

“B. Wordsworth” by V. S. Naipual

About the Author

The Nobel Prize for literature has gone to someone who deserves it. Like the great masters of the past, V.S. Naipaul tells stories which show us ourselves and the reality we live in. His use of language is as precise as it is beautiful. Simple, strong words, with which to express the humanity of all of us.

Born in Trinidad in 1932, the descendant of indentured labourers shipped from India, this dispossessed child of the Raj has come on a long and marvellous journey. His upbringing familiarised him with every sort of deprivation, material and cultural. A scholarship to Oxford brought him to this country. Nothing sustained him afterwards except the determination, often close to despair, to become a writer. Against all likelihood, a spirit of pure comedy flows through his early books. It is a saving grace.

Footloose, he began to travel for long periods in India and Africa. It was at a time of decolonisation, when so many people the whole world over had to reassess their identity. Naipaul saw for himself the resulting turmoil of emotions, that collision of self-serving myth and guilt which make up today's bewildered world and prevents people from coming to terms with who they really are, and to know how to treat one another. On these travels he was exploring nothing less than the meaning of culture and history.

Victimhood might have been his central theme, granted his background. Not at all. That same determination to be a writer also liberated him from self-pity. Each one of us, his books declare, can choose to be a free individual. It is a matter of will and choice, and above all intellect. Critics have sometimes argued that people - in the Third World especially - are trapped in their culture and history without possibility of choice, and can only be free if others make them so. To them, V.S. Naipaul's vision that they have to take responsibility for themselves can seem like some sort of First World privilege, and a conservative philosophy at that.

Quite the contrary: the absolute rejection of victimhood is necessary if we are to meet as we must on an equal footing, and it is no exaggeration to say that he has shifted public opinion towards this understanding as no other writer has done. Courage and persistence were required to hold a belief quite so unfashionable in recent years, but it is this belief that has made Naipaul the universal writer and humanist that he is.

The comic spirit is still present, though submerged in his later books beneath a darkening sense of tragedy. Naipaul has written about slavery, revolution, guerrillas, corrupt politicians, the poor and the oppressed, interpreting the rages so deeply rooted in our societies. Long before others, he began to report on the irrational frenzy loosed these past two decades by religion in the Islamic world from Iran to Indonesia and Pakistan. This phenomenon too was a retreat from history into self-serving myth. Self-pity possesses Islamic fundamentalists so absolutely that they are able to close out everything else. Yet Naipaul also observed with profound insight that even the most fanaticised among them know that the West will always be there setting the objective standards, and that they can do nothing about that. They are to be pitied for rage so helpless.

In himself, Naipaul is a private man, who lives in the country in order to have the solitude for thinking and writing. Everything that has ever happened to him is pigeonholed with exactitude in his memory. Formidably well-read, he can quote books he read years ago, and all the conversations he has had. Melancholy grips him at the spectacle of "the steady grinding down of the old world" as he put it, and he might complain to an interviewer that he is living in a "plebeian culture that celebrates itself."

Other writers born abroad have settled here and enriched our literature, but there has never been one like Naipaul. His personal story is moving; his achievement extraordinary. There is a great moral to his life's work, that the human comedy will come out all right because, when all is said and done, intellect is more powerful than vicissitude and wickedness.

"B. Wordsworth"

Three beggars called punctually every day at the hospitable houses in Miguel Street. At about ten an Indian came in this dhoti and white jacket, and we poured a tin of rice into the sack he carried on his back. At twelve an old woman smoking a pipe came and she got a cent. At two a blind man led by a boy called for his penny. Sometimes we had a rogue. One day a man called and said he was hungry. We gave him a meal. He asked for a cigarette and wouldn't go until we had lit it for him. That man never came again. The strangest caller came one afternoon at about four o'clock. I had come back from school and was in my home-clothes. The man said to me, "Sonny, may I come inside your yard?" He was a small man and he was tidily dressed. He wore a hat, a white shirt and black trousers. I asked, "What you want?" He said, "I want to watch your bees." We had four small gru-gru palm trees and they were full of uninvited bees. I ran up the steps and shouted, "Ma, it have a man outside here. He say he want to watch the bees." My mother came out, looked at the man and asked in an unfriendly way, "What you want?" His English was so good, it didn't sound natural, and I could see my mother was worried. She said to me, "Stay here and watch him while he watch the bees." The man said, "Thank you, Madam. You have done a good deed today." He spoke very slowly and very correctly as though every word was costing him money. We watched the bees, this man and I, for about an hour, squatting near the palm trees. The man said, "I like watching bees. Sonny, do you like watching bees?" I said, "I ain't have the time." He shook his head sadly. He said, "That's what I do, I just watch. I can watch ants for days. Have you ever watched ants? And scorpions, and centipedes, and congorees-have you watched those?" I shook my head. I said, "What you does do, mister?" He got up and said, "I am a poet." I said, "A good poet?" He said, "The greatest in the world." "What your name, mister?" "B. Wordsworth." "B for Bill?" "Black. Black Wordsworth. White Wordsworth was my brother. We share one heart. I can watch a small flower like the morning glory and cry."

I said, "Why you does cry?" "Why, boy? Why? You will know when you grow up. You're a poet too, you know. And when you're a poet you can cry for everything." I couldn't laugh. He said, "You like your mother?" "When she not beating me." He pulled out a printed sheet from his hip-pocket and said, "On this paper is the greatest poem about mothers and I'm going to sell it to you at a bargain price. For four cents." I went inside and I said, "Ma, you want to buy a poetry for four cents?" My mother said, "Tell that blasted man to haul his tail away from my yard, you hear." I said to B. Wordsworth, "My mother say she ain't have four cents." B. Wordsworth said, "It is the poet's tragedy." And he put the paper back in his pocket. He didn't seem to mind. I said, "Is a funny way to go round selling poetry like that. Only calypsonians do that sort of thing. A lot of people does buy?" He said, "No one has yet bought a single copy." "But why you does keep on going round, then?" He said, "In this way I watch many things, and I always hope to meet poets." I said, "You really think I is a poet?" "You're as good as me," he said. And when B. Wordsworth left, I prayed I would see him again.

About a week later, coming back from school one afternoon, I met him at the corner of Miguel Street.

He said, "I have been waiting for you for a long time." I said, "You sell any poetry yet?" He shook his head. He said, "In my yard I have the best mango tree in Port of Spain. And now the mangoes are ripe and red and very sweet and juicy. I have waited here for you to tell you this and to invite you to come and eat some of my mangoes."

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 a 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. He was right. The mangoes were sweet and juicy. I ate about six, and the yellow mango juice ran down my arms to my elbows and down my mouth to my chin and my shirt was stained.

My mother said when I got home, "Where you was? You think you is a man now and could go all over the place? Go cut a whip for me? She beat me rather badly, and I ran out of the house swearing that I would never come back. I went to B. Wordsworth's house. I was so angry, my nose was bleeding.

B. Wordsworth said, "Stop crying, and we will go for a walk." I stopped crying, but I was breathing short. We went for a walk. We walked down St. Clair Avenue to the Savannah and we walked to the race-course. B. Wordsworth said, "Now, let us lie on the grass and look up at the sky, and I want you to think how far those stars are from us." 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 in our faces, and we saw a policeman. We got up from the grass. The policeman said, "What you doing here?"

B. Wordsworth said, "I have been asking myself the same question for forty years." We became friends, B. Wordsworth and I. He told me, "You must never tell anybody about me and about the mango tree and the coconut tree and the plum tree. You must keep that a secret. If you tell anybody, I will know, because I am a poet. I gave him my word and I kept it. I liked his little room. It had no more furniture than George's front room, but it looked cleaner and healthier. But it also looked lonely. One day I asked him, "Mister Wordsworth, why you does keep all this bush in your yard? Ain't it does make the place damp?" He said, "Listen, and I will tell you a story. Once upon a time a boy and girl met each other and they fell in love. They loved each other so much they got married. They were both poets. He loved words. She loved grass and flowers and trees. They lived happily in a single room, and then one day, the girl poet said to the boy poet, 'We are going to have another poet in the family.' But this poet was never born, because the girl died, and the young poet died with her inside her. And the girl's husband was very sad, and he said he would never touch a thing in the girl's garden. And so the garden remained, and grew high and wild." I looked at B. Wordsworth, and as he told me this

lovely story, he seemed to grow older. I understood his story. We went for long walks together. We went to the Botanical Gardens and the Rock Gardens. We climbed Chancellor Hill in the late afternoon and watched the darkness fall on Port of Spain, and watched the lights go on in the city and on the ships in the harbour. 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. He would say to me, "Now, how about having some ice cream?" And when I said yes, he would grow very serious and say, "Now, which café should we patronize?" As though it were a very important thing. He would think for some time about it, and finally say, "I think I will go and negotiate the purchase with that shop." The world became a most exciting place.

One day, when I was in his yard, he said to me, "I have a great secret which I am now going to tell you." I said, "It really secret?" "At the moment, yes." I looked at him, and he looked at me. He said, "This is just between you and me, remember. I am writing

a poem." "Oh." I was disappointed. He said, "But this is a different sort of poem. This is the greatest poem in the world." I whistled. He said, "I have been working on it for more than five years now. I will finish it in about twenty-two years from now, that is, if I keep on writing at the present rate." "You does write a lot, then?" He said, "Not any more. I just write one line a month. But I make sure it is a good line." I asked, "What was last month's good line?" He looked up at the sky, and said, "The past is deep." I said, "It is a beautiful line." B. Wordsworth said, "I hope to distil the experiences of a whole month into that single line of poetry. So, in twenty-two years, I shall have written a poem that will sing to all humanity." I was filled with wonder.

Our walks continued. We walked along the sea-wall at Docksite one day, and I said, "Mr. Wordsworth, if I drop this pin in the water, you think it will float?" He said, "This is a strange world. Drop your pin, and let us see what will happen." The pin sank.

I said, "How is the poem this month?" But he never told me any other line. He merely said, "Oh, it comes, you know. It comes." Or we would sit on the sea-wall and watch the liners come into the harbour. But of the greatest poem in the world I heard no more. ***** I felt he was growing older. ***** "How you does live, Mr. Wordsworth?" I asked him one day. He said, "You mean how I get money?" When I nodded, he laughed in a crooked way. He said, "I sing calypsoes in the calypso season." "And that last you the rest of the year?" "It is enough." "But you will be the richest man in the world when you write the greatest poem?" He didn't reply.

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." He wasn't looking at me. He was looking through the window at the coconut tree, and he was speaking as though I wasn't there. He said, "When I was twenty I felt the power within myself." Then, almost in front of my eyes, I could see his face growing older and more tired. He said, "But that-that was a long time ago." And then-I felt 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. He looked at me, and saw my tears and sat up. He said, "Come." I went and sat on his knees. He looked into my

eyes, and he said, "Oh, you can see it, too. I always knew you had the poet's eye." He didn't even look sad, and that made me burst out crying loudly. He pulled me to his thin chest, and said, "Do you want me to tell you a funny story?" and he smiled encouragingly at me. But I couldn't reply. He said, "When I have finished this story, I want you to promise that you will go away and ever come back to see me. Do you promise?" I nodded. He said, "Good. Well, listen. That story I told you about the boy poet and the girl poet, do you remember that? That wasn't true. It was something I just made up. All this talk about poetry and the greatest poem in the world, that wasn't true, either. Isn't that the funniest thing you have heard?" But his voice broke. I left the house, and ran home crying, like a poet, for everything I saw.

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. (1959)

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<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/bword.htm> 3.9.06