A Portrait of the Man Who is, at Present, One of the More Significant Figures in Literature

By DIJNA BARNES

THERE are men in Dublin who will tell you that the sweet voice has gone; and there are a few women, lost to youth, who will add: "One night he was singing and the next he wasn't, and there's been no sign of the like of it!" For the singing voice of James Joyce, author of The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and of Ulysses is said to have been second to none. Those who say that Joyce we no longer sing, may not come as a revelation to the casual reader of his books; one must perhaps have spent one of those strangely aloof evenings in one of the Dublin pubs, where he used to come, as it appeared in The Little Review to have realized the singing quality of his words. For tradition has it that a singer must have a touch of bardic, a joyous pouring forth of the right leg and then the left, and a sigh or two this side of the cloister, and Joyce has none of these.

I had read Dublines over my coffee during the war, I had been on one or two theatrical committees just long enough to suggest the production of Exciles, his one play. The Portrait had been consumed, turning from one show to the other, but it was not until I came upon his last work that I sensed the singer. Lines like: "So stood they both awhile in wan hope harking for the step of the echo," the extroverted large wains bring forth of the fields, spherical potatoes and iridescent kale and onions, pearls of the earth, and red, green, yellow, brown, russet, sweet, big bitter rive pulpilshed apples and pears, fit for princes and raspberries from their canes," or still better the singing humour in that delicious execution scene in which the "learned predilekt kent in a most Christian spirit in a pool of rainwater.

Yes, then I realized Joyce must indeed have begun life as a singer, almost a very tender singer, and occasionally no voice can hold out over the brutalities of life without breaking—he turned to quill and paper, for so he could arrange, in the memory, the abundant inadequacies of life, as a laying out of jewels—jewels with a will to decay.

Joyce, the Man

YET of Joyce, the man, one has heard very little. I had seen a photograph of him, the collar up over the narrow throat, the beard, heavier in those days, descending into the almost of the jaw and nose. I had been told that he was going blind, and we in America learned from Ezra Pound that "Joyce is the only man on the continent who continues to produce, in spite of poverty and sickness, working from eight to sixteen hours a day.

I had heard that for a number of years Joyce taught English in a school in Trieste, and this is almost all of his habits, of his likes and his dislikes, nothing, unless one dared come to some conclusion about them from the number of facts hidden under an equal number of imponderables in his Ulysses.

And then, one day, I came to Paris. Sitting in the cafe of the Deux Magots, that faces the little church of St. Germain des Prés, I saw applauding an old man, it was James Joyce, old man, with head slightly lifted and slightly
turned, giving to the wind an orderly disorder of red and black hair, which descended sharp- edged into a white velvet cape.

He wore a blue grey coat, too young it seemed, partly because he had thrust his gatherings behind his neck, partly because he had clasped it, lay two full inches above the hips.

At the moment of seeing him, a remark made to me by a mystic flashed through my mind "A man who has been more crucified on his sensibilities than any writer of our age," and I said to myself — "this is a strange way to recognize a man I never held my eye on.

Because he had heard of the suppression of The Little Review on account of Ursula and of the subsequent trial, he sat down opposite me, who was familiar with the whole story, ordering a white wine. He began to talk at once.

"The pity is," he said, "I seem to choose his words for his age rather than their aptness, there I have sinned, at least unthinkingly in my book — or worse they may take it in some more serious way, and on the honour of a gentleman, there is not one single sentence in it.

"For a moment there was silence. His hands, peculiarly limp in the introductory shake and peculiarly pulpy, running into a thickness that the base gave no hint of, lay, one on the stem of the glass, the other, forgotten, palm out, on the most delightful wristlet it has ever been my happiness to see. Purple with alternate doe and dog heads. The does, tiny scarlet tongues hanging out over blood lower lips, drowned in low white, and the dogs so more fervently. A sort of mounting animal which adheres to his master through the seven cycles of change.

He saw my admiration and he smiled. "Made by the hand of my grandmother for the first hunt of the season," and there was another silence in which he arranged and lit a cigar.

"All great talkers," he said softly, "have spoken in the language of Sterne, Swift or the Restorations, but not the Chaucerian. The Chaucerian. He studied the Restoration through a microscope in the morning, repeated it through a telescope in the evening."

"And in Ursula?" I asked...

"They understand, great talkers" he answered, "them and the things they forgot. In Ursula, I will tell, in my own silly, what a man says, sons, thinks, and what such seeing, saying do, to what you Freudsians call "the unconscious" for psychoanalysis" he broked off, "it's neither more nor less a subconscious perception."

He raised his eyes. There is something un-calculated in them — the same pathness seen in plants long hidden from the sun, — and sometimes a little jitter that goes with a lift and rounding of the upper lip.

His Appearance

PEOPLE say of him that he looks both sad and tired. He does look sad and he does look tired. A man is the sum of his sins, who has procured some medieval permission to sorrow out of time and in no place; the weariness of one self-subjected to the creation of an over abounding sphere.

If I were asked what seemed to be the most characteristic pose of James Joyce I should say that he wore a hat; turned farther away than disgust and not so far as death, for the turn of displeasure is too near with him, yet the only thing at all like it, is the look of a stricken animal. With this I should add — think of him as a heavy man yet this, drink- ing a thin cool wine with lips almost hidden in his high narrow mouth, making the etern- al cigar, held slightly above shoulder-level, and never moved until consumed, the mouth brought to and taken away from it to eject the sharp juts of yellow smoke.

Because he talks so much and he questions one must know him. It has been my pleasure to talk to him many times during my four months in Paris, and this is a tale of rivers and of ret
James Joyce

ligion, of the instinctive genius of the church which chose, for the singing of its hymns, the voice of Minstrelsy—the voice of the covenants. We have talked of women, about whom we seem a bit disinterested. Were I vain I should say he is after them, but I am certain he is only a little skeptical of their existence. We have talked of Blasen, of Strindberg, of Shakespeare. "Hamlet is a great play, written in Denmark, it is a drama, a comedy, a tragedy," and of Strindberg, "No drama behind the hysterical ravings.

We have talked of death, of rats, of horses, of the sea; languages, climates and offerings. Of artists and of Ireland.

'The Irish are people who will never have leaders, for at the great moment they always desert them.' They have produced one skeleton—Parnell—never a man.

Sometimes his wife, Nora, and his two children have been with him. Large children, almost as tall as he is himself, and Nora walks under fine red hair, speaking with a brogue that carrries the dust of Ireland in it; Ireland as a place where poverty has become the art of scarcity. A brogue is a little more 'defiant than Joyce's which is tamed by preoccupation. Joyce has few friends, yet he is alway willing to leave his writing table and his white coat of an evening, to go to some quiet near-by cafe, there to discuss anything that is not "artistic" or "sublime" or "rational." Caliban has often found him writing into the night, or drinking away the day. Nora says, "I myself quite came upon him as he lay full length on his stomach poring over a valve full of notes in his yellowing shoes."—for as Nora says, "It's the great fana
ticism in him, and it is coming to no end." Once he was reading out of the book of saints (he is never without it) and muttering to himself that this particular day's saint was "A devil of a fellow for bringing on the rain, and we wanted to go for a stroll." However in his he will come away for the evening, for he is simple, a scholar, and sees nothing objectionable in human beings if they will only remain in place.

Yet he has been called eccentric, mad, incoherent, unintelligible, yes and futuro-
istic. One wonders why, thinking what a fine lyric beginning that great Kabe
laischer's, "...Die Welt war so erstaunlich und inper
tially addenda for foliage,—the thin sweet lyricism of Chamber Music; the casual inevitability of Dubliners, the passion and prayer of Stephen Dedalus, who said that he would go alone through the world.

"And, not only separate from all others, but to have not even one friend," and he has, if we admit Joyce to be Stephen Dedalus's, then he would have to do. "I will not serve that which I no longer believe in—this shop, my home, my fatherland, or my church; and I will try to express myself in my art as freely as I can," as he said to his medic. I, for one, cannot defend the German art or or, even for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning.

This is somehow Joyce, and one won-
ders if, at last Ireland has created her man.
A sketch made by Miss Loy in Paris of Joyce, who, in exile from his native Ireland, has continued, in spite of many tribulations, to create a body of work that will have permanent significance. There can be little doubt. "Cham-
ber Music," his first volume of verse, contains Joyce, subdued in tone, but of irreproachable loveliness. "Dub-
liners," his volume of short sketches, was compared with the best of de Maupassant. "The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," on whose perfection he laboured ten years, brought to the novel an interest in form, selection and style, more French than English. "Ulysses," which was cen-
sured and its suppression is about to be published in Paris. It represents, in form, a following and elabora-
tion of that method which Joyce first made apparent in the "Pictur-
alis." It is a question in many minds whether Joyce, in this new volume, has not pursued a theory too far for coherence and common understanding.

OldMagazineArticles.com