

James Joyce

A Portrait of the Man Who is,

at Present, One of the More Significant Figures in Literature

By DJUNA BARNES

THERE are men in Dublin who will tell you that out of Ireland a great 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 silence 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.

The thought that Joyce was once a singer may not come as a revelation to the casual reader of his books; one must perhaps have spent one of those strangely aloof evenings with him, or have read passages of his *Ulysses*, 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 bravado, a joyous putting forth of first 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 *Dubliners* over my coffee during the war, I had been on one or two theatrical committees just long enough to suggest the production of *Exiles*, his one play. *The Portrait* had been consumed, turning from one elbow 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 sorrowing one with other" or "Thither the extremely large wains bring foison of the fields, spherical potatoes and iridescent kale and onions, pearls of the earth, and red, green, yellow, brown, russet, sweet, big bitter ripe pomillated apples and strawberries fit for princes and raspberries from their canes," or still better the singing humour in that delicious execution scene in which the "learned prelate knelt in a most Christian spirit in a pool of rain-water."

Yes, then I realized Joyce must indeed have begun life as a singer, and a very tender singer, and—because 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 necessary silence, 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 about the narrow throat, the beard, heavier in those days, descending into the abyss of the hidden bosom. 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 improbabilities in his teeming *Ulysses*.

And then, one day, I came to Paris. Sitting in the café of the Deux Magots, that faces the little church of St. Germain des Près, I saw approaching, out of the fog and damp, a tall man, with head slightly lifted and slightly



JAMES JOYCE DRAWING BY MINA LOY

A sketch made by Mina Loy in Paris of Joyce, who, in exile from his native Ireland, has continued, in spite of all but impossible difficulties, to produce work of whose permanent significance there can be little doubt. "Chamber Music" his frail volume of verse, contains lyrics, subdued in tone, but of irreproachable loveliness. "Dubliners," his volume of short sketches, was compared with the best of de Maupassant. "The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," on whose perfecting he laboured ten years, brought to the novel an interest in form, selection and style, more French than English. "Ulysses," which appeared serially in *The Little Review*, on one occasion causing its suppression, is about to be published in Paris. It represents, in form, a following and elaboration of that method which Joyce first made apparent in the "Portrait." It is a question in many minds whether Joyce, in this new volume, has not pursued his theory too far for coherence and common understanding

turned, giving to the wind an orderly distemper of red and black hair, which descended sharply into a scant wedge on an out-thrust chin.

He wore a blue grey coat, too young it seemed, partly because he had thrust its gathers behind him, partly because the belt which circled 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 laid my eyes on."

Because he had heard of the suppression of *The Little Review* on account of *Ulysses* 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, seeming to choose his words for their age rather than their aptness, "the public will demand and find a moral 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 serious line 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 waistcoat it has ever been

James Joyce

my happiness to see. Purple with alternate doe and dog heads. The does, tiny scarlet tongues hanging out over blond lower lips, downed in a light wool, and the dogs no more ferocious or on the scent than any good animal who 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 Restoration. Even Oscar Wilde. He studied the Restoration through a microscope in the morning and repeated it through a telescope in the evening."

"And in *Ulysses*?" I asked.

"They are all there, the great talkers" he answered, "them and the things they forgot. In *Ulysses* I have recorded, simultaneously, what a man says, sees, thinks, and what such seeing, thinking, saying does, to what you Freudians call the subconscious,—but as for psychoanalysis" he broke off, "it's neither more nor less than blackmail."

He raised his eyes. There is something unfocused in them,—the same paleness seen in plants long hidden from the sun,—and sometimes a little jeer 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, but it is the sadness of a man 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 abundance in the limited.

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

Because one may not ask him questions one must know him. It has been my pleasure to talk to him many times during my four months in Paris. We have talked of rivers and of religion, of the instinctive genius of the church which chose, for the singing of its hymns, the voice without "overtones"—the voice of the eunuch. We have talked of women, about women he seems a bit disinterested. Were I vain I should say he is afraid of them, but I am certain he is only a little skeptical of their existence. We have talked of Ibsen, of Strindberg, Shakespeare. "Hamlet is a great play, written from the standpoint of the ghost," and of Strindberg, "No drama behind the hysterical ravine."

We have talked of death, of rats, of horses, 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 carries the dread of Ireland in it; Ireland as a place where poverty has become the art of scarcity. A brogue a little more defiant than Joyce's which is tamed by preoccupation.

Joyce has few friends, yet he is always 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 "flashy" or "new." Callers have often found him writing into the night, or drinking tea with Nora. I myself once came upon him as he lay full length on his stomach poring over a valise full of notes taken in his youth for *Ulysses*,—for as Nora says, "It's the great fanaticism is on 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 wanting to go for a stroll."

However it is with him, 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 futuristic. One wonders why, thinking what a fine lyric beginning that great Rabelaisian flower *Ulysses* had, with impartial 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.

"Alone, not only separate from all others, but to have not even one friend," and he has, if we admit Joyce to be Stephen, done as he said he would do. "I will not serve that which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in my art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can; using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning."

This is somehow Joyce, and one wonders if, at last Ireland has created her man.