of his swearing and his swaggering, he stood aloof from his erstwhile friends. The simile that Naipaul uses to describe him is less than complimentary:

> When Edward brought any American friends to his house he pretended that he didn't know us, and it was funny to see him walking with them, holding his arms in the American way, hanging loosely, like a gorilla's. (p.190)

Like Titus Hoyt and like Bogart he strove to imitate; his spontaneous "artistic" self was buried and he ceased to relate constructively to the society of his street. The source of the error comes as a refrain several times in the chapter in a couplet from a calypso: "I was living

with my decent and contented wife/ Until the soldiers came and broke up my life." (p.196) The life of the island consists of scattered and broken fragments, the remnants of continents beyond the expanse of sea.

The society of the island people is brutal, selfish and false. Their daily fraudulence is what they admiringly call "real man"--which is their term for any lawless or irresponsible behaviour. For example, Popo, the carpenter, began stealing furniture in order to refinish and sell it. Eventually, like most of the other men of the street, he came up against the law and was led off to jail:

> It was a fantastic story. Popo had been stealing things left and right. . . .
> Hat spoke for all of us when he said, 'That man too foolish. Why he had to sell what he thief? Just tell me that. Why?'
> We agreed it was a stupid thing to do. But we felt deep inside ourselves that Popo was really a man, perhaps a bigger man than any of us. (p.24)

Popo came back, says the writer, as a hero. "He was one of the boys. He was a better man than either Hat or Bogart." (p.25) Popo began to grow popular when the gardener ran off with his wife. The writer describes Popo's alteration in character for the worse, and his corresponding change in reputation for the better:

> Popo began drinking a lot, and I didn't like him when he was drunk. He smelled of rum, and he used to cry and then grow angry and want to beat up everybody. That made him an accepted member of the gang.
> Hat said, 'We was wrong about Popo. He is a man, like any of we.' (p.21)

Such notoriety did he acquire that, in spite of his new dislike for Popo, the boy tried to share his reputation, as did Hat:

> They made a calypso about Popo that was the rage that year. . . . It was a great thing for the street.
> At school, I used to say, 'That carpenter feller was a good, good friend of mine.'
> And, at cricket matches, and at the races, Hat used to say, 'Know him? God, I used to drink with that man night and day. Boy he could carry his liquor.' (p.22)

His manhood was his lawbreaking, his brutal disposition, and his capacity for liquor, and the rest of the street held him up as an ideal. Bogart's manhood, of course, was his hard Bogartian attitude, and his bigamy. When Sergeant Charles arrested Bogart, Hat, taking delight in the role of story-teller, told the gang why Bogart was arrested:

> 'You see,' Hat said on the pavement that evening, 'the man leave his first wife in Tunapuna and come to Port of Spain. They couldn't have children. He remain here feeling sad and small. He go away, find a girl in Caroni and he give she a baby. In Caroni they don't make joke about that sort of thing and Bogart had to get married to the girl.'
> 'But why he leave she?' Eddoes asked.
> 'To be a man, among we men.' (p.16)

In any society that cherishes inheritance or the institution of family Bogart is socially irresponsible, and devoid of respect for the ties that bind the human world. Responsibility, self-respect and respect for other people are virtues that Naipaul recommends to his island people.

Another person in whom the inhabitants of Miguel Street took pride was Man-man. Everybody in Miguel Street said that Man-man was mad. Following the example of Ganesh

Pundit, the mystic masseur of Fuente Grove, he claimed that he had seen God, began preaching and Bible slapping on the corner of Miguel Street, and then had himself crucified--almost:

> Some men put up the cross, and tied Man-man to it.
> Man-man said, 'Stone me, brethren,'
> The women wept and flung bits of sand and gravel at his feet.
> Man-man groaned and said, 'Father, forgive them. They ain't know what they doing.' Then he screamed out, 'Stone me, brethren!'
> A pebble the size of an egg struck him on the chest.
> Man-man cried, 'Stone, <u>stone</u>, STONE me, brethren! I forgive you.'
> Edward said, 'The man really brave.'
> People began flinging really big stones at Man-man, aiming at his face and chest.
> Man-man looked hurt and surprised. He shouted, 'What the hell is this? What the hell you people think you doing? Look, get me down from this thing quick, let me down quick, and I go settle with that son of a bitch who pelt a stone at me.'
> From where Edward and Hat and the rest of us stood, it sounded like a cry of agony.
> A bigger stone struck Man-man; the women flung the sand and gravel at him.
> We heard Man-man's shout, clear and loud, 'Cut this stupidness out. Cut it out I tell you. I finish with this arseness, you hear.' And then he began cursing so loudly and coarsely that the people stopped in surprise.
> The police took away Man-man.
> The authorities kept him for observation. Then for good. (pp.53-55)

The nature of Man-man's commitment to the functioning of his society is of a kind with the others: it is superficial and false. Like Bogart he is an imitator, an imitator of Christ, but very much degraded; and his name "among we men" is Man-man:" . . . on top of our wonder and worry, we had this great pride in knowing that Man-man came from

Miguel Street." (p.53)

Such are the heroes of the street; one can hardly admire them. Nor for all their ignorance and folly can one despise them, for to do so is to conclude one's life in lonely isolation. Old man Bolo, for example, after having invested two hundred dollars in a housing project, read in the Gazette that the Director of the Co-operative Housing Society had disappeared. In anger he said, "'I leaving this island for good. Is only a lot of damn crooks here.'" (p.172) He paid his passage on a boat and left for Venezuela. When he arrived and began talking to the people in Spanish they shook their heads and laughed. The boat's crew had driven him around all night and put him down in a swamp on the Trinidad shore. Bolo became bitter: "Bolo said, 'You see how black people is. They only quick to take, take. They don't want to give. That is why black people never get on.'" (p.170) And he grew even more sour towards his black island people. "He said, 'These Trinidad people does only lie, lie. Lie is all they know. They could fool you, boy, but they can't fool me.'" (p.177) Finally his disgust and despair betrayed him into a futile loneliness; he became as isolated and useless as Toni or Bogart:

> Afterwards he lived to himself in his little room, seldom came out to the street, never spoke to anybody. Once a month he went to draw his old-age pension. (p.178)

Like the boy who began working in Customs, Bolo experienced an insular oppression. It drove him not away, but equally as far--into the small room of his own life and the ritual of the dying.

The boy-writer foresees an aversion in the reader as strong as Bolo's. Therefore he paints his people with humour, and shows that he is a man of sympathy; the street after all was the life that he knew:

> A stranger could drive through Miguel Street and just say 'Slum!' because he could see no more. But we who lived there saw our street as a world, where everybody was quite different from everybody else. Man-man was mad; George was stupid; Big Foot was a bully; Hat was an adventurer; Popo was a philosopher; and Morgan was our comedian. (p.79)

For better or for worse the street was his compulsory world; seeing everywhere an elemental injury he responded with sympathy. George, for example, used to beat his son Elias, his daughter, and his wife. The boys on the street recognized that Elias had brains and that he would go somewhere. They felt sorry for Elias because his father "brutalised" him:

> George liked beating Elias. He used to tie him with rope, and then beat him with rope he had soaked in the gutters of his cow pen. Elias didn't cry even then. And shortly after, I would see George laughing with Elias, and George used to say to me, 'I know what you thinking. You wondering how me and he get so friendly so quick.' (p.38)

At the same time George was proud that his son was getting an education. It was not easy, especially when George turned his "house" into a brothel, where the street whores

and the American sailors could congregate:

> Elias had a room of his own which he never left whenever he came home. He ate his meals outside. He was trying to study for some important exam. He had lost interest in his family, Bogart said, or rather, implied. (p.33)

George also had a wife, an Indian woman, whom he used to beat. When she died Edward said, "'I think he kill she.'" His daughter too was hurt. On the day of her marriage Dolly returned to her father's pink house for a reception among the soldiers, the sailors, and the freshly attired whores. Her father began to belittle her.

> For a moment so brief you could scarcely measure it there was absolute silence; then an American sailor waved his hands drunkenly and shouted, 'You could put this girl to better work, George.' And everybody laughed.
>
> Dolly picked up a handful of gravel from the yard and was making as if to throw it at the sailor. But she stopped suddenly, and burst into tears.
>
> There was much laughing and cheering and shouting.
>
> I never knew what happened to Dolly. . . .But she had left the street, left it for good. (pp.34-35)

The occasion is a source of laughter, except for those who cry, for those who are sympathetic. "My heart went out," says the boy-writer, "to the Indian woman and Dolly."(p.32)

Injury of another kind befell Elias, with regard to what the writer ironically calls "His Chosen Calling", for it was chosen only when his earlier choices reached an impasse. The street boys stood in awe when Elias passed the Cambridge School Certificate with a three and said that he intended to write again for a second grade:

> We understood. He wanted to be a doctor.
> Elias sat down on the pavement and said, 'Yes, boy.

> I think I going to take that exam again, and this year I going to be so good that Mr. Cambridge go bawl when he read what I write for him.'
> We were silent, in wonder. (p.41)

But even with the help of Titus Hoyt Elias was unable to make Mr. Cambridge bawl. Boyee hurled the disappointment at him:

> Boyee said, 'But I thought you was thinking of taking up doctoring.' . . .
> Elias said, 'I change my mind. I think I want to be a sanitary inspector. I really like the work.' (p.43)

However, he encountered even further frustration. Having chosen his new calling Elias sat the sanitary inspector's examination for three years and failed every time:

> Elias began saying, 'But what the hell you expect in Trinidad? You got to bribe everybody if you want to get your toenail cut.'
> Hat said, 'I meet a man from a boat the other day, and he tell me that the sanitary inspector exams in British Guiana much easier. You could go to B.G. and take the exams there and come back and work here.'
> Elias flew to B. G., wrote the exam, failed it, and flew back.
> Hat said, 'I meet a man from Barbados. He tell me that the exams easier in Barbados. It easy, easy, he say.'
> Elias flew to Barbados, wrote the exam, failed it, and flew back.
> Hat said, 'I meet a man from Grenada the other day _____'
> Elias said, 'Shut your arse up, before it have trouble between we in this street.' (p.44)

Eventually his chosen calling was that which all the street boys coveted, that of a cart-driver picking up the rubbish trowelled out of the open sewers by the scavenging women. He liked the work, he said.

> For Elias had become one of the street aristocrats. He was driving the scavenging carts.
> 'No theory here,' Elias used to say. 'This is the practical. I really like the work.' (p.45)

But the last that the reader hears of Elias is when he jealously cursed the boy-writer for earning a second grade and finding a job in the Customs. The injury is elemental: he is in theory and by desire a doctor, a garbage collector in reality. The street offers no exit for him; he remains to toil among the garbage in an unpromising land.

The writer felt sorry too to see the bully Big Foot bawling in the boxing ring, for he knew that Big Foot was really a coward. He felt sorry for Morgan who seemed compelled to go to any extent to evoke laughter from the street, even to the point of setting up a kangaroo court in his house and passing harsh sentences upon his children, felt sorry for him "because of that little devil he had inside him." (p.87) What Hat says of Morgan's excess applies as well to the other inhabitants of Miguel Street: "Hat said, 'when a man start laughing at something he fight for all the time, you don't know whether to laugh or cry.'" (p.84) There were tears for Dolly, tears for Elias, tears for Morgan, and tears for Toni as he lay among his garbage:

> We saw him sprawling on a mattress in one of the rooms. The room was perfectly empty. Nothing but the mattress and the empty rum bottles and the cigarette ends.
> He was drunk and sleeping, and his face was strangely reposed.
> The thin and wrinkled hands looked so frail and sad. (p.145)

Each of them is sad and frail. Their condition is an elemental sadness--in the wrinkled hands, and in the skin and bone. Still remembering Toni the writer says:

> And, in truth, he had a nasty skin. It was yellow and pink and white, with brown and black spots. The skin above his left eye had the raw pink look of scalded flesh.
>
> But the strange thing I noticed was that if you just looked at Toni's hands and saw how thin and wrinkled they were, you felt sorry for him, not disgusted. (p.137)

The Custom's boy felt disgust and Bolo felt disgust; but the writer is more patient. He sees Miguel Street as a world, unfortunately a world of isolated parts--broken, scattered and incapable of regeneration. He regards the force of human regeneration as a dumb, chaotic thing. The writer's story of Laura, and of her daughter Lorna, ironically entitled "The Maternal Instinct," displays that force, and is replete with his sympathy. The title is ironic, for the maternal instinct becomes a sense of propriety that the daughter should die.

Laura had eight children; those eight children had seven fathers. Their yearly regularity, to the boy a wonder, was to her a nuisance:

> To me this was one of the wonders of the world in which I lived, and I always observed Laura. She herself was quite gay about what was happening to her. She used to point to it and say, 'This thing happening again, but you get use to it after the first three four times. Is a damn nuisance, though.' (p.107)

On the Friday evening before the event he had seen Laura standing in her yard leaning on the fence. On Saturday morning, two hours after the child's birth, he saw her again leaning on her window sill. "She was eating a mango, and the yellow juice was smeared all over her face." (p.112)

The regenerative force is not a wonder, but a plague, a kind of prison, an inherited and self-perpetuating injury. It overpowered even the accustomed lively laughter of Laura as she saw the injury transmitted within her own offspring:

> The eldest daughter, Lorna, came home from her typing lessons late one night and said, 'Ma, I going to make a baby.'
>
> I heard the shriek that Laura gave.
>
> And for the first time I heard Laura crying. It wasn't ordinary crying. She seemed to be crying all the cry she had saved up since she was born, all the cry she had tried to cover up with her laughter. I have heard people cry at funerals, but there is a lot of showing-off in their crying. Laura's crying that night was the most terrible thing I had heard. It made me feel that the world was a stupid, sad place, and I almost began crying with Laura. (pp.115-16)

After the day of laughter is the day of weeping. The writer's heart goes out to Laura in sympathy; his mind goes out to the world in an awareness of unrelenting sadness. Finally, however, both laughter and tears become meaningless. One can only wait:

> Lorna brought her baby home. There were no jokes about it in the street.
>
> Laura's house was a dead, silent house.
>
> Hat said, 'Life is helluva thing. You can see trouble coming and you can't do a damn thing to prevent it coming. You just got to sit and watch and wait.' (p.116)

The land of the living is a dead and silent house. The

regenerative force is destructive and self-destructive. When Lorna drowned, the newspapers reported the drowning as "just another week-end tragedy"--one of many.

> And when the police came to tell Laura about it, she had said very little.
> Laura said, 'It good. It good. It better that way.' (pp.116-117)

The instinct for death replaced the instinct for generating life.

The boy's tears were also for himself. Newly arrived on the street he was sent to the store and he got lost:

> I found about six Miguel Streets, but none seemed to have my house. After a long time walking up and down I began to cry. I sat down on the pavement and got my shoes wet in the gutter. (p.94)

To a person who is as compulsively clean as the boy was, the gutter is distasteful; and to a person who has known a house, being lost is a desperate fear. But they are only a few of many injuries--the shin cut while learning to ride a bike, and the beatings of a passionless mother. After being beaten he often escaped from Miguel Street to the company of B. Wordsworth, the poet-philosopher, who, like Hat, made the world seem exciting: "He did everything as though he were doing it for the first time in his life. He did everything as though he were doing some church rite." (p.61) He lived in a garden:

> He lived in Alberto Street in a one-roomed hut placed right in the centre of the lot. The yard seemed all green. There was the big mango tree. There was a coconut tree and there was a plum tree. The place looked wild, as though it wasn't in the city at all. You couldn't see all the big concrete houses in the street. (p.59)

One evening the boy's mother beat him badly and he retreated to B. Wordsworth's house with a bleeding nose. The two of them strolled out into the Savannah and lay down in the grass. The distance above them put the boy's small injuries into a new perspective and became a source of strength. His tears meant only themselves.

> I did as he told me, and I saw what he meant. I felt like nothing, and at the same time I had never felt so big and great in all my life. I forgot all my anger and all my tears and all the blows.
>
> When I said I was better, he began telling me the names of the stars, and I particularly remembered the constellation of Orion the Hunter, though I don't really know why. I can spot Orion even today, but I have forgotten the rest.
>
> Then a light was flashed into our faces, and we saw a policeman. We got up from the grass. (p.60)

Two forces prevented the boy's escape from the meanness and misery of Miguel Street. Like each of the other residents of the street he was confronted by the Police: he faced the imposition of a lawful and organized society. For a person of his sensibility the brutal, irresponsible and chaotic society of "all of we men" was not a humane possibility in the world. Thus, when he left the world of Miguel Street as a boy of eighteen, he left to return. Nature too prevented his escape; he saw that escape was impossible when he observed the fate of his poet-friend B. Wordsworth:

> One day when I went to see him in his little house I found him lying on his little bed. He looked so old and so weak that I found myself wanting to cry.
>
> He said, 'The poem is not going well.'. . .
>
> And then--I felt it so keenly, it was as though I had been slapped by my mother. I could see it clearly

> on his face. It was there for everyone to see. Death on the shrinking face. (p.64)

Death haunted the shrinking face of Wordsworth, caressed the frail, wrinkled hands of Toni, and washed the limp body of Lorna. Death is the elemental injury of the flesh. It makes escape not only impossible but also irrelevant, throws one back among the scattered fragments of humanity, among the rubbish of Miguel Street. It throws one back in the role of the Man-man original. Because he was mad everyone left him alone. "But I," says the writer, "am not so sure now that he was mad, and I can think of many people much madder than Man-man ever was." (p.46) There is little madness in an imitator of Christ--only such self-surrender and sympathy as might bind together all the fragments of earth.

The irony of the last chapter, "How I Left Miguel Street", is that the boy-writer went back to his street; his mother's crying for the spilt milk is absurdly literal. He arrived at Piarco airport to hear that his flight had been delayed for six hours and he decided to return home. His indifferent welcome was a shock. In years past, when Bogart had disappeared from the street for brief intervals, he had felt a similar surprise at the effect of Bogart's absence: "It was as if Bogart had never come to Miguel Street. And after all Bogart had been living in the street only for four years or so." (p. 12) The effect was the same when B. Wordsworth died. One detects in the writer-friend a worried sympathy, the fear for a being lost in not-being,

for a fertile garden world buried beneath the concrete:

> I walked along Alberto Street a year later, but I could find no sign of the poet's house. It hadn't vanished just like that. It had been pulled down, and a big, two-storied building had taken its place. The mango tree and the plum tree and the coconut tree had all been cut down, and there was brick and concrete everywhere.
>
> It was just as though B. Wordsworth had never existed. (p.65)

So it was even for Hat; but in spite of his fondness for Hat, the boy did not experience the same sense of loss when Hat went to prison for several months. The boy was older, and working in Customs. His affection succumbed to the practicality of daily living, to the reasonable selfishness, to the real unconcern about anyone but himself:

> But as the months passed I became more and more concerned with myself, and I wouldn't think about Hat for weeks on end. It was useless trying to feel ashamed. I had to face the fact that I was no longer missing Hat. From time to time when my mind was empty, I would stop and think how long it would be before he came out, but I was not really concerned. (pp.212-13)

In the chaotic living of Miguel Street, where each man is an island and where there is no continuity in the bonds of human affection or endeavour, a person is more gladly lost than remembered. Thus, the shock that the boy felt when he returned home was the awareness that he was not someone especially deserving of the care that he himself did not offer, and that daily life would continue there without him. With Hat's cold welcome in mind he reflected upon his own insignificance:

> All he said was, 'I thought you was in the air by this time.'
>
> I was disappointed. Not only by Hat's cool reception. Disappointed because although I had been away, destined to be gone for good, everything was going on just as before, with nothing to indicate my absence. (p.222)

His familiar world left him very much on his own, ambiguously burdened with his disgust at its meanness and his despair at the human condition, with a desire to escape and a sense of duty born of sympathy. His departure leaves many things in doubt. The aeroplane signifies escape, at least from the geographical island, and his not looking back may be a final critical and selfish aloofness. But it may also be a fear of crying:

> I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a dancing dwarf on the tarmac. (p.222)

The one certainty is that he is alone: there remains only his insistent shadow, which gives the lie to his fragmented physical world.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTIC MASSEUR

One bridge between Naipaul's first novel and The Mystic Masseur[1] is what to the boy was a haunting image of the uncle whom he admired for a kind of innocent activity:

> I was haunted by the thoughts of the dhoti-clad Pundit Bhakcu, crawling under a car, attending to a crank-shaft, while poor Hindus waited for him to attend to their souls.[2]

That Bhakcu should neglect the Hindu faithful made his innocent activity harmful; it struck the boy as being irresponsible. Moreover, it troubled the boy that Bhakcu became a pundit because there was money in it, when his heart really lay in his mechanical tinkering: he was in a way unfaithful to himself. The life of Pundit Ganesh, the mystic masseur, is similar in that respect, for as masseur he was aware of many physical injuries, and as mystic, of much mental suffering. Yet, he abandoned his responsibility for wealth and fame. These several injuries are described in the second part of this chapter. Geography and climate are a chief source of physical ruin, a ruin which the human body shares with the mind. A dark cloud sits above minds that are oppressed with a feeling of inferiority, for, set against the lands of England and India, with their strong fabric of history and society, an island is insignificant.

[1] V. S. Naipaul, The Mystic Masseur, (London: Deutsch, 1957).

[2] _____, Miguel Street, p. 164.

The first part of the chapter briefly discusses the writer, whom the reader comes to know as a young boy, as a university student and as a biographer-historian, and the writer's purpose: to tell how Ganesh despised what he was, and became what he was not. Part three presents in more detail the lie that was his life: the shame he felt with regard to his native land, and the honour he envisioned in more distant lands. The last part of the chapter focusses again upon "the writer," as he decides where individual responsibility ought to begin, and of what kind it should be--whether, in a world which is to all private purposes a "house of the dead," to attend to the souls of the Hindu faithful is any more meaningful than tinkering beneath a car.

A summary view of the first and last chapters of The Mystic Masseur quickly discovers the writer's design. His opening paragraph displays the change in fame and fortune of Ganesh Ramsumair, whom the narrator first knew as a struggling masseur:

> Later he was to be famous and honoured throughout the South Caribbean; he was to be a hero of the people and after that, a British representative at Lake Success. But when I first met him he was still a struggling masseur, at a time when masseurs were ten a penny in Trinidad. (p.7)

In the fifteen years from the occasion of his first visit to Ganesh as a patient with an injured shin, to the occasion of their past meeting at an English railway station during the summer of 1954, Ganesh enjoyed a change in fortune, as he moved upwards from an obscure masseur to become the famous

statesman described in the final paragraphs of the book:

> In the summer of 1954 I was at an English university, waiting for the results of an examination. One morning I got a letter from the Colonial Office. A party of Colonial Statesmen were in Britain for a conference, and would I be willing to entertain a statesman from my own territory? It was the vacation and I had much time on my hands. I agreed. It was arranged that I should be host for a day to G. R. Muir, Esq., M.B.E.
>
> The day of the visit came and I was at the railway station to meet the 12:57 from London. As the passengers got off I looked among them for someone with a nigrescent face. It was easy to spot him, impeccably dressed, coming out of a first-class carriage. I gave a shout of joy.
>
> 'Pundit Ganesh!' I cried, running towards him. 'Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair!'
>
> 'G. Ramsay Muir,' he said coldly. (p.215)

The impeccable dress is reminiscent of the Ganesh whom the reader first encounters; so too, without the coldness, is the scorn for his Indian name and for his past, and as it is his dominant trait so it is likewise the writer's final touch, to a portrait that begins to take shape when Ganesh enrolled at Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain, and suffering the laughter aimed at his Indian appearance, chose instead the name of Gareth:

> Ganesh never lost his awkwardness. He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Gareth. This did him little good. He continued to dress badly, he didn't play games, and his accent remained too clearly that of the Indian from the country. He never stopped being a country boy. (pp.16-17)

His constant wish was to place his past at a distance--to bury the shame of the Indian background, the country upbringing and the small town shyness. Even as the story closes he would like to be an aloof Englishman. That his transfor-

mation is incomplete is manifest in the fact that the student-writer greets the representative as Pundit Ganesh.

The narrator's ostensible purpose in The Mystic Masseur is to write the biography of Ganesh, the man and his writings, in order to appease such people as would like to advertise their son to the world, to benefit such as missed the pleasure of Ganesh's own autobiography, and to tell what he believes is also the history of his times:

> Nineteen forty-six was the turning-point of Ganesh's career; and, as if to underline the fact, in that year he published his autobiography, The Years of Guilt (Ganesh Publishing Co. Ltd., Port of Spain, $2.40). The book, variously described as a spiritual thriller and a metaphysical whodunit, had a considerable success of esteem in Central America and the Caribbean. Ganesh, however, confessed that the autobiography was a mistake. So, in the very year of publication it was suppressed and the Ganesh Publishing Company itself wound up. The wider world has not learnt of Ganesh's early struggles, and Trinidad resents this. I myself believe that the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times; and there may be people who will welcome this imperfect account of the man Ganesh Ramsumair, masseur, mystic, and, since 1953, M.B.E. (p.14)

The history of Ganesh is remarkable for an innocent desire to become learned and civilised, that is, English, and an unflagging sense of destined greatness. The course of his life carried him from the negligible Indian Village of Fourways to the slightly less negligible town of Port of Spain where he attended the "town college"--never an athlete, never more than a mediocre student, and never happy:

> Ganesh was never really happy during the four years he spent at the Queen's Royal College. He went there when he was nearly fifteen and he was not as advanced as the other boys of his own age. He was always the oldest boy in his class, with some boys three or even four years younger than himself. But he was lucky to go to the college at all. (p.15)

Thereafter he attended the Government Training College for teachers and taught unsuccessfully for a few months at a school in a rowdy district in the east end of Port of Spain. On the day that he quit that job he also received a telegram advising him to return to Fourways. With the help of his Aunt and the entire village he buried his father, and at the age of twenty-one he found himself alone, educated, but without any means of earning a living. In his solitary bicycle rides he encountered Mr. Stewart, who placed the idea of writing in the back of his mind. With considerable fawning and coaxing on the part of the shopkeeper Ramlogan, he decided to marry his daughter Leela, and having obtained a small house in Fuente Grove as part of the dowry, they both moved there to a poor existence. There, at Ramlogan's instigation, Ganesh took up the one-time occupation of his father, that of masseur. Fuente Grove was an unpromising land, small, remote and wretched:

> Right from the start Fuente Grove looked unpromising. The Great Belcher had said it was a small, out of the way place. That was only half true. Fuente Grove was practically lost. . . You couldn't really like Fuente Grove. In the dry season the earth baked, cracked, and calcined; and in the rainy season melted into mud. Always it was hot. Trees would have made some difference, but Ganesh's mango tree was the only one.
>
> The villagers went to work in the cane-fields in the dawn darkness to avoid the heat of day. When they returned in the middle of the morning the dew had dried on the grass; and they set to work in their vegetable gardens as if they didn't know that sugar-cane was the only thing that could grow in Fuente Grove. . . . Once a year, at the 'crop-over' harvest festival, when the sugar-cane had been reaped, Fuente Grove made a brave show of gaiety. The half-dozen bullock carts in the village were decorated

> with pink and yellow and green streamers made from crepe paper; the bullocks themselves, sad-eyed as ever, wore bright ribbons in their horns; and men, women and children rattled the piquets on the carts and beat on pans, singing about the bounty of God. It was like the gaiety of a starving child. (pp.63-64)

Ganesh realized that he was not meant to be a masseur: "'Facts is facts,'" he said to Leela, "'I ain't have a hand for massage'". (p.69) The realization was a gradual but decided one, the result, if not of sympathy for his native people, then of a wish not to inflict pain upon them or upon himself. Observing the real injury of his patients, as of the broken body of earth, and as of the starving child, he wished to escape, to place all responsibility, as everyone else did, in the hands of Fate:

> One day a young girl with a twisted arm came to see him. She looked happy enough but her mother was weeping and miserable. . . . She was a pretty girl, too, with lively eyes in an impassive face. She looked only at her mother, not once at Ganesh.
>
> 'Twenty time people break over the girl hand, if they break it over one time,' the mother continued. 'But still the hand can't set.'
>
> He knew what his father would have done. He would have made the girl lie down, he would have placed his foot on her elbow, levered the arm upwards until it broke, then set it again. But all Ganesh said, after examining the hand, was, 'It have nothing wrong with the girl, maharajin. She only have a little bad blood, that is all. And too besides, God made she that way and is not for me to interfere in God work.'
>
> The girl's mother stopped sobbing and pulled her pink veil over her head. 'Is my fate,' she said, without sadness.
>
> The girl never spoke a word. (p.68)

The silent lively eyes and impassive face of the girl spoke an accustomed and unconsolable hurt, and made Ganesh aware of his own impotence to heal. Perhaps fear and shame lurked as well in the back of his mind, the fear of perpet-

uating the guilt of a father who was known at one time as the best masseur in Fourways, and who accidentally killed a young girl:

> For years old Mr. Ramsumair had this reputation until, his luck running out, he massaged a young girl and killed her. The Princes Town doctor diagnosed appendicitis and Mr. Ramsumair had to spend a lot of money to keep out of trouble. He never massaged afterwards. (p.31)

Thereafter, having for some time been an admirer of books and magazines, that is, of their writers' strong feeling for colour and beauty and order, and having professed that he too would one day "write books like these," he began to hoard hundreds of volumes on literature and religion, and even gave birth to a penurious piece of pedantry entitled <u>One Hundred Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion</u>. It did not sell, but it carried the awful authority of type, and when his customers received a free copy they were duly impressed.

awesome?

During those idle years two things happened that changed his fortunes for ever. The first was that his wife and his Aunt, the Great Belcher, persuaded Ganesh to turn from curing bodies to curing minds. They were eager that he make some money, or, as they said, that he use his learning to benefit other people. Ganesh was reluctant until he heard a promise of greatness, the promise of his private dream:

> The Great Belcher went on, 'Is the sort of thing your uncle, poor man, used to do until he dead. . . .

> Ganesh, you have the Power. I could see it in your hands, your eyes, in the shape of your head. Just like your uncle, God bless him. He woulda be a great man today, if only he did live.'
>
> Ganesh was interested now. 'But how and where I go start, man?'
>
> 'I go send you all your uncle old books. They have all the prayers and everything in it, and a lot more besides. Isn't really the prayers that important, but the other things. Oh, Ganeshwa, boy, I too too glad now.' In her relief she began to cry. 'I carrying around these books like a weight on my chest, looking for the proper person to give them to, and you is the man.'. . . .
>
> 'Yes, is true,' Ganesh said. 'I did always feel I had something big to do.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> A fortnight later she brought a parcel wrapped in red cotton spattered with sandalwood paste and handed it over to Ganesh with appropriate ceremony. When Ganesh untied the parcel he saw books of many sizes and many types. All were in manuscript, some in Sanskrit, some in Hindi; some were of paper, some of palm strips. The palm strips bound together looked like folded fans.
>
> Ganesh warned Leela off. 'Don't touch these books, girl, or I don't know what going to happen to you.'
>
> Leela understood and opened her eyes wide. (p.111-12)

How much one can rely on any information supplied by a person who is known as The Great Belcher is less a matter of conjecture than of exact probability. One is doubtful of any special Power in Ganesh, and it is apparent that the power of the books lies in their persuasive awe; it isn't really the prayers that are important.

What is important is clarified by the second fortune-changing event: Ganesh discovered the Hollywood Hindus and was impressed by their methods:

> The Hollywood Hindus are Hindus who live in or near Hollywood. They are holy, cultivated men who issue frequent bulletins about the state of their soul, the complexities and variations of which are endless and always worth description.
>
> Ganesh was a little annoyed. 'You think I could

> do this sort of thing in Trinidad and get away with it?' he asked Beharry. (p.112)

As the word "Hollywood" suggests, the Power is the ability to produce a splendid show by various falsehoods. Therefore Ganesh assumed the dhoti, and in the manner of the Hollywood self-advertisers, placed his shingle on the mango tree and his numerous books on open display:

> Ganesh was not happy to be called simply a pundit. He felt he was more than that and he felt that he was entitled to a weightier word. So, remembering the Hollywood Hindus, he nailed a signboard on the mango tree: GANESH, Mystic. (p.116)

The deception had the desired effect upon the mother of one of his first patients. She was at once pleased by the correctness of his English. Then, says the writer, her satisfaction turned to respect when the car stopped outside Ganesh's house and she saw the GANESH, Mystic sign on the mango tree and the book-display in the shed.

The patient was a young boy, whose problem, as Ganesh scribbled in one of his note-books, was "black boy under a black cloud." Since his brother's death the child had been pursued more and more closely each day by the cloud. It spoke to him, and reached out to him, and as it came closer was certain to strangle him. When the boy came for his appointment, his suffering was so terrible that it pierced through Ganesh's customary deception and became a source of pain:

> When Ganesh saw the boy next morning he felt he had never seen anyone so tormented. It was torment heightened by a deep sense of helplessness. Though

> the boy was thin now and his arms looked bony and brittle, it was clear that he had once been strong and healthy. His eyes were dead, lack-lustre. In them you could see not the passing shock of momentary fear, but fear as a permanent state, fear so strong that it had ceased to thrill. (p.123)

As he drew personal information from the boy he slowly uncovered a scene of horror and a sense of guilt. The boy had been sent by his mother to buy ice and he in turn had asked his brother; his brother was run over:

> 'A truck knock him down. Ram him against a wall, break him up and mash him up. But he was trying to get away even then. He try to pull hisself away and all he could do was take his foot out of the shoe, the left foot. He didn't want to dead either. And the ice only melting in the hot sun and running down on the pavement next to the blood. . . . But it was really me that shoulda go to buy the ice, not he.'(p.125)

Such effort did Ganesh expend in reading and thinking that at first Leela reproved him: "'I don't know why for you wasting all this time on one little black boy. . . . Anybody would think you was a schoolchild doing homework.'" (p.123) Ganesh argued: "'Girl, this is the most important case anybody ever handle in the world. I know that the boy going to dead tomorrow unless I do something for him.'" (p.126) He and Leela agreed on arrangements for the next day, and all that night camphor and incense burned in the bedroom. The next day the splendid show began:

> Ganesh's chants were becoming more frenzied. Leela said, 'The fight beginning between him and the cloud. It not after you. It after him. God! the cloud dying,' Leela screamed, and as she screamed there seemed to be a muffled explosion, and Hector said, 'Oh God, I see it leaving me. I can feel it leaving me.'
>
> The mother said, 'Look at the ceiling. At the ceiling. I see the cloud. Oh, Hector, Hector. It

> ain't a cloud at all. Is the devil.'
> Hector's father said, 'And I see forty little devils with him.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> Ganesh stopped chanting. He got up and led them to the room outside. The air was fresher and the light seemed dazzling. It was like stepping into a new world.
> 'Mr. Ganesh,' Hector's father said. 'I don't know what we could do to thank you.'
> 'Do just what you want. If you want to reward me, I don't mind, because I have to make a living. But I don't want you to strain yourself. (p.130)

As soon as they had left, Ganesh returned to Leela, who said that his effort made her feel really nice, but pleaded against ever having to take part in such a way again. Ganesh reassured her:

> 'We not going to do that again. I only wanted to make sure this time. It make them feel good, you know, hearing me talk a language they can't understand. But it not really necessary.'
> 'Manwa, I did see the cloud too, you know.'
> 'The mother see one devil, the father forty little devil, the boy see one cloud, and you see one cloud. Girl, whatever Suruj Mooma say about education, it have its uses sometimes.'
> 'Oh, man, don't tell me you use a trick on them.'
> Ganesh didn't say. (p.131)

It is obvious that Ganesh used a trick: neither the prayers nor the Hindu language was important, except, like the camphor smell, the candle, the pictures, the chants, the screams, and the flashing powder, as stage property for a Hollywood picture. And it is plain that the audience was well deceived; Ganesh would not set aside the deception even for Leela.

That the trick was efficacious in a practical sense, in that the dead-eyed boy was able to walk out of the house

into the light of a new world, places the humanity of Ganesh in an ambiguous perspective. The reader wonders, thinking of his words of reassurance to Leela, what he wanted to "make sure" of. Was it simply an initial success that would bring power, prestige and wealth, as the statement, "I don't want you to strain yourself" implies? Or was it a real cure for the boy? The one explanation which he gave Leela suggests the latter:

> 'This is the most important case anybody ever handle in the world. I know that that boy going to dead tomorrow unless I do something for him. It give you a funny feeling, you know. Is like watching a theatre show and then finding out afterwards that they was really killing people on the stage.' (p.126)

One would guess that the feeling spoken of is a feeling of unreality: an abrupt dislocation of one's sense of continuity, of reasonableness or of purpose in what happened and in what is happening. The spectator at a theatre realizes that what occurs on stage may relate notionally to the outside world, but there is always a distance between the stage and the world, and only such personal involvement as the spectator will allow. The discovery that events on the stage took place on the same non-distant plane of the rational world, strikes one with the guilt of involvement: a mental picture of oneself and the stage as the same rational world and an awareness of impotence at not having helped an injury that one didn't know. The mental picture

remains as a still image--discrete, discontinuous, related only to itself because of its absurdity, or, if any meaning exists, known only to the stage manager. Ganesh was aware of a terrible mental suffering, and for once, in contrast to his treatment of the girl with the twisted arm, he assumed personal responsibility. At the same time he overcame his feeling of impotence: he was able to heal the little boy.

Thus, Ganesh's funny feeling was very likely a sense of compulsory involvement--that his own world and that of the boy were on the same plane of reality--and a sense of responsibility for the boy's life. However, if his motives were humane, they remained hidden. He was the stage manager of his little production and in vain did Leela ask him if he had used a trick. The facts remain that the boy was cured, and that Ganesh got his money and his fame:

> So, Ganesh's prestige had risen until people who came to him sick went away well. Sometimes even he didn't know why.
>
> His prestige was secured by his learning. Without this he might easily have been lumped with the other thaumaturges who swarmed over Trinidad. They were nearly all fakes. They knew an ineffectual charm or two but had neither the intelligence nor sympathy for anything else. . . .The people of Trinidad knew that Ganesh was the only true mystic in the island. (p.134)

Ganesh too was a thaumaturge, a miracle-worker, a magician that was jealous of his knowledge; he was a man of power, but a man of sympathy and charity.

One day, for example, Ganesh discovered that his

father-in-law, Ramlogan, had established a taxi monopoly to Fuente Grove and was exploiting Ganesh's customers. En route to Ramlogan's shop in one of Ramlogan's taxis he made a startling new discovery:

> The driver laughed and sang. 'Sookhoo smart, sahib. He drive the man car on the grass one day and take up the crank and he go over and tell him cool cool that if he don't stop playing the fool, you was going to make the car bewitch.'
> Ganesh cleared his throat.
> 'Sookhoo is like that, sahib. But listen to the upshot. Two days good ain't pass before the man car get in an accident. A bad accident too.'
> The driver began to sing again. (p.142)

A person's law in the islands is self-preservation, by cruelty and by falsehood. Ganesh did not share the driver's delight in the bad accident and was surprised by the man's barbarity. The reader knows that Ganesh was humanly sympathetic; but that knowledge is darkened by Ganesh's superfluous wealth, as the means which Ganesh used to stop Ramlogan's greed was to buy the taxis himself. The monopoly and the money went to Ganesh.

A mansion replaced the small house in Fuente Grove, and a splendid Hindu temple restored Ganesh's bedroom to its original purpose. The village grew, and Ganesh found himself a philosopher and arbiter. He was attacked by Narayan in The Hindu for being a religious visionary, and an impediment to real progress. Offended that Narayan should be romanticised in the London Messenger as "chain-smoking, balding C. S. Narayan, veteran journalist" and so remembered, and that Narayan was using The Home of Destitutes

Fund for his own benefit, Ganesh and his followers, among them an overly clever boy, opposed him and his Hindu association at their General Meeting. Amid the speeches and accusations Narayan saw himself defeated:

> 'My friends, we are not united. And now, with your permission, I am going to tell the story of an old man, his three sons, and a bundle of sticks.' He didn't tell it very well. . . . My friends, I only want back my self-respect and I want your respect. My friends, I withdraw from public life. I do not want to be re-elected President of the Hindu Association of Trinidad, of which I am a founder member and President.'
>
> Narayan was cheered loud and long. Some people wept. Some shouted, 'Long live Narayan!'
>
> He wept too. 'Thank you, thank you, my friends.' And sat down to wipe his eyes and blow his nose.
>
> 'A diplomatic son of a bitch, pundit,' the boy said.
>
> But Ganesh was wiping away a tear.
>
> Ganesh was the only candidate for the Presidency and was elected without any fuss at all. (p.191)

The fact that Narayan acted cunningly in the interest of self-preservation does not alter the accuracy of his statement about racial or religious schism. Ganesh sympathised with the man. The boy's retort, like the taxi-driver's anecdote, seemed callous and barbarous.

The boy belonged to an uncivilised society. Prior to Narayan's withdrawal, Indarsingh, a former school friend of Ganesh and an Oxford scholarship winner, had been defending Narayan on a constitutional matter. However, he was shouted down by Swami, a leading member of the Ganesh election committee:

> Indarsingh looked hurt. 'It is, Mr. President. A motion, certainly.'

> Swami bellowed, 'Mr. President, enough of this damn nonsense motion and commotion, and listen to something sensible for a change. It is my motion that the constitution should be _____be_____'
>
> 'Suspended,' the boy prompted.
>
> '_____ be suspended, or anyway that part which say that members have to pay before they vote. Suspended for this meeting, and this meeting only.' (pp.189-190)

Constituted procedure is reduced to "damn nonsense." The good of many is overwhelmed by the selfish wishes of one, and order succumbs to chaos.

As a member of the Legislative Council in Port of Spain, Ganesh was confronted with the manners of civilised society. Naipaul sets the place of confrontation at Government House--a dinner for the members of the new Legislative Council, and their wives:

> The meal was torture to Ganesh. He felt alien and uncomfortable. He grew sulkier and sulkier and refused all the courses. He felt as if he were a boy again, going to the Queen's Royal College for the first time.
>
> *
>
> He was in a temper when he returned late that night to Fuente Grove. 'Just wanted to make a fool of me,' he muttered, 'fool of me.'
>
> 'Leela!' he shouted. 'Come, girl, and give me something to eat.'
>
> She came out, smiling sardonically. 'But, man, I thought you was dining with the Governor.'
>
> 'Don't make joke, girl. Done dine. Want to eat now. Going to show them,' he mumbled, as his fingers ploughed through the rice and dal and curry, 'going to show them.' (p.204)

The confrontation revealed that Ganesh was alien to polite society; he was still the awkward Indian boy from the country, ashamed of his past and his present, annoyed at his ignorance, and more desirous than ever either of becoming English or of defying English authority.

His subsequent mode of behaviour in government office adhered to the second possibility, that of defiance:

> He was a terror in the Legislative Council. It was he who introduced the walk-out to Trinidad and made it popular as a method of protest. The walk-out was no sudden inspiration. It had crude beginnings. At first he simply lay flat on his back on the Council table and refused to move. Policemen had to lift him up. Acts like this caught the public imagination and in no time at all Ganesh became popular throughout the South Caribbean. (p.207)

That Ganesh became a hero of the people and even had a calypso written about him is in keeping with the irresponsible attitudes of a servile and rebellious people. The run-in with the police, the servants of lawful society, made him a popular ideal:

> There was no doubt that at this time Ganesh was the most popular man in Trinidad. He never went to a cocktail party at Government House. He never went to dinner there. He was always ready to present a petition to the Governor. He exposed scandal after scandal. And he was always ready to do a favour for any member of the public, rich or poor. For such favours his fees were never high. He always said, 'You must give only what you can afford.' (p.208)

However, his conduct changed abruptly when he encountered the same type of behaviour in other people. One afternoon, when he was trying to persuade an angry strike mob to be patient with their employers, he barely escaped injury. Thereafter, as the writer states with humorous irony, he was a firm member of the establishment and no longer a hero of the people:

> Ganesh never walked out again. He went to cocktail parties at Government House and drank lemonade. He wore a dinner-jacket to official dinners.

> In the Colonial Office report of Trinidad for 1949 Ganesh was described as an important political leader.
>
> In 1950 he was sent by the British Government to Lake Success and his defence of British colonial rule is memorable. The Government of Trinidad, realizing that after that Ganesh stood little chance of being elected at the 1950 General Elections, nominated him to the Legislative Council and arranged for him to be a member of the Executive Council. . . .
>
> In 1953 Trinidad learned that Ganesh Ramsumair had been made an M.B.E. (pp.213-14)

Such is the history of Ganesh; in what way it is also "the history of our times" might be discussed in terms of "black boy under a black cloud." In the context of the little boy's case history the black cloud was his sense of guilt at being the indirect cause of his brother's death. In the context of Ganesh's life the cloud is the shame of having "old-country" parents, of being an ignorant country Hindu boy in the "big city," in the English school, and later in the English establishment. He is in a way the cause of their death. He attempts to escape from the familiar to embrace the foreign; and while he is essentially never other than Ganesh Pundit, superficially and to all practical purposes he is G. Ramsay Muir. He scorns what he is and becomes what he is not. As struggling masseur and as pundit the reader can feel some affection for one who is intrinsically innocent, sympathetic and generous, most of all when he acts on the little boy's behalf. Thereafter the reader is more and more disaffected as Ganesh's goodness becomes garishly overlaid with wealth, possessions and

notoriety, and as he becomes increasingly distant from the people who believed in him. He is in a way the cause of their dying. In the context of history the black cloud is the inherited guilt of being ignorant, servile and black when the civilising forces are white; in which oppressive circumstance a person can be either humble or defiant, but in a land that offers little promise of comfort or civility the instinct of self-preservation is the only law. It is a law that is destructive; it reduces human action and organisation to barbarity, irresponsibility and individual chaos. It leaves the social and political foundations of the islands open to continuous erosion.

The course of Ganesh's life is for the most part an escape from the realities of such a society. One recalls the description of Fuente Grove: the earth baked and cracked in the dry season, turned to mud in the wet season, the villagers coaxing the land in vain, being gay with the gaiety of a starving child. Living among them but separate from them was Ganesh as the boy-writer first met him:

> I often thought with a good deal of puzzled interest about the little man locked away with all those fifteen hundred books in the hot and dull village of Fuente Grove. (p.13)

As a boy the writer thought that the little man was "kind of crazy;" his mother informed him though that Ganesh was not a fool: "'He is the sorta man who woulda be a <u>rishi</u> in India.'" (p.13) And yet, as Trinidad is not India, his way

of life became in a practical sense more or less irrelevant, a useless employment at that time and in that place. He was locked away; he escaped the suffering of Fuente Grove.

The reader recalls that as a boy of fifteen Ganesh wanted to escape the shame of his old father who was taking him from Fourways to school in Port of Spain:

> When they got to St. Joseph, Ganesh began to feel shy. Their dress and manner were no longer drawing looks of respect. People were smiling, and when they got off at the railway terminus in Port of Spain, a woman laughed.
>
> 'I did tell you not to dress me up like this,' Ganesh lied, and was near to sobbing.
>
> 'Let them laugh,' the old man replied in Hindi, and passed the palm of his hand over his thick grey moustache. 'Jackasses bray at anything.' (p.16)

He lied to escape humility and derision. He lied when he took the name of Gareth, the name of G. Ramsay Muir. His initiation rites as a brahmin proved to be a dual source of shame, in the innocent and enthusiastic manner in which he participated and in his having to return to school with a shaven head:

> A fresh mortification awaited him. When he went home for his first holidays and had been shown off again, his father said, 'It is time for the boy to become a real brahmin.'
>
> The initiation ceremony was held that very week. They shaved his head, gave him a little saffron bundle, and said, 'All right, off you go now. Go to Benares and study.'
>
> He took his staff and began walking away briskly from Fourways. . . .
>
> 'But what happen to the boy?' people asked. 'He taking this thing really serious.'
>
> Dookhie caught Ganesh by the shoulder and said, 'Cut out this nonsense, man. . . . You think you really going to Benares? That is in India, you know, and this is Trinidad.'

> They brought him back home. But the episode is significant. (p.17)

The significance of the episode, aside from the immediate abashment, is that Trinidad is not India, and at best only a disheartening imitation. The original land was stamped somewhere in the recess of his mind in an image of light that gave the lie to his familiar world.

There was as well the image of a land that was not so distant in time or place, and his being in attendance at Queen's Royal College among English masters kept the promising image before his eyes: "At the end of Ganesh's second year Indarsingh won a scholarship and went to England. To Ganesh, Indarsingh had achieved a greatness beyond ambition." (p.18) For a Trinidadian student attending an English grammar school and knowing that his future depends on a Cambridge School Certificate, England is the life-controlling power and the ideal. However, as Ganesh discovered unhappily on several occasions, the ideal did not yield easy access. He incurred one of his first little rebuffs when he went to his headmaster in search of a job:

> The headmaster looked a little puzzled and asked, 'What do you want to do?'
> 'Teach,' Ganesh said, because he felt he ought to flatter his headmaster.
> 'Teach? Strange. Primary schools?'
> 'What you mean, sir?'
> 'You're not thinking of teaching in <u>this</u> school?'
> 'Nah, sir. You making joke.' (p.19)

One recognises his disappointment and the feeling of insufficiency that made him lie.

The occasion of a second rebuff was the accidental encounter, after the death of his father, with Mr. Stewart, who, it was generally assumed was "English, a millionaire, and a little mad:"

> Ganesh still went out cycling, his thoughts maundering between himself, his future, and life itself; and it was during one of his afternoon wanderings that he met the man who was to have a decisive influence on his life.
>
> The first meeting was not happy. (p.32)

This event, like the initiation ceremony, was unhappy, and decisive as well, for it impressed him with the quality of something remote--a quality in the lay-out of Mr. Stewart's thatched hut, which was "all order and simplicity," and in his statement that one day Ganesh might write a book of his meditations. From only three unhappy meetings with Mr. Stewart emerged the dedication in Ganesh's autobiography, and in it he lied: "To Lord Stewart of Chichester, Friend and Counsellor of Many Years." (p.37) To emulate English-ness meant, in the eyes of one's fellow islanders, to be worthy of respect; to oneself it meant personal worth, a sense of self-sufficiency, of order and simplicity in one's life.

When Ganesh began to think seriously about the art of writing he found himself in the embarrassing situation of having to practise speaking correct English:

> Like many Trinidadians Ganesh could write correct English but it embarrassed him to talk anything but dialect except on very formal occasions. So while, with the encouragement of Street and Smith, he perfected his prose to a Victorian weightiness, he con-

> tinued to talk Trinidadian, much against his will.
>
> One day he said, 'Leela, is high time we realise that we living in a British country and I think we shouldn't be shame to talk the people language good.' (p.71)

The shame turned instead in the direction of all that was Trinidadian. Trinidad was a place from which all would gladly go, and to which none would willingly return. He agreed with his friend Beharry when, speaking about the Governor and his staff, Beharry said: "'If they was really educated they wouldn't want to leave England where they printing books night and day and come to a place like Trinidad.'" (p.74)

The most devastating rebuff for Ganesh, already mentioned briefly in the context of his rise to fame, was the reception given by the Governor. The setting allows Naipaul to display a whole room of mimic men. Were they not so ludicrous they might be pitiable.

> The dinner was a treat for the photographers. Ganesh came in dhoti and koortah and turban; the member for one of the Port of Spain wards wore a khaki suit and a sun helmet; a third came in jodhpurs; a fourth, adhering for the moment to his pre-election principles, came in short trousers and an open shirt; the blackest M.L.C. wore a three-piece blue suit, yellow woollen gloves and a monocle. Everybody else, among the men, looked like penguins, sometimes even down to the black faces.
>
> . . . . .
>
> The members looked at the waiters who looked away quickly. Then the members looked at each other.
>
> The man in jodhpurs muttered, 'Is why black people can't get on. You see how these waiters behaving? And they black like hell too, you know.'
>
> Nobody took up the remark.

> Unoriginal disaster befell Mr. Primrose. His monocle fell into his soup.
>
> The Governor's lady quickly looked away.
>
> But Mr. Primrose drew her attention to the monocle. 'Eh, eh,' he chuckled, 'but see how it fall down!'
>
> The M.L.C.'s looked on with sympathy.
>
> Mr. Primrose turned on them. 'What all you staring at? All you ain't see nigger before?'
>
> The man in jodhpurs whispered to Ganesh, 'But we wasn't saying anything.'
>
> 'Eh!' Mr. Primrose snapped. 'Black people don't wear monocle?'
>
> He fished out the monocle, wiped it, and put it in his coat pocket. (pp.201-204)

Each of them is alien to himself, to the other, and to the propriety of English manners, and in various degrees each tries to imitate the model--in the sun helmet, the riding breeches, the monocle and the book etiquette. The monocles that black people wear are designed to escape the darkness--the blackness of their skin, of their shame, of their ignorance, of their past, and of their entire vanity. The surface of their lives is the criterion of worth, and in that respect every person stands aloof from the other. One is always "the blackest." The waiters, as part of the Governor's retinue, look down their noses at the guests, and condescend to nod; and, as the man in jodhpurs says with contempt, "they black like hell, too." "All you ain't see nigger before?" shouts Mr. Primrose; the man in jodhpurs whispers sarcastically to Ganesh, "But we wasn't saying anything." Light-skinned nigger hates dark-skinned, Indian scorns Negro, and the stupid scorn the ignorant. In his own humorous way the boy-writer told an anecdote about the same kind of enmity:

> My foot was hot and swollen, and getting more and more painful. 'So what we going to do?' I asked.
> 'Do?' my mother said. 'Do? Give the foot a little more time. You never know what could happen.'
> I said, 'I know what going to happen. I going lose the whole damn foot, and you know how these Trinidad doctors like cutting off black people foot.' (p.7)

Each person becomes a microcosm of the land--without faith, without sympathy, without integrity, an island lost in the sea, looking backward to England, to Africa, to India, dreaming of escape. Each becomes more proud and aloof as he inches nearer. "Is the trouble with Indians in Trinidad," says Leela. "Is the trouble with Indians all over the world," says Beharry. At last they step off a London train, transformed, and irrelevant to any but themselves--useless, and equally distant from the island they scorn and the people they imitate.

One wonders if even the boy-writer does not fall into the same company. At the close of the story he too is in England, and in the footsteps of Indarsingh attending university. His escape is certain to that extent. Moreover his attitude towards Ganesh, while never denying his basic humanity, is unequivocally derisive: he presents Ganesh as a fraud--in his role as masseur, as mystic, as politician, and above all as writer. The biographer facetiously labels Ganesh as being foremost "a connoisseur of paper-smells." However, if the reader feels that the biographer is less of a panegyrist than he might expect, at least he may appreciate his fidelity to fact, and perhaps his humility:

> Thinking now about that visit I made to Ganesh as a boy, I am struck only by my egotism. It never crossed my mind then that the people I saw casually all around me had their own very important lives; that, for instance, I was as unimportant to Ganesh as he was amusing--and puzzling--to me. Yet when Ganesh published his autobiography, The Years of Guilt, I read it half hoping to find some reference to myself. Of course, there was none. (p.113)

It is too much to expect that one's loneliness should touch and heal another's.

Finally, any statement that pretends to come to grips with The Mystic Masseur ought to discuss the nature of Ganesh's involvement with his society. Obviously at the close of the story he is aloof, and almost wholly detached from any meaningful involvement with his fellow Trinidadians; what there is is superficial. Throughout his life he shunned active participation in his own career and on only two occasions did his life willingly improve the life of someone else. At other times he preferred to remain passive, accepting the advice of people like Beharry, the Great Belcher and Mr. Stewart, simply being swept along by the current of events, unwilling to move out of the rut which is the history of his times. The first of the two kindnesses was extended to the little black boy, the second to Leela's father. It concluded the long enmity between Ganesh and his father-in-law:

> One night Ganesh came back late to Fuente Grove from a prayer meeting at Bamboo Walk, a village at the boundary of his ward. Upstairs in the drawing room Leela, Beharry and the boy were, as usual, working on the posters. They were at the dining-table. But Ganesh saw someone else kneeling next

> to the refrigerator, filling in the outlines of a 'Ganesh is a man of good and God' poster spread on the floor. He was a big fat man; but it wasn't Swami.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Ganesh said, 'Leela, I hope you have a lot of food for me tonight. Anything that leave over, I could eat all of it. I hungry like a horse. Eh, but Leela, you ain't give your father anything?'
> She moved with alacrity to the refrigerator.
> Ramlogan kept on filling in letters.
> 'What you think of it?'
> 'Is very nice wordings, sahib.' Still Ramlogan didn't look up.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Ganesh went through the drawing room to the large room next to the verandah.
> Leela had tears in her eyes. 'Man, is the second time in my life you make me feel proud of you.' She leaned on him.
> He didn't push her away.
> 'The first time was with the boy and the cloud. Now is with Pa.' (pp.96-97)

Ramlogan went to Ganesh as the penitent, with downcast eyes. There was little mention of the past, and no recrimination. Ganesh saw, as he did with the boy, that he must do something. Twice was the distance spanned--a bridge between the islands; and the reader is aware of human worth in Ganesh and Ramlogan. One wonders why such bonds as that do not endure and ramify. The source of failure may be a psychological one--the unsure foundations of people who must imitate, insufficient in themselves and fearful of their kind. Or the source of failure may be a physical one--a non-attachment imposed by the everyday world. The reader recalls the scene in which Ganesh stood beside his father's coffin in the cool, dark,

camphor-smelling room of the house in Fourways, and by way of contrast, that in which Ganesh squatted before the little black boy in a similar room in the house at Fuente Grove:

> When he had closed the door behind him the wailing sounded far away. The coffin rested on a table in the centre of the room and he couldn't see the body from where he was. To his left a small oil lamp burned low and threw monstrous shadows on the walls and the galvanized-iron ceiling. When he walked nearer the table his footsteps resounded on the floor-planks and the oil lamp shivered. The old man's moustache still bristled fiercely but the face had fallen and looked weak and tired. The air around the table felt cool and he saw that it came from the casing of ice around the coffin. It was a room of the dead, strange with the smell of camphor balls, and there was nothing alive in it except himself and the squat yellow flame of the oil lamp, and they were both silent. Only, from time to time, the water from the melting ice plopped into the four pans at the feet of the table and punctured the silence.
>
> He didn't know what he thought or felt but he didn't want to cry and he left the room.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Ganesh didn't sleep that night and everything he did seemed unreal. Afterwards he . . . remembered having to walk round the body of his father, remembered applying the last caste-marks to the old man's forehead, and doing many more things until it seemed that ritual had replaced grief. (pp.25-26)

Ritual is the solace of the body. In the land of the living and the house of the dead breeds grief that shocks with a sense of unreality--like watching a play and finding out afterwards that they were really killing people on the stage. The everyday world itself becomes a stage, a fiction; a man stands beneath a cloud of joylessness, alone, humbly awaiting the eternal silence, pretending that his motions are real.

The broken shin, the twisted arm, the crushed brother, the dead father, the quack masseur, the Hollywood mystic and the fearful politician are all consumed in the natural disorder of earthly life. The islands themselves are a kind of natural rubbish, the scraps of geography and history. To involve oneself with their life is to toss another piece of rubbish on the mound. Perhaps Ganesh sensed the futility of attachment and action more than once; a particular instance was the possibility of his becoming involved with Leela. Ramlogan was enticing him with flattery, but Ganesh shrank away:

> Another day he said, 'You does read real sweet, sahib. I could just shut my eye and listen. You know what Leela tell me last night, after I close up the shop? Leela ask me, "Pa, who was the man talking in the shop this morning? He sound just like a radio I hear in San Fernando." I tell she, "Girl, that wasn't a radio you was hearing. That was Ganesh Ramsumair. Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair," I tell she.'
>
> 'You making joke.'
>
> 'Ah, sahib. Why I should make joke with you, eh? You want me call Leela herself, and you can ask she?'
>
> Ganesh heard a titter behind the lace curtain. He looked down quickly at the floor and saw it littered with empty cigarette boxes and discarded paper bags.
>
> 'Nah, nah. Don't bother the girl.' (p.30)

Can participation begin when one is terrified by the discarded fragments of human flesh, by the chaos of the islands, and by endless futility? Obviously for Ganesh it was short-lived.

One kind of participation, as advised by Mr. Stewart, is writing, since it demands experience, discovery, analysis, and a statement about one's people. Mr. Stewart admitted

his cowardice in that respect:

> 'I know the things that are worrying you, and I think one day you may find the answer. One day you may even bring it all out in a book. If I weren't so terribly afraid of getting involved I might have written a book myself.' (p.36)

The books written by Ganesh, having been inspired by such objects as a musical toilet-paper rack (the wartime Profitable Evacuation), are typical of his involvement. The boy-writer on the other hand, as erstwhile patient of the masseur, as student, as biographer, as historian "of our times," searches for facts among the rubbish of time to "find the answer," and is wholly involved with his native people, beginning to record their history, beginning to create the arts of society. At the same time he is the thaumaturge, the magician, never entirely revealed, jealous of his knowledge but offering healing to such as will believe in him.

CHAPTER III

THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA

The power and wealth that bury the natural kindness of Ganesh in The Mystic Masseur are transferred in The Suffrage of Elvira[1] to the town of Elvira. Elvira had been going about her business in her unnoticeable way until the coming of an election threw life into a frenzy. Wealth and power ran through her like a plague. The rich Hindu, Surujpat Harbans, came to her soliciting votes, and having got them he left. As he left he muttered, "Elvira, you is a bitch," (p.238) and he had treated her much as he had treated the black bitch that limped about in the road that entered the town: he ran over her with the truck. Foam and Herbert found the dog later by the cocoa-house and buried her:

> Under the steps he saw a dead dog and five dead puppies. The mother had its mouth open, its teeth bared. She was the dog Harbans had hit that afternoon weeks before.
>
> Her eyes were horribly inanimate. Her chest and belly were shrunken. Her ribs stood out, hard. Damp black earth stuck to her pink blotched dugs, thin and slack like a punctured balloon. The puppies were all like Tiger. They had died all over their mother, anyhow.
>
> . . . . .
>
> They dug a shallow hole and buried the mother. Herbert trimmed a switch, broke it in two, peeled off the bark and tied the pieces into a cross. He stuck it on the grave. (pp.134-35)

Herbert had come across the sixth scrawny puppy shortly after the accident and had named it Tiger. His frail Tiger became a source of terror to the town.

[1] V. S. Naipaul, The Suffrage of Elvira (London:Deutsch, 1958).

The present chapter describes in two parts the frenzy of activity in Elvira during Harbans's election campaign. The first part focusses upon Harbans's "deals" with Baksh and Chittaranjan, the two influential men in Elvira, and the manner in which such dealing spread until the whole of Elvira had to be bribed. The people surrendered their real electoral power to Harbans's wealth, and finally manifested their power in the form of violence as they made their claim to a case of whisky. The pictures of the mob standing in an arc about the case of whisky, and of the same mob surrounding Harbans's burning Jaguar with the glow of the fire reflecting on their faces suggest the terrifying chaotic nature of democracy in Elvira.

The second part focusses on the activity of Preacher, the rival candidate, and of Herbert. Preacher was a rival in more ways than one, for the ethical principles of his campaign differed from those of Harbans: he was able to offer "only sympathy" where Harbans could always offer a bribe. Though there was no likelihood of his winning the election, his presence made Harbans appear in what to the reader is a sickly light. Likewise, the fear and awe with which the powers of Elvira regarded Tiger make those powers seem cowardly, subversive and destructive. The picture of the Harbans committee members planning the defeat of Preacher, parallelled by the image of the moths dashing themselves against the Petromax lantern, suggests the

chaotic and self-destructive nature of their principles.

The prologue to the story, entitled "A Bad Sign," describes Mr. Surujpat Harbans chugging timidly up Elvira Hill one afternoon on his way to present himself to two powerful political backers in Elvira in his constituency of County Naparoni:

> He had done all his bargaining for the elections; the political correspondents said he had as good as won already. This afternoon he was going to offer himself formally to Baksh and Chittaranjan, the powers of Elvira. The bargains had only to be formally sealed. (p.11)

However, Harbans had two bad signs. Approaching the brow of the hill he sent one of a pair of cyclists, white Jehovah Witnesses, stumbling forward and had to apologize. Second, having left the settlement of Cordoba and nearing the cocoa-house he struck the black bitch with the lorry.

> It was only when he had driven away that Harbans thought. His first accidents in twenty years. The strange white women. The black bitch. The stalling of the engine on both occasions.
> It was clearly a sign. (p.11)

Thereafter he was followed by a cloud of misfortune, that of having to dole out more and more money in order to ensure his election--to Baksh and Chittaranjan, and also to Dhaniram, Harichand the printer, Ramlogan the shopkeeper, the ballotting clerk at the school, and eventually to all the other citizens of Elvira.

The negotiation of pay-offs, with various degrees of subtlety, is the story of the suffrage of Elvira.

Harbans was not long in the town before he realised how vulnerable was his position among his so-called supporters: "And then Harbans knew. No one in Elvira was fighting for him. All Elvira--Preacher, Lorkhoor, Baksh, Chittaranjan, Dhaniram and everybody else--all of them were fighting him." (p.59) All were trying to take as much as they could out of the election process with the least loss to themselves. Their greed is what the writer means by "the possibilities" of democracy:

> Democracy had come to Elvira four years before in 1946; but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn't until 1950, a few months before the second general election under universal adult franchise, that people began to see the possibilities. (p.12)

That the writer refers to the possibility of private gain is made certain later when, much of the bargaining being in progress, Teacher Frances was discussing suffrage with Chittaranjan's daughter, a student in his evening class:

> He gave a sour laugh. 'No point in voting. People in Elvira don't know the value of their vote.'
> Nelly looked up from her pad. 'It look to me that a lot of them know it very well, Teach.' (p.96)

The least tractable of Harbans's supporters was Baksh, the tailor, who had a following of 1000 Muslims. He was a "man of power" in Elvira on account of his money, his depth (that is, his business cunning), and his capacity for an excess of drink and of heated discussion:

> It was a puzzle: how Baksh came to be the Muslim leader. He wasn't a good Muslim. He didn't know all the injunctions of the Prophet and those he did know he broke. For instance, he was a great drinker. . . .

> He had none of the dignity of the leader. He was a big talker: in Elvira they called him 'the mouther.' (p.12)

In all fairness the position should have fallen to Haq; "Haq was orthodox. . . but Haq was poor." Baksh, moreover, boasted his ability to make money, and was regarded by the other inhabitants of Elvira not only as a talker, but also as one who did things:

> Baksh made money. It was hard not to feel that for all his conviviality Baksh was a deep man. He was a talker, but he did things. Like that shirt-making business. For months Baksh talked. 'Make two three dozen cheap khaki shirts,' he told them in Ramlogan's rumshop. 'Take them to Princes Town and Rio Claro on market day. A cool seventy dollars. Some damn fool or the other come up to you. You tell him that the shirts not really good enough for him. You say you going to make something especially to fit him pussonal. You pretend you taking his measure, and when you go back the next week, you give the damn fool the same shirt. Only, you charge him a little extra.' He talked like that for months. And then one day he actually did it all as he had said. And made money. (p.13)

His political activity was an extension of his business activity; it required the same cunning, and it was a means of sucking Elvira dry. Harbans's formal self-presentation to him, for example, was a play for power on Baksh's part. It took place with spurious politeness on both sides. Foam, Baksh's oldest son, saw Harbans approaching the shop:

> Foam said, 'Candidate coming, Pa.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> Foam kept on tacking. Baksh made more marks on his cloth.
>
> Two months, one month ago, they would have jumped up as soon as they saw him coming.
>
> Harbans suffered.
>
> 'Aah, Baksh.' He used his lightest coo. '<u>How</u> you is?' He flashed his false teeth at Foam and added all at once, 'And how the boy is? He doing well? Ooh, but he

> looking too well and too nice.'
> Foam scowled while Harbans ruffled his hair.
> 'Foam,' Baksh said, very gently, 'get up like a good boy and give Mr. Harbans your bench.' (pp.15-16)

Baksh had already promised the Muslim vote for two thousand dollars; now he preferred a van equipped with a loudspeaker, as something more profitable, and he wanted Harbans to appoint Foam as his campaign manager. Foam made the deal explicit: "Harbans accepted the loudspeaker van sorrowfully. He tried again. 'But, Baksh, I ain't want no campaign manager.' Foam said, 'You ain't want no Muslim vote.'" (p.21).

The second big power in Elvira was Chittaranjan, the goldsmith. His social nature was altogether different from that of Baksh. Instead of being one of the people, he stood aloof: "Chittaranjan, now, the other power in Elvira, was aloof and stiff, and whenever he talked to you, you felt he was putting you in your place." (p.12) Likewise, the outward appearance of his person and of his house surpassed that of Baksh in sumptuousness:

> Easily the most important person in Elvira was Chittaranjan, the goldsmith. And there was no mystery why. He looked rich and was rich. . . .Everyone knew his house as the biggest in Elvira. It was solid, two-storied, concrete, bright with paint and always well looked after. (p.25)

However, his political nature was similar to that of Baksh: he had his own interest at heart, his daughter Nelly. When Harbans made his formal presentation the goldsmith called her to serve Coke for the guests in order to draw her to

Harbans's attention:

> 'Daughter?' Harbans asked. As though he didn't know about Nalini, little Nelly; as though all Elvira didn't know that Chittaranjan wanted Nelly married to Harbans's son, that this was the bargain to be settled that afternoon. (p.32)

The bargain was that Chittaranjan would support Harbans if Harbans's son, a plump yellow-skinned medical student, would marry Nelly Chittaranjan. The fathers didn't discuss the deal; this, and all other transactions were conducted with a seemingly generous mind. The position of campaign manager, for example, since it carried a salary, was abhorrent to Chittaranjan:

> It pleased Harbans to see Chittaranjan growing less frigid towards Foam. At length he broke the news that Foam was the campaign manager. Chittaranjan took it well. It was not a post he coveted, because it was a paid post; everything he did for Harbans, he did only out of the goodness of his heart. (p.38)

Another of the supporters was Dhaniram, part-time pundit, part-time tractor owner. Like Baksh he always considered the People:

> Dhaniram, who had been promised something--contracts for his tractor--pulled at his cigarette. 'Is not as though you giving things to we pussonal, Mr. Harbans. You must try and feel that you giving to the people. After all, is the meaning of this democracy.' (p.55)

Harichand the printer was less subtle in his greed. He made a deal with Baksh for some election posters:

> As he was leaving he said, 'Still waiting for those election printing jobs, Baksh. If Harbans want my vote, he want my printery. Otherwise...' And Harichand shook his head and laughed. (pp.127-28)

Ramlogan's support was guaranteed when Harbans opened a rum

account at his shop, and it was also a considerable incentive to the citizens of Elvira.

The web increased as the committee members sought out their own supporters. Chittaranjan visited an injured member of his following who was afraid lest Preacher work obeah on him:

> He said he wasn't going to vote for anybody because he didn't want anybody to put any obeah on him, he didn't believe in this new politics business, politicians were all crooks, and nobody was going to do anything for him anyway.
>
> Chittaranjan listened patiently, his hat on his knees.
>
> When Rampiari's husband was finished, Chittaranjan asked, 'When you does want money borrow, Rampiari husband, who you does come to?'
>
> 'I does come to you, Goldsmith.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> 'When you want any sort of help, Rampiari husband, who you does come to?'
>
> 'I does come to you, Goldsmith.'
>
> 'So when I want help, who I must come to?'
>
> 'You must come to me, Goldsmith.'
>
> 'And when I want this help to put a man in the Legislative Council, who I must come to?'
>
> 'You must come to me, Goldsmith.' (pp.88-89)

And in that manner the electoral process was born in Elvira until power became a plague and the entire population was infected. Just prior to election day Chittaranjan pointed out that the town had to be appeased with a motorcade: "'You can't disappoint the people, Mr. Harbans,' Chittaranjan said. 'It go cost you about fifteen hundred dollars.'" (p.186) On election day itself the campaigning

continued under cover. For such people as were ignorant of how to mark their ballot, helpers advised them to mark an X beside "Harbans." Hinderers too were present, in particular the negro clerk at the school, but his recalcitrance was quietly checked:

> The clerk, a cheerful young negro, greeted Harbans with unabashed warmth. 'Is a big big day for you today, Mr. Harbans.'
> 'Ooh, I hear you having a little trouble here.'
> 'People ain't even know their own name, Mr. Harbans.'
> 'But ain't they got a number?'
> The clerk didn't stop smiling. 'I ain't want to know their number. Want to know their name.'
> 'Ooh. And when they tell you their name, you spend a long long time finding out whether they on the list, and then sometimes you does ask them to spell their name? Let we look at the election regulations together.'
> The clerk brightened.
> From his hip pocket Harbans pulled out an orange pamphlet folded in two. He opened it so that only he and the clerk could see what was inside. It was a ten-dollar note.
> The clerk said, 'Hm. I see what you mean. My mistake. Just leave these regulations here, Mr. Harbans.' (pp.213-14)

The extent of the infection is revealed in "The Case of Whisky," the epilogue to the story. Harbans, having left Elvira for good, had to return in order to present a case of whisky which Ramlogan had promised during the campaign to the committee of the winning candidate. While the committee sat in Chittaranjan's drawing room the citizens of Elvira and its outskirts gathered outside his shop, in much the same way as they had gathered before elections at Mr. Cuffy's house: "Outside Chittaranjan's shop the crowd thickened. People were coming from as far as Cordoba and Pueblo Road. It was like Mr. Cuffy's wake

all over again." (p.226) Presently the committee appeared on the verandah, then descended to the platform and moved into their orbits around the case of whisky:

> The chairs and benches had been disarrayed. The crowd had spread out into the road and formed a solid semicircle around the case of whisky draped with the Union Jack.
>
> Harbans sat directly in front of the whisky. Ramlogan was on his right, Chittaranjan on his left. Foam was next to Ramlogan, Mahadeo next to Chittaranjan. Not far from Foam, on his right, Haq and Sebastian sat. (p.228)

The crowd were eager to take all that they could, coveting especially the whisky. They buzzed each time a member said that it was destined for the committee. Rampiari's husband became one of their spokesmen:

> 'We didn't hear nothing about no whisky for no Committee. And I think I must say right here and now that Elvira people ain't liking this bacchanal at all. Look at these poor people! They come from all over the place. You think a man go put on his clothes, take up his good good self and walk from Cordoba to Elvira in the night-time with all this dew falling, just to see committee get a case of whisky?' (p.230)

Nor, as the printer pointed out, was that the first time that the citizens of Elvira had inconvenienced themselves:

> Harichand said, 'Mr. Harbans, I think I should tell you that the people of Elvira not going to take this insult lying down. They work hard for you, they waste their good good time and they go and mark X on ballot-paper for your sake.' (p.231)

Harbans salved the crowd's sense of injustice by promising them ten cases of whisky. "Almost miraculously, the crowd was appeased. They laughed at Harbans's little joke and chattered happily among themselves." (p.232) Chittaranjan

jumped up to abrogate the promise, and hoping, in a final attempt to close his deal with Harbans, to shame the crowd into honouring their M.L.C. with a religious ceremony, recommended that the one case be returned to Ramlogan. Every sect wanted to honour Harbans in its own way; no one was happy about the whisky; no one was happy about the ceremony:

> Then it was chaos. Rampiari's husband switched his attack to Baksh. Baksh was attacking Harbans. Foam was being attacked by innumerable anonymous people. Mahadeo was being attacked by people whose illnesses he had spurned. Haq was poking questions directly under Harbans's nose. Harbans was saying, 'Ooh, ooh,' and trying to pacify everybody. Only two objects remained immovable and constant: Chitteranjan and the case of whisky. (p.234)

One can appreciate the rightful vexation of the crowd, the power of the modern-day miracle, and the strength of the two constants--Chittaranjan and the whisky.

The traitorous Baksh emerged from the mob shouting a last deal that caught the support of the mob:

> 'Jordan sick, Mr. Harbans.'
> 'I hope he get better.'
> 'For the last time, Mr. Harbans. Jordan sick.'
> The crowd pressed forward silently around the committee. (p.235)

They wanted Harbans to visit the sick man, as he had been accustomed to do with other sick people during the campaign. Harbans surrendered; Chittaranjan surrendered but retained his scorn. They went to see Jordan.

> 'Jordan,' Harbans called. 'You sick?'
> 'Yes, man,' Jordan said. 'Stroke. Hit me all down here.' He ran his hand along his left side.
> 'The man break up bad,' Rampiari's husband said. 'He can't do no more work for a long time to come.'
>
> . . . . .

> Chittaranjan regarded Jordan and Jordan's family with contempt. He said, 'Give him ten dollars and let we go.'
>
> 'Ten!' Jordan exclaimed acidly. 'Fifty.'
>
> 'Fifty at least,' Baksh said.
>
> 'At least,' said Rampiari's husband.
>
> 'Is not something just for Jordan,' Baksh said. 'You could say is a sort of thank-you present for everybody in Elvira.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> Almost immediately there was a loud explosion from the main road. Seconds later there were more explosions.
>
> The crowd in the trace shouted, 'Fire!'
>
> Jordan's stroke was forgotten. Everybody scrambled outside, committee, mother, wife, brother. Jordan himself forgot about his stroke and knelt on his couch to look out of the window.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Harbans found the crowd standing in a wide silent circle around the burning Jaguar. It was a safe spectacle now; the petrol tanks had blown up. The firelight reddened unsmiling, almost contemplative, faces. (pp.236-37)

The bribery of Jordan was the last bargain, and it gave the lie to democracy in any sense but that of selfish, chaotic power, devoid of any justice or integrity. The car burned in the darkness; the crowd with reflecting eyeballs dumbly witnessed the reasonable conclusion of their rage. Willingly, unwittingly, they sought their own destruction.

Harbans's campaign manager spirited him safely out of Elvira. Harbans pondered her inhabitants from a distance with fear, anger and anxiety:

> 'Elvira. Elvira.' Harbans shook his head and spoke to the back of his hands, covered almost up to the knuckles by the sleeves of his big grey coat. 'Elvira, you is a bitch.'
>
> And he came to Elvira no more. (p.238)

His success was private: his suit, his Jaguar, his seat in

the Assembly. It was expected and accepted, but in many ways jealously resented. Then Elvira in County Naparoni, "the smallest, most isolated and most neglected of the nine counties of Trinidad," like the black bitch, ceased to exist.

Harbans was a Hindu; his rival candidate, Preacher, was a negro. There was never any real chance of Preacher's winning the election, for when Harbans arranged for the thousand Muslim votes by buying Baksh, the three or four thousand Hindu, Spanish and Negro votes by buying Chittaranjan, and the two thousand Hindu votes that he controlled himself, then few of the eight thousand votes remained for Preacher. Moreover, Preacher had only a small obscure committee consisting of Mr. Cuffy, who died, and Lorkhoor, who sold out. Harbans's committee on the other hand consisted of the "powers" of Elvira. Nor did Preacher have the wherewithal to purchase power. He conducted his campaign on foot instead of with a Dodge lorry and loudspeaker van, and to the poor and sick whom he visited he could offer no money. They and the Harbans committee knew his poverty and bargained accordingly, as for example when Chittaranjan visited Rampiari's husband, laid up with an injured foot:

> Rampiari's husband said, 'Preacher coming to see me tomorrow.'
> 'What Preacher could do for you? A man like you ain't want only sympathy. You want a lot more.' (p.89)

The power of money wrestles with the power of sympathy. In the novel the few humane people, like Preacher, tread

silently in the background while the urbane fill the fore with the glitter of gold, the blare of loudspeakers, and the grin of false teeth. Preacher haunts the novel as an unknown quantity, a moving figure caught suddenly in the glare of the headlights of Harbans's lorry as he first entered Elvira:

> Harbans saw. A tall negro with high frizzy hair, long frizzy beard, long white robe; halted in the light of the headlamps walking briskly at the edge of the road, stamping his staff, the hem of his robe dancing above sandalled feet. (p.40)

The chapters of the book which focus upon Tiger catch the remaining few: Foam and Herbert, sons of Baksh. One night Herbert found the wobbly flea-infested little puppy, took it home, and full of anxiety for its discovery hid it in the pile of rubbish beneath the staircase that led to the upper floor. Baksh stumbled in besotted with rum and encountered the dog. Herbert and Rafiq heard him from their bed:

> At that moment they heard the van drive into the yard and after a while they heard Baksh fumbling with the back door. Then there was a rattling and a stumbling, and Baksh began to curse.
> Rafiq said, 'The old man drunk again.'
> They heard him clattering hastily up the stairs, his curses becoming more distinct.
> Then: 'Man!' Baksh cried. 'See a dog. Big dog. Downstairs.'
> Herbert nudged Rafiq.
> 'Is all this campaigning and loudspeaking you doing,' Mrs. Baksh said.
> 'Telling you, man. Big big dog. Downstairs. Walking about. Quiet quiet. Sort of guarding the steps.'
> 'You go start seeing hell soon, if you ain't careful,' Mrs. Baksh said.
> Herbert giggled.

> 'Who bite who?' Mrs. Baksh asked. 'You bite the dog, or the dog bite you?' (p.67)

Baksh was the mad one, misperceiving the little dog because of his inebriation. The following morning he convinced himself and the rest of Elvira that the dog really was big and that it became small during the night by magic. Tiger was black magic:

> Baksh was saying, 'But I tell you, man, I did see a big big dog here last night. And look how small it come this morning. Is only one thing. Magic. Obeah. But who want to put anything on me?' (p.68)

Obviously it was Baksh himself who had put something on himself. The lie was a result of his own ignorance, his fear of a beating from his wife, and his excess. But he and the rest of the committee put the blame on Preacher, until Chittaranjan pointed out that the citizens of Elvira would not dare vote for anyone but Preacher if they thought that he was an obeah man; whereupon they attributed the magic to the Witnesses, who were not in the running, and who in fact were telling the people not to vote.

Chittaranjan, the other power in Elvira, also experienced the Tiger, in what to the reader is a humorous scene. Nelly Chittaranjan had kept her rendezvous with Foam after evening class and having already agreed to care for the dog, had taken him home and bedded him in a cupboard behind the shop. Chittaranjan had been cursing his neighbor Ramlogan, promising to work obeah on him, telling Mrs. Chittaranjan of what had befallen Baksh two days before--

how the dog "was big big in the night and next morning was tiny tiny." He walked to the cupboard for a hammer and nail.

> There was no light in the cupboard--that was part of this economy. . . .He knew where the hammer was and where the nail-tin was.
>
> When he opened the door a strong smell met his nostrils. 'That white lime growing rotten like hell,' he said. He felt for the hammer, found it. He felt for the nail-tin. His fingers touched something hard and fur-lined. Then something slimy passed over his hand. Then something took up the loose flesh at the bottom of his little finger and gave it a sharp little nip.
>
> Chittaranjan bolted.
>
> One sabot was missing when he stood breathless against the kitchen door.
>
> 'Man,' he said at last. 'Man, dog.'
>
> 'Dog?' . . . . .
>
> 'Yes, man. Store-room. Lock up in the store-room.'
>
> Mrs. Chittaranjan nearly screamed. 'Just like the one Baksh say he see, man. They send it away but it come back. To we, man, to we.' (pp.110-11)

One hardly expects such terror in Chittaranjan, otherwise known as the Fighter. It was unfounded in fact and it was unreasonable. Yet, the fear spread its web throughout Elvira, and when Christians, Hindus and Muslims saw Tiger moving along the road they crossed themselves:

> The news ran through Elvira. Baksh's puppy, the obeah-dog, the one that had been sent away, was back.
>
> Tiger limped on. School children and labourers stood silently at the verge to let him pass. Faces appeared behind raised curtains. People ran up from the traces to watch. No one interfered with Tiger and he looked at no one. His hiccoughs had gone. He tottered, wobbled, and went on, as though some force outside him were pushing him on to a specific destination. (p.115)

That a wretched creature like Tiger should be held in such fear is a sign of injury--the ignorance and the

excess of the people of Elvira. It requires only such sympathy as Herbert possessed in order to see the little dog not as a black magic, but simply as a creature needing food. When he and Foam discovered the black bitch beneath the steps of the cocoa-house he cried to Foam: "Everybody only know how to say, 'Mash, dog!' The words came between sobs. 'Nobody know how to feed it.'" And when Tiger fell at their gate looking as if he was about to die of starvation he cried, "'Oh, God, . . . don't let Tiger dead.'" (p.119) When Foam was told by Baksh and Mrs. Baksh to dispose of the dog he suddenly realised why they were impatient, and grew angry. It was fear, but fear gladly indulged to exclude any warmth of feeling:

> 'All <u>right</u>,' Foam said, with sudden irritation. 'All right, don't rush me. I going to take him so far, he not going to offend your sight <u>or</u> your heart.' (p.93)

Theirs was a world in which the heart was excluded, and where people of feeling fell prey. Therefore Herbert's home became a small room, his prison. He had been revealed as the puppy's abettor:

> Baksh undid his leather belt, pulling it carefully through the loops of his khaki trousers as though he wanted to damage neither trousers nor belt. Mrs. Baksh took the belt. Herbert began to cry in advance. . . .On a sudden she turned; and lunged at Herbert, striking out with the belt, hitting him everywhere. Herbert ran about the small room, but he couldn't get out. The back door was still barred; the door that led to the tailor shop was still padlocked. Unhurried, Mrs. Baksh stalked him. (p.71)

Such was the fate of the few who haunted the background of

the stage: Preacher, offering only sympathy, Foam and Herbert. Herbert suffered, Tiger suffered, and the black bitch that was Elvira suffered.

Those who fill the foreground, as certainly they do, conduct themselves on different principles. Their greed and prejudice separate them from one another and from the community. They claim to be thinking of the people, but they do so with an eye to profit. The election, as Teacher Frances told Mrs. Baksh, brought all sorts of prejudice to the surface, and the parties aligned themselves. Harbans, a Hindu, wondered how the Hindu Lorkhoor could traitorously work for the Negro Preacher:

> Foam said, 'Mr. Harbans, Lorkhoor start loudspeaking against you, you know.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> 'But I is a Hindu,' Harbans cried. 'Lorkhoor is a Hindu. Preacher is negro.' (p.19)

Haq menacingly castigated the Muslim Foam for being seen with the Hindu Nelly Chittaranjan: "For a Muslim you ain't got no shame. Going out with a kaffir woman." (p.99) Her father treated Baksh in a similar manner and sowed lasting enmity:

> 'And look, eh, Goldsmith, Foam better than ten of Harbans sons, you hear. And too besides, you think I go instigate Foam to go around with your daughter? Don't make me laugh, man. Your daughter? When it have five thousand Muslim girl prettier than she. . . . Let me tell you, eh, every Hindu girl think they in paradise if they get a Muslim boy.' (p.129)

Chittaranjan parted company with a blow that hurt Baksh: "This is pure blood. Every Hindu blood is pure blood.

Nothing mix up with it. Is pure Aryan blood." (pp.129-30) Even Foam was motivated by his own private prejudice against an old schoolmate: "He never forgave Lorkhoor. . . .He worked not so much for the victory of Harbans and the defeat of Preacher, as for the humiliation of Lorkhoor and Teacher Francis." (p.43)

The election strategy of the Harbans committee bordered the inhumane. They decided that Mahadeo should keep track of any old negro people so that Harbans might provide a splendid funeral if the occasion offered itself. Mahadeo's victim was Old Sebastian; "Old Sebastian," he said, "is one negro who look as though he might dead before elections." (p.57) His daily vigil began, an almost sadistic desire for Sebastian's death:

> His big worry was old Sebastian.
> That evening in Dhaniram's veranda he had been pretty confident that Sebastian would die before polling day; and in the happy days before his interview with Mr. Cuffy he had kept a hopeful eye on him. Every morning he passed Sebastian's hut and saw him sitting on a backless kitchen chair before his front door, a stunted unlit pipe in his mouth, making fish-pots from strips of bamboo, an inexplicable and futile occupation because Sebastian had no connection whatever with the sea and the fish-pots only remained and rotted in his yard. Mahadeo would ask, 'How you feeling this morning, Sebastian?' And Sebastian would smile--he hardly spoke--showing his remaining teeth, isolated and askew. . . .In the afternoon Mahadeo would pass again, after the day's work on the estate, and repeat his question; and Sebastian would smile again. (p.140)

Sebastian did not die; therefore Harbans decided to visit the Hindu sick, taking a cheque with him.

However, one day good fortune befell them when Mr. Cuffy, Preacher's right-hand man and Sebastian's guardian, suddenly died. Chittaranjan said, "Cawfee dead," and Dhaniram could not restrain his delight:

> 'Aha! What I did tell you?' Dhaniram was so excited he lit a cigarette. 'One negro was bound to dead before elections. You in luck, Mr. Harbans. Lorkhoor going away tonight. And tonight self you get a chance to start paying the negroes <u>their</u> entrance fee.' (p.194)

The committee had their opportunity to provide a wake. It was also the writer's opportunity to present a picture of unfeeling: the wake was a selfish political advertisement. The D.M.O., "a young Indian with a handsome dissipated face," and wearing a Harris tweed, summarily despatched Mr. Cuffy: "'Heart,' he said and filled out the form." (p.196) Tanwing, "an effervescent little Chinese who had revolutionized burial in Central Trinidad," strikes the reader as a mercenary parasite: "Tanwing fell to work at once. He wasted no time sympathizing with anybody. But he was anxious to do his best; Mr. Cuffy was being laid out in one of his more expensive coffins." (p.197) Then the callous propaganda began:

> Shortly after the D.M.O. had signed the death certificate, Foam and Chittaranjan had taken over quantities of rum, coffee and biscuits to the house; and the news was broken. People began to gather, solemn at first, but when the rum started to flow all was well. Harbans mingled with the mourners as though they were his guests; and everyone knew, and was grateful, that Harbans had taken all the expenses of the wake upon himself. Some of Mr. Cuffy's women disciples turned up in white dresses and hats, and sat in the drawing-room, singing hymns. The men preferred to remain in the yard. They sat on benches and chairs under

> Mr. Cuffy's big almond tree and talked and drank by the light of flambeaux. (p.197)

Some, like Baksh, began to advertise themselves. He drank, and sought attention by suggesting the cause of Cuffy's sudden death. Preacher was there, neither drinking nor pouring forth tears:

> His long white robe was sweat-stained and dusty; but there was nothing in his expression to show regret, either at the election or at Mr. Cuffy's death: his tolerant eyes still had their bloodshot faraway look. (p.200)

Meanwhile Chittaranjan and Foam tried to arrange the loud-speaker van so that the mourners could hear, as none needed to, the funeral arrangements:

> Chittaranjan staggered in with a large five-valve radio. It was his own and he didn't trust anyone else with it.
>
> . . . . .
>
> 'Shh!'
> A fresh blare.
> 'Listen.'
> Time for a Carib!
> Time for a Carib
> La - ger!
>
> The mourners became restless. Chittaranjan, responsible for the radio, felt responsible for what came out of it. He looked appeasingly at everybody.
>
> . . . . .
>
> The organ music swelled again.
> 'Now.'
> 'We have also been asked to announce the death of Joseph Cuffy . . .'
> There was a long satisfied sigh. Rampiari's husband had to be restrained again.
> '...which occurred this evening at The Elvira in County Naparoni. The funeral of the late Joseph Cuffy takes place tomorrow morning, through the courtesy of Mr. Surujpat Harbans, from the house of mourning, near Chittaranjan's Jewellery Establishment, Elvira main road, and thence to the Elvira Cemetery. Friends and relations are kindly asked to accept this intimation. (pp.200-202)

Then a woman sang an advertisement for Colgate Dental Cream:

> It cleans your breath
> (One, two),
> While it guards your teeth. (p.202)

Thus, Harbans and Chittaranjan enjoyed their own advertisement among those that were broadcast on the radio. The scene is ugly and there is an intimation of a cold, inhumane, and pernicious attitude in their narcissism. It feeds upon destruction and death, and unwittingly it invokes its own destruction because it lacks any connection or continuity with the human world. The activity of the mob at the end of the story, culminating in the burning of the Jaguar, is an extension of the same principles as the committee used. For example, the meeting to plan the strategy against the rival committee of Preacher promised division and defiance:

> 'Don't fool your head,' Foam said quickly. 'Preacher help out a lot of Hindu people in this place. And if the Hindus see a Hindu like Lorkhoor supporting Preacher, well, a lot of them go want to vote for Preacher. Lorkhoor going about telling people that they mustn't think about race and religion now. He say it ain't have nothing wrong if Hindu people vote for a negro like Preacher.'
>
> 'This Lorkhoor want a good cut-arse,' Baksh said. Chittaranjan agreed. 'That sort of talk dangerous at election time. Lorkhoor ain't know what he saying.'
>
> Harbans locked and unlocked his fingers. 'Nothing I does touch does turn out nice and easy. Everybody else have life easy. I don't know what sin I commit to have life so hard.'
>
> Everyone fell silent in the veranda, looking at Harbans, waiting for him to cry. Only the Petromax hissed and hummed and the moths dashed against it. (pp.54-55)

Harbans could not cry for a fate half so unfortunate as the

suffering of Elvira. The greed of her citizens, their ignorance, and the unreasonable expense of their power in the burning of the Jaguar, are pitiable, all the more so when a man like Harbans, who was supposed to represent Elvira, carelessly ran over her. His wealth was his sole concern. His sin was his unkindness.

CHAPTER IV

A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

Out of his despair Mr. Biswas often wrote short stories, whose hero was in some respect always himself. In general however there were two kinds of hero:

> Sometimes his hero had a Hindu name; then he was short and unattractive and poor, and surrounded by ugliness, which was anatomized in bitter detail. Sometimes his hero had a Western name; he was then faceless, but tall and broad-shouldered; he was a reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr. Biswas had read and the films he had seen.[1]

Likewise, V. S. Naipaul's hero is a Hindu, a small comic man surrounded by ugliness. At the same time he is the Western reporter moving in a world of romance. He is, in fact, one man trying to live in two worlds--the past and the future--and the attempt continuously destroys his present. Consequently he experiences the present and his whole life as a "void," an emptiness.

As a boy Mr. Biswas, like the boy of Miguel Street, was a painter of signs and a prisoner of his society, of his sadness and of his self-disgust. His society was chaotic. The War, which is background to part of the novel, is the manifestation of a more radical disorder, in the land and in its people. They too are divided between two worlds: the past of India and the future of America. They remain undefined and unordered, as they have remained since their arrival in servitude. Their servitude, either physical or psychological, continues. In their continued present

[1] V. S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas (London: Deutsch, 1961).

they have created nothing: their history is a void.

The emergence from servitude requires creation: the creation of a person who can stand on his own, and the creation of an ordered civilization. Mr. Biswas managed to create a sufficient self, and a house, and a family; the experience was not a pleasant one, but the product was rewarding. His house, though open to the ugliness of the city around him, was made richer by a garden. The completeness of self was always the necessary condition for a house, and that completeness, for Mr. Biswas, was symbolized by the garden.

The method followed in this chapter is to discuss the images that Naipaul uses to express Mr. Biswas's emergence. It begins with the garden. The unstated but important implication associated with the garden is that if Mr. Biswas's father had not been a miser, their neighbour would not have destroyed the garden around their house. The chapter continues with a discussion of the prison, which is variously Hanuman House, the past, human guilt, the human body, a person's self-awareness and his self-disgust. It goes on to discuss the images of the road and the void, and the means by which a person escapes from the void: the house. It focuses briefly upon the picture of the city, and finally, discusses the relevance of Mr. Biswas's house and V. S. Naipaul's book to history. The novel is, very much like <u>The Mystic Masseur</u>, a history "of our times."

In the course of his brief forty-six years Mr. Biswas lived in a dozen habitations. His first and only real home was the mud hut in a small village where he lived with his miserly father Raghu, his mother Bipti, his two brothers, Pratap and Prasad, and his sister, Dehuti. When his father died, the family suffered the depradations of their neighbour Dhari, and Mr. Biswas and his mother moved to the village of Pagotes where they lived in a back trace with relations of Aunt Tara, Bipti's sister, by whose kindness, as well, Mr. Biswas was sent to school for six years and then apprenticed to a pundit for eight months. He worked for Tara's husband, Ajodha, and for Ajodha's brother, the thieving Bhandat. Thereafter he was a wanderer, with no house and no family. As a sign-painter he found a job at Hanuman House in the village of Arwacas; it offered great expectations from the outside, but inside it proved to be a trap, a squalid engulfing world against which, having married a Tulsi daughter, he rebelled continually, and from which he wanted to escape. The Tulsi family, owners of Hanuman House, allowed Mr. Biswas to occupy dwellings which they owned in more rural areas: a food store in The Chase and the cane-labourers' barracks in Green Vale. Unsuccessful and uncomfortable in those locations he returned to Hanuman House. One day he escaped--left behind his wife and four children, and looked for romance in the city of Port of Spain. He felt free there, and sensed excitement lying hidden. It remained hidden, leaving him hot and weary, and afraid of his freedom:

> The wind from the Savannah was like a blessing. His mind was hot. And now he saw the city as made up of individuals, each of whom had his place in it. The large buildings around the Savannah were white and blank and silent in the heat.
>
> He came to the War Memorial Park, sat on a bench in the shade of a tree and studied the statue of a belligerent soldier. Shadows were black and well-defined and encouraged repose and languor. His stomach was hurting.
>
> His freedom was over, and it had been false. The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect, makeshift and cheating. (p.285)

In A House for Mr. Biswas Naipaul begins to make explicit the significance of "a sense of place." Place is a person's position with regard to his self, his family, his community, his society, and his entire world. For most of his life, the Tulsi world was Mr. Biswas's entire world, and it was imperfect, makeshift and cheating, and because it was not a part of what Mr. Biswas defined as truth, his position in it was that of the belligerent soldier. Since he was weak he had either to fight or to succumb to the unacceptable. Therefore he was the rebel in the household, and as such, owned a kind of perverse strength that Naipaul can attach without misgiving only to Biswas's son, Anand:

> Though no one recognized his strength, Anand was among the strong. His satirical sense kept him aloof. At first this was only a pose, an imitation of his father. But satire led to contempt, and at Shorthills contempt, quick, deep, inclusive, became part of his nature. It led to inadequacies, to self-awareness and a lasting loneliness. But it made him unassailable. (p.372)

Mr. Biswas's fortress was his absurdly shaped house in Sikkim Street, a house that was connected in no way with the web of

the Tulsi family. Its comfort was not that it was any less imperfect, makeshift or cheating than Hanuman House, for it was all of those, as it had to be if it was to include Mr. Biswas's past life; the difference was that the house belonged to him and was Mr. Biswas. It had weak pillars of clay brick at the four corners, but Mr. Biswas was finally free to have a garden, to accommodate himself to his sense of place in the world, to allow beauty and colour where there had been only ugliness and darkness. Naipaul says of the Biswas family:

> And how quickly they forgot the inconvenience of the house and saw it with the eyes of the visitors! What could not be hidden, by bookcase, glass cabinet or curtains, they accommodated themselves to. They mended the fence and made a new gate. They put up a garage. They bought rose trees and planted a garden. They began to grow orchids and Mr. Biswas had the exciting idea of attaching them to dead coconut trunks buried in the ground. At the side of the house, in the shade of the breadfruit tree, they had a bed of anthurium lilies. To keep the lilies cool they surrounded them with damp, rotting immortelle wood which they got from Shorthills. And it was on a visit to Shorthills that they saw the concrete pillars rising out of tall bush on the hill where Mr. Biswas had once built a house. (p.253)

The image of the garden is not used abundantly, but it is used deliberately. The garden is both the familiar domestic flower garden that Mr. Biswas kept trying to cultivate, and the natural garden (or otherwise) of the geographic islands. The vegetable and flower gardens at the back of the mud hut belonging to Bipti and Raghu, Mr. Biswas's parents, are the first of importance. Raghu had died while diving for Mr. Biswas, who had supposedly drowned in a pond; Dhari, their neighbour, wasted no time before pillaging Raghu's

property for his money. Bipti was awakened in the night by noises coming from the garden:

> Someone was stumbling among the bottles Rhagu had buried neck downwards around the flower-beds.
> She roused Prasad and Pratap.
> Mr. Biswas, awaking to hushed talk and a room of dancing shadows, closed his eyes to keep out the danger; at once, as on the day before, everything became dramatic and remote.
>
> . . . . .
>
> The garden was lit up by a hurricane lamp. A man was working a fork into the ground among the bottle borders.
> 'Dhari!' Bipti called.
> Dhari didn't look up or reply. He went on forking, rocking the implement in the earth, tearing the roots that kept the earth firm.
> 'Dhari!'
> He began to sing a wedding song.
> 'The cutlass!' Pratap said. 'Give me the cutlass!'
> 'O God! No, No,' Bipti said.
> 'I'll go and beat him like a snake,' Pratap said, his voice rising out of control.
>
> . . . . .
>
> As soon as it was light she went out to the garden. The flower-beds had been dug up; dew lay on the upturned earth which partially buried uprooted plants, already limp and quailing. The vegetable patch had not been forked, but tomato plants had been cut down, stakes broken and pumpkins slashed. (pp.34-36)

The scene is remarkable for several reasons. Primarily, though as yet the figurative meaning of the garden is not apparent, it shows the garden destroyed; Darhi is the snake. It implies as well that the desire for money is at the root of the evil which is being inflicted. And, centrally to the theme of the novel as a whole, it shows the weak "In the shadow of the strong." (p.499). Dhari plunders unhindered because he is strong; the mother and her three sons can not prevent him. Pratap vows to kill him, but the vow does not

even become a fragment of his memory; it does for Mr. Biswas, in whose mind, fearful and withdrawn, the deed is a child of the darkness and the dancing shadows, and it remains in his memory distant and remote. Thereafter he was continually galled by his awareness of injury and his impotence to heal it.

The garden next mentioned was in a place ironically called Green Vale--ironically, for the vale was brown and barely alive: "It was as if all the trees had, at the same moment, been blighted in luxuriance, and death was spreading at the same pace from all the roots. But death was for ever held in check." (p.185) There, at a short distance from the Tulsi barracks where he was living as a sub-overseer, Mr. Biswas had his own first house built. The garden, as he described it to Mr. MacLean, the carpenter, would have completed the landscape:

> 'And then I was thinking about a little path down to the road here. Steps. In the ground itself. Garden on both sides. Roses. Exora. Oleanders. Bougainvillea and Poinsettia. And some Queen of Flowers. And a neat little bamboo bridge to the road.' (pp.216-17)

But the house went up little beyond the cedar frame and there was never a garden.

Then, the seemingly stupendous offer of Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain carried with it the "promise" of a garden:

> So there was space; space below the floor of the house itself, space at the back, space at the sides, space for a garden at the front.
> Could his luck have been more complete? (p.301)

Feeling secure in his job as a reporter for the Sentinel, feeling the thrill of urgency in his work, and the excitement of distant lands passing daily before his eyes, he planted his roses: "So used to thinking of the house as his own, and in his new confidence, he made a garden." (p.312) When Mrs. Tulsi moved into the house for a week to prepare for the departure of her son Owad to London, the house filled up with sisters, husbands, children, and retainers. Mr. Biswas's position became uncertain. He found himself squeezed into one room and for short periods lost track of his wife and children. "The rose-bushes and the lily-pond suffered;" they were restored when the Tulsi family went back to Arwacas. (p.325).

Shortly afterwards, replacement of editors at the Sentinel brought a pro-establishment policy that stifled Mr. Biswas's satirical sense, made him write words that he did not feel, and made his writing burdensome and bad; "he lived now in constant expectation of the sack." (p.339) His flowers suffered too:

> Untended, the rose trees grew straggly and hard. A blight made their stems white and gave them sickly, ill-formed leaves. The buds opened slowly to reveal blanched, tattered blooms covered with minute insects. . . .The children's interest in the garden was spasmodic, and Shama, claiming that she had learned not to interfere with anything of Mr. Biswas's, planted some zinnias and marigolds of her own, the only things, apart from an oleander tree and some cactus, that had flourished in the garden of Hanuman House. (p.340)

Mr. Biswas's luck was not complete. Seth, who was Mrs. Tulsi's brother-in-law and the Tulsi land-boss, accompanied

by two negro labourers parked his lorry behind the house just before Mr. Biswas returned from the office, with the intention of unloading it:

> One afternoon Mr. Biswas came back from the Sentinel and as soon as he pushed his cycle through the front gate he saw that the rose garden at the side of the house had been destroyed and the ground levelled, red earth mingling with the black. The plants were in a bundle against the corrugated iron fence. The stems, hard and stained and blighted on the outside, yet showed white and wet and full of promise where they had been cleanly gashed; their ill-formed leaves had not begun to quail; they still looked alive.
>
> He threw his bicycle against the concrete steps.
>
> . . . . .
>
> He saw it clearly. . . . he was fumbling among the scantlings. He tried to pick one up, had misjudged its size, abandoned it, Shama saying from the verandah, 'No, no,' picked up a large stained wet stone from the bleaching-bed and 'Who tell you you could come and cut down my rose trees? Who?' Scraping the words out of his throat so that they didn't seem to come from where he stood, but from someone just behind him. . . . His wrist was seized, roughly, by large hot gritty fingers. The stone fell to the ground.
>
> Disarmed, he was without words. Beside the three men he felt his frailty, . . . his wrist burned where it had been held.
>
> . . . . .
>
> 'You will be hearing from my solicitor,' Mr. Biswas said. 'And those two rakshas you have with you. They too.' He disappeared again.
>
> The labourers, unaware of their identification with Hindu mythological forces of evil, unloaded.
>
> Seth winked at the children. 'Your father is a damn funny sort of man. Behaving as though he own the place . . . . ' (pp.348-50)

As in his childhood garden Mr. Biswas was helpless to stop the destruction that was occurring, for, except in his words, he was frail. Nor indeed had he the right, for as Seth said maliciously, the house was not his. However, so strong was his sense of injury that, violating his oppressive self-

awareness, he tried to repell the destroyers.

Next, at a comfortable distance from the timber house on the newly acquired Tulsi estate at Shorthills among the mountains of the Northern Range, on the top of a bush-covered hill, Mr. Biswas built his first complete and habitable house and set about clearing the land for a garden. "He spared only the poui trees, for their branches and their yellow flowers, which came out bright and pure for one week of the year." (p.384) Thus, and with the help of his mother, the garden began. But abruptly it ended, when in the night of the evening on which Mr. Biswas and his children fired the land, the fire spread and consumed the sloping verdure. His garden destroyed by fire, Mr. Biswas and his family took refuge in a room of the Tulsi house. And not until he lived in Sikkim Street was he independent of the Tulsi family and able to enjoy the freshness of his garden.

The mood in which Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House was one of expectation, for the house offered better prospects than he had ever had. The mercenary Pundit Jairam had grown disgusted with Mr. Biswas during his period of training and would not keep him. Working in Bhandat's rum-shop, owned by Tara's husband Ajodha, he had been ridiculed by the customers for his "smartness", quartered with Bhandat's two sons in a dark room and finally beaten with a belt for supposedly stealing a dollar:

> The room in which Mr. Biswas slept had no window and was perpetually dark. His clothes hung on a nail on one wall; his books occupied a small amount of floor space.
>
> . . . . .
>
> He awoke to find Bhandat standing over his mattress on the floor. Above red eyes Bhandat's lids were swollen, the way they became after he had been drinking.
>
> . . . . .
>
> He was shouting now, and pulling out his leather belt through the loops of his trousers. 'Eh? You will tell them you stole my dollar?' He raised his arm and brought the belt down on Mr. Biswas's head. Whenever the buckle struck a bone it made a sharp sound.
>
> Suddenly Mr. Biswas howled. 'O God! O God! My eye! My eye!'
>
> Bhandat stopped.
>
> Mr. Biswas had been cut on the cheek-bone and the blood had run below his eye. (pp.56-59)

Running away from there he rediscovered the obvious sign-painting, obvious because it had been his only real success to that time, as a pupil for six years in Lal's school, and as a school friend of Alec.

> And it was through this association that Mr. Biswas discovered his gift for lettering. When Alec tired of doing inaccurate erotic drawings he designed letters. Mr. Biswas imitated these with pleasure and growing success. (pp.43-44)

Spending whole classes at lettering Mr. Biswas had incurred Lal's displeasure and had been called forward: "Lal. . . flew into a rage. 'Ah! Sign-painter. Come up.'" (p.44) Thus Mr. Biswas acquired his lasting identity, with the distinction, when his lettering triumphed over Lal's restraints, of hero: "Mr. Biswas went back to his desk, smiling, a hero." (p.44) Therefore Mr. Biswas became a sign-painter, began to use his gift to earn his bread and began to discover distant worlds:

> To satisfy the extravagant lettering tastes of his shopkeepers he scanned foreign magazines. From looking at magazines for their letters he began to read them for their stories, and during his long weeks of leisure he read such novels as he could find in the stalls of Pagotes. . . . They introduced him to intoxicating worlds. Descriptions of landscapes and weather in particular excited him; they made him despair of finding romance in his own dull green land which the sun scorched every day. (pp.70-71)

Mr. Biswas yearned after the outside world. The novels fired his imagination, and, while kindling his desire for the years ahead, also allowed him the worry of finding nothing:

> He never ceased to worry. He no longer simply lived. He had begun to wait, not only for love, but for the world to yield its sweetness and romance. He deferred all his pleasure in life until that day. And it was in this mood of expectation that he went to Hanuman House at Arwacas, and saw Shama. (pp.72-73)

Hanuman House looked promising, by comparison not only with the other houses in the street, but also with any house he had ever lived in. It appeared to be strong, spacious and alluringly alien. The Tulsi family, founded in Trinidad by the deceased Pundit Tulsi and controlled by the corpulent and passive Mrs. Tulsi, had a reputation among the Hindu population in Arwacas as a pious, conservative, landowning family.

> Among the tumbledown timber-and-corrugated-iron buildings in the High Street at Arwacas, Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were, and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits in the façade. The balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent monkey-god Hanuman. From the ground his whitewashed feature could scarcely be distinguished and were, if anything, slightly sinister,

> for dust had settled on projections and the effect was that of a face lit up from below. (p.73)

"Façade," for Naipaul, is the superficial, and implies the cheating. The white was just wash and the house was more sinister than benevolent. The store in the front of the building at once fell short of Mr. Biswas's expectation:

> The Tulsi store was disappointing. The façade that promised such an amplitude of space concealed a building which was trapezoid in plan and not deep. There were no windows and light came only from the two narrow doors at the front and the single door at the back, which opened on to a covered courtyard. The walls, of uneven thickness, curved here and jutted there, and the shop abounded in awkward, empty cobwebbed corners. (p.74)

The dark and cobwebbed corners were too nearly his unhappy past: the guilt of a father whose death he had caused, the guilt of flesh, as of the meal after the burial:

> The food was unsalted and as soon as he began to chew, Mr. Biswas felt he was eating raw flesh and the nauseous saliva filled his mouth again. He hurried outside to empty his mouth and clean it, but the taste remained. And Mr. Biswas screamed when, back at the hut, Bipti put him to bed and threw Raghu's blanket over him. The blanket was hairy and prickly; it seemed to be the source of the raw, fresh smell he had been smelling all day. Bipti let him scream until he was tired and fell asleep in the yellow, wavering light of the oil lamp which left the corners in darkness. (p.34)

The dark corners told likewise of the violation inflicted by Dhari when Mr. Biswas was a boy, and of his brother's courage:

> Cutlass in hand, Pratap moved in a frenzy between the window and the door, so swiftly that the flame of the oil lamp blew this way and that, and once, with a plopping sound, disappeared. The room sank into darkness. A moment later the flame returned, rescuing them. (pp.36-37)

The dark corners were the corners of Bhandat's rumshop, where people quailed while Bhandat, as Dhari had done, stole from them for their own good, to make them drink less. The wide doors of the rumshop had left a mark on his mind:

> The doors were needed, for many of the people who came past them meant to drink themselves into insensibility. At any time of the day there were people who had collapsed on the wet floor, men who looked older than they were, women too; useless people crying in corners, their anguish lost in the din and press of the standing drinkers. . . and steadily the coppers and the silver and the notes went into the greasy drawer below the shelves.
>
> . . . . .
>
> The shop had thick edges of darkness; the smell of dirty boards and stale rum was sharp; and Bhandat made his calculation in whispers against the noise of the Petromax whose hiss, lost in the din of the evening, had now in the silence swollen into a roar. (pp.54-55)

The corners were not only the empty corners of the Tulsi emporium, but also, as Mr. Biswas found out as he penetrated the building, almost the whole edifice--the spacious hall for example, and especially the kitchen:

> The pale green paint had grown dim and dingy and the timbers revealed the ravages of woodlice which left wood looking so new where it was rotten. Then Mr. Biswas had another surprise. Through the doorway at the far end he saw the kitchen. And the kitchen had mud walls. It was lower than the hall and appeared to be completely without light. The doorway gaped black; soot stained the wall about it and the ceiling just above; so that blackness seemed to fill the kitchen like a solid substance. (pp.78-79)

When, after his marriage to Shama, Bipti introduced herself to the family she described to her son a house that he knew was deceptive:

> She described a house he hardly knew. She spoke of a drawingroom with two tall throne-like mahogany chairs, potted palms and ferns in huge brass vases on marble topped tables, religious paintings, and many pieces of Hindu sculpture. She spoke of a prayer-room above that, which, with its slender columns, was like a temple: a low, cool, white room, empty except for the shrine in the center.
>
> . . . He didn't tell her that that part of the house was reserved for visitors. . . . (p.89)

Mr. Biswas knew enough before the marriage to have been warned: the blackness, Seth's false teeth and cigarette holder, the squeals of children being slapped, Mrs. Tulsi's dismay at his having no money, and the faces of children and women peeping out at him from the kitchen doorway: "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (p.82) Counting on a dowry he should have been warned when Mrs. Tulsi said, "Drums and dancing and big dowry. We don't believe in that." (p.85) Expecting a fortress he should have been warned by Mrs. Tulsi's description of the manner in which Pundit Tulsi had built the structure:

> 'This house--he built it with his own hands. Those walls aren't concrete, you know. Did you know that?'
>
> Mr. Biswas went on eating.
>
> 'They looked like concrete to you, didn't they?'
>
> 'Yes, they looked like concrete.'
>
> 'It looks like concrete to <u>everybody</u>. But everybody is wrong. These walls are really made of clay bricks. Clay bricks,' she repeated, staring at Mr. Biswas's plate and waiting for him to say something.
>
> 'Clay bricks!' he said. 'I would never have thought that.'
>
> 'Clay bricks. And he made every brick himself. Right here. In Ceylon.'
>
> 'Ceylon?'
>
> 'That is how we call the yard at the back. You haven't seen it? Nice piece of ground. Lots of flower trees. He was a great one for flowers you know.' (p.85)

He was ashamed to tell his mother or his friend Alec what he

was getting himself into; Tara knew that it was a "gum-pot."

> There was no one in Pagotes he could talk to, for pure shame had kept him from telling Tara or Bipti or Alec that he was going to be married. At Hanuman House, in the press of daughters, sons-in-law and children, he began to feel lost, unimportant and even frightened. (p.86)

The wedding ceremony was succinct, and instead of fresh flowers Mr. Biswas found paper ones. From then on he shared a crowded room, and the slavery imposed by Mrs. Tulsi:

> After a brief ceremony at the registrar's, as make-believe as a child's game, with paper flowers in dissimilar vases on a straw-coloured, official-looking desk, Mr. Biswas and Shama were given part of a long room on the top floor of the wooden house.
>
> And now he became cautious. Now he thought of escape. To leave the way clear for that he thought it important to avoid the final commitment. He didn't embrace or touch her. . . .
>
> He spent the rest of that day imprisoned where he was, listening to the noises of the house.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi.
>
> At once he rebelled.
>
> Pretending not to know what was expected of him, he finished the signs for the Tulsi Store and decided that the time had come to escape. (pp.87-88)

Sign-painting had taken him to the Tulsi Store; that commitment carried out, he wished to escape from the prison in which he had placed himself. However, his weakness and his lack of self-sufficiency prevented him; he remained there, labelled a rebel:

> The house was too full, too busy; . . . he mattered little to the house. His status there was now fixed. He was troublesome and disloyal, and could not be trusted. He was weak and therefore contemptible. (p.92)

Even as a rebel, at least he occupied a definite place in

the Tulsi family; that in itself was a source of solace, and more than that, that identity allowed him to reject notionally all that the family stood for, to continue wandering with such expectation as he first approached the alien white fortress, while still enabling him to seek its protection.

The idea of escape contributes a considerable part to Mr. Biswas's sense of place, for his sense of place includes the awareness that escaping from something-- inclusively, "the past"--is impossible and meaningless; the past cannot be undone, a man cannot be remade. His own past, from the time of his birth, was one of loneliness and suffering. He was born at midnight. The midwife shrieked at his birth because he was six-fingered and born in the wrong way. And though his grandmother hung cactus leaves over every aperture through which an evil spirit might enter the hut, the midwife prophesied to Bissoondaye: "Whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father." (p.16) Thereafter, Mr. Biswas was "this unfortunate boy" and "an unlucky child," and lived beneath an ominous cloud. The fate predicted by the pundit who helped give him the name Mohun was no less sombre. He would have an unlucky sneeze, and might be a lecher, a spendthrift and a liar. Bissoondaye asked about the six fingers:

> 'What about the six fingers, pundit?'
> 'That's a shocking sign, of course. The only thing I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water. Particularly water.' (p.16)

After that he carried the stigma that shut him out from the childhood enjoyments of his two brothers, and from the well-built houses that they were to own:

> A few days later Bipti and her children returned home. And there Mr. Biswas's importance steadily diminished. The time came when even the daily massage ceased.
>
> But he still carried weight. They never forgot that he was an unlucky child and that his sneeze was particularly unlucky.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Mr. Biswas grew. The limbs that had been massaged and oiled twice a day now remained dusty and muddy and unwashed for days. The malnutrition that had given him the sixth finger of misfortune pursued him now with eczema and sores that swelled and burst and scabbed and burst again, until they stank; his ankles and knees and wrists and elbows were in particular afflicted, and the sores left marks like vaccination scars. Malnutrition gave him the shallowest of chests, the thinnest of limbs; it stunted his growth and gave him a soft rising belly. And yet, perceptibly, he grew. He was never aware of being hungry. It never bothered him that he didn't go to school. Life was unpleasant only because the pundit had forbidden him to go near ponds and rivers. . . . every Sunday morning Raghu took Pratap and Prasad to swim in a stream not far off, and Mr. Biswas stayed at home. . . . (pp.19-21)

Frailty of body, joylessness, isolation and an awareness of himself as a worthless thing were his inheritance. His own frail flesh began to turn to dust: "Mr. Biswas lost his sixth finger before he was nine days old. . . .Bissoondaye. . . buried the finger behind the cowpen at the back of the house, not far from where she had buried Mr. Biswas's navel string." (pp.17-18) He was not consoled when the midwife's prophesy that he would kill his father and mother began to fulfill itself. Amusing himself with the black fish in a stream near his house he lost the calf that he was tending.

Fearful of punishment he hid beneath his father's bed. Raghu, thinking him drowned, began diving for his body in a nearby pond. Lonely, the boy emerged from his hiding place and wandered up behind the villagers who were watching his father. Lakhan the carter, apprehensive, dived after Raghu.

> Then they were all still. Someone had sneezed.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Lakhan brought up Raghu unconscious. They rolled him on the damp grass and pumped water out of his mouth and through his nostrils. But it was too late. (p.29)

Thus the guilt of his father's death became part of his inheritance, and the guilt, as it seemed to him, of his mother's dying, for he could not accept her attitude to life and could not bring himself to comfort her:

> It would have pained Mr. Biswas if anyone from the school saw where he lived, in one room of a mud hut in the back trace. He was not happy there and even after five years considered it a temporary arrangement. Most of the people in the hut remained strangers, and his relations with Bipti were unsatisfying because she was shy of showing him affection in a house of strangers. More and more, too, she bewailed her Fate; when she did this he felt useless and dispirited and, instead of comforting her, went out to look for Alec. . . . Continually, when he was with her, Mr. Biswas had to struggle against anger and depression. (pp.44-45)

When he needed sympathy he turned to Tara rather than to his mother. He saw his mother as the pitiable derelict of the fate which she accepted without question. At Christmas when the Tulsi sons-in-law were expelled from Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas cycled to Pagotes to see her, only to feel disgusted with her and with himself:

> For Mr. Biswas Christmas was a day of tedious depression. He went to Pagotes to see his mother and Tara and Ajodha, none of whom recognized Christmas. His mother. . . was happy where she was and did not want to be a burden to any of her sons; her life was over, she had nothing more to do, and was waiting for death. To feel sympathy for her he had to look, not at her face, but at the thinness of her hair. . . . Dutifully he put his arm around her. The gesture caused him pain, making him feel his own worthlessness. . . . He gave her a dollar, which he could scarcely afford. She took it without showing surprise and without a word of thanks. He was always glad when he could leave the back trace to go to Tara's. (p.172)

Instead of sympathy he offered money. He was unable to bridge the distance between himself and his mother, and the guilt of his lack of sympathy gave him pain. Likewise, when Mr. Burnett, the man who, as editor of the Sentinel, first employed Mr. Biswas as a sign-painter and then as a reporter, was dismissed, with prospect of employment in America, the same impotence afflicted him:

> And at last it was time for Mr. Burnett to leave. Mr. Biswas wanted to make some gesture to show his gratitude and sympathy, but he could think of nothing. And after all Mr. Burnett was escaping; he was staying behind. (p.333)

The omission of sympathy haunted him until his own death: "From time to time, until he died, he thought of writing. But he never wrote." (p.347)

Mr. Biswas's inability to show sympathy or even friendship towards other people came from a mind that was timorous and withdrawn, that was thwartingly self-conscious, and that perceived all objects as alien to itself. On the occasion when, having lost the calf in his keeping, he hid under his father's bed, his mind registered the surrounding events as

distant from him:

> It was a long wait but he endured it without discomfort. Below the bed the smell of old cloth, dust and old thatch combined into one overpoweringly musty smell. Idly, to pass the time, he tried to disentangle one smell from the other, while his ears picked up the sounds in and around the hut. They were remote and dramatic. (p.26)

When Dhari came to steal, his experience was the same: "Mr. Biswas . . . closed his eyes to keep out the danger; at once, as on the day before, everything became dramatic and remote." (p.34) One can detect the same distance-- from himself-- in his beating at the hands of Govind, one of the subservient sons-in-law. Disgusted with the food which Shama took to him in his upstairs room in Hanuman House he left the dish on the floor, went to the window, washed his hands, gargled and spat, and unintentionally spat on Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's "little god." Defied by Owad, he repeated the action and missed. Then, thinking more of disposing of this meal than of defacing Owad he returned to the window.

> Going to throw the whole damned thing out, he had decided. But his violence calmed him, and at the window he had another thought: throw the plate out and you could kill somebody. He arrested his hurling gesture, and merely tilted the plate. The food slipped off easily, leaving a few grains of rice sticking to streaks of lentils and oily, bubble-ridden trails of curry.
>
> 'O God! Oo -- Go-o-od!'
>
> . . . . .
>
> Heavy footsteps made the stairs shake, rattled the glass panes on doors, drummed across the Book Room, and Govind was in Mr. Biswas's chamber.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Govind threw himself on Mr. Biswas.
>
> Caught by surprise, stupefied by fear, Mr. Biswas neither shouted nor hit back at Govind, and allowed himself to be pummelled. He was struck hard and often on the jaw, and with every blow Govind said, 'Is you.'

> Vaguely Mr. Biswas was aware of women massing in the room. . . . He was acutely aware of the god bawling. . . .
>
> Punched on his hollow chest, short-jabbed on his soft, rising belly, Mr. Biswas found, to his surprise, that his mind remained quite clear. . . . He wanted to scratch and pinch Govind, but reflected that it would be unmanly to do so.
>
> 'Kill him!' the god shouted. 'Kill him, Uncle Govind.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> He doesn't want any encouragement, Mr. Biswas thought.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Suddenly he heard himself bawling, 'O God! I dead. I dead. He will kill me.'
>
> His terror silenced the house. (pp.120-122)

The beating was painful; it shared the degradation of the earlier, childhood beating from Lal in school, the beating from the drunken Bhandat and the cut on the cheekbone; it strengthened the resolution to find a job and to get a house of his own. At the same time his mind rose above the suffering, clear and reflecting, making him an object to himself, and registering the absurdity of the entire scene. Even in an immediate confrontation there was the distance between the self and other people and the distance between the self and its self-awareness. As the weak live in the shadow of the strong so the mind lives in the shadow of its self-awareness.

One night during the weeks of his most complete isolation, loneliness and depression, while he was living in the Tulsi barracks in Green Vale, his mind rested from a turmoil of questioning and discovered its defect. He took down the Reader's Library edition of The Hunchback of Notre Dame and began to read.

> His mind was clear. He had pushed everything apart from the Victor Hugo to the boundaries. He had made a clearing in the bush: that was the picture he gave himself of his mind: for his mind had become quite separate from the rest of himself.
>
> The image changed. It was no longer a forest, but a billowing black cloud. Unless he was careful the cloud would funnel into his head. He felt it pressing on his head. He didn't want to look up.
>
> Surely it was only a trick of the oil lamp, which stood directly in front of him on the table?
>
> . . . . .
>
> Then he was so afraid that he almost cried out.
>
> Why should he be afraid? Of whom? Esmerelda? Quasimodo? The goat? The crowd?
>
> People.
>
> . . . . .
>
> His fingers were dusted with the gilt from the pall-like cover of the book. As he studied them the clearing became overgrown again and the black cloud billowed in.
>
> . . . . .
>
> He surrendered to the darkness. (p.239)

In the morning he remembered the night and knew that he was not a whole man. In the evening he sat down to read again, opening Notre Dame: "But the reading only brought back t he memory of the previous night, the discovery of fear, and left his hands dusted with gilt." (p.243) In the distance between himself and his awareness of self, between himself and other people was fear for and of the flesh, a feeling of guilt at his temerity, a feeling of guilt at any assertion of himself. Fear had become a mode of perception, "so that, by merely looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past." (p.243) His fear spoiled any relationship with people, any freedom and any happiness; "and mixed with his fear was this grief for a happy life never enjoyed and now lost." (p.241) His wholeness could be restored

only by the violation of his self-awareness.

The image which Naipaul uses to express both the desire for escape and the impossibility of escape is the road. Roads pictured in the imagination offer excitement and freedom, but those that are the byways of the everyday world go nowhere. Living in a back trace of Pagotes with Bipti was an unhappy life, but Mr. Biswas found moments of excitement when he worked as an itinerant sign-painter and as a bus conductor:

> And yet there were moments when he could persuade himself that he lived in a land where romance was possible. When, for instance, he had to do a rush job and worked late into the night by the light of a gas lamp, excitement and the light transforming the hut; able then to forget that ordinary morning would come and the sign would hang over a cluttered little shop with its doors open on to a hot dusty road.
>
> There were the days when he became a conductor on one of Ajodha's buses . . . . He enjoyed the urgent motion and noisy rivalry, and endangered himself needlessly by hanging far out from the running-board to sing to people on the road, 'Tunapuna, Naparima, Sangre Grande, Guayaguayare, Chacachacare, Mahatma Gandhi and back,' the glorious Amerindian names forming an imaginary route that took in the four corners of the island and one place, Chacachacare, across the sea. (p.72)

As a Tulsi son-in-law living in The Chase, where the two most important public buildings were the two rumshops, he realized how terminable the roads were:

> The chase was a long, straggling settlement of mud huts in the heart of the sugar cane area.
>
> . . . . .
>
> For Mr. Biswas it was like returning to the village where he had spent his early years. Only, now the surrounding darkness and mystery had gone. He knew what lay beyond the sugarcane fields and where the roads went. They went to villages which were just like The Chase. (p.127)

And though he was aware that the roads led from nowhere to nowhere, they remained notionally, at least, the means of escape from a life of futility:

> In all Mr. Biswas lived for six years at The Chase, years so squashed by their own boredom and futility that at the end they could be comprehended in one glance. But he had aged . . . .
>
> Though he never ceased to feel that some nobler purpose awaited him, even in this limiting society, he gave up reading Samuel Smiles. That author depressed him acutely. He turned to religion and philosophy. He read the Hindus. . . . As a boy he had liked to read descriptions of bad weather in foreign countries; they made him forget the heat and sudden rain which was all he knew. But now, though his philosophical books gave him solace, he could never lose the feeling that they were irrelevent to his situation. The books had to be put down. The shop awaited; money problems awaited: the road outside was short, and went through flat fields of dull green to small, hot settlements.
>
> And at least once a week he thought of leaving the shop, leaving Shama, leaving the children, and taking that road. (pp.163-64)

On the evenings when religious ceremonies were conducted at Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas rode there to participate with the pundits in their discussion; seated in the drawing room he was reminded of "an old, secret ambition" that he had entertained as a boy, that was, to be grown up and as contented and comfortable as Pundit Jairam with his clean dhoti, his pillows, book and spectacles, and his wife cooking in the kitchen, or, similarly, to be grown up and as comfortable as Ajodha with his slippers, rocking chair and bed-time warm milk. Then the ambition, realized vicariously, seemed absurd:

> But on these evenings when Hanuman House was bright with lights and hummed with happy activity, when he was able to sit among the cushions on the polished floor of

> the drawingroom and call for a glass of hot milk, he experienced no sharp pleasure, and was instead nagged by the uneasiness he had felt when he visited Tara's and read That Body of Yours to Ajodha. Then he knew that as soon as he stepped out of the yard he returned to nonentity, the rumshop on the Main Road and the hut in the back trace. (p.170)

The main road on which daily life passes runs from The Chase to The Chase, from nonentity to nonentity, from darkness to darkness in futile motion. It is lined with rumshops, with huts, harbouring useless people in their corners of darkness.

In particular he was haunted by a still picture of the frailty not only of human life, that is, that in its innocence lives with the unknown and struggles into something beyond itself, but also of life's "progress": the loss of innocence, the corruption that invariably invades. It is a still picture in his mind because it is a fragment of truth, of Mr. Biswas's sense of place: not, as he often wished, the "landscapes without people. . . vast white plateaux, with himself safely alone, a speck at the centre," (p.240) but landscapes startlingly peopled:

> Once, years before, he was conducting one of Ajodha's motorbuses that ran its erratic course to remote and unsuspected villages . . . . in the gloom, a boy was leaning against the hut, his hands behind him, staring at the road. He wore a vest and nothing more. The vest glowed white. In an instant the bus went by, noisy in the dark, through bush and level sugar-cane fields. Mr. Biswas could not remember where the hut stood, but the picture remained: a boy leaning against an earth house that had no reason for being there, under the dark falling sky, a boy who didn't know where the road, and that bus, went.
>
> And often, among the pundits and the cushions and the statuary in the drawingroom, eating the enormous meals the Tulsis provided on these occasions, he was assailed by this sense of utter desolation. Then, without conviction, he counted his blessings and ordered himself to enjoy the

moment, like the others. (p.171)

His mind gave back the image of the boy leaning against the hut, himself in far different circumstances, sitting upon cushions in a well-furnished room sharing discussion, and the elemental scene overwhelmed him with grief. In his childhood he had been, and in many ways still was the boy, more often looking backward though than forward.

His own son Anand was more nearly the boy. To escape the loneliness of the barracks in Green Vale Mr. Biswas occasionally cycled to Hanuman House to see his children. One afternoon he found Anand kneeling in a corner as punishment for making a mistake:

> It was the first time he had seen Anand in a temper. He looked at the boy's narrow shoulder blades below the thin cotton shirt; the slender neck, the large head; the thin eczema-stained legs in small, loose trousers; the blackened soles . . . and the big toes.
>
> 'He was frightened,' Savi said.
>
> 'To do what?'
>
> 'Frightened to ask Teacher permission to leave the room. And when he leave the room he was frightened again. Frightened to use the school W.C.'
>
> 'Is a nasty, stinking place,' Anand burst out, getting off his knees and turning to face them.
>
> . . . . .
>
> 'And when I come home Ma beat me,' Anand said. He wasn't complaining. He was angry. 'Ma beat me. She beat me.' Repeated, the words lost their anger and became pleas for sympathy.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Anand followed Mr. Biswas outside and seemed unwilling to let him leave. He said nothing; he simply hung around the bicycle, occasionally rubbing against it. (pp.211-13)

Mr. Biswas could not reach out to Anand in sympathy, even though he may have felt it. He was impeded by knowledge

which made all action seem irrelevant and futile. The frailty of the bony body, the fear, the revulsion, the beating, the corner of darkness and the defiance partake of an elemental injury that cannot be repaired. To Anand it seemed that there ought to be more than the "nasty, stinking place," but, other than in his defiance, there was not. Mr. Biswas, impotent to help, cycled "home," leaving Anand standing in the arcade of Hanuman House; Anand became that other boy:

> He cycled down the High Street. Just past the shop with the Red Rose Is Good Tea sign, he looked back. Anand was still under the arcade, next to one of the thick white pillars with the lotus-shaped base; standing and staring like that other boy Mr. Biswas had seen outside a low hut at dusk.
>
> When he got back to Green Vale it was dark. Under the trees it was night. The sounds from the barracks were assertive and isolated one from the other: snatches of talk, the sound of frying, a shout, the cry of a child: sounds thrown up at the starlit sky from a place that was nowhere . . . a dot on the map of the world. The dead trees ringed the barracks, a wall of flawless black.
>
> He locked himself in his room. (p.213)

His small room, locking out the world, became his prison, infinitesimal in the universe because it connected with nothing and with nobody; there he quailed, an island within an island, within the island of the world, in the prison of his heart. The navel cord, the thread of life, had long turned to dust.

The image which Naipaul uses to indicate the despair, the joylessness, the emptiness and the lack of relationship in Mr. Biswas's life is The Void, and one of the late chapters of the book goes by that title. Reflecting upon his past,

and upon his present role in Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas realized that his life related to nothing outside itself, except perhaps to his mother, whom he saw however as weak and broken:

> He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him! . . . In none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine. Was Bipti thinking of him in the back trace? But she herself was a derelict. And, even more remote, that house of mud and grass in the swamplands: probably pulled down now and ploughed up. Beyond that, a void. There was nothing to speak of him. (pp.118-19)

If Bipti were thinking of him, that would have been a connection. As for the hut, though, "when huts of mud and grass are pulled down they leave no trace," (p.38) and a person has no roots in the past. The past, and the future too, were the void into which Mr. Biswas was falling: time without place, without action, without anything to which the human hand might cling:

> Now it was the thought of the shop in darkness at The Chase, the shelves of tinned foods that wouldn't sell . . . And always the thought, the fear about the future. The future wasn't the next day or the next week or even the next year, times within his comprehension and therefore without dread. The future he feared could not be thought of in terms of time. It was a blankness, a void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling. (pp.170-71)

Moreover, each new child born to Shama made his fall more precipitous, for his children were not extensions of himself, but alien objects that he could not reach, visitors from school or from Hanuman House:

> And so for the rest of the term, she came and left; and he never ceased to feel that he was alone, with the

> trees, the newspapers on the wall, the religious quotations, his books.
>
> One thing gave him comfort. He had claimed Savi.
>
> At Easter he learned that Shama was pregnant for the fourth time.
>
> One child claimed; one still hostile; one unknown. And now another.
>
> Trap!
>
> The future he feared was upon him. He was falling into the void, and that terror, known only in his dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights, hearing the snores and creaks and the occasional cries of babies from the other rooms. . . . When he closed the door of his room for the night it was like an imprisonment. (pp.204-205).

Alone in the barracks he was a prisoner. His having reached out to claim Savi, to take her from Hanuman House to live with him for a short time in Green Vale, as he did later with Anand, gave him comfort; however the action was too little on his part and, at that time, too late. The concluding paragraph of "The Void" focusses upon the relationship of Mr. Biswas to his children: he avoids commitment, just as on the day of marriage to Shama he avoided "the final commitment" of the flesh:

> And now Mr. Biswas began to make fresh calculations, working out over and over the number of years that separated each of his children from adulthood. Savi was indeed a grown person. . . . Anand was more than halfway through college. Soon, Mr. Biswas thought, his responsibilities would be over. . . . Then he thought: 'I have missed their childhoods.' (p.480)

The childhoods of his children became part of the void which was his past; their lives did not touch his and he continued to fall.

In order to loose his children from the infant hordes of Hanuman House and to bring his family together, Mr. Biswas decided to have a small wooden house built in Green Vale, at a short distance from the barracks. One bedroom was boarded

in, the remainder of the building was a timber skeleton:

> That week he decided he couldn't wait any longer. Unless he started his house now he never would. His children would stay at Hanuman House, he would remain in the barrack-room, and nothing would arrest his descent into the void. Every night he wound himself up to a panic at his inaction, every morning he reaffirmed his decision. . . . (p.213)

Seth's galvanized iron covered the frame; in the sun the tar that had been used to patch the holes in the iron oozed through and formed curling black snakes. One day in January he moved into the one room with his belongings and his son:

> There were many reasons why Mr. Biswas moved from the barracks to the finished room of his house. It was a positive action; it was a confident, defiant gesture. . . . And there was his hope that living in a new house in the new year might bring about a new state of mind. He would not have moved if he had been alone, for he feared solitude more than people. But, with Anand, he had enough company. (p.253)

The new state of mind, however, was prerequisite to the house, and Mr. Biswas, as he bewailed to his dog Tarzan, was not whole. A torrential storm arose and broke into the house, while Mr. Biswas quailed on his bed. The lightning lit up a shining chaotic world outside. Inside, the wavering flame of the oil lamp danced the shadows of the snakes on the shivering roof. Lightning lit up the room and Anand saw black columns of biting ants stretched diagonally across two walls making their way towards a multitude of winged ants expiring on the floor around the lamp.

> The edges of the floor were wet.
> 'Rama Rama Sita Rama, Rama Rama Sita Rama.'
> Mr. Biswas was rolling on the bed, his legs locked together, his lips moving rapidly. . . .
> Anand thought this was a plea for sympathy and ignored it.
>
> . . . . .

> Mr. Biswas muttered hymns in Hindi and English, left them unfinished, cursed, rolled on the bed, his face still expressing only exasperation.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Then there was a roar that overrode them all. When it struck the house the window burst open, the lamp went instantly out, the rain lashed in, the lightning lit up the room and the world outside, and when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void.
>
> Anand began to scream.
>
> He waited for his father to say something, to close the window, light the lamp.
>
> But Mr. Biswas only muttered on the bed, and the rain and wind swept through the room with unnecessary strength and forced open the door to the drawingroom, wall-less, floor-less, of the house Mr. Biswas had built. (pp.260-63)

Death invaded the house from the wet chaos, only to find an ally within. The house that was to arrest Mr. Biswas's descent into the void, became part of the void, part of the emptiness within Mr. Biswas. Autistically absorbed in his fear, in his cursing of Ajodha, of Pundit Jairam, of Mrs. Tulsi, Shama and Seth, and in his disgust, he was unable to offer help or assurance to Anand. Lying beneath the roof provided by Seth, beneath the swinging shadows of snakes, as in the power of Dhari, he remained incomplete, and like the frivolous winged ants, in the shadow of the strong.

The early pages of "The Void" describe Mr. Biswas in later years in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Still falling in the void he ceased to be terrified, regarding himself in such manner as he regarded his mother, as a derelict of fate. Life had ceased to offer even a promise of colour or comfort:

> Change had come over him without his knowing. There had been no precise point at which the city had lost its romance and promise, no point at which he had begun to

> consider himself old, his career closed, and his visions of the future became only visions of Anand's future. Each realization had been delayed and had come, not as a surprise, but as a statement of a condition long accepted.
>
> But it was not so when, waking up one night, he saw that he had for sometime grown to accept his circumstances as unalterable: the buzzing house, the kitchen downstairs, the food being brought up the front steps, the growing children and Shama and himself squeezed into two rooms. He had grown to look upon houses--the bright drawingrooms through open doors, the clink of cutlery from diningrooms at eight, when he was on the way to a cinema, the garages, the hose-sprayed gardens in the afternoons, the barelegged lounging groups in verandahs on Sunday mornings--he had grown to look upon houses as things that concerned other people. . . . They had ceased to rouse ambition or misery. He had lost the vision of the house.
>
> He sank into despair as into the void which, in his imagining, had always stood for the life he had yet to live. Night after night he sank. But there was now no quickening panic, no knot of anguish. He discovered in himself only a great unwillingness, and that part of his mind which feared the consequences of such a withdrawal was increasingly stilled. (pp.445-46)

Withdrawal carries a person into the void; engagement with people and with objects carries a person out of the void, annihilates the nonentity. Anand and Mr. Biswas were rescued from the storm by Ramkhilawan who, barefooted, wearing a jutebag over his head and shoulders like a cape, and carrying a hurricane lamp, came from the barracks and relit the oil lamp:

> Then Anand saw a light swaying in the dark. It was a man, bending forward against the rain, a hurricane lamp in one hand, a cutlass in the other. The living flame was like a miracle. (p.263)

The concern and kindness of Ramkhilawan worked the miracle. His life touched and rekindled the life of Mr. Biswas.

Indeed, it was never alone, but in relationships with other people that Mr. Biswas found strength and com-

fort. Even before marrying Shama, for example, he knew that he was getting into a trap, but he proceeded all the same because he felt that he was becoming part of something larger than himself. That he did proceed seemed both then and later an absurd event.

> How often, in the years to come, at Hanuman House or in the house at Shorthills or in the house in Port of Spain, living in one room, with some of his children sleeping in the next bed, and Shama . . . sleeping downstairs with the other children, how often did Mr. Biswas regret his weakness, his inarticulateness, that evening: How often did he try to make events appear grander, more planned and less absurd than they were!
>
> And the most absurd feature of that evening was to come. When he left Hanuman House and was cycling back to Pagotes, he actually felt elated! . . . He felt he had been involved in large events. He felt he had achieved status. (pp.82-83)

By necessity Mr. Biswas became involved with the people of the house, albeit as the rebel. His involvement gave him a well-defined place, as he realized when, after his beating from Govind, the hall returned to life: "Between everyone downstairs there was for the moment a new bond, and Mr. Biswas recognized this bond as himself." (p.123) Later, having left Hanuman House and gone to live with Shama in the Tulsi shop in The Chase, he looked back upon Hanuman House with favour as a place filled with human activity, and though their own establishment began to come to life in their being together, because it did not increase, they were still attracted to Hanuman House.

> He wanted to comfort her. But he needed comfort himself. How lonely the shop was! And how frightening! He had never thought it would be like this when he found

himself in an establishment of his own. It was late afternoon; Hanuman House would be warm and noisy with activity. Here he was afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light.

. . . . .

He was astonished at the change in Shama. Till the last she had protested at leaving Hanuman House, but now she behaved as though she moved into a derelict house every day. Her actions were assertive, wasteful and unnecessarily noisy. They filled the shop and house; they banished silence and loneliness.

And, further miracle, she produced a meal from that kitchen in the yard. He could not look on it as simply food. For the first time a meal had been prepared in a house which was his own. He felt abashed. (pp.130-31)

Reflecting upon the organization of Hanuman House Mr. Biswas discovered that it was more organized than had been immediately obvious and that it was in reality a kind of fortress, capable of protecting its inhabitants, even those who were antagonistic to its way of life, and able to survive in a way that he was not able:

Though Hanuman House had at first seemed chaotic, it was not long before Mr. Biswas had seen that in reality it was ordered, with degrees of precedence all the way down, with Chinta below Padma, Shama below Chinta, Savi below Shama, and himself far below Savi. With no child of his own, he had wondered how the children survived. Now he saw that in this communal organization children were regarded as assets, a source of future wealth and influence. . . .

It was not for this reason alone that his attitude to Hanuman House changed. The House was a world, more real than The Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored. He needed such a sanctuary. And in time the House became to him what Tara's had been when he was a boy. He could go to Hanuman House whenever he wished and become lost in the crowd, since he was treated with indifference rather than hostility. And he went there more often, held his tongue and tried to win favour . . . . in himself he remained aloof.

Indifference turned to acceptance, and he was pleased and surprised to find that because of his past behaviour

he . . . had a certain licence. (p.169)

Likewise, in the loneliness and despair of Green Vale he realized that "it was always better to be out among real people than to be in his room with the newspapers and his imaginings." (p.243) Rescued from there and taken to Hanuman House he was glad of the house in his helplessness, glad to be part of something larger than himself, glad too to hear that his unfinished house had been destroyed by fire.

> Lying in the room next to Shama's, perpetually dark, Mr. Biswas slept and woke and slept again. The darkness, the silence, the absence of the world enveloped and comforted him. At some far-off time he had suffered great anguish. He had fought against it. Now he had surrendered, and this surrender had brought peace. He had controlled his disgust and fear when the men had come for him. He was glad he had. Surrender had removed the world of damp walls and paper covered walls, of hot sun and driving rain, and had brought him this: this worldless room, this nothingness . . . . .
>
> He remained in the Blue Room, feeling secure to be only a part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it. (pp.269-72)

The wooden floors and partitions, the windows and doors of the house had a life of their own, distinct from the lives of the particular people who lived there. There Mr. Biswas could find peace, a kind of parasitic peace, and permanence--with no extension of himself, no assertion and no commitment. Later, living with Ramchand and Dehuti in Port of Spain and working for the Sentinel, Mr. Biswas returned to Hanuman House. The house seemed then, as it was to seem even later, a permanent past, for it contained so much in the way of furniture,

of memories, of actions that identified Mr. Biswas:

> It was as though he had never left. Neither Shama nor the children nor the hall carried any mark of his absence.
>
> . . . . .
>
> It was better than he had imagined to be back in the sooty green hall with the shelflike loft . . . the photographs of Pundit Tulsi, the kitchen safe with the Japanese coffee-set. (pp.297-98)

On the later occasion, by then passed on from the Sentinel to a position as Community Welfare Officer, living in a crumbling wooden tenement house of Mrs. Tulsi, he saw the house as a carcase, and like memory, a permanent record of the past; it carried the marks of his actions, of his relationships with objects and with other people. Then, as creator, he had stood at the centre--not the centre of darkness, the passive nothingness, but the centre of light, the miracle, the active freedom.

> A large red advertisement for Bata shoes hung below the statue of Hanuman, and the store was bright and busy. But at the back the house was dead. The courtyard was littered with packing cases, straw, large sheets of stiff brown paper, and cheap untreated kitchen furniture. . . . Yet there were times when the wooden house appeared to be awaiting reanimation: when, in the still hot afternoons, from yards away came the thoughtful cackling of fowls, the sounds of dull activity; when in the evenings oil lamps were lit, and conversation was heard, and laughter, a dog being called, a child being flogged. But Hanuman House was silent.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Mr. Biswas welcomed the silence, the stillness. He requisitioned a desk and swivel chair from government stores (strange, such proofs of power), and turned the long room into an office. In this room, where the lotuses still bloomed on the wall, he had lived with Shama. Through the Demerara window he had tried to spit on Owad and flung the plateful of food on him. In this room he had been beaten by Govind, had kicked Bell's Standard Elocutionist and given it the dent on the cover. Here,

> claimed by no one, he had reflected on the unreality of his life, and had wished to make a mark on the wall as proof of his existence. Now he needed no such proof. Relationships had been created where none existed; he stood at their centre. In that very unreality had lain freedom. Now he was encumbered, and it was at Hanuman House that he tried to forget the encumbrance: the children, the scattered furniture, the dark tenement room, and Shama, as helpless as he was and now, what he had longed for, dependent on him. (pp.478-79)

Hanuman House at that time was only a skeleton. The Tulsi family had left it to live at Shorthills and then in Port of Spain. Without people it was inanimate, for its life derived solely from the lives of its dwellers. The dissolution of that family left Mr. Biswas at the centre of a new family, his family, in a place of power and responsibility. But, as was always his skill, he tried to escape, to forget the immediately unpleasant, the claims laid upon him by other people.

Mr. Biswas's experience of the City was in many ways his experience of Hanuman House. The city was first of all an adventure that promised activity, excitement and romance. And, like Hanuman House, it was something bigger than himself.

> He comprehended the city whole; he did not isolate the individual, see the man behind the desk or counter, behind the pushcart or the steering-wheel of the bus; he saw only the activity, felt the call to the senses, and knew that below it all there was an excitement, which was hidden, but waiting to be grasped. (p.279)

In its daily functioning it seemed ordered, and because the city was also a port, it incorporated other parts of the world every day:

> The organization of the city fascinated Mr. Biswas:

> the street lamps going on at the same time, the streets swept in the middle of the night, the rubbish collected by the scavenging carts early in the morning. . . . Even about Ramchand's going out to work every morning there was something knowing, brave and enviable.
>
> And with Mr. Biswas Ramchand was indeed the knowledgeable townsman. . . . They went up Chancellor Hill and looked down at the ships in the harbour. For Mr. Biswas this was a moment of deep romance. He had seen the sea, but didn't know that Port of Spain was really a port, at which ocean liners called from all parts of the world. (p.281)

He longed to be part of the ordered activity of the city, as he had been a part of Hanuman House, to escape from the freedom that he felt when he had first come to the city, the freedom which, because it contained no action and related only to itself, was empty:

> Mr. Biswas, now practically without money, had begun to feel burdened by his freedom. He was no longer content to walk about the city. He wanted to be part of it, to be one of those who stood at the black and yellow bus-stops in the morning, one of those he saw behind the windows of offices, one of those to whom the evenings and week-ends brought relaxation. (p.282)

He did become part of the city. The editor of the Sentinel, Mr. Burnett, employed him to paint a few signs; Mr. Biswas worked with such dedication that Mr. Burnett allowed him to train as a reporter. As a reporter and free to indulge his "satirical sense," he was involved, sometimes frantically involved, with a far-reaching world; but at the same time he was secluded from the world. For in his office the world came to him: he sat behind a desk at the still centre of activity, the centre of knowledge and light:

> The ships sailed away with their scorched tourists,

> distinguished by their tropical clothes, after only a few hours. But they had come from places with famous names. And in the Sentinel office news from those places spilled out continually onto spools of paper. Outside was the hot sun, the horse-dunged streets, the choked slums, the rooms where he lived with Ramchand and Dehuti; and, beyond that, the level acres of sugar-cane, the sunken ricelands, the repetitive labour of his brothers, the short roads leading from known settlement to known settlement, the Tulsi establishment, the old men, who gathered every evening in the arcade of Hanuman House and would travel no more. But within the walls of the office every part of the world was near. (p.294)

Living with his family even in a house owned by Mrs. Tulsi he was happy:

> The house faced east, and the memories that remained of these first four years in Port of Spain were above all memories of morning. . . . The promise of the evening; the expectation of the morning. (p.303)

His job gave him status, an ambivalent one, that was almost identical to what he had had in Hanuman House:

> And so he rode to his reporter's job and its curious status: welcomed, even fawned upon, by the greatest in the land, fed as well as anybody and sometimes even better, yet always, finally, rejected. (p.313)

At the end of the four happy years, under the new regime at the Sentinel and the privations imposed by war conditions, Mr. Biswas was fearful of losing his job and found "home" life unhappy. He ceased to see the city as a whole, but as separate parts. Like Hanuman House, its life was the life of its dwellers, and therefore possibly as mean and obscure as any one of those lives, and as dark as the kitchen of Hanuman House or the corners of Bhandat's rumshop:

> And often, in the end, Mr. Biswas would leave the house and go for a long night walk through the city, stopping at some empty shack of a café to eat a tin of salmon, trying to stifle the pain in his stomach and only

> making it worse; while below the weak electric bulb the sleepy-eyed Chinese shopkeeper picked and sucked his teeth, his slack, bare arms resting on a glasscase in which flies slept on stale cakes. Up to this time the city had been new and held an expectation which not even the deadest two o'clock sun could destroy. Anything could happen: he might meet his barren heroine, the past could be undone, he would be remade. But now not even the thought of the Sentinel's presses, rolling out at that moment reports of speeches, banquets, funerals . . . could keep him from seeing that the city was no more than a repetition of this: this dark, dingy café, the chipped counter, the flies thick on the electric flex, the empty Coca Cola cases stacked in a corner, the cracked glass-case, the shopkeeper picking his teeth, waiting to close. (p.341)

With nowhere else to go Mr. Biswas remained part of the city, and at a time when the city had lost its romance, when he had lost the vision of the house and when his future was desolate, he became even more closely involved with it. He was offered, and accepted, a job as Community Welfare Officer in the incipient Community Welfare Department, at a salary fifty dollars a month higher than the one he was getting from the Sentinel.

> Suddenly, quite suddenly, he was revivified. . . . Because of his unrivalled experience of destitutes Mr. Biswas had become the Sentinel's expert on matters of social welfare.
>
> . . . . .
>
> He had stopped thinking of a new job. He had paid no more than a journalist's attention to all the talk of postwar development, since he did not see how it involved him and his family. And now, on a Monday morning, he had walked into a new job, and this job made him part of the new era. And it was a job with the government! (p.447)

His decision to accept the job, to commit himself to a new undertaking, to move out into the unknown, had increased his involvement to the extent that he was not only part of a place, but also part of a time, time that is recorded: history. In his involvement he looked upon a new world.

He even found a woman who did not fill him with disgust. She was not passive, servile and dull like the Tulsi daughters.

> He had been immediately attracted by Miss Logie, the head of the department. She was a tall, energetic woman in late middle age . . . . She had the graces . . . . She also had the attraction of novelty. He had known no Indian woman of her age as alert and intelligent and inquiring. (p.447)

By her kindness the Biswas family was able to enjoy a week at her house at Sans Souci. On route they stopped and bathed at Balandra; Balandra was a perfect garden world:

> They stopped at Balandra, and walked to the dangerous part of the bay where the waves were five feet high and a sign warned against bathing. Never had water seemed so blue; never had sand shone so golden; never had bay curved so beautifully, waves broken so neatly. It was a perfect world, the curve of the coconut trees repeated in the curve of the bay, the curl of the waves, the arc of the horizon.
>
> . . . . .
>
> The wind never ceased to rage through the trees; above the swaying bush, the dancing plumes of green, the sky was high and open. From time to time they had glimpses of the sea: so near, so unending, so alive, so impersonal. (pp.454-55)

The four children savoured the long days and shared the evenings with their parents, all beginning to experience one another, and to grow: "Mr. Biswas saw that as a father he now had fresh responsibilities. In the evenings with the noise of sea and wind, comforting now, around them, they played cards." (p.456) The house that on the first night, dark and lonely, had squeezed them towards the oil lamp in one room, freed them into all its rooms:

> They forgot the house in Port of Spain and spread themselves about the house on the hill. It seemed there

> was no one in the world but themselves, nothing alive but themselves and the sea and the wind. (p.456)

What seemed to be, however, as it invariably befell Mr. Biswas, was not real. Real life was never the place that he escaped to, but the place where he was, however ugly, however lacking colour: Port of Spain, the two rooms, the city pavement, the badly concreted floor under the house, the noise and the quarrels. And that perhaps was the virtue of the house that Mr. Biswas finally bought in Sikkim Street: it was so entirely Mr. Biswas, so entirely his experience of the world. He paid for it too dearly. When he "revealed the tremendous details" of its cost to Shama she said, "O God! . . . You hanging a millstone around my neck." Mr. Biswas, recalling "a story by a French writer" about an imitation necklace, replied, "A necklace." (p.512)

> He had never been able to understand why it was considered a comic story. Debt was a fearful thing; and with all its ifs and might-have-beens the story came too near the truth: hope followed by blight, the passing of the years, the passing of life itself, and then the revelation of waste: Oh my poor Matilda! But they were false! (pp.508-09)

Debt, that which is owed to another, and to life itself, was always a fearful thing for Mr. Biswas. Debt had been the terror of his nightmare:

> He was on a hill, a bare, brown-green hill. It was hot but the wind was cool and blew his hair. A woman was at the foot of the hill. She was crying and coming to him for help. . . . What help could he give? And the woman--Shama, Anand, Savi, his mother--kept coming up the hill. He heard her sobs and wanted to cry to her to go away. (p.245)

But there was no retreat from suffering, no retreat from the world. The house on Sikkim Street did not refuse that reality: only the kitchen escaped the sun, and since the time that the children had first seen the house in another's possession it had lost the "thick curtains keeping out the world:"

> Undraped by curtains, the large areas of lattice work left the house open, to the green of the breadfruit next door, the bleedingheart vine thick and tendrilled on the rotting fence, the decaying slum house at the back, the noises of the street. (p.516)

The real world, his compulsory world, however imperfect, makeshift and cheating, was the world of human flesh, the final commitment. Mr. Biswas's house, with its four pillars of clay was the world of flesh, and Mr. Biswas "was discovering commitments almost as fast as he discovered the house." (p.517) His freedom, like his darkness, lived within him. And that which at the end promised to be false--the house--proved most to be true. With commitment, with freedom, the garden grew.

Finally, the images which this chapter discusses as ideas--like the garden, the prison, the rebel, the road, the void, the house, and the city-- are pertinent to a concrete world, not on the level of fiction, but on the level of history, the history of the present time. It is not a pleasant history, and one might say that Mr. Biswas made the best he could of a bad situation. The alien white fortress to which he went as a youth full of expectation was India in Trinidad; Mrs. Tulsi

refers to the yard of Hanuman House at one point as Ceylon. Unlike the family of his father Raghu, or of his uncle Ajodha, the Tulsi family was still connected to India:

> The Tulsis had some reputation among the Hindus as a pious, conservative, landowning family. Other communities, who knew nothing of the Tulsis, had heard of Pundit Tulsi, the founder of the family. . . .His family still flourished in India--letters arrived regularly--and it was known that he had been of higher standing than most of the Indians who had come to Trinidad, nearly all of whom, like Raghu, like Ajodha, had lost touch with their families and wouldn't have known in what province to find them. (pp.73-74)

The connection was largely through Mrs. Tulsi, and through the people of her own age and older. Naipaul speaks frequently of the old men sitting in the Arcades of Hanuman House in the evenings, talking about India:

> They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness. And every evening they came to the arcade of the solid, friendly house, smoked, told stories, and continued to talk of India. (p.174)

One can easily see how the historical experience of those men as travellers from the continent of India to the island of Trinidad, the experience that Trinidad was a place where they had come for a short time, was the fictional experience of Mr. Biswas, the "wanderer with no place he could call his own" (p.37): the experience that he was a visitor in every place, and that each habitation was only a temporary arrangement, and also how it was, by extension, the experience of Naipaul: that Trinidad is a "nowhere place." Their affection

for the past is the human desire, (for those who have a past) for the continuity of one's self in time. Mr. Biswas of course did not have a past, or at least, did not have a past that he would more gladly remember than forget. Their fear of the unknown was the experience of The Wanderer, the fear of Mr. Biswas invading the unknown. And their familiar temporariness was the emptiness and the insecurity that Mr. Biswas wanted to banish by building a house. Where no house is built no city is built, no civilization is built, and a land with its people continues in the void of "no history."

The chapter which most explicitly suggests history, "The Shorthills Adventure," describes the Tulsi family matter-of-factly in their historical role:

> Despite the solidity of their establishment the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India. Only the death of Pundit Tulsi had prevented them from going back to India; and ever since they had talked, though less often than the old men who gathered in the arcade every evening, of moving on, to India, Demerara, Surinam. (p.352)

The Shorthills estate is also described--the Trinidad that the English left to the people of Trinidad. In prospect it was a full and ordered garden world:

> Yet the talk was less of Seth than of the new estate. Shama heard its glories listed again and again. In the grounds of the estate house there was a cricket field and a swimming pool; the drive was lined with orange trees and gri-gri palms with slender white trunks, red berries and dark green leaves. The land itself was a wonder. . . . All day the immortelle trees dropped their red and yellow bird-shaped flowers. . . .Cocoa trees grew in the shade of the immortelles, coffee in the shade of the cocoa. . . . There was talk of rearing sheep, and an idyllic project

> of giving one sheep to every child as his very own, the foundation, it was made to appear, of fabulous wealth. (pp.353-54)

When Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Biswas actually arrived there, they strolled along the road towards the white steps of the estate house; they observed a sign that caused Mr. Biswas a moment's reflection:

> An old signpost stood slightly askew in the gully. The letters were bleached and faint: Christopher Columbus Road. It was fitting. The land, though fruitful from a former cultivation, felt new.
>
> 'This used to be the old road,' Mrs. Tulsi said.
>
> And Mr. Biswas found it easy to imagine the other race of Indians moving about this road before the world grew dark for them. (p.359)

The road which history follows is often short and dark. That the weak should be in the shadow of the strong is not only a law of nature, but also the law of an incipient civilization. A person trusts that the darkness will pass and that light will appear.

The estate, in fact, was not perfect: the pitch was red and broken, the pool empty and cracked, with plants pushing up through the concrete, the mule old and dispirited, the drive weed-ridden and the garden abondoned:

> On either side of the house there was an abandoned garden, flowerless, except for some stray marigolds; but through the bush it was possible to see the pattern of the beds, edged with concrete and stunted shrubs called 'green tea' and 'red tea'. At the end of one garden a Julie mango tree stood on a concrete-walled circular bed more than three feet high. (p.360)

However, dilapidated as everything was, life was strong, and Mr. Biswas could envision everything mended.

But instead of mending what was broken, the family, in-

cluding Mr. Biswas, destroyed what was there:

> Mr. Biswas too, was waiting for improvements. But he did not greatly care about them. For him, Shorthills was an adventure, an interlude. His job made him independent of the Tulsis; and Shorthills was an insurance against the sack. It also provided an opportunity to save, an opportunity to plunder.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Then the tree-cutting began. In less than a morning the reader of W. C. Tuttle cut down the gri-gri palms along the drive. He came back sweating to the house. . . . Mrs. Tulsi ate the hearts of the trees, which had been recommended to her by one of her Arwacas friends. . . . Govind, asserting himself, then cut down the orange trees: they were blighted, encouraged snakes, and could conceal thieves.
>
> . . . . .
>
> In place of the orange trees and the palm trees seedlings were planted along the drive and hedged around with bamboo stakes. The cows broke down the cricket field fence. The sheep, escaping, broke down the bamboo stakes and stripped the seedlings clean. The silt rose in the canal at the side of the drive. Weeds grew from the cracks in the concrete culvert and up the wide, shallow steps. (pp.363-366)

The men destroyed the garden to deter snakes and thieves; but they themselves were the thieves and it was they who were the snakes, the destroyers of the garden. The sheep, too, the intended foundation of wealth, destroyed the green inheritance. The greed of the Tulsi family, like the greed of Dhari, left a garden destroyed: "The integrity of living bush was replaced by a brown chaos of collapsed and dying trees." (p.384) Their greed left Mr. Biswas and his children in darkness. The folly of Mr. Biswas, a partner in their folly, burned down the house that was to be their home, and left them at midnight beneath a cloud of smoke, a blackness from which, if they were to live, they had to escape by following

the dark road:

> They held hands and worked their way down the hill, into the gully, up the gully and into the road. Trees vaulted the blackness. The blackness was like a weight. . . . They didn't look up, not willing to be reminded that darkness lay above them and behind them as well as in front of them. They fixed their eyes on the road and kicked the loose gravel for the noise. It was chilly. (p.388)

The easiest escape was to the land of those who had bequeathed Trinidad, to a land beyond the sea: to England where Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's son, and later where Anand, Mr. Biswas's son, attended university. Education meant a new age: it meant the dissolution of the Hanuman House which was India:

> The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection. (p.393)

The dissolution of the fortress required that new selves, new houses, be made, that the Tulsis give way to the Ajodhas. However, there was no love lost between the two houses, as Mr. Biswas kept in mind one evening when he was visiting his Aunt Tara:

> She asked about the Tulsis and he replied as briefly as he could. He knew that, though the two houses had little to do with one another, an antagonism existed between them. The Tulsis, who did <u>puja</u> every day and celebrated every Hindu festival, regarded Ajodha as a man who pursued wealth and comfort and modernity and had alienated himself from the faith. Ajodha and Tara simply thought the Tulsis squalid. . . .despite his concern for his children he found it hard not to agree with her view, particularly when he was in her clean, uncrowded, comfortable house, waiting for a meal he knew would be good. (p.219)

The family link between the house of Ajodha and the Tulsi house was Mr. Biswas, as he implied by comparing himself with Bhandat's son: "He too. . . lived a divided life." (p.227) But it was a division that left him impotent: divided to the bone between a dark past and a bright future, the continent of India and the island of Trinidad, yesterday and tomorrow, the void and the vision of the house.

The other link was Tara, Bipti's sister, whose strength, her sympathy, was Mr. Biswas's weakness. Lack of sympathy makes all things alien; sympathy, the debt to others, re-creates the garden. It is the cord that binds together, that destroys the years of darkness, and that makes the self whole. After his mother's death, Mr. Biswas showed her the love that he had never shown while she lived. The doctor who performed the autopsy had gone about his business in anger and with what Mr. Biswas felt was disrespect; Mr. Biswas was hurt:

> The wound was still there, too deep for anger or thoughts of retribution. What had happened was locked away in time. But it was an error, not a part of the truth. He wished this stated; and he wanted to do something that would be a defiance of what had happened. The body, lying in earth, was unhallowed, and he owed it honour: the mother who had remained unknown and whom he had never loved. Waking in the night, he felt exposed and vulnerable. He longed for hands to cover him all over, and he could only fall asleep again with his hands over his navel, unable to bear the feel of any alien object, however slight, on that part of his body.
>
> To do honour he had no gifts. He had no words to say what he wanted to say. . . . But awake one night, looking at the sky through the window, he got out of bed, worked his way to the light switch, turned it on, got paper and pencil and began to write. He addressed his mother. . . .

> The poem written, his self-consciousness violated, he was whole again. (pp.436-37).

Sympathy is made possible by the remembrance of a happy past. By remembering his mother Mr. Biswas was able to recreate a garden world:

> When, after Bipti's death, Mr. Biswas wished to be reminded of her, he thought less of his childhood and the back trace than of this fortnight at Shorthills. He thought of one moment in particular. The ground in front of the house had been only partly cleared, and one afternoon, when he had pushed his bicycle up the earth steps to the top of the hill, he saw that part of the ground, which he had left that morning cumbered and unbroken, had been cleared and levelled and forked. The black earth was soft and stoneless; the spade had cut cleanly into it, leaving damp walls as smooth as mason's work. Here and there the prongs of the fork had left shallow parallel indentations on the upturned earth. In the setting sun, the sad dusk, with Bipti working in a garden that looked, for a moment, like a garden he had known a dark time ages ago, the intervening years fell away. Thereafter the marks of a fork in earth made him think of that moment at the top of the hill, and of Bipti. (p.385)

The simile, which brings together the cleanly shaved garden earth and the smooth walls of a building, points to the importance of a house for Mr. Biswas and of A House for Mr. Biswas. Not only for the father, but for his children also, the house provided continuity in time. The book, as history, gives West Indians a past, which, as people brought to the islands as indentured servants, they did not have, or would more gladly forget: the book tells of their servitude. The book, as fiction, as one of the arts of civilized society, begins to create a society where none existed. Mr. Biswas paid dearly for his house, but not in vain:

> Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim

> Street. From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent. The mind, while it is sound, is merciful. And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, the Tulsi house in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred; events would be telescoped, many forgotten. Occasionally a nerve of memory would be touched . . . and a fragment of forgotten experience would be dislodged, isolated, puzzling. . . . So later, and very slowly, in securer times of different stresses, when the memories had lost the power to hurt, with pain or joy, they would fall into place and give back the past. (pp.523-524)

The role of Mr. Biswas, the role of Naipaul, is to bind together--not just people, but times, the recorded times of history. The author says that Mr. Biswas, working for the Sentinel as investigator of Deserving Destitutes, visiting the mutilated, the defeated, the futile and the insane, had to accept "a temporary shaming eminence"(pp.338-39):

> Day after day he came upon people so broken, so listless, it would have required the devotion of a lifetime to restore them. But he could only lift his trouser turn-ups, pick his way through mud and slime, investigate, write, move on. (p.398)

Later in his life Mr. Biswas asked Owad, just returned from England, what relationship his job as Welfare Officer bore to his society, and Owad replied:

> 'You, Mohun Biswas. Welfare Officer. After they have broken people's lives, deprived them of opportunity, sending you around like a scavenger to pick the pieces up . . . (p.489)

Mr. Biswas picks up the pieces of broken lives, attempting to remake them. The reader seldom hears the name Mohun, but according to the pundit who with the help of Bissoondaye gave the name, it was not dishonourable:

> The pundit was surprised and genuinely pleased. 'But

> that is excellent. Excellent. Mohun. I couldn't have chosen better myself. For Mohun, as you know, means the beloved, and was the name given by the milkmaids to Lord Krishna. (p.17)

And, in his dying he was favoured. The spectacle of his cremation drew together various races:

> The cremation, one of the few permitted by the Health Department, was conducted on the banks of a muddy stream and attracted spectators of various races. (p.531).

CHAPTER V

MR STONE AND THE KNIGHTS COMPANION

The themes of human growth and social progress that Naipaul develops darkly in the life of Mr. Biswas are demonstrated more brightly in the life of the faceless Mr. Stone. The setting is the city, no longer Port of Spain but London, and Mr. Stone's sense of place is, at the beginning of the novel, a sense of involvement in the activity of the city; at the end of the novel his sense of place is an awareness that the only meaningful involvement is with people. His vision of the city is like Mr. Biswas's impression of Hanuman House after its abandonment: the city is only a skeleton, and only the flesh is of importance to man. The present chapter describes the manner in which Mr. Stone acquired a new sense of place: the variation in his life that produced the vision.

The story of Mr. Stone is the story of someone who tried to live in a void, involved with the city around him in a mechanical and superficial way. He lived like those who, as part of the city, wait for the train in the morning, fill in an empty day at the office, and wait for the train at four. From the age of seventeen (when his mother died) to sixty-two his daily life ran along smoothly, and in his mind he hoarded away each uninterrupted year as a year safely got through. Then there occurred an interruption: he married Mrs. Springer in March, and the two of them enjoyed their honeymoon in Cornwall, where Mr. Stone, cut off from the

artificial setting of the city and exposed to the harshness of nature, experienced "the white void." That experience, along with his fear of imminent retirement, sparked a plan, (which he wrote out with great care), to activate all the retired men of his company, Excal, in a group called the Knights Companion. The members would visit and comfort one another: "a society," as Whymper, his assistant in Welfare called it, "for the protection of the impotent male."[1] It was approved, and was successful; Mr. Stone was honoured at a Christmas dinner for the Knights. However, no amount of success for the Companion approached the pristine passion of the idea: "it was but a shadow of that shadow." Disappointed, he wished for a return to his former calm.

In one of the grotesque fancies that arose from the loneliness and emptiness of Richard Stone's house he was able to fly above the heads of amazed onlookers; he pictured himself as being calm in the midst of turmoil. He saw as well that most of his past had been calm: that he had been with Excal for thirty years, that he had lived in his house for twenty-four, that his salary had risen steadily, that he had been the friend of Tony Tomlinson for forty-four years, that the aged Miss Millington had been his housekeeper for twenty-eight years, and "though it was an occasion of grief--the sharpest he had known-- . . .that it was forty-five years since his mother had died."

[1] V. S. Naipaul, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, (London: Deutsch, 1963), p. 84.

> His life, since his recovery from that disturbance, he saw as a period of protracted calm which . . . he had never ceased to savour in his special way. Life was something to be moved through. Experiences were not to be enjoyed at the actual moment; pleasure in them came only when they had been, as it were, docketed and put away in the file of the past . . . it always was a marvel to him that the years had gone on, had rolled by so smoothly, that in spite of setbacks and alarms his life had arranged itself with a neatness and order of which the boy of seventeen had never dreamed. (pp.18-19)

And, importantly, for it is indicative of Mr. Stone's urbanity and superficiality, the writer says, "Cherishing the past in this way, he cherished his appearance. . . . And he cultivated his habits." (p. 19)

Nevertheless there were moments when "it seemed that all the ordered world was threatened," (p.22) like meeting Mrs. Springer, or the thought that Miss Millington must one day die, or the destruction of the neighbouring black cat by its owners, or the "white void." Such moments, he saw, had been increasing of late: "moments he had thought buried, for they formed no part of his life, but which now, through all the mechanical actions and unseen sights of the familiar journey home, rose revivified, one after the other, to be examined, discarded, taken up again." (p.25) Once in his study, a piece of his orderly life just having been shattered by his wife Margaret, he recalled himself as a boy of seventeen on his way home from school, ignorant of the grief awaiting him:

> He beheld a boy of seventeen walking back alone from school on a winter's day, past the shops of the High Street. The boy was going home, unaware of what awaited him there. Whether the picture was true or composite he

> no longer knew; whether there was a reason for the remembering this stretch of the way home he couldn't say. But it was what he saw when he wished to think of his childhood in a tender way. This boy didn't know that his life would unroll without disturbance, the years flow evenly; and for him Mr. Stone felt an ache of pity. (p.55)

In order to think of his childhood "in a tender way" Mr. Stone had to visualize the boy in a state of ignorant bliss. He saw that condition as pitiable, now that forty-five years had rolled by and he had proven that life is bliss.

Holidays too disrupted his order, and he never enjoyed them--Christmas for example:

> It was a time of year when routine was everywhere broken, the streets impossible, when for a whole week life was dislocated, Christmas week, with little work done, for the lonely and the unhappy tedious days to be lived through until the holidays were over and routine returned. (p.23)

Late in March, shortly after marrying Margaret Springer, he took his holiday, which was also their honeymoon. They went to Cornwall and put up at the Queen's Hotel in Penzance, experience having proven that Ireland and Paris were a "tedious torment." The holiday was even more dislocating than previous holidays. They walked one Sunday to Chysauster to view abandoned Celtic dwellings; "the hovels", Mr. Stone said, "were indefinably depressing":

> Afterwards, like giants entering the houses of men, they examined the cluster of solid stone hovels. How thick the walls, how clumsy, how little space they enclosed, as though built for people sheltering from more than the elements! Mr. Stone thought of the Monster with her watering can, the nest-building of the Male: this was not their setting. Then he remembered his own Simpson's coat. He saw himself, a cartoon figure, with knotted club and leopard skin: he could not hold the picture for long. . . . He wanted to get away. (p.62)

He, like his back-yard neighbours, whom he had mentally christened the Male and the Monster, and like the Celtic dwellers, was sheltering from more than the elements. He with his coat, they with their house and garden and stone hovel, needed "the protection of their artificial setting." (p.48) The harsh Celtic setting was not theirs, but they continued to improve upon their hovels. Their "softness and inaptitude" was not something which Mr. Stone wanted to consider.

The knowledge of their weakness was forced upon Mr. Stone on the day before he and Margaret left Cornwall. They had gone for a walk.

> Their way led along cliffs which, rimmed with deep white footpaths, fell to the sea in partial ruin, on a principle of destruction that was easy to comprehend but was on such a scale that the mind could not truly grasp it. (p.65)

Tired out, they saw a neat sign promising a tea shop. There Mr. Stone saw the kind of "man" that he was shortly to become, a man just retired after forty years with the same firm:

> The man was a wizened creature with narrow, sloping shoulders loose within a stiff new tweed jacket, his thin hair, the flex of his hearing-aid and the steel rims of his spectacles contributing to a general impression of perilous attenuation, as did the hand-rolled cigarette which, thin and wrinkled like the neck of the smoker, lay dead and forgotten between thin lips. He showed no interest in the arrival of Margaret and Mr. Stone, and continued to stare at the checked tablecloth, sitting between the two women . . . who looked like his keepers. (p.66)

Mr. Stone could not keep his eyes off the man, who was attacking the light meal before him with animal-like energy without uttering a word. Compulsively, fearing some similarity be-

tween that man and himself, he altered his own pace: "In spite of himself he stared with horror and fascination, and found that, as the eater's actions had grown more frenzied, his own had grown exaggeratedly slow." (p.67)

His silence and that of the other table were banished when another couple arrived, a small girl and a tall fair man in mountaineering clothes, carrying rucksack and ropes, a man different from the wizened creature or from himself:

> Sitting at the table, his rough-trousered knees reaching to the tablecloth, dwarfing the table and the flower vase, the mountaineer extended a greeting, accompanied by a bow, to the room. . . .
>
> The eater and his keepers nodded. Mr. Stone's eyebrows dropped, like one surprised and affronted. . . .
>
> But the man filled the room. His speech created a conversational momentum on its own; the silence of others did not matter. He said that he was Dutch; that in his country there were no mountains; that Cornwall was indescribably picturesque. All of this in English which, because he was Dutch, was perfect; and the linguistic performance was made more impressive by his occasional sentences in Dutch to his mute scarfed companion.
>
> He required no replies, but the eater and his keepers were steadily drawn into his talk. (p.68)

Like Mr. Stone he was on a fortnight's holiday, but the ragged, cliff-broken landscape that seemed so perilous to Mr. Stone to him was indescribably picturesque, and the room which Mr. Stone and the eater together could not enliven, the mountaineer was able to fill. The mountaineer and the mouse (as Mr. Stone thought of them afterwards) were different people and would accommodate themselves differently, the one to the earth, and the other to his hovel. Mr. Stone, more nearly the mouse, would return to his "imprisonment at home." (p.134)

The other shocking event of the holiday occurred immediately after the inspection of the stone hovels. Mr. Stone and Margaret noticed that they were lost. They saw a fire advancing silently towards them "with much clean white smoke," (p.63) on the windward side of a stone wall. They saw a man considering the fire. Mr. Stone called to the man for directions, "and found himself shouting, as though his words would otherwise be overcome by the smoke of the silent fire." (p.63) The man went along a white path into the smoke, and the couple followed.

> They heard the low, contented crackle of the fire. Smoke enveloped them. They were robbed of earth and reality. He was robbed of judgement, of the will to act.
>
> Then Margaret's cry . . . recalled him to questioning and fear, and they ran back to the wall, out of the smoke, into the clear open air, to rocks and earth and sky.
>
> Behind the wall they stood, watching the fire. It came right up to the wall and before their eyes burnt itself out. The smoke was dissipated in the air. And it was as if there had been no fire, and all that had happened a hallucination.
>
> Reality was completed by the arrival of a Morris Minor.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Mr. Stone never doubted that the incident could be rationally and simply explained. But that hallucinatory moment, when earth and life and senses had been suspended, remained with him. It was like an experience of nothingness, an experience of death. (p.64)

The experience of "the white void" as he afterwards thought of it, implanted an idea that he worked on as soon as he arrived home. Filled with fear and passion he went to the study, and "aware only of the baize-covered desk (Margaret's) as a pool of light in the darkness" he outlined a plan for the protection of the old.

The success of his plan altered the course of his life: he received a salary increase of five hundred pounds a year, he saw improvements in the visible parts of his house, and he was made famous, in a small circle, for his Knights Companion. He saw a change in himself. He saw himself as he saw the tree in his back yard. The tree as it is first mentioned, spoke of his insulation from the changing world:

> There was a tree in the school grounds at the back of his house by which he noted the passing of time, the waxing and waning of the seasons, a tree which daily when shaving he studied, until he had known its every branch. The contemplation of this living object re-assured him of the solidity of things. He had grown to regard it as part of his own life, a marker of his past, for it moved through time with him. The new leaves of spring, the hard green of summer, the naked black branches of winter, none of these things spoke of the running out of his life. They were only a reminder of the even flowing of time, of his mounting experience, his lengthening past. (p.20)

Mr. Stone and Mrs. Springer were married in the second week of March, "when on the tree in the school grounds the buds had swollen and in sunshine were like points of white." (p.34) Thereafter the tree was no longer a comfort to him, but a reproach, for he had slipped from the permanent pattern which the tree preserved:

> Communing with his tree, he could not help contrasting its serenity with his disturbance. It would shed its leaves in time; but this would lead to a renewal which would bring greater strength. Responsibility had come too late to him. He had broken the pattern of his life, and this break could at best be only healed. It would not lead to renewal. (p.45)

However, with the changes brought about in his life by the realization of his plan, Mr. Stone was again at one with the

tree, in its April season:

> Around him the world was awakening to green and sun. The tree in the school grounds at the back became flecked, then brushed, with green. And this was no mere measuring of time. He was at one with the tree, for with it he developed from day to day, and every day there were new and inspiring things to do. (p.79)

By the following spring though, his brilliance had receded and had been replaced by a sense of loss. Beyond spring lay summer and retirement. He shared his loneliness with the neighbour's black cat, which had in earlier days invaded his house and which he had intended to kill:

> His communion with the cat, stretching every morning in the warming sunshine, made him more attentive to the marks of the approaching spring. It extended his observations from the tree in the school grounds to every tree and shrub he saw on the way to work. . . . He noticed the approaching spring in the behaviour of people on the streets and in the train. . . .
>
> He observed. But participation was denied him. It was like his 'success,' from which at its height he had felt cut off and which reminded him only of his emptiness and the darkness to come. (pp.133-34)

Though he realized that participation was impossible, he could not restrain the wish. One evening, bedding out his petunias in the back garden with Miss Millington and Margaret in "the gathering darkness," and thinking of the tree, he said, "Doesn't it make you think, though? . . . I mean, don't you think it's just the same with us? That we too will have our spring?" (p.146) No one replied, but later he heard Margaret say, "Well, I think it's a lotta rubbish." (p.147)

The wound went deep, and threw him back into the void of his former life, completely disillusioned not only with

his present emptiness, but also with his former creativity:

> Nothing that came out of the heart, nothing that was pure ought to be exposed.
>
> . . . . .
>
> And now he saw that in that project of the Knights Companion which had contributed so much to his restlessness, the only pure moments, the only true moments were those he had spent in the study, writing out of a feeling whose depth he realized only as he wrote. What he had written was a faint and artificial rendering of that emotion, and the scheme as the Unit had practised it was but a shadow of that shadow. All passion had disappeared. . . . All that he had done, and even the anguish he was feeling now, was a betrayal of that good emotion. All action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth. And in the process of this betrayal his world had come tumbling about him. There remained to him nothing to which he could anchor himself. (p.149)

The implication of Mr. Stone's statement is that the heart, in purity of emotion, is truth, and that the heart is a world, in the empty lives of men who are mice and of women who are monsters, that is unmentionable and untouchable. Creation he says is a betrayal of that truth; the word is ambiguous, for creation may be either "divulging" truth or "being disloyal" to truth. For Mr. Stone the creation of the Knights Companion was a divulging of what he felt was truth. The latter meaning however is obviously intended: the physical world is at best only an extended shadow of an idea, and that at best only a shadow of a pure emotion--a statement, which, if it is the sentiment of Naipaul, is sensitively skeptical of the worth of the physical world, the world that had come tumbling about Mr. Stone. Though the collapse frightened him, the loss may have been his gain.

The sentiment is made more explicit in Mr. Stone's

vision, a vision of the city. The vision occurred twice. The first time it "assailed" him at his first dinner party shortly after his marriage:

> He was assailed by a vision of the city stripped of stone and concrete and timber and metal, stripped of all buildings, with people suspended next to and above and below one another, going through all the motions of human existence. And he had a realization, too upsetting to be more than momentarily examined, that all that was solid and immutable and enduring about the world, all to which man linked himself (the Monster watering her spring flowers, the Male expanding his nest), flattered only to deceive. For all that was not flesh was irrelevent to man, and all that was important was man's own flesh, his weakness and corruptibility. (p.53)

All that man links himself to--in the case of Mr. Stone his orderly past, his neat appearance, his declining house, his unflinching habits, and the seasonal rebirth of the tree--all except flesh, flatters men with a feeling of permanence. The physical world gives them the lie.

The vision occurred again long after the success of the Companion, after his disillusionment; it did not assail him this time, it distilled from his past experience. Part of London had died for the day in a city-wide transport strike. Mr. Stone decided to walk home: the variation brought with it the vision:

> He had a vision of the city such as he had had once before. . . . The order of the universe, to which he had sought to ally himself, was not his order. So much he had seen before. But now he saw, too, that it was not by creation that man demonstrated his power and defied this hostile order, but by destruction. By damming the river, by destroying the mountain, by so scarring the face of the earth that Nature's attempt to reassert herself became a mockery. (pp.158-59)

Mr. Stone's creation had not given him a final release from the order of the universe. In destruction though lay man's power: the expunction of Nature and the building of cities. The terms "creation" and "destruction" are left undefined, but it appears that the vision consists of conflicting ideas: the only important flesh, and the only possible destruction of Nature: the man and the city.

Destruction, one would guess, is the riddance of the old to make way for the new; that process, which is the road of progress, often is not a process which a person could relish. In his own life Mr. Stone could not bear to break up his past, but he did, and while he may have lost his bliss he may have found his humanity. The doddering Miss Millington, who had been with Mr. Stone for longer than he had been in his house, one day dropped a bread knife accidentally from the upstairs, barely missing Margaret. Margaret decided that Miss Millington would have to go; while she remained Margaret spoke to her "as one might do when requiring an animal to perform its tricks." (p.137) One afternoon when Margaret was out, Mr. Stone heard Miss Millington talking to another person on the phone, and his heart was warmed:

> To whom was she speaking? Who, in all the huge city, was the person to whom Miss Millington could turn for comfort, to whom was she speaking with such security, such an assurance of sympathetic reception? Of her life outside the house . . . he knew very little. And now this saddened him. But more than this was the warmth that started in him for the creature who could scarcely disguise her hurt by her show of dignity, which both he and Margaret had assumed to be dead. (p.138)

All that is not flesh is of no importance to man, but beneath the floors and behind the partitions of the armoured city, the cells of human life are easily buried, and feebly, unwillingly, die.

We should abandon what we cherish for the truth. So the ancient saying goes. The truth for Mr. Stone was the pure emotion of the heart; to move in that direction he had to abandon or to destroy the past that he cherished, so many little things that he linked himself to. "Cherish" is far from being a feeble word. Mr. Stone saw himself, not as the Destroyer, but as the Cherisher, the Preserver, with "a desire to rescue and protect and cause to continue." (p.141) For a while, after his realization that man demonstrated his power by destruction, he saw himself as the destroyer, the instrument of progress. It was the day of the transport strike.

> As he walked up the street to his home with long, hard strides, he felt himself grow taller. He walked as the destroyer, as the man who carried the possibility of the earth's destruction within him. Taller and taller he grew, firmer and firmer he walked, past the petty gardens of petty houses where people sought to accommodate themselves to life, past the blank, perceptive faces of cats, past the 'To Let' and 'For Sale' signs, and all the transient handiwork of Eddie and Charley. (p.159)

But the petty gardens and petty houses spoke the truth of human frailty and corruptibility. Their destruction could not be a part of Mr. Stone's truth. He arrived home to an empty house. Letting himself into the dark hall he spied a pair of green eyes, the green eyes of a black cat, the offspring of the cat he had once intended to destroy. His

immediate sensation was fear. But he was no destroyer: "Fear blended into guilt, guilt into love." (p.159) Thus Mr. Stone moved from the psychological void of empty days to the physical "white void" and to the possibility of continuous renewal in love.

CHAPTER VI

THE MIMIC MEN

"A sense of place" in Naipaul's latest novel, The Mimic Men[1] is the New World and the Third World sense of placelessness and irrelevance in the patterns of development of affluent countries: New World because the society of the West Indian islands remains basically primitive and therefore at the beginning of its development, and Third World because the society remains undeveloped and poor. The society is in the frustrating position of living the primitive past in the progressive present. Precluded by time from natural evolution the society must imitate the developed countries in order to create an impression of substantiality. However, as the author points out, the impression attempted does not alter the fact of the internal insufficiency: the society is composed of mimic men.

Thus, the sense of place is essentially geographical, a sense of living on an island. The writer speaks of his "geographical sense, that feeling of having been flung off the world, for all the landscapes and memories that were locked in the heads of those we met." (p.81) The sense of place is a feeling of incompleteness, a fear of being no place, and a longing to reunite with "the absent world." The metaphor which the writer uses to express his sense of place is that of shipwreck, though he uses as well that of the captive; he has chosen the former for its relevance to

[1] V. S. Naipaul, The Mimic Men (London: Deutsch, 1967).

a sea-bound setting--either Isabella or England--and for its applicability to the fortunes of both the individual and the "ship of state."

The present chapter discusses the metaphor first with reference to Naipaul--the fact of a West Indian writer living not in his native island, but in self-imposed exile in London. The apparent reason, though it is not made explicit in the novel, is that while in the heart of the city of Isabella's capital he might view a clump of old fruit trees, in the centre of London he might view the city of olden times in the window of a print shop. He has allied himself with progress and the arts of society: not with the clump of fruit trees, but with the picture of them. London provides the equipment with which a writer works, and it provides the necessary distance. The main part of the chapter discusses the metaphor with reference to the narrator's experience of London in his student days, and to his experience of Isabella in his childhood. His total experience seems to evolve from a "prison of the spirit"--the psychology of the slave, the colonial, the mimic man.

An East Indian from the island of Isabella, age forty, living in a modest hotel on the outskirts of London laid down his pen after fourteen months of creative writing. He had written a novel about himself. He reflected upon the difficulty that he experienced when he began to write, for at that time he felt overwhelmed not only by the formlessness of his experiences and by their irrelevance to the urban setting,

but also by the setting itself, his "physical situation, in this city, this room, with this view, that lustreless light." (p.292) A memory struggled to the surface and onto the page: the memory of his first snow and the memory of "the city of the magical light." It was suitable.

> Fourteen months have passed since, in a room made over-dry by the electric fire, I re-created that climb up the dark stairs to Mr. Shylock's attic to look through a snowfall at the whitening roofs of Kensington. By this re-creation the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me. And this became my aim: from the central fact of this setting, my presence in this city which I have known as student, politician and now as refugee-immigrant, to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to. (p.292)

The narrative begins not with the teller's childhood but <u>in mediis rebus</u>, with his life as a student in London, and then concludes with his political life and his exile in London. The London setting he says is the central fact in his creative endeavour; it is "the great city, centre of the world," (p.22) but it is a place which in terms of duration of stay has not accommodated him for nearly as long as his native island. However, the fact remains that he is living in London and he chooses to begin his <u>epos</u> with the memory of his first sojourn in the city, and in particular with the memory of the attic room where he first lived and the memory of his first snow. The re-creation of that event made it historical, and manageable within his self-defined aim of imposing order upon a generally formless life.

The writing of history achieves the effect of making

events appear orderly, as fitting into some pattern, for a particular event can often be seen as the fulfilment of a certain generally prevalent mood. The narrator recalls, for example, a deed performed by his father on the island of Isabella, the killing of a horse: an assertion of power in the long-standing struggle between master and slave in the West Indies, an individual act in the move towards the political independence of the islands. The question which the narrator asks with regard especially to his own career, that is, whether the mood, or the action between moods, is real, is answered with regard to his father:

> In the history books, as I say, my father's movement is now made to appear just another part of a recognizable pattern of events in one region of the world. The mood is seen to have created both the leader and the special event associated with him. That event . . . was the killing of Tamango. That was the movement's most famous deed, as central to it as the race-course suicide was to the suffragette movement in England. They are both events which, becoming history, lose their horror and obscenity and appear the natural, almost logical, expression of a mood; they are events which now seem oddly <u>expected</u> and dramatically right. . . .
>
> So the deed becomes a crystallization of an existing mood. But my memory of those days tells me that the deed in such a situation is necessary; that without it a mood is useless and burns itself out. After this deed our island changed, though change was not to show for fifteen years. (pp.168-69)

The sacrificial killing of the race-horse, Tamango, sickened the boy-narrator with its bloody and barbaric destructiveness, but he later concluded that the act of destruction was as necessary as the mood of individual and social hurt that had led up to the deed. Only action produces necessary change,

albeit destructive action, and history sanctions its horror. That that particular change was necessary is made amply clear:

> But I feel we might claim credit for our courage. The nature of the political life of our island must be understood. We were a colony, a benevolently administered dependency. So long as our dependence remained unquestioned our politics were a joke. (p.227)

The evolution of the polis, to which all history tends, would have remained a joke. Independence, both individual and territorial, was indispensable.

The importance of the experience in the attic of Shylock's boarding house was not as action, but as mood. The narrator's mood as exiled politician-writer, and his mood as student, were similar; that enduring mood linked his several stays in the city:

> They talk of the pessimism of the young as they talk of atheism and revolt: it is something to be grown out of. Yet less than twenty years after Mr. Shylock's death, with this journey to London which I feel is final, sealing off such experience and activity as were due to me, my present mood leaps the years and all the intervening visits to this city--leaps the Humbers, the hotels, the helpful officials, the portrait of George III in Marlborough House, leaps my marriage and business activities--leaps all this to link with that first mood which came to me in Mr. Shylock's attic; so that all that came in between seems to have occurred in parenthesis. Which is the reality? The mood, or the action in between, resulting from that mood and leading up to it again? (pp.12-13)

That first mood can be described in several ways. Mr. Shylock's boarding house is symbolically the world, society, a person's range of experience in society, and the self. The attic was reserved for Mr. Shylock, the wealthy owner, so that he could occasionally spend a night there with a young girl.

In the basement lived Lieni, the Maltese housekeeper, with her illegitimate infant. "Between attic and basement, pleasure and its penalty, we boarders lived, narrowly." (p.7) The mood was created by a snowfall, the first that the West Indian student had experienced. He ran upwards towards the skylight, trying to observe the snow more closely, for the snow was the fulfilment of a long kept expectation:

> Snow. At last; my element. And these were flakes, the airiest crushed ice. More than crushed: shivered. But the greater enchantment was the light. I went out to the dark passage and stood before the window. Then I climbed up and up towards the skylight, stopping at each floor to look out at the street. . . . The attic door was ajar. I went in, and found myself in an empty room harsh with a dead-fluorescent light that seemed artificial. The room felt cold, exposed and abandoned. (pp.8-9)

He moved from the dark passage towards the snow and the light. The snow, however, was outside and he was within, and his experience was rather that of the artificial light of the empty room: a room made empty by the death of Mr. Shylock, made empty by wealth, made empty by a passion turned corrupt, made empty by its artificiality, made empty finally by the emptiness of the person within it. Looking out from the window he was moved by the snow, and also by the sight of more sordid things: the physical rubble of World War Two, and the human rubbish of an even greater destructor, the city itself:

> Standing before the window . . . so fragile the structure up here which lower down appeared so solid--I felt the dead light on my face. . . . The bombsite was wholly white; every shrub, every discarded bottle, box and tin was defined. I had seen. Yet what was I to do with so

> complete a beauty? And looking out from that room to the thin lines of brown smoke rising from ugly chimneypots, the plastered wall of the house next to the bombsite tremendously braced and buttressed, looking out from that empty room with the mattress on the floor, I felt all the magic of the city go away and had an intimation of the forlornness of the city and of the people who lived in it. (p.9)

More moving than the beauty, worse by comparison, were the ugliness of the city and the meanness of its dwellers. The further a person rises from the earth, however mean, the more fragile is the structure that supports him. The student wondered what he could do with beauty when faced with the solidity of the pervasive penalty.

In the drawer of a desk in the empty room he came upon the creased photograph of Shylock's mistress and began to re-create the picture-taking scene in his imagination:

> An innocent, unarresting face, untouched by the wonder which vice and the word 'mistress' ought to have given it. She stood in a back garden. The house behind her was like its neighbours. Her familiar home: I sought to enter it in imagination, to recreate the moment--an early summer Sunday afternoon perhaps, just before lunch--when the photograph was taken. Not by Mr. Shylock surely? Brother, father, sister? Here anyway it had ended, that moment, that impulse of affection, in an abandoned room among the chimneypots of what to the girl from the back garden must have seemed like a foreign country.
>
> I thought I should preserve the photograph. But I left it where I had found it. I thought: let it not happen to me. Death? But that comes to all. Well, then, let me leave more behind. Let my relics be honoured. Let me not be mocked. But even as I tried to put words to what I felt, I knew that my own journey, scarcely begun, had ended in the shipwreck which all my life I had sought to avoid. (pp.9-10)

The innocent young girl had stepped from the garden into a cold empty room. The shared impulse of a pure affection had

ended meanly: the garden, the paradise within, had been destroyed. Likewise, the innocent young student had come from his garden island to a foreign country, to a forlorn city, and to an empty room. He thought of his emptiness as shipwreck. The city had taught him, as he stated later, "the impossibility of escape:" (p.267) escape from the past, from corruption, and from knowledge.

The narrator himself discusses the metaphor of the word "shipwreck." He says that as a child he sensed that his father had been shipwrecked on the island, for, as the son read in the diary of a missionary to the island, his father had shown promise as a religious leader, but then had become only a poor school teacher:

> Always in this stage in the book I felt the need for a climax. But after this, in The Missionary Martyr of Isabella, there was no more of my father. . . . So that it had all led to nothing, as far as my father was concerned. When I read this book I used to get the feeling that my father was a man who had been cut off from his real country. . . . I used to get the feeling that my father had in some story book way been shipwrecked on the island and that over the years the hope of rescue had altogether faded. The book, of magic, was in his bookcase, but he never spoke of it. (pp.106-107)

Preparation which leads to nothing is shipwreck. Being cut off from one's native land, or from whatever place a person regards as his real country, is also shipwreck. The young boy in Isabella thought of England rather than the island as his real country, and therefore he felt that he too had been shipwrecked. Before he left the island however, he received an unexpected parting gift from his school friends: a book, with

a few words typed on a marker. The ocean journey in progress he reluctantly discovered his own error. His roots were really in the island soil, and only there was his foundation firm.

> It came to me on the ocean, this message ending in dots, telling me that all my notions of shipwreck were false, telling me this against my will, telling me I had created my past, that patterns of happiness or unhappiness had already been more or less decided.
>
> . . . . .
>
> And witness me then just four months later . . . holding a photograph of a girl and praying for a little bit of immortality, a prophylactic against the greater disorder, the greater shipwreck that had come to me already. (p.214)

The greater shipwreck was the foolish denial of the past, the willing self-delusion, the disorder within himself.

His years as a student in London, years of dissipation, were a second shipwreck, for in the too solid city he remained an island, an individual cell, and the light of the city which drew colour from the heart of objects drew only darkness from his heart. He sought pleasure, and he sought the physical city rather than its lost people.

> It is with cities as it is with sex. We seek the physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells. In the city as nowhere else we are reminded that we are individuals, units. Yet the idea of the city remains; it is the god of the city that we pursue, in vain.
>
> So quickly had London gone sour on me. The great city, centre of the world, in which, fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order. So much had been promised by the physical aspect. That marvel of light, soft, shadowless, always protective. They talk of the light of the tropics and Southern Spain. But there is no light like that of the temperate zone. It was a light which gave solidity to everything and drew colour out from the heart of objects. (p.22)

When he encountered other people he did not want to hear of the relationships that bound them to their lands, of their petty lives; he did not want their several darknesses to mingle. Cut off from both past and present relationships he began to develop a kind of neurosis:

> Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me. And this was what I felt I had encountered again in the great city: this feeling of being adrift, a cell of perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter. . . .
>
> In the great city, so three-dimensional, so rooted in its soil, drawing colour from such depths, only the city was real. Those of us who came to it lost some of our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures. And, in their growing dissociation between ourselves and the city in which we walked, scores of separate meetings, not linked even by ourselves, who became nothing more than perceivers: everyone reduced, reciprocally, to a succession of such meetings, so that first experience and then the personality divided bewilderingly into compartments. Each person concealed his own darkness. (pp.32-33)

In contrast with the city whose roots were deep in the past, the boy had no roots, no depth of history, no continuity of the self in time, and no depth of personality. He was spectral and two-dimensional. He ceased to feel himself as a whole person.

Thus, the attic mood was a feeling of shipwreck--of the city, of its people, of himself--for all of those for whom no escape was possible; and it was a mood that remained with him from his boyhood as the kelson of his experience and of his perception of the world. One wonders whether the source of the feeling was a shortcoming in the student, or a deficiency in the city: an aberration in the mode of per-

ception, or in the object perceived. Perhaps it was both. He knew that his unwillingness to share the lives of his fellow students was a mistake: "I am describing a failure, a deficiency." (p.30) At the time of his writing the book, however, he realized as well that the physical city was at fault; it imposed a mood that undermined him both then in London, and later in Isabella when he began to build his own little city:

> It is only now I see that all the activity of these years, existing as I have said in my own mind in parenthesis, represented a type of withdrawal, and was part of the injury inflicted on me by the too solid three dimensional city in which I could never feel myself as anything but spectral, disintegrating, pointless, fluid. The city made by man but passed out of his control: breakdown the negative reaction, activity the positive: opposite but equal aspects of an accommodation to a sense of place which, like memory, when grown acute, becomes a source of pain. (p.61)

As the city grows its polyp-like people are buried deeper beneath stone and metal, becoming more and more frail. The student, new to its ways, felt intimidated by its solidity, by its permanent extension in place and in time. In the process of accommodating himself to his sense of place in the city, that is, to his own placelessness, he underwent a breakdown: the loss of solidity, the falling away of flesh, the dissociation of self. Later, having returned to Isabella he reacted oppositely to the injury inflicted by the city: he was continuously active, buying up land, building Crippleville, and entering politics. Breakdown, the loss of self, demands compensatory activity. The feeling of impermanence makes a person want permanence; the feeling of placelessness

makes him want an acre of land or a small home; the desire for a place demands that he assert power and destroy. Thus the process continues: the city, the placelessness, breakdown, activity, destruction, the bigger city passing out of his control--beyond his needs, beyond his sanity--leaving him as vital and free as a puppet.

In the final chapter of part one of the novel, that part which describes the process of personality breakdown in London and of activity in Isabella, the narrator summarizes his attitude towards the city, and the relevance of the city to his writing:

> My first instinct was towards the writing of history. . . . It was an urge that surprised me in the midst of activity, during those moments of stillness and withdrawal which came to me in the days of power, when with compassion for others there also came an awareness of myself not as an individual but as a performer. . . . It was the shock of the first historian's vision, a religious moment if you will, humbling, a vision of a disorder that was beyond any one man to control yet which, I felt, if I could pin down, might bring me calm. It is the vision that is with me now. . . . It is a moment that dies, but a moment my ideal narrative would extend. It is a moment that comes to me fleetingly when I go out to the centre of this city, this dying mechanized city, and in the window of a print shop I see a picture of the city of other times: sheep, say, in Soho Square. Just for an instant I long to be transported into that scene, and at the same time I am overwhelmed by the absurdity of the wish and all the loss that it implies; and in the middle of a street so real, in the middle of an assessment of my situation that is so practical and realistic, I am like that child outside a hut at dusk, to whom the world is so big and unknown and time so limitless; and I have visions of Central Asian horsemen, among whom I am one, riding below a sky threatening snow to the very end of an empty world. (pp.97-98)

In the midst of political power the narrator realized his impotence to quell radically the disorder within his society.

He seemed no longer the manipulator of change, but the victim of change, caught up in a process without end. The growth of the city is a process, and, the narrator would reluctantly admit, it is also progress, but it is progress at the expense of the garden: the young girl in an empty room, an impulse of affection turned hungry, the link with the earth broken. The picture of the city of old, like the snow, was on the other side of a glass, visible but beyond reach: "I had seen. Yet what was I to do with so complete a beauty?" (p.9) His answer, as his vision suggests, was to live in the garden world of lands he had fashioned in his imagination, incorporating the process of breakdown and activity within himself on a mental plane, as the analysis and synthesis of the writing process.

In Isabella too, progress had taken place at the cost of the garden. As a schoolboy the narrator was made aware of an unnaturalness in the process. He used to think of Isabella as a virgin island awaiting discovery, but his schoolfriends pointed out to him the violation:

> I had been able at certain moments to think of Isabella as deserted and awaiting discovery. Browne showed me that its tropical appearance was contrived; there was history in the vegetation we considered most natural and characteristic. . . . In the heart of the city he showed me a clump of old fruit trees: the sight of a slave provision ground. From this point look above the roofs of the city, and imagine! Our landscape was as manufactured as that of any great French or English park. But we walked in a garden of hell, among trees, some still without popular names, whose seeds had sometimes been brought to our island in the intestines of slaves. (pp.175-76)

At the centre of that city, as at the centre of London, was a remembrancer of what was: old fruit trees, with the suggestion

of richness, abundance and growth. But it too was a garden destroyed, not only by changes in the landscape, but also by changes within the people, changes effected by the imposition of slavery. Their minds, like their bodies, took on the blackness of hell and the unremitting penalty.

On one occasion the boy-narrator visited Browne's house. He saw old man Browne sitting in his vest staring blankly out the window; he saw the old man ask him inside in respect for Isabella Imperial College; he saw the irritation on young Browne's face at the intrusion upon his private shaming world; he heard Browne refer to his father as a black jackass, and he saw all the images of their servitude and their freedom:

> I had been choked in that interior, and not only by its smallness. Joe Louis and Haile Selassie on the wall, the flannel vest, the family photograph, that black jackass: it was more than an interior I had entered. I felt I had had a glimpse of the prison of the spirit in which Browne lived, to which he awakened every day. In those rooms he collected his facts, out of which he could make no pattern. (pp.179-80)

The beginning of their society was unnatural and the continuation is unnatural. The narrator's statement about the industrial growth of the island is equally descriptive of the mental growth of the people of Isabella: "Industrialization, in territories like ours, seems to be a process of filling imported tubes and tins with various imported substances." (p.258) They are an imported people filling themselves with imported ideas--ideas that are irrelevant

to their setting or to their history. Their schooling is the epitome of the process--not the drawing out of local richness, but the putting upon, as of clothes. The boys with whom the narrator attended school, feeding upon visions of the world outside their island, began to despise their own land:

> We had converted our island into one big secret. Anything that touched on everyday life excited laughter when it was mentioned in a classroom. . . . The laughter denied our knowledge of these things to which after the hours of school we were to return. We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher. . . . School remained a private hemisphere. (pp.114-15)

The lands from which the masters came were regarded as the real world: a conglomerate image of the city of light and purity:

> There, in Liège in a traffic jam, on the snow slopes of the Laurentians, was the true, pure world. We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new. (p.175)

Denying the selves that were moulded by their land and by their suffering they had no selves, but were merely imitators of foreign people: men without depth and unable to stand alone, men going through the motions of living in their own corner of darkness.

The emergence of the boy's father as a religious nationalist meant that school ceased to be a private hemisphere: the real world which the boy had denied for

so long began to invade it. He too was expected to be a champion of "the people" against the old order: "In this new stage of the old war between master and slave it was left to me to have the fight with Deschampneufs, a fight I never looked for." (p.164) That commitment, unwilling as he was, was the only faithful expression of his experience of Isabella. One day, for example, he was being driven around the countryside with his wealthy grandfather, one of the island's political leaders. He was pained by the sight of poverty, but even more injured by his grandfather's almost fatalistic attitude to the condition of his countrymen:

> It was at these moments that I found the island most unbearable. Study the paradox of my fantasy. I looked about me minutely; I was pained. And I discovered that I was more pained than most. I was driving with Cecil's father one day along a country road. We were in the area of swamps. Sodden thatched huts, set in mud, lined the road. It was a rainy day, grey, the sky low and oppressive, the water in the ditches thick and black, people everywhere semi-naked, working barefooted in the mud which discoloured their bodies and faces and their working rags. I was more than saddened, more than angry. I felt endangered. My mood must have communicated itself to Cecil's father, for at that moment he said, 'My people.'
>
> I wonder why those calm words had such an effect on me. I hated the speaker. (p.118)

Thus, he lived divided between his desire to escape and his sense of debt to his people, to his father, and to himself.

It was not until he returned from London with his degree that he assumed his role. Having escaped to the place that he had tried to escape from he carried within him a feeling of a double failure and a double threat. The

London injury, the mood of shipwreck and annihilation, remained with him, but hidden behind a compensatory mood of celebration:

> We celebrated our unexpected freedom; we celebrated the island and our knowledge, already growing ambiguous, of the world beyond; we celebrated our cosmopolitanism, which had more meaning here than it ever had in the halls of the British Council. (p.67)

At the centre of his mood of celebration, of his social and economic activity, was placidity, but at the centre of that, as in London, was the mood of his own "imminent extinction," and he remained as insulated as he had been there:

> It was the mood of my placidity, the mood of my new life of activity. . . . This placidity, at the heart of celebration, I felt to be my strength; I visualized it as existing within a walled, impregnable field. I lived neutrally; activity was real, but it was all on the surface; I felt I would never allow myself to be damaged again. (p.68)

To avoid injury he became himself the destroyer. He built Kripalville, handling men, he says, as he handled money--by instinct--and devastating the living earth. One day his foreman showed him where a tree had been blasted. His reaction, one feels, was spuriously sentimental:

> He showed me the crater: a monstrous wound in the red earth. A giant tree, old perhaps when Columbus came: I would have liked to have seen it, I would have liked to have preserved it. I kept a piece of the wood on my desk, for the interest, as a reminder of violation, as a talisman. Success has its alarms! It was open to me to go on. . . . Between this and inactivity, between the alarm of a world without end and a world without point, there was no middle way. And I was glad, to tell the truth, when the time for withdrawal came. (pp.72-73)

The narrator's statement concerning the destructive activity made necessary by urban development is the most

optimistic view that Naipaul holds with respect to material progress; progress is the lesser of two evils. A man has the choice of a life of activity or a life of inactivity, of commitment or of non-attachment. He opts for things as they are and will be, or for things as they are and were. The notion of a continued past, of a garden paradise, is perhaps, rationally absurd. Milton's Adam, while he lived in the garden, wanted to find daily work, and, if one sets aside the value of an immediate perception of the divine, then one might say that his tasting knowledge was an escape from the eternity of a world that he could see as going nowhere, a world without point. Nor indeed after knowledge was there any relief from work, from activity, from the modern world without end. For the builder-narrator there was no middle way between the threat of the world without point and the world without end. He chose the latter.

He entered politics as he had entered building, in his celebrating mood, and he continued to manipulate people and to destroy, at the same time attempting to exonerate himself from any charge of over-hastiness:

> Courage: this is all I could claim now for our movement in its early stages. It takes courage to destroy any system, however shabby, which has permitted one to grow. We did not see this shabbiness as a type of order appropriate to our circumstances. That we were to see only when we had swept it away. And yet, equally, this shabbiness did not represent us; it could not have lasted. Did we then act? Or were we acted upon? (pp.227-28)

The evolution of the system was not natural. However, within

the larger pattern of postwar political change, the "pattern" of the greater chaos, it seemed understandable.

> They talk of the pace of postwar political change. It is not the pace of creation. Nor is it the pace of destruction, as some think. Both these things require time. The pace of events, as I see it, is no more than the pace of a chaos on which strict limits have been imposed. I speak of course of territories like Isabella, set adrift yet not altogether abandoned, where this controlled chaos approximates in the end . . . to a continuing order. The chaos lies all within. (p.230)

When in turn the tenure of his own party appeared to be eroding the narrator realized not only the folly of his present zeal but also the original causes of the internal chaos of islands like his own:

> I had never thought of obedience as a problem. Now it seemed to me the miracle of society. Given our situation, anarchy was endless, unless we acted right away. But on power and the consolidation of passing power we wasted our energies, until the bigger truth came: that in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, no link between man and the landscape, a society not held together by common interests, there was no true internal source of power, and that no power was real which did not come from the outside. Such was the controlled chaos we had, with such enthusiasm, brought upon ourselves. (p.246)

Society is "an association of consent", but in a society that was transported in chains to a new world and where consent was never even a matter for consideration, who thereafter could be willing either to consent or to obey? Where bonds of affection were deliberately sundered to prevent any <u>esprit de corps</u> how could society be anything but fragmented and insular; where bonds of endeavour were made futile by exploitation how could any organized structures arise, and when men were bound to the land as slaves, when will they

ever love the earth? When, having succumbed to power from without, will they have power and sufficiency within, and cease to be mimic men? So many links are needed.

The link, so far as the writer-narrator needed one to organize the formlessness of his island experiences and to justify their seeming irrelevance to his city setting was his memory of his first snow and of the city seen from Shylock's attic, his intimation of the forlornness of the city and of the people who lived in it. That feeling was the diapason of his life's experience of the island, of the city, and of his entire world. It was his sense of place, which was placelessness.

> I thought that this absurd disorder, of placelessness, was part of youth and my general unease and that it would go as soon as I left Isabella. But certain emotions bridge the years. It was unease of just this sort which came to me when I began this book. There was then no fear of the collapse of either the hotel or the public house between which I divided my time--as I still divide it--but I sickeningly recognized that sense of captivity and lurking external threat, that pain of a rich world destroyed and rendered null. Perhaps it was the effort of writing. The houses by which I was surrounded--like those in a photograph I had studied in a Kensington High Street attic during a snowfall and sought in imagination to enter, to recreate that order which, as I thought, expressed its sweetness in young girls and especially in one in a jumper in a sunny back garden--the red brick houses became interchangeable with those others in our tropical street, of corrugated iron and fretted white gables, which I had also once hoped never to see again. Certain emotions bridge the years and link unlikely places. Sometimes by this linking the sense of place is destroyed, and we are ourselves alone: the young man, the boy, the child. The physical world, which we yet continue to prove, is then like a private fabrication we have always known. (pp.184-85)

The sense of place is a sense of captivity, a feeling of having been made a prisoner by the physical world, by the

societies of the lands that one has known. Not only the corrugated iron roofs of huts in Isabella, but also the narrow red-brick houses in London threatened the sanity of the writer, his longing for wholeness for himself and for all men. The sense of place is like memory, and when grown acute becomes a source of pain--the pain of a rich world destroyed by a cruel and chaotic evolution, by all that is unsympathetic to the inmost needs of man. As the cruelty of social evolution is destroyed by the writing of history, so the individual's sense of place is destroyed by linking; the link in history is a prevailing mood, in personal growth a continuing emotion: not so much the phenomenal world, but the world as it is perceived. By this linking the physical world which makes every man a captive loses its impassability. The entire world becomes a private fabrication: both a private lie, and a private building. As the word also implies, every person is responsible for the kind of world that he lives in: quisque est faber suae fortunae. Every person is the architect of his own fortune. The growth of the individual and the progress of society depend equally upon what he builds within himself.

CONCLUSION

That which is less than itself is pitiable; that which is only itself is absurd; and that which is more than itself is a miracle. In the green shade of Black Wordsworth's yard stood "the best mango tree in Port of Spain;"[1] in the yard of Ganesh's house in Fountain Grove stood another mango tree, "the only tree in the village;"[2] at the end of one garden beside the house at Shorthills "a Julie mango tree stood on a concrete-walled circular bed."[3] In the school grounds at the back of Richard Stone's house there grew a nameless deciduous tree. "In the heart of the city" on Isabella was "a clump of old fruit trees" and in the centre of London "in the window of a print shop . . . a picture of the city of other times."[4] The tree is a man: the mango tree is the West Indian. The growth of the tree is the flowering of man. Life in the islands prompts with the threat of failure rather than with the promise of growth. Fountain Grove, as Ganesh saw it "looked unpromising" right from the start. Black Wordsworth died without ever writing his poem, the mango tree was cut down, "and there was brick and concrete everywhere."

The pattern of movement within the novels of V. S. Naipaul is from rural to urban, from nature to art, and

[1] Miguel Street, p. 59. [2] The Mystic Masseur, p. 9.

[3] A House for Mr. Biswas, p. 360.

[4] The Mimic Men, pp. 176 and 97.

from picture to symbol: it is the pattern of social and historical evolution; it is a pattern of which he is highly skeptical. Answering the boy-narrator's bright impression of London in Miguel Street is the political-narrator's statement in The Mimic Men that London is "the final emptiness." (p.10) What Naipaul says in An Area of Darkness about Delhi applies as well to any other megalopolis. His experience was of "an endless, ever spreading city which encouraged no repose, which sent people scuttling through its avenues and malls . . . shrunk to less than human size in the presence of the monumental city." (p. 90) That which is less than human size is pitiable, and the monumental city is damnable. In The Middle Passage Naipaul makes the reason for his condemnation of the life of the vast mechanical city even more explicit by particularizing its weakness: "all the apparatus of the modern society for joylessness, for the killing of the community spirit and the shutting up of people in their separate prisons of similar ambitions and tastes and selfishness: the class struggle, the political struggle, the race struggle." (p. 77) The city is the prison of the spirit. To the question implied in Mr. Biswas as to whether Hanuman House or its dwellers are more akin to truth, the answer must fall to the latter. The dilemma in Mr. Stone concerning the only possible city and the only important flesh sides finally with the spirit.

Taking his experience of India as the vantage point

Naipaul reflected upon London and his response to it. He spoke of the Indian philosophy of despair, a philosophy of passivity, detachment and acceptance; and then he went on:

> It is only now, as the impatience of the observer is dissipated in the processes of writing and self-inquiry, that I see how much this philosophy had also been mine. It had enabled me, through the stresses of a long residence in England, to withdraw completely from nationality and loyalties except to persons; it had made me content to be myself alone, my work, my name (the last two so different from the first); it had convinced me that every man was an island, and taught me to shield all that I knew to be good and pure within myself from the corruption of causes.[5]

Within his reflection one can hear the voice of Richard Stone when he said that nothing that comes out of the heart, nothing that is pure ought to be exposed. It is not surprising to hear the statement from Mr. Stone, as that novel too grew out of the Indian experience. "Srinagar, August 1962" are the final relevant words of the novel. Nor is it surprising that that novel, written in an area of darkness, in an attitude of negation, should so clearly affirm a positive: the world of the heart, the gathering place of islands.

And yet, one must go even further back than Mr. Stone, to Miguel Street, The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira, and to Mr. Biswas, to the local, the comparatively rural, to find the examples of the positive: the spontaneity, the joy, the warmth and the basically human values of the characters of the early novels. Lord David Cecil, in his introduction to The Mystic Masseur, summarizes the virtue of

[5] Area, p. 198.

that novel, and his judgement applies as well to all the other local novels.[6] After giving a cursory account of the plot he continues:

> Told like this, the tale sounds like a piece of smart cynicism. The originality and charm of the book lie in the fact that it is not. All comedians concentrate on the incongruities of human life; but whereas the satirist disapproves of them and wishes to mock them out of existence, the humorist enjoys them far too much to disapprove. Mr. Naipaul is a humorist who likes the animal called man. This does not mean he thinks highly of him. On the contrary, he has a sharp eye for his vanities and absurdities. Still less is his liking for him a sentimental one. His is a dry not a sweet wine: we never catch him shedding a dreadful kindly tear over his characters' failings. But he enjoys them, and he makes us enjoy them too. (p.xii)

The scope of this thesis does not include a discussion of the relevance of the style or the tone of writing in the novels to the subject of the novels. It concentrates on pictures of place: the street and the house, as picture and as symbol; it accentuates the negative, the darkness, but in so doing it affirms a positive: the basic kindness of Ganesh, of Herbert, of Mohun Biswas, of Richard Stone and of Vidiadhar Naipaul.

It turns repeatedly to the role of the writer in West Indian society, a role which, albeit as exile, carries with it not the fourfold threat of failure but the opposing fifth, the promise of fulfilment: "so this present residence in London, which I suppose can be called exile, has turned out to be the most fruitful."[7] The image in Miguel Street of the

[6] See also A. C. Derrick, loc. cit.

[7] The Mimic Men, p. 297.

boy who came back is, on the level of fiction, the narrator in The Mimic Men, and on the level of history the traveller on The Middle Passage. A reviewer of The Middle Passage regarded that journey as "the re-engagement of Mr. Naipaul:"

> Without realizing it Mr. Naipaul, by suffering in his person the agonies of the five societies in the West Indies and Latin America he visited, has become re-engaged in the West Indian scene from which he had hoped to be freed. Provided that his intellect and judgement are given future play, this bondage might give him the imaginative liberty he needs.[8]

His involvement lasts and of course his imagination did continue freely in Mr. Stone and The Mimic Men, so much so that after the publication of his last novel Professor Walsh attributed to him a quality that Naipaul himself would appreciate in every man:

> The Mimic Men reveals the features of a talent of great scope and perhaps of even more promise since it is endowed with what is perhaps the most significant artistic quality of all, the gift of growth.[9]

Thus, the West Indies and their history continue to be his concern. Conscious that history is built around achievement and creation and that nothing was created in the West Indies, he is helping to erase the void through his writing. Faithful to both his peculiar "geographical sense" and his sense of place as writer, he says: No city or landscape is truly real unless it has been given the quality of myth by writer, painter or by its association with great

[8] "The Re-engagement of Mr. Naipaul," TLS, p.578.

[9] William Walsh, A Manifold Voice (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 85.

events.[10] One cannot help but feel that his sense of place is peculiar. He writes consciously as the colonial and his subject is the colonial. Until now, with the exception of Mr. Stone, he has been examining the relationship between the mother and the offspring. That, in fact, is the only relationship that he can see as having any historical justification:

> A literature can grow only out of a strong framework of social convention. And the only convention the West Indian knows is his involvement with the white world.[11]

That is not to say that either his subject or his form will remain the same as he continues to write, and Naipaul himself is sensible to the fact not only of a changing outer world, but also of a changing inner world, both of which govern his writing. Speaking about the difficulties of the professional writer he says:

> "It isn't a problem of seeking a new form, but of finding the reality of the situation.
>
> "There's another problem: if you aren't just churning out novels of situations against fixed backgrounds, writing depends on personal abrasions, on the world altering around you. So in a way its hardly a profession at all, because it depends on accidents all the time. You can't say 'So-and-so is a writer' in the sense that he will write a book every two years, because you don't know that he will. The gift one appeared to exploit so easily in one's early twenties is very fragile.
>
> . . . . .
>
> "So you see the absurdities of the beginning of the profession seem to be sticking to one right to the end. A man writing his first book sits down and pretends he's writing a book: that element is still with me. In fact, it lasts for longer and longer with each book, until the moment you realize a book is there. It doesn't spring,

[10] Area, p. 205. [11] Ibid., p. 70.

> it has to be called up, a sort of slow magic. You have to pretend to be writing a book until you discover who you are." [12]

The "personal abrasions" mould a peculiar attitude to the world, and a peculiar set of responses. The colonial politician in London, having been introduced to The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book, settled down with the book in his hotel room and began to read.

> My mood was soft. And soon I was saddened, but pleasurably, not only by the loss, in this roaring red city, of village greens and riders on horseback and milkmaids and fairs and eggs in baskets and journeys by country folk to London town, but also by that limpid, direct vision of the world, neither of which had been mine, neither vision, of delight, nor world, of order. [13]

Writing is slow magic; reading too is a kind of magic: endeavours which, by discovering the self and by extending the self, work the miracle of growth and link unlikely places.

[12] Francis Wyndham, op. cit., col. 3.

[13] The Mimic Men, p. 275.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Augier, F. R. et al. The Making of the West Indies. London: Longmans, 1960.

Boxill, Herman Francis Anthony. The Novel in English in the West Indies. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation presented at University of New Brunswick, Spring 1966.

Commonwealth Literature. Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture. Extracts from the proceedings of a Conference held at Bodington Hall; Leeds 9-12 September 1964 under the auspices of the University of Leeds. Ed. John Press. London: Heinemann, 1965.

The Commonwealth Pen: An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth. Ed. A. L. McLeod. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961.

Harris, Wilson. Tradition, the Writer and Society. London: New Beacon, 1967.

The Islands in Between: Essays on West Indian Literature. Ed. Louis James. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Lamming, George. The Pleasures of Exile. London: Michael Joseph, 1960.

Naipaul, V. S. The Mystic Masseur. London: Andre Deutsch, 1957. Reprinted by Vanguard Press, 1959.

_____. The Suffrage of Elvira. London: Andre Deutsch, 1958.

_____. Miguel Street. London: Andre Deutsch, 1959.

_____. A House for Mr. Biswas. London: Andre Deutsch, 1961.

_____. The Middle Passage. London: Andre Deutsch, 1962.

_____. Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. London: Andre Deutsch, 1963.

_____. An Area of Darkness. London: Andre Deutsch, 1964.

_____. A Flag on the Island. London: Andre Deutsch, 1967.

_____. The Mimic Men. London: Andre Deutsch, 1967.

_____. The Loss of El Dorado. A History. London: Andre Deutsch, 1969.

Parry, J. and Sherlock, P.M. A Short History of the West Indies. London: Macmillan, 1956.

Ramchand, Kenneth. The West Indian Novel and its Background. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.

Walsh, William. A Manifold Voice. Studies in Commonwealth Literature. London: Chatto and Windus, 1970.

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

Allen, Walter. "London Again." Review of V. S. Naipaul's Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. New York Review of Books, 19 March 1964, p. 21.

_____. "Commonwealth Literature." New Statesman, 10 Sept. 1960, p. 341.

Anon. "The Caribbean Mixture: Variations and Fusions in Race and Style." Times Literary Supplement, 10 August 1962, p.578.

"High Jinks in Trinidad." Review of V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas. Times Literary Supplement, 29 Sept. 1961, p. 641.

"The Re-engagement of Mr. Naipaul." Review of V. S. Naipaul's The Middle Passage. Times Literary Supplement, 10 August 1962, p. 578.

Review of V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas. Time Magazine, 22 June 1962, p. 74.

"Sounding the Sixties--2: The Commonwealth." Times Literary Supplement, 16 Sept. 1965, pp. 786-812.

"Speaking of Writing. VI. V. S. Naipaul." Times (Daily), 2 Jan. 1964, p. 11.

"Suburbia in the Sun." Review of V. S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men. Times Literary Supplement, 27 April 1967, p.349.

"Sunk in Suburbia." Review of V. S. Naipaul's Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion. Times Literary Supplement, 31 May 1963, p. 385.

Carr, W. I. "Reflections On The Novel In The British Caribbean." Queen's Quarterly, LXX, 4 (Winter 1964), pp. 585-97.

Cartney, W. "The Knights Companion--Ganesh, Biswas and Stone: novels by Vidia Naipaul." New World Quarterly, II, 1, pp. 93-98.

Corke, Hilary. Review of The Mimic Men. The Listener, 25 May 1967, p. 693.

Coulthard, G. R. "Rejection of European Culture as a theme in Caribbean Literature." Caribbean Quarterly, V, 4, (June 1959), pp.231-44.

Derrick, A. "An Introduction to Caribbean Literature." Caribbean Quarterly, XV, 2 and 3 (June- Sept. 1969), pp. 65-78.

_____. "Naipaul's Technique as a Novelist." Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 7, July 1969, pp. 32-44.

Enright, D. J. "Who is India?: on V. S. Naipaul's journey into 'darkness'." Encounter, 23 Dec. 1964, pp. 59-64.

Krikler, Bernard. "The Novel Today: V. S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas'." The Listener, 13 Feb. 1964, p. 270.

Lewis, Prof. Gordon. "The New West Indies: Nationality and Literature." Sunday Gleaner, 8 Dec. 1957, p. 8.

Maes-Jelinck, Hena. "V. S. Naipaul: A Commonwealth Writer?" Revue des Langues Vivantes, No. 5, 1967, pp. 499-513.

_____. "The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel." Journal of Commonwealth Literature, VI, 1 June, 1971, pp. 113-27.

Miller, Karl. "Naipaul's Emergent Country." The Listener, 28 Sept. 1967, pp. 402-403.

_____. "Power, Glory and Imposture." Review of The Loss of El Dorado. The Listener, 13 Nov. 1969, pp. 673-74.

_____. "V. S. Naipaul and the New Order." Kenyon Review, XXIX, 5, pp. 685-98.

Naipaul, V. S. "In black ink." The Listener, 23 May 1968, p.666.

Ormerod, D. "In a Derelict Land: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul." Contemporary Literature, Vol. 9, 1968, pp. 74-90.

_____. "Theme and Imagery in V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas." Texas Studies in Literature and Language, VIII, 4, pp. 589-602.

Pearse, Andrew. "West Indian Themes." Caribbean Quarterly, XI, 2, pp. 12-23.

Pritchett, V. S. "Climacteric. Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion." New Statesman, 65 (31 May 1963), pp.831-32.

Ramchand, Kenneth. "The World of 'A House for Mr. Biswas'." Caribbean Quarterly, XV, 1 (March 1969), pp. 60-72.

Rohlehr, F. G. "Character and Rebellion in A House for Mr. Biswas." New World Quarterly, IV, 4, pp. 66-72.

_____. "Predestination, Frustration and Symbolic Darkness in Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas'." Caribbean Quarterly, X, 1, (March 1964), pp. 3-11.

Thorpe, M. "The Mimic Men: A Study of Isolation." New World Quarterly, IV, 4, pp. 55-59.

Walsh, William. "Meeting Extremes." Journal of Commonwealth Literature, I, pp. 169-72.

Wyndham, Francis. "Writing is Magic." Interview with V. S. Naipaul. The Sunday Times, 10 Nov. 1968, p. 57.