

Portrait of a Teacher as an Artist

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Last year in June I was invited to Bloomsday in Melbourne. One of the highlights of the occasion was to see James Joyce's first published novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, performed in an old theatre, next to Papa Goose restaurant.

The prose work, published in 1916, was dramatized and the 90-minute performance was the first I was seeing of a book I'd read more than half a century ago at Natabua High school amidst the rain-trees on the verdant hills of Natabua, next to a prison and an Old People's Home hidden among the thatched avenues and green fields of sugar-cane.

The Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 and the political rebellion of the Irish was, for James Joyce, not sufficient to free the spirit of the people from the bondages and servility of the past under Roman Catholicism and British imperialism.

Today, it's high irony that the recent referendum on Brexit is regarded by the voting majority in the UK as their Independence Day! How the Empire always strikes back. And Brexit could lead to an unUnited Kingdom.

My teacher of English then was one Mr F E Joyce from Dunedin, New Zealand. He was trying to introduce a few of us to modern literature with works by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It was a heavy reading list for me. But I ploughed through the books without much comprehension or appreciation. He also staged Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* on the school grounds shaded by several huge rain-trees. The mob in the play were dressed as indentured Indians with white safas. Only now I am beginning to see what the Irish Mr Joyce was subtly hinting to us with that great political drama that led to the assassination of Caesar and changed the course of Roman imperial history just as the first coup in the Fiji Parliament so dramatically defined the personal destiny of so many of us and distorted the life of a small but essentially a decent, colonially created nation.

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After years, the seeds sown by my teacher have germinated in the furrows of my mind and imagination. And in the lines of my writings. Only recently I re-read *Portrait* -- perhaps the finest novel on the growth of sensitive student and a writer. It should be taught in every university and senior classes of our secondary schools and colleges.

We, Jyoti and I, went to Bloomsday partially because I wanted to remember my remarkable teacher, Mr Frederick Earnest Joyce. He gave me my first love for literature and I was travelling with my first love. When you're as old as I am, and autumn leaves fall in June stippling the edges of your streets and you see children playing among fallen leaves, you remember your own childhood and days of adolescence - and innocence.

And you see coloured parrots flit from bough to bough on naked trees as we used to swim in the pristine waters of the Nadi river.

All teachers are artists: both in the art of teaching and in shaping the lives of the taught. But most vitally in the use of language, creatively and critically, in reading and writing. And in making us see the world around us in our daily living - the ground beneath our feet, creating that deepest awareness of a place of belonging we call home from the sole of your feet to the soul of your being and becoming. THAT is the longest journey and nothing portrays it more vividly and vitally than the stories we tell about ourselves from the class rooms to the streets and roads we traverse every day.

In modern literary circles Bloomsday is a special event: it's celebrated world-wide. Modernism came into its full bloom when James Joyce's most remarkable and original novel, *Ulysses*, was published in Paris in 1922, on his 40th birthday.

Bloomsday falls on 16 June. The story is set in the city of Dublin which Joyce left as a young man. It is the story of Leopold Bloom, the archetypal stranger-outsider, who spends 18 hours loitering and ruminating in the streets of Dublin on that day in 1904. The day he had met his girl-friend.

From exile, Joyce gives us a portrait of the city as no other writer. It's in the exilic condition that his mind and memory and remembrance of things past and the faces of people become so real with the splendour of grass and the beauty and betrayal of the human body. The writer's exile adds a sharp awareness of his place of growth - Dublin. It is a love story.

It's an important milestone in James Joyce's personal life when he left Ireland with his girl-friend, Nora Barnacle, for Europe. Nora did stick by him in penury and pleasure like a barnacle to a sailing ship but pleaded

with him for the rest of her life: 'James, why don't you write a book that people can read.'

Joyce, spent his most creative days in exile in Zurich, Paris and Trieste, and became the most influential writer who affected the form, style, and content of the creative lives of individuals with interior monologues and stream of consciousness. It's said that he's the only writer whose every work is a masterpiece.

The structure and substance of *Ulysses* changed our perceptions of the world around us. The mythical title from a Greek epic adds other dimensions to the modern world. But the hero of *Ulysses* is an ordinary individual whose life illuminates the most quotidian preoccupations of the dullness of our existence. That is what makes the novel so extraordinary and appealing.

Ulysses was first published in Paris in a limited edition of 1000 copies. Every copy was signed by Joyce and if someone has a copy, today it may be worth a million dollars. The book was promptly banned in Britain and the US for its perceived frankness and piercing integrity of observations. The last pages are a passionate record of Molly Bloom's promiscuous ruminations of her past.

Joyce never really returned to Ireland and yet all his works are set in Ireland. Joyce's great masterpiece was written in exile and as he presciently remarked, 'I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that is the only way of ensuring one's immortality'.

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Books, like sacred texts, exist only in their readings in our contemporary circumstances and their relevance and resonance to our human existence and evolution.

While *Ulysses* in structure and allusions resembles Homer's epic, it's set in the ordinariness of Dublin's squalid streets and pubs and the occasional epiphanies encountered in daily life. Ulysses voyages for a decade; Bloom covers the ground in a day. But both return home: the journeys are always homeward. But the great question the writer asks is: *What and where is my home?*

And this is the deepest quest and question of the twentieth century's catastrophes that gave us two World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Partition and numerous refugees the world over.

It touched the shores of Fiji too. And how does one write and teach THAT history, so close to our bones like ashes of cremation blown in the wind?

Ulysses, the hero of Homer's epic, is now the ordinary man Leopold Bloom: the years of wanderings of the ancient hero are reduced to 18 hours of a single day with all its seedy side of life but it is also life in its myriad beauty and the messiness out of which our humanity grows: flawed, unfinished but alive.

The random and trivial gain value in one's life and give grace to relationships. Hardly any aspect of life in Dublin is left untouched by the writer's masterly imagination and memory.

How does one give shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history, wrote T S Eliot, the author of *The Wasteland*, which too was published in 1922. A novelist and a poet were born out of the debris of the Great War, 1914-1918.

Leopold Bloom's wife Molly's final words are: 'yes I said, yes I will YES', thus affirming life in its infinite variety of love and loss, betrayal and human bondage.

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I've always wanted to go to Dublin, having been introduced to Joyce's writing during my secondary schooling. The teacher who gave me a copy of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was coincidentally named Frederick Ernest JOYCE. I've tried to remember him in my short story 'A Teacher's Story' published in my collected short stories *Seashells on the Seashore: A Pair of Black Shoes and Other Stories*.

Mr Joyce taught us English and introduced us to new writing: Gerard Manley Hopkins' one poem haunts me to this day:

Spring and Fall

(to a young child)

Margaret, are you grieving

Over Goldengrove unleaving?

Leaves, like the things of man, you

With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

Ah! as the heart grows older

It will come to such sights colder

By and by, nor spare a sigh

Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;

And you will weep and know why.

*Now, no matter, child, the name:
Sorrrows springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.*

Before going to Melbourne, I re-read the wonderful *Portrait* by Joyce and what a fabulous book it is. It tells you how every teacher is really a writer and vice-versa. You need the imagination of the artist to be a great teacher. Mr Joyce tried to give me a gift—I didn't quite appreciate it at that time.

Towards the end, the book has these stirring words:

I will tell you what I will do and what I'll not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning.

How much of modern world has been shaped by artists, writers, thinkers, intellectuals, who have written and articulated alternative visions of their world to make it habitable and perhaps a bit more just and equal.

This is truly the 'freedom of imagination', embedded in Fiji's new constitution. It enables and ensures every other kind of freedom and creativity.

Stephen, the main character in the novel, as he leaves Ireland, says: '*Welcome O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.*' This is, of course, a huge claim and writers and intellectuals tend to do that. But in the republic of the imagination all things are possible - from the greatest epic, The Mahabharata, to an unforgettable lyric, William Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper'. We've to read and understand both. And so much in between.

James Joyce does it through memory of a city and the growth of an artist's sensibility.

It is what Frederick Earnest Joyce had tried to teach me more than fifty years ago under the rain-trees on those Natabua hillocks.

I travelled to Melbourne in memory of a Joyce who gave me an immeasurable gift as a teacher: he knew when to be on the same page as his student for reading; and when to help him turn a new page for writing.

And this is the great challenge of our teachers, generally in the South Pacific, and specifically in Fiji. A country brutalized by coups, racism, religious bigotry, corruption needs all the healing touches of a scalpel of the mind and the annealing balm of the heart.

And every teacher has that responsibility and gift to give to his students. The classroom is your sacred space of freedom.

Author:

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