

# Portrait of the Artist as Crab

*Letters of James Joyce, Vols. II and III, edited by Richard Ellmann (Viking, 1,056 pp. \$25), completes the voluminous personal record of the author of "Ulysses" and "Finnegans Wake." Leon Edel, who had glimpses of Joyce on the Left Bank in the late 1920s and early '30s, is himself an editor of letters and a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer.*

By LEON EDEL

IN 1957 Stuart Gilbert edited a volume of James Joyce's letters, and I wrote at the time that far from constituting a "portrait of the artist" they offered a melancholy picture of "Joyce-against-the-world"—and the skill with which the novelist turned this into a legend of "the world-against-Joyce." Now Richard Ellman, Joyce's biographer, has compiled two further volumes, adding more than 1,200 letters to the canon and some 200 letters and documents written by other hands.

The new volumes further document and reinforce my earlier impression. You would have expected the author of *Ulysses* to be among the great letter-writers of the century. But letters require a feeling for one's correspondents; they are one of the friendliest forms of intercourse, and Joyce did not possess the art of friendship. What you hear in these two stout volumes is a perpetual cry for money, for help, for love. The world is repeatedly proclaimed cheat and liar, and Joyce its crucified martyr. The letters are a mixture of cadging, self-advertisement, charlatanism, pedantry, and supreme arrogance, by which Joyce sought to defend himself against his private demons.

The weight and abundance of these terrible writings of a desperate man risks weariness to the spirit and to the reader's sympathy. Too much is told, more than is needed for the purposes of truth and history. Anguish is made redundant. Ellmann recognizes some of the shortcomings, but he makes it his thesis that Joyce's self-mockery and Chaplinesque vaudeville injected a relieving note of pathos into these communications to family and friends. Stephen Spender recently remarked that if one does not keep in mind Joyce's sense of comedy "he may find Joyce's letters oppressive and, in the long run, almost unbearable." However, when one comes to the es-

sence of the matter, laughter is impossible.

For these letters demonstrate, more clearly than ever, the pathological elements in the art of James Joyce. The writer was so alienated from the world, so cut off from empathy with fellow humans, that he was ruthless with family, cruel to friends, and surprisingly infantile in his recurrent demands that the world give him recognition even before he gave anything to it. His talent, when he finally showed it, was accepted; yet Joyce continued to cry betrayal, for in his alienation everything was pulled inward, into himself and his own "madness in art." The result was a constant paranoid distortion of realities. The difficulties he encountered in being published, for instance, are now legend; yet it can be seen that they were no greater than those of other gifted writers with new ways of saying things. Those famous four-letter words that antagonized the printers and are now commonplace offer merely a paradox—that one of the most richly endowed verbal artists in the history of language felt a need to resort to the poverty of scribbblings on toilet walls.

It is not difficult to document from these letters the ways in which the realities of Joyce's existence were constantly deformed, parodied, satirized. To say this is not to dismiss the power of his satire or the greatness of his verbal imagination—the only kind of imagination he truly had. He could imagine nothing save "the book of himself." It is always Joyce on Joyce, and it is a Joyce consuming himself with the eternal rage of his art. For the Irish rebel writing was a form of revenge against a host of imaginary foes, and he achieved it with "dagger definitions."

The essential story of Joyce's life remains unchanged: how he quit Ireland in poverty and anger although many held out hands of friendship to him; how he wandered, pathetic and unheroic, until he settled in backwater polyglot Trieste and taught at Berlitz; how he exploited his talented brother, Stanislaus, one of the martyred siblings of literary history; and how finally, with the aid of Ezra Pound, he pulled himself together, went to live in Paris, and did his most characteristic work. Here his creativity found its greatest release. He discovered that the world was only too ready to accept him even if it did not always admire *Ulysses* and scoffed at *Work in Progress* (which later became

*Finnegans Wake*). Harriet Weaver endowed him; the sympathetic ladies of the rue de l'Odeon, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, published, protected, cushioned him. But he quarreled with everyone, he sued at the drop of a hat, he invited strife. He was one of the great "injustice collectors" of literature. I think it could be demonstrated that Joyce needed the censorship and contumely of the world: he could thereby vent his rage and consider himself one of the insulted and injured. Some of his letters read as if written by Dostoevsky's soliloquizing functionary in *Notes from the Underground*.

Ellmann concedes there are "traces" of pathology in Joyce's queer, erotic, childish letters to Nora, his common-law wife. He speaks of "fetishism, anality, paranoia, and masochism," yet asks us to turn away from Krafft-Ebing to recognize Joyce's "Circean beguilements" and "vaudeville routines." But no amount of self-mockery or literary heroics can conceal the sad, ugly truths disclosed. Strange laughter can still be the laughter of madness, and Joyce's wry comedy is a comedy of the helplessness and anger and aggression of an artist filled with grandiosities who walked "a way a lone a last a loved a long the," as he told us in the uncompleted final sentence of *Finnegans Wake* which leads us back to the book's beginning. It was one of his many insights into his personal self-containment.

TO the miseries of his psyche were added the physical torments of a dozen eye operations for cataract, general poor health, partial poverty at first and self-impoverishment by a grandeur of spending. He had bouts of drunkenness; his father had been a barroom cadger, and Joyce made himself into one on a gargantuan scale. He had periods of deep depression, during which he moved from "great irritation and impotent fury" to sudden fits of weeping. This is the haunted, driven existence to which we are made spectators; and with this there was Joyce's way — I suppose through the combination of helplessness and mockery—of commanding always a circle of loyal friends who were hypnotized by his genius and prepared to immolate themselves on its altar. They received scant thanks for their pains.

Ellmann has edited the documents with scholarly thoroughness. If their dreary totality is a kind of heaping of Pelion on Ossa, one is nevertheless grateful that Joyce's self-portrait can be viewed in all its colors. A corrective now exists against the prevailing tendency to use Joyce's art to soften our vision of his human failings. In the end, these volumes should help to restore a sense of proportion both to Joycean criticism and to biography.

# Poet's Epistles to Posterity

*Letters from Petrarch, selected and translated by Morris Bishop* (Indiana University Press. 306 pp. \$9.50), reveals a Renaissance man who above all loved and was fascinated by himself. Mark Musa, who is editor of "Essays on Dante," translated Dante's "Vita Nuova."

By MARK MUSA

MORRIS BISHOP, whose wit, charm, and variety of literary interests are reminiscent of the Renaissance man, offers in his *Letters from Petrarch* another translation into English of an important work that long since should have been accessible to the public. Through careful choice of words and rhythms Mr. Bishop has captured the spirit and tone of the poet's Latin letters. This elegant translation is a beautiful companion-piece to *Petrarch and His World* by Mr. Bishop, published three years ago.

Petrarch made his greatest literary discovery in Verona in 1345: a manuscript of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*. In them he found a Cicero quite different from the orator and moral philosopher he had worshiped; here was Cicero writing about everyday matters (even about the steam pipe in his bathroom). Following Cicero's example Petrarch began collecting, selecting, and revising his own letters, which ranged from discussions on the art of writing and the evils of adultery, to his dog and canine fidelity. He published them in twenty-four books under the title *Familiarum rerum libri* in 1361, the year of the return of the Great Plague.

Morris Bishop tells us in his brief introductory note, "He survived the Plague and found his itch for letter writing undiminished." Petrarch's secretaries kept copies of all his correspondence until he died in 1374, and shortly afterwards this later correspondence was edited and published as *Senilium rerum libri*. Miscellaneous letters that turned up after Petrarch's death were issued in a collection entitled *Epistolae variae*.

Few of the letters in Mr. Bishop's translation—selected from all three categories—have been rendered before into English. The collection opens with the famous "Epistle to Posterity" (1351), which consists of a brief autobiography. Although according to Petrarch it was the first one written, he probably meant

the first one written with the specific intention of reaching posterity.

Petrarch loved Laura, but more than Laura he loved Petrarch; he was fascinated by the men and movements of the exciting age in which he lived, but he was fascinated above all by himself. Like so much of his work, the poet's Latin letters reveal his thirst for glory, his pedantry, emotion, and false modesty. Petrarch is always analyzing himself and his sufferings, especially in his poetry: he leads you to believe he will talk about the lady Laura — about whom Morris Bishop has some amusing things to say in his important book *Petrarch and His World*—but no sooner has he captured you by the beauty of an elaborate conceit than the "Io" or "Ego" of the poet takes the center of the stage. In his collection of love poetry, *Canzoniere*, the lovely Laura with the golden hair and black eyes, angelic mouth of pearls and roses (who in reality was married and had eleven children; she must have been pregnant at most of their meetings) was the cause for Petrarch's continuous self-examination and his life-long conflict: he was torn between lust for the things of this world (*vanitas*)—including his love for Laura, a probable illiterate, who represented to him fame and glory—and his love of God or spiritual values. While Beatrice led Dante to God, Laura led Petrarch away from God to the world.

PETRARCH'S conflict is most evident in his letter entitled "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux" to Father Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolero. While attempting to find the easiest approach to the summit of Mount Ventoux during a climb on April 26, 1336, with his beloved brother Gherardo, Petrarch discovers that three or four times when he has tried to ascend easily he was going down instead of up, and, as he observes, "there is no way for anybody to reach the heights by going down." Tired, he rests and begins addressing himself:

The summit is the ultimate goal, the terminus of the road on which we journey. Everyone wishes to arrive there, but, as Ovid says: "To wish is not enough; to gain your end you must ardently yearn." You, certainly, both wish and ardently yearn, unless you are fooling yourself, as you so often do. What then holds you back? Surely nothing but the level road that seems at first sight easier, amid base earthly pleasure. But after much wandering



—Bettmann Archive.

**Petrarch—"pedantry, emotion, and false modesty."**

you will either have to climb upward eventually, with labors long shirked, to the heights of the blessed life, or lie sluggishly in the valley of your sins.

When he reaches the top and looks toward the Italian skies Petrarch muses:

Today ten years have passed since you finished your youthful studies and left Bologna. . . . What I used to love, I love no longer. No, I'm lying. I love it still, but more moderately. No, again I have lied. I love, but with more shame, more sadness; and now at last I have told the truth. This is the fact: I love, but I love what I long not to love, what I should like to hate. I love nonetheless, but unwillingly, under compulsion, with sadness and mourning.

This is one of those rare times that Petrarch will refer, though indirectly, to his love of Laura in his correspondence. This letter, as do so many others in Morris Bishop's collection, serves as a key to an understanding of the artistic structure of his *Canzoniere*, which is, alas, despite Petrarch's predictions that only his Latin works would be read and appreciated by posterity, his most significant contribution to the world of poetry.

Petrarch's letters admirably show that he possessed all the medieval remnants characteristic of the early Renaissance man; he was the first who had to go mountain climbing with his St. Augustine in one pocket and his "occasional" poems in another. Later Renaissance alpinists like Ariosto, Boiardo, Pulci, and Machiavelli found it possible to challenge the peaks with a lighter load.

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