

## *The Person of the Artist*

IT IS one of our strict modern feelings about literature that the mind which makes the work of art ought to be defined only by the work of art itself—that there is something illicit and low, or at least un-literary, about inquiring into the personality of the man whose name is signed to the work. This is quite wrong. No curiosity is more legitimate than that which directs itself upon the connection between the “impersonal” creative mind and the “actual” and “human” person. No question is more justified, or more beautiful, than that which asks how the ordinary human being transcends himself in art. Between Bergotte read by the young Marcel at Combray and Bergotte met at luncheon at the Swanns’ there is a shocking difference which we do right to contemplate. And we should fail in humanity if we didn’t wonder how it came about that the despicable Monsieur Biche of Madame Verdurin’s parties developed into the splendid Elstir.

Among the great modern literary personalities there is none whom it has seemed harder to connect with his work than James Joyce. It was Joyce, of course, who gave us one of the classic formulations of the idea of the artist’s impersonality. Stephen Dedalus, in his famous discourse on æsthetics in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, says that “the personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluent and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak.” But it is worth noting that the impersonality is covertly transferred from the artist to the person-who-is-the-artist, for three sentences later Stephen says that “the artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his finger nails.” The impersonality

of the artist is described in quite personal terms—it becomes a personal trait, or a social attitude; it is at once translated, as it were, into “indifference,” which the young Joyce expresses by the arrogantly rude gesture of paring the finger nails. And there can be no doubt that Joyce thought of impersonality as a personal trait of his own, and one by which he set great store. Stephen Dedalus cannot be said to *be* Joyce, and much less can the Richard Rowan of *Exiles*; the Joyce critics often remind us of this and they are right. But these two characters do indeed *stand for* Joyce, and they make it plain that “impersonality,” expressed by aloofness, irony, and condescension, was an attribute which he cherished. Stephen and Richard have the manner of speaking not in their own persons but as if they were ambassadors representing their sovereign selves at the court of some unpolished nation.

And apparently this was pretty close to the personal manner which Joyce actually used, or aspired to use. The point is but a small one, yet it does stick in the mind that when Stuart Gilbert was writing his commentary on *Ulysses*, Joyce asked him to refer to him as often as he could as Mr. Joyce. It was not impossible for Joyce to “unbend,” it was by no means hard for him, especially as he grew older, to be courteous, often in a very sweet way, but most accounts of him lead us to suppose that he never involved his personality easily and naturally and pleasurably with anyone else’s. In the preface to his edition of Joyce’s letters,\* Mr. Gilbert speaks of the authoritativeness of Herbert Gorman’s biography, and this authoritativeness we cannot doubt, if only because Gorman wrote with Joyce’s consent and help. But Gorman

\* *Letters of James Joyce*. Edited by STUART GILBERT. Faber and Faber. 42s.

is not able to get very far along with the job of literary biographer—he can suggest very little of the connection between the person and the artist. His habit of referring to Joyce in such phrases as “the Irish writer,” “the exiled writer,” “the Dubliner”—in contexts where this depersonalisation has no special rhetorical intention—suggests that he had great difficulty in thinking of Joyce as really a person. He can make plain the fierce integrity, the heroic dedication and pertinacity, the unremitting single-mindedness. And it is indeed not hard to understand how the man whose temperament is marked by these qualities should be the author of *A Portrait* and *Exiles* and even *Dubliners*. But the more we perceive Joyce’s rigorousness, his cultivation of the virtues of defence and attack, the harder it is to see how he could have been the author of one of the most delightful and charming books of the age.

It is time, I think, to use these two suspect words about *Ulysses*. It is time to forget the hard elaborateness of the many devices by which the book proceeds and by which the impersonality of the author is protected, and the solemnity of the ambience in which it has long existed, and to keep chiefly in mind its brilliance, its humour, its warmth, its pathos, its rich sentimentality, its eroticism, its beautiful simplicity of right feeling. Disengage it from our recollection of the battles that were fought over it, from its high status as a cultural symbol, from all the critical ingenuities it asked for and received, and take it with some of the simplicity it deserves. It will then be seen to be one of the kindest books in the world, one of the most loving and most forgiving, and therefore one of the saddest.

SO THERE is the mystery: that *Ulysses* is what it is and that it was James Joyce who wrote it. From Gorman’s biography, as I say, we gain no clue, no sense of how the man is related to the artist. But Joyce’s letters of forty years do make the connection for us, and in a rather dramatic way.

They are not great letters. They don’t support a view I expressed some years ago when I said that “among the letters of great men those of the great creative artists are likely to be the most intimate, the liveliest, and the fullest of wisdom.” I said this under the influence of my enthusiasm for Keats’s letters, and it is surely an extravagant generalisation.

It doesn’t hold, for example, for Yeats’s letters. And it doesn’t hold for Joyce’s. They are not remarkable in themselves, or not often. Yet taken in their continuity, they make a biographical document of the highest interest.

They begin with a great flourish, with the famous letter to Ibsen. Joyce is nineteen; the occasion of the letter is Ibsen’s seventy-third birthday. There had previously been a kind of communication between the old and the young man—Joyce had published in *The Fortnightly Review* an essay on *When We Dead Awaken* and Ibsen had told William Archer of his pleasure in it; Archer sent word of this to Joyce, who took licence from the message to address his great hero and master. It is really a superb letter—it is meant to be just that, in the literal sense of the word: it was the young man’s announcement that he was claiming his birthright, that he was taking his place in the tradition. He speaks of his defiant advocacy of Ibsen’s work at his college, and we do not fail to note that what he says he had put forward as Ibsen’s “highest excellence” is his “lofty, impersonal power.” He is nothing if not pugnacious: “It may annoy you,” he says, “to have your works at the mercy of striplings but I am sure you would prefer hot-headedness to nerveless and ‘cultured’ paradoxes”—it is surely Shaw whom he is challenging. He is quick to protect himself from condescension: “Do not think me a hero-worshipper,” he says, “—I am not so. And when I spoke of you in debating societies and so forth, I enforced attention by no futile rantings.” He concludes with conscious magnificence:

But we always keep the dearest things to ourselves. I did not tell them what bound me closest to you. I did not say how what I could discern dimly of your life was my pride to see, how your battles inspired me—not the obvious material battles but those that were fought and won behind your forehead, how your wilful resolution to wrest the secret from life gave me heart and how in your absolute indifference to public canons of art, friends, and shibboleths you walked in the light of your inward heroism. And this is what I write to you of now. Your work on earth draws to a close and you are near the silence. It is growing dark for you. Many write of such things, but they do not know. You have only opened the way—though you have gone as far as you could upon it—to the end of “John

Gabriel Borkman" and its spiritual truth—your last play stands, I take it, apart. But I am sure that higher and holier enlightenment lies—onward.

As one of the younger generation for whom you have spoken, I give you greeting—not humbly, because I am obscure and you in the glare, not sadly because you are an old man and I am a young man, not presumptuously or sentimentally—but joyfully, with hope and with love, I give you greeting.

It is very moving, this hail-and-farewell from the young hero to the old hero. It has the right generosity and the right touch of the heroic and tragic cruelty. It has the legendary note that was strangely possible in many artists' conceptions of themselves in the first years of the twentieth century. We listen to it now, when we hear it in the distance of the past, with the curiosity of epigoni; and there are those who hear it with the relieved awareness that this grandiose idea of the life in literature is now done with and forever impossible.

**B**UT AFTER the first letter the Siegfried call is not to be sounded again. The dedication to art once made, and ritually and grandiosely, the high promises can be fulfilled only by slogging hard work, by dirty details. Joyce was not alone, he demanded help and he got it in one measure or another. Pound and Yeats, Edward Marsh, and H. G. Wells were among the many who undertook to relieve his difficulties or to advance his reputation. By 1917 Harriet Shaw Weaver had begun her generous and tactful financial help. But all the way it was hard going and it needed more than courage—it needed obsession and pertinacity, and shrewdness and even shamelessness. No small peasant proprietor, no shopkeeper could have been more willing than Joyce to scheme and calculate and haggle and do the mean chores. (The famous "secrecy, silence, and cunning" are, we must know, the personal weapons not only of artists and revolutionaries, but also of diplomats, operators, peasants, and shopkeepers.) After reading the letters, it is impossible not to see how deeply involved in class feelings Joyce was—Wyndham Lewis's old accusation that Joyce was forever worried about his gentility or gentlemanliness is perfectly true—and he thought of his genius not only as a sacred spiritual trust but as a

property, as an investment that had to be made to pay.

I suppose that it can be said that the record of the long bitter enterprise does not show Joyce in an attractive light. He had to fight for his rights with publishers, in long letters stiff with detailed argument and the sense of aggrievement. The story of the battle for the publication of *Dubliners* is well known; it lasted over nine years and Joyce waged it alone. And this, of course, is but the best-known of the occasions given Joyce for angry pertinacity. We can say of Joyce, as Johnson said of Dryden, that "he knew how to complain"; and complaint is, I suppose, not ingratiating. (But he never really complains about the torture of his eyes.) When at last his reputation began to grow, he hovered over it like a hen with one chick—no mention of his name is too unimportant for him to take note of, no word of praise is too small for him to take pleasure in; he can never have enough clippings of reviews, for he likes to send them to correspondents.

And through it all he seems to have attached himself to no one (outside his family) in a personal way: in the early years there is no one to whom he writes in the light and teasing way of friendship, let alone of intimate serious communication. There seems to be no evidence that at this time he had a close friend, and it is hard to see, if we can draw conclusions from his tone, on what terms he would have maintained friendship. The belief which so decisively marks Stephen Dedalus's character, that he is being conspired against and betrayed, is an important part of his creator's character. And even when, as time passed, he did come to write in the way of friendship, his manner is uncertain. Mr. Gilbert, speaking of the letters in their relation to the literary style of *Ulysses*, remarks on "the writer's skill in adjusting their tone, not merely their content, to the personality of his correspondents... many of Joyce's letters are masterpieces of epistolary psychology..." Rather too much adjustment, I should say, rather too much psychology. At other times adjustment and psychology quite fail. When he writes to Frank Budgen or Robert MacAlmon with the intention of easy camaraderie, the manner just about comes off, but we can see it being brought off, with undue effort. A letter of condolence to the widow of a boyhood friend

is truly kind but hopelessly awkward and embarrassed. What Mr. Gilbert calls "the informative, whimsical, slightly deferent letters to Miss Weaver" make us think that that lady would more than once need all the generosity of spirit she so clearly had, not to feel a little snubbed and condescended to.

YET IT is in a letter to Miss Weaver that there occurs what may be thought of as the beginning of a revision in Joyce's conception of himself, a rather striking expression of ruefulness and self-doubt. The letter was written in 1921, when Joyce was thirty-nine years old, and in it he takes note of the legends about his character that had grown up during his long years of struggle. He lists the extravagant and malicious stories in some detail. "I mention these views," he says, "not to speak about myself but to show you how conflicting they all are. The truth probably is that I am a quite commonplace person undeserving of so much imaginative painting.... There is a further opinion that I am a crafty, simulating, and dissimulating Ulysses-like type, a 'jeune priet,' selfish and cynical. There is some truth in all this, I suppose: but it is by no means all of me (nor was it all of Ulysses) and it has been my habit to apply this alleged quality to safeguard my poor creations."

It is as if he had come to view with some misgivings the "secrecy, silence, and cunning" which his Stephen Hero had invoked. And when once the long enterprise has reached its culmination, when once *Ulysses* has neared the end of its progress, and was known by at least a few to be a great work, the secrecy, silence, and cunning seemed to be no longer necessary and Joyce seems almost consciously to be trying to escape from their habit. The letters from this point on become very much more relaxed, as if by an avowed desire for relaxation, intimacy, and friendliness. In this Joyce does not always succeed—for example, the note in which he thanks Constantine Curran for what would seem to be a magnificent present, an 18th-century painted woodcarving of the arms of the City of Dublin, is almost cold in its gratitude. But in general the personal letters become warm, frequently playful, and, in a degree, self-revealing. I shrink from saying it, it is so much what every newspaper interviewer always seeks to discover and to reassure



himself by, but the fact is as it is—that the Joyce of these letters was the simplest of men, the most (save the mark!) “human,” the most conventional. It was not easy for him to form associations in the world, but the strength of his family associations was enormous and touchingly open. This, I suppose, has long been known of Joyce, but it presents itself to us in the letters with a new force. He never mentions his wife save in a way that suggests his admiration and affection, and the only thing that can make him angry at his daughter is some untoward behaviour to her mother. All references to his son are warm and proud, and when his son marries and has a son of his own, Joyce envelopes the whole family in his affection and in his joy over their familial existence—there is no difficulty at all in connecting the person with the artist of *Finnegans Wake*, that hymn to all recurrences, especially those of the family. His daughter Lucia was stricken by extreme mental illness; it cannot be said that Joyce showed great wisdom in his handling of her case, but his tortured concern for her never abates, and nothing could be more touching than the way he continues to affirm his pride in her and to speak of her talents, and the way he tries in secret to support her fatal pride by gaining for her the public recognition she wanted, for this poor girl’s trouble was that she could not possibly compete with her father for the distinction she craved. His aunt Mrs. Murray is a person of the greatest importance to Joyce—all his letters to her are full of interest, especially those in which he writes to her about *Ulysses*, instructing her in the monetary value of the copy he has sent her, adjuring her not to lend it, the book-borrowing habits of Dubliners being what they are, conjuring her to read the *Odyssey* before she begins his book, and if not the whole *Odyssey* then at least Lamb’s Tales, and he frets and fusses because she doesn’t do what she should.

The death of his father devastates him. It must come as a surprise, and a pleasant one, to anyone who remembers the rough handling Simon Dedalus is given in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* that Joyce at fifty should be able to write—to T. S. Eliot—of being “very broken down” by the loss of his father. “I... was always in correspondence with him,” he says. It is interesting to see how the need for

loyalty asserts itself even at this moment. It is not only that “[my father] had an intense love for me” but that “I feel that a poor heart which was true and faithful to me is no more.” In a letter to Miss Weaver he writes:

My father had an extraordinary affection for me. He was the silliest man I ever knew and yet cruelly shrewd. He thought and talked of me up to his last breath. I was very fond of him always, being a sinner myself, and even liked his faults. Hundreds of pages and scores of characters in my books came from him. His dry (or rather wet) wit and his expression of face convulsed me often with laughter. When he got the copy I sent him of *Tales Told*, etc. (so they write me), he looked a long time at Brancusi’s Portrait of J. J. [this was a quite non-representational design on the cover of the *Shem and Shawn* volume] and finally remarked: Jim has changed more than I thought. I got from him his portraits, a waistcoat, a good tenor voice, and an extravagant licentious disposition (out of which, however, the greater part of any talent I may have springs but, apart from these, something else I cannot define. But if an observer thought of my father and myself and my son too physically, though we are all very different, he could perhaps define it. It is a great consolation to me to have such a good son. His grandfather was very fond of him and kept his photograph beside mine on the mantelpiece.

I LEAVE it to better scholars than myself to say whether Joyce’s antagonism to psychoanalysis kept him from observing that his name and Freud’s mean the same. And although it may at first seem an odd comparison, the two men were in many respects very like each other. They share the avowedly heroic intention and the ability to wait long for achievement and fame. They share a fierce, isolate pride, and the need for loyalty. They are at one in point of family feeling, especially in the disillusioned attachment to the father. And they share the paradox of being revolutionary in their work and rigorously conventional in their lives, a corollary, no doubt, of their family feeling. Joyce’s propriety was really monumental—nothing could be more amusing than his reiterated grievance that the wreath he had ordered sent to George Moore’s funeral was not mentioned in the papers, and nothing could be more touching than his saying of Moore, “. . . I hope I be-



haved toward him during the three or four visits I paid him with the respect due to his age, personality, and achievements." Neither Joyce nor Freud liked the modern in art—Joyce seems to have been quite indifferent to what was being done around him. He apparently knew a large part of *The Waste Land* by heart, but I have the impression that this is the only modern work he honours even by implication. He had no admiration for D. H. Lawrence, and he mentions Proust only to object—not unpleasantly—to Proust's fame as a competitor of his own. He speaks of Picasso only to say how much better than his Picasso's situation is. He is rather put out by a design of Brancusi's used as a decoration for the cover of *Tales of Shem and Shawn*. He speaks of Brancusi as being "something of a fogey like myself"—"But I wish he or Antheil, say, could or would be as explicit as I try to be when people ask me: And what's this here, Guvnor?" His tastes all go back-

ward. Stephen Dedalus's judgment of Byron as the greatest English poet may well have been affirmed to the very end by his creator; the older man does not revise the judgment of the younger that Newman is the greatest writer of English prose. He is delighted when he learns that the universities are taking him seriously. He asks that a copy of *Ulysses* be sent to Professor George Saintsbury—"I am old-fashioned enough to admire him though he may not return the compliment." He speaks with high pleasure of having received from the poet-laureate Robert Bridges a signed copy of *The Testament of Beauty* "with an inscription expressing his full sympathy with what I am doing." He expresses his astonishment at this, yet after all it seems to him but an example of something he has noted of himself: "The rapprochement between myself and very old men is very curious." Very curious—and not so very hard to understand.

Lionel Trilling

## ARMS AND THE PROFESSOR

A GLANCE at any railway bookstall's amazing cargo of tunnellers, frogmen, aces, and agents is enough to demonstrate that the British public (like most publics in the Western world) has a keen appetite for war literature. So has the British juvenile, according to a survey of the reading habits of 8,000 boys and girls: "Biggles," who deals with daredevils of the air, is the boys' favourite character, against all comers.

Why then have the academics not shared and moulded this taste, in their academic fashion? They write as well as read detective stories: why do they not write about war? Why do they not think about it?

One answer is that they *do* to some extent. In the last few years there have been some excellent scholarly studies of the Crusades, of the Royal Navy, of Wellington's system of supply. War and society were discussed recently in some admirable Third Programme talks. The man who organised them, Mr. Michael Howard, holds a newly created lectureship in military history at King's College, London. Under the direction of a Cambridge don, J. R. M. Butler, the British official histories of the Second World

War have been broadly conceived and capably executed (though at too majestic a pace) by such "professional" military historians as Professor N. H. Gibbs and Mr. John Ehrman. They are a great deal more interesting and ambitious than the fat, four-square, red-coated official volumes that commemorate the First World War, competent though these were in their unyielding way.

But this is not a wholly convincing answer. Few of the studies I have mentioned have been reviewed as fully as they deserved: they have not tempted Sir Harold Nicolson or Mr. Raymond Mortimer to have a go. If Mr. Howard's is a fresh academic post, its appearance is balanced by the disappearance of a similar lectureship that used to exist at Manchester University. The latter post originated, no doubt, in the remote, excited era of Seeley and Mahan and Spenser Wilkinson, when grand strategy threatened to become as socially respectable as the grand piano. Since then, military history as a learned pursuit has been out of favour. From time to time some professor stresses its importance in an article or lecture. Nobody disagrees loudly with him, but nobody is persuaded either. A curious boredom