

## Amit Chaudhuri's Would-Be Writers: A Joycean Rewriting\*

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Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962 and brought up in Bombay, but when he was twenty-one left India for Britain to pursue his university studies. He graduated from University College, London, and then became a research student at Balliol College, Oxford. He received his PhD degree (on D. H. Lawrence's poetry) from that university, was appointed Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, and was later awarded the Harper Wood Studentship for English Literature and Poetry from St John's College, Cambridge, where he lived for a number of years before finally returning to Calcutta, where he now lives with his wife and daughter. He is the author of four novels: *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998) and *A New World* (2000). He has also edited *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001) and has published short stories, essays and reviews for newspapers and magazines, such as *The Guardian*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The London Magazine*, *Granta* and *The New Yorker*. His most recent publication is the book *Real Time. Stories and a Reminiscence* (2002), a collection of stories (most of them published before) and a verse autobiography.<sup>1</sup>

His first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, has a curious structure. There are two parts: the first—which amounts to two thirds of the book—is a *novella* divided into 14 untitled chapters; the second comprises a collection of nine short stories, each with a title, and all of them independent. The impression we are left with after finishing the book is that the author has wanted to tell us the story of a child who wishes to become an artist, a writer, to be precise. It is the story of a child who lives in Bombay but who goes to Calcutta to spend his summer holidays with his mother and his mother's family, while his father, a businessman who is always very busy, stays in Bombay. But along with this story—which is of course the central tale in the novel, as it occupies two thirds of the book—we have at the end those nine short stories, unconnected in terms of plot or characters with the main tale. Apparently they have been put there to give further details of the background against which the main story takes place, or to provide the reader with the atmosphere that will enable him/her to better understand the development of the *novella*.

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One critic, Julian Symons, when reviewing it for *The London Review of Books* (25 July 1991), asked himself whether this book, and particularly the final nine short stories, were concerned with the "Condition of India Question."<sup>2</sup> Some of these short stories certainly deal with many of the problems of Calcutta as a great urban centre, where power cuts are frequent, TV doesn't work, plumbers are ineffectual (or, more than that, an utter disaster), the telephone is full of undesired crossed lines, and so on. But these stories, as well as the *novella*, are not narrated in a sociological or journalistic style at all. As I have just pointed out, my impression is that these short stories have been put there in order to provide readers with complementary material, so to speak, that helps to fill possible gaps in their knowledge of the fictional world depicted in the *novella*. Things described in these short stories are, in fact, insignificant, and offer little glimpses into the reality of everyday life in Calcutta. No action is presented; no programme for social improvement is proposed; no essential information for the main narrative is given. They seem to be poetic notes, written as in a rapture, merely to give local colour to the main story.

Chaudhuri himself has explained that his first book was the result of commercial requirements, because he had really written a short novel (the *novella* which takes up two thirds of the book), but his publishers needed something longer, so he decided to add the nine stories:

When I set about writing the novel I thought it would be a full-length novel, but in Britain full-length is about two hundred pages at least, and in India full-length would be seven hundred pages, nine hundred pages. After I wrote the novel I began to revise it and I took out lots and lots, and put it together again. It was a bit of a nightmare actually: reworking the novel and making it whole again and leaving things out. Before that I had published chapter seven in *The London Review of Books*, and I had got lots of letters from agents and publishers who thought—even though it had been published as an independent story—it was part of a novel, and they wanted to have a look at the novel. They all professed an enthusiasm, an interest, so I finished the novel, it came to eighty-seven pages or so in typescript, and I sent it to my agent, who got cold feet. Anyway she sent it to a publisher who liked it but thought it was too small to bring it out by itself, and wanted me to write some short stories. . . . So the short stories were actually written to supplement the short novel.<sup>3</sup>

But let's return to the main story, the one that gives meaning to the title of the book, *A Strange and Sublime Address*. It is of course a very Joycean title, as we learn when we advance in our reading of the novel. On page 85, almost in the middle of the book, we read that one of the characters, Abhi, a cousin of Sandeep's, the protagonist, has written on the first page of his books:

Abhijit Das,  
17 Vivekananda Road,  
Calcutta (South),  
West Bengal,  
India,

Asia,  
Earth,  
The Solar System,  
The Universe.

And when Sandeep reads this he thinks, "It was a strange and sublime address." Of course, for readers of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Abhi's inscription immediately brings to mind Stephen Dedalus's written on the flyleaf of his book of geography:

Stephen Dedalus  
Class of Elements  
Clongowes Wood College  
Sallins  
County Kildare  
Ireland  
Europe  
The World  
The Universe<sup>4</sup>

This parallel is probably evidence of Chaudhuri's debt to Joyce in writing this first novel focused on a portrait of an artist as a young man, because the novel deals with the development of a young boy in his birthplace and the discovery of art at an early age. We are very likely before an autobiographical novel, as Sandeep is brought up in Bombay, as was Chaudhuri, and enjoys his summer holidays, with his cousins Abhi and Babla, in Calcutta, city of Chaudhuri's birth.

All critics have praised this novel, which won the Betty Trask Award (1991) and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia) (1992), as well as a runner's-up award for the *Guardian* Fiction Prize in 1991. The qualities in this first novel are certainly those of a miniaturist and also vaguely evoke the effects of Joyce's stories in *Dubliners*, because Chaudhuri presents his readers with a detailed and lyrical evocation of his childhood in India through minor anecdotes, apparently irrelevant episodes of ordinary life which, for the artist, encapsulate transcendent meanings.

As I said before, nothing special really happens in the story; Sandeep, the young hero of the novel, passes through some sorts of initiation rites, as he leaves behind the world of his childhood and starts discovering the new world of adolescence. It is then that Sandeep realises he wants to be a writer, to be able to put into words what surrounds him. And that experience is narrated by Chaudhuri with a superb lyrical tone, full of melancholy and powerful scenes of epiphanies, as in the best Joyce of the *Portrait*. The most insignificant details of the city and its inhabitants pass before our eyes framed in moving expressions of feelings. For example, we read that Calcutta is "a city of dust," in a description heavily redolent of the picture of paralysis Joyce presents in *Dubliners* (further references to the Dublinesque atmosphere later):

Calcutta is a city of dust. If one walks down the street, one sees mounds of dust like sand-dunes on the pavements, on which children and dogs sit doing nothing, while sweating labourers dig into the macadam with spades and drills. The roads are always being dug up, partly to construct the new underground railway system, or perhaps for some other obscure reason, such as replacing a pipe that doesn't work with another pipe that doesn't work. At such times, Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has utility, but exists for some esoteric aesthetic reason. Trenches and mounds of dust everywhere give the city a strange bombed-out look. The old houses, with their reposeful walls, are crumbling to slow dust, their once-gleaming gates are rusting. Dust flakes off the ceilings in offices; the buildings are becoming dust, the roads are becoming dust. At the same time, dust is constantly raised into startling new shapes and unexpected forms by the arbitrary workings of the wind, forms on which dogs and children sit doing nothing. Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust, and daily it rises from dust again.<sup>5</sup>

Descriptions of the life of some animals are also good examples of the Joycean epiphanies, such as in the following excerpt, where two birds courting each other certainly recall other birds in the *Portrait*:

On the far side of the parapet, while the rest dreamed, two pigeons began to kiss each other in a solemnly painful manner, beaks locked together, heads moving up and down simultaneously as if they were trying to release themselves from the mysterious lock. It was a strange kind of passion; it was the only way birds could embrace, or come close to embracing—locking their beaks in that funny, tortured way. Finally, the male climbed on the female's back and proceeded to flap its wings in an abstracted fashion. The female waited, bending its head in a world-weary manner. . . . The entire spectacle, from courtship to climax to possible marital bliss or discord, lasted around ten minutes. God had apparently created these birds with the sole purpose of amusing slothful boys, and probably Himself, on unpleasantly humid afternoons.<sup>6</sup>

Memories of the famous epiphany of the girl on Dollymount beach come easily to our minds: "Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight; slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove. . .";<sup>7</sup> or this from the fifth chapter in the novel:

for ages men had gazed upward as he was gazing at birds in flight. The colonnade above him made him think vaguely of an ancient temple and the ashplant on which he leaned wearily of the curved stick of an augur. A sense of fear of the unknown moved in the heart of his weariness, a fear of symbols and portents, of the hawklike man whose name he bore soaring out of his captivity on osierwoven wings, of Thoth, the god of writers, writing with a reed upon a tablet and bearing on his narrow ibis head the cusped moon. . . . They came back with shrill cries over the jutting shoulder of the house, flying darkly against the fading air. What birds were they? He thought that they must be swallows who had come back from the south. Then he was to go away for they were birds ever going and coming, building ever an unlasting home under the eaves of men's houses and ever leaving the homes they had built to wander.<sup>8</sup>

The critical point in the story happens when Sandeep's maternal uncle, Chhotomama, suffers a heart attack, but does not die. Sandeep and his cousins are affected not for the emotional reasons that we might expect, but mainly because

this is an opportunity for another family gathering, eighteen months after their holidays together. What constitutes the essence of the story is not then action, but reflections, memories and evocations. The following excerpt is a good illustration of the narrative mood of the novel:

So they went out for a walk. They went through narrow, lightless lanes, where houses that were silent but gave out smells of fish and boiled rice stood on either side of the road. There was not a single tree in sight; no breeze and no sound but the vaguely musical humming of mosquitoes. Once, an ancient taxi wheezed past, taking a short-cut through the lane into the main road, like a comic vintage car passing through a film-set showing the Twenties into the film-set of the present, passing from black and white into colour. But why did these houses—for instance, that one with the tall, ornate iron gates and a watchman dozing on a stool, which gave the impression that the family had valuables locked away inside, or that other one with the small porch and the painted door, which gave the impression that whenever there was a feast or a wedding all the relatives would be invited, and there would be so many relatives that some of them, probably the young men and women, would be sitting bunched together on the cramped porch because there would be no more space inside, talking eloquently about something that didn't really require eloquence, laughing uproariously at a joke that wasn't really very funny, or this next house with an old man relaxing in his easy-chair on the verandah, fanning himself with a local Sunday newspaper, or this small, shabby house with the girl Sandeep glimpsed through a window, sitting in a bare, ill-furnished room, memorising a text by candlelight, repeating suffixes and prefixes from a Bengali grammar over and over to herself—why did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them? And yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep, would be too caught up in jotting down the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives, and the life of a city, rather than a good story—till the reader would shout 'Come to the point!'—and there would be no point, except the girl memorising the rules of grammar, the old man in the easy-chair fanning himself, and the house with the small, empty porch which was crowded, paradoxically, with many memories and possibilities. The 'real' story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist.<sup>9</sup>

In short, the memory we are left with after reading *A Strange and Sublime Address* is not one of a story full of action or about the politics or social reality of India, although hints about those issues appear in the novel (criticisms of Mahatma Gandhi, or Subhas Chandra Bose, a Bengali leader). All that is completely marginal and we probably forget such references when recalling the novel. But we cannot forget the smells, the air, the slow passing of time, the breeze, the rain, the Bengali family structure, the poetic atmosphere created by Chaudhuri, "a writer of delicate, realistic and quite brilliant talent," as Julian Symons has put it,<sup>10</sup> and a writer who is, no doubt, much indebted to Joyce's style and taste for epiphanies.

Even though Chaudhuri has said that he was not directly inspired by Joyce's text when writing this novel, textual evidence seems only to confirm this influence, an influence that was probably partly unconscious and took place in the process of revising and rewriting, as he finally confessed to me when I mentioned the existence of some striking parallels:

I'd read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when I was seventeen years old, and I hated it at that time. Then I read it later, when I had written this novel and I was revising it. I began to reread Joyce's *Portrait...* and *Anna Karenina* at the same time. I was full of admiration for *Anna Karenina* and yet thought this is very far away from my temperament, but loved *A Portrait of the Artist* on the second reading. I saw an affinity there, but when I was writing this book Joyce was not in my mind. But I do love his work. Again as far as this book, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, being a portrait of an artist, I wasn't conscious of doing that. I realise that there are certain parts in the novel where I talk about him wanting to write, but at the same time I said he wanted to write horror stories, so I sort of undercut that association. I wasn't consciously interested in Sandeep as a character. Sandeep was just there, but to me the city of Calcutta, and Chhotomama, and that house, those were what interested me. But of course I am talking about my conscious intentions, which is not to say that those things were not an influence on me.<sup>11</sup>

That Joyce's influence is not however a passing influence in his career is proved also by the publication in 1993 of a short story in *The London Review of Books* which bears the significant title of "Portrait of an Artist." The story is strictly autobiographical, according to Chaudhuri's own words, contrary to the character of Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address*: "the story in 'Portrait of an Artist' is based on real experience and real characters. It's very true; I mean, I don't think I made up a single word in that story. So, yes, I was that sort of boy."<sup>12</sup> The story presents the life of a boy who wants to become a writer and who, although he lives in Bombay, spends his holidays in Calcutta with his cousins. There he meets their private English tutor, the *mastermoshai*, who encourages him to write poetry and talks with him about literature and philosophy. This character and his influence on the boy's adult career as a writer evokes in Chaudhuri modernist, and particularly Joycean, resonances, clearly connected to the Dublinesque atmosphere I suggested above:

'Every writer needs his Pound,' he said to me 'Il miglior fabbro—Eliot's better craftsman.' He was my first impresario, showing my poem in the *Youth Times* to his friends and 'disciples.' On another occasion, he compared himself to Leopold Bloom and me to Stephen Dedalus, adding, 'Every writer needs a guide, a father-figure.' On one level, he *was* a father to me, and on another level, a friend. For, behind the big talk about literature, a fondness had grown between us, based on the ardent exchange of ideas that belonged to a foreign language and continent, ideas probably already obsolete over there, but which here, in the comforting presence of relatives and friends, took on a unique intensity, a freshness; a friendship that could only have formed in a country with a colonial past. Even more provincial, and marginal to Europe, than Dublin was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was Calcutta at the century's close. Trams, rickshaws, markets, office buildings with wide, creaking stairs, bookshops, little magazines, literary critics, uncles, aunts, created this Dublinesque metropolis of which mastermoshai was a part.<sup>13</sup>

However, the Joycean influence is not restricted to his first novel and this short story, because—though to a lesser degree—it pervades other works, particularly his second novel, which looks like a continuation of Sandeep's development into adolescence and early adulthood. This second novel, *Afternoon Raag*, was published in

1993, and was also awarded important literary prizes, such as the 1993 Southern Arts Literature Prize, and the Encore Award from the Society of Authors for best second novel of 1993. It was also shortlisted for the 1993 *Guardian* Fiction Prize. The qualities of this short novel are basically the same as those of *A Strange and Sublime Address*, namely the qualities of good prose, full of lyrical resonances, although the novels are different in structure and in the conception of the story, as I shall explain.

In *Afternoon Raag* Chaudhuri proves again his extraordinary ability to depict with security and brilliance the minutest details of reality. That is why this novel can be seen as a second phase in the construction of his particular *Bildungsroman*, as we are presented with a young man in his early twenties who has come from India to study at the University of Oxford. The image of Sandeep haunts the reader through the pages of this novel, because the protagonist of *Afternoon Raag*—who is a first person narrator—arrives from Bombay, his head crammed with the illusions created by his previous readings of English literature. When we read the protagonist's reflections on the books he mentions, his allusions to Shakespeare, to Wordsworth, to D. H. Lawrence, to Thomas Hardy, or to places in Oxford as emblematic as the Bodleian Library or Blackwells, we cannot but feel that these are the impressions of Sandeep, that young boy in *A Strange and Sublime Address* who wanted to be a writer. Moreover, the memories presented by the anonymous first person narrator of *Afternoon Raag* coincide in many details with Sandeep's childhood in Bombay and Calcutta: the same magical atmosphere, the same affectionate picture of his parents, particularly his mother, the same pleasant reference to his old Ambassador car, and so on. Like Hardy's hero in *Jude the Obscure*, this young man feels exhilarated and deeply moved by the atmosphere of "the pinnacles and rooftops, the dreaming spires" of the university town, so literary and so full of the promise of a new life beyond India.<sup>14</sup>

The action is almost non-existent in *Afternoon Raag*; the barely 130-odd pages of this short novel are mostly filled with pictures of Oxford life contrasted with memories and evocations of the life in India, both in Bombay and Calcutta. For those who have lived in Oxford for some time, the novel offers a charming view of the comforts of its pubs and cafés, the atmosphere of lectures, weekly essays and tutorials, the discomforts of the halls of residence, with details of the conditions of baths and toilets at the end of the corridor or downstairs, the bare college rooms of students with simple and shabby furniture, the images of students riding bicycles everywhere, gathering in formal or informal garments for different occasions, and so on and so forth.

These images, provided in sudden flashes *à la* Proust, are connected to the protagonist's life as a student in Oxford, who gets emotionally involved with two different girls, Shehnaz and Mandira. But these two female characters emerge from the narrative almost as shadows; only in one of the short 27 chapters of the novel, in chapter 26 specifically, do we get a gentle glimpse of one of these two women (but we don't even know whether she is Shehnaz or Mandira). The picture we obtain in this

chapter comes from a third person narrator (the only narrator of this sort in the novel) who is in fact a reflector or focaliser of the female character. But she (whoever she might be) is not of course important in the story. The novel is built around the anonymous male character, and each chapter is a sort of picture or *tableau vivant* of memories, evocations or feelings. The style—as some critics have commented—seems like that of a collection of lyrical essays, because each chapter of the novel can be read independently of the others and not necessarily in the order in which they appear. We could go further and say that some passages of the novel, in the voice of this fictional first person narrator, are very similar to some of the lyrical and evocative descriptions that Amit Chaudhuri, as a critic, has written in his reviews and essays about Calcutta or India in general.

Taking all these points into consideration, it will not be difficult for any reader to establish a connection between *Afternoon Raag* and Joyce's *Portrait*, with which—although not in specific details—it shares so much. In conclusion, Joyce's shadow is long indeed, as Chaudhuri's would-be writers—*malgré lui* perhaps—clearly prove.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *A Strange and Sublime Address* (London: William Heinemann, 1991; reprinted Vintage, 1998); *Afternoon Raag* (London: William Heinemann, 1993; reprinted Minerva, 1994); *Freedom Song* (London: Picador, 1998); *A New World* (London: Picador, 2000); *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (London: Picador, 2001); and *Real Time. Stories and a Reminiscence* (London: Picador, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Julian Symons, "City of Dust," *London Review of Books* (25 July 1991): 13.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Galván, "On Belonging and Not Belonging: A Conversation with Amit Chaudhuri," *Wasafiri* 30 (Autumn 1999): 44.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. José Antonio Álvarez Amorós (Salamanca: Ediciones Colegio de España, Colección Clásicos Almar-Angléstica, 1995) 114-115.

<sup>5</sup> *A Strange and Sublime Address* 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> *A Strange and Sublime Address* 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 274.

<sup>8</sup> *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 330.

<sup>9</sup> *A Strange and Sublime Address* 56-58.

<sup>10</sup> "City of Dust" 14.

<sup>11</sup> Fernando Galván, "On Belonging and Not Belonging: A Conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" 45.

<sup>12</sup> Fernando Galván, "On Belonging..." 43.

<sup>13</sup> *The London Review of Books* (19 August 1993): 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Afternoon Raag* 120.