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Books Current

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JOYCE.

DESPITE the War, despite the paper shortage, and despite those old-established publishers whose god is their belly and whose godfather was the late F. T. Palgrave, there is a new edition of James Joyce's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man."* It is extremely gratifying that this book should have "reached its fourth thousand," and the fact is significant in just so far as it marks the beginning of a new phase of English publishing, a phase comparable to that started in France some years ago by the "Mercure."

The old houses, even those, or even *more* those, which once had a literary tradition, or at least literary pretensions, having ceased to care a damn about literature, the lovers of good writing have "struck"; have sufficiently banded themselves together to get a few good books into print, and even into circulation. The actual output is small in bulk, a few brochures of translations, Eliot's "Prufrock," Joyce's "A Portrait," and Wyndham Lewis' "Tarr" (announced), but I have it on good authority that at least one other periodical will start publishing its authors after the War, so there are new rods in pickle for the old fat-stomached contingent and for the cardboard generation.

Joyce's "A Portrait" is literature; it has become almost the prose bible of a few people, and I think I have encountered at least three hundred admirers of the book, certainly that number of people who, whether they "like" it or not, are wholly convinced of its merits.

Mr. Wells I have encountered only in print. Mr. Wells says that Joyce has a cloacal obsession, *but* he also says that Mr. Joyce writes literature and that his book is to be ranked with the works of Sterne and of Swift. Mr. Wells' recent appearance is rather in the *rôle* of the small boy of the following dialogue (most ancient):

"Johnnie, what are you drawing?"

"God."

"But nobody knows what he looks like."

"They will when I get through."

But let us pass over this. Mr. Wells had doubtless heard that Silas Hocking had a bigger circulation than he, H.G.W., had attained. Before he got messed up with bishops, their souls, &c., Wells was mixed up with abdomenalia. His "New Macchiavelli" could be read with alternate admirations and disgusts, but his style was always a bit greasy in comparison with the metallic cleanness of Joyce's phrasing. Wells is no man to babble of obsessions. But let it stand to his honour that he came out with a fine burst of admiration for a younger and half-known writer.

Still, from England and America there has come a finer volume of praise for this novel than for any that I can remember. There has also come impotent spitting and objurgation from the back-woods and from Mr. Dent's office boy, and, as offset, interesting comment in modern Greek, French and Italian.

Joyce's poems have been reprinted by Elkin Mathews, his short stories re-issued, and a second novel started in "The Little Review."

For all the book's being so familiar, it is pleasant to take up "A Portrait" in its new exiguous form, and one enters many speculations, perhaps more than when one read it initially. It is not that one can open to a forgotten page so much as that wherever one opens there is always a place to start; some sentence like—

"Stephen looked down coldly on the oblong skull beneath him overgrown with tangled twine-coloured hair"; *or*

"Frowsy girls sat along the curbstones before their baskets"; *or*

"He drained his third cup of watery tea to the dregs and set to chewing the crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into the dark pool of the jar. The yellow dripping had been scooped out like a boghole, and the pool under it brought back to his memory the dark turf-coloured water of the bath in Clongowes. The box of pawntickets at his elbow had just been rifled, and he took up idly one after another in his greasy fingers the blue and white dockets, scrawled and sanded and creased and bearing the name of the pledger as Daly or MacEvoy.

"1 Pair Buskins, &c."

I do not mean to imply that a novel is necessarily a bad novel because one can pick it up without being in this manner, caught and dragged into reading; but I do indicate the curiously seductive interest of the clear-cut and definite sentences.

* "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." Egoist, Ltd. 4*s.* 6*d.*

Neither, emphatically, is it to be supposed that Joyce's writing is merely a depiction of the sordid. The sordid is there in all conscience as you would find it in De Goncourt, but Joyce's power is in his scope. The reach of his writing is precisely from the fried breadcrusts, as above, and from the fig-seeds in Cranley's teeth to the casual discussion of Aquinas:

"He wrote a hymn for Maundy Thursday. It begins with the words *Pange lingua gloriosi*. They say it is the highest glory of the hymnal. It is an intricate and soothing hymn. I like it; but there is no hymn that can be put beside that mournful and majestic processional song, the Vexilla Regis of Venantius Fortunatus.

"Lynch began to sing softly and solemnly in a deep bass voice:

'Impleta sunt quae concinit
David fideli carmine . . . .'

"They turned into Lower Mount Street. A few steps from the corner a fat young man, wearing a silk neckcloth, &c."

On almost every page of Joyce you will find just such swift alternation of subjective beauty and external shabbiness, squalor, and sordidness. It is the bass and treble of his method. And he has his scope beyond that of the novelists his contemporaries, in just so far as whole stretches of his keyboard are utterly out of their compass.

And the conclusion or moral termination from all this is that the great writers of any period must be the remarkable minds of that period; they must know the extremes of their time; they must not represent a *social status*; they cannot be the "Grocer" or the "Dilettante" with the egregious and capital letter, nor yet the professor or the professing wearer of Jaeger or professional eater of herbs.

In the three hundred pages of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" there is no omission; there is nothing in life so beautiful that Joyce cannot touch it without profanation—without, above all, the profanations of sentiment and sentimentality—and there is nothing so sordid that he cannot treat it with his metallic exactitude.

I think there are few people who can read Shaw, Wells, Bennet, or even Conrad (who is in a category apart) without feeling that there are values and tonalities to which these authors are wholly insensitive. I do not imply that there cannot be excellent art with quite distinct limitations, but the artist cannot afford to be ignorant of his limitations; he cannot afford a pretence of such ignorance. The artist must also choose his limitations. If he paints a snuff-box or a stage scene he must not be ignorant of the fact that he is not painting a landscape, three feet by two feet, in oils.

I think that what tires me more than anything else in the writers now past middle age is that they always seem to imply that they are giving us all modern life, the whole social panorama, all the instruments of the orchestra. They have their successors in Lawrence and Gilbert Cannon. Joyce is of another donation.

Joyce's earlier book, "Dubliners," contained several well-constructed stories, several sketches rather lacking in form. It was a definite promise of what was to come. There is very little to be said in praise of it which would not apply with greater force to "A Portrait." I find that whoever reads one book inevitably sets out in search of the other.

The quality and distinction of the poems in the first half of Mr. Joyce's "Chamber Music" (new edition, published by Elkin Mathews, 4A, Cork Street, W.1, at 1*s*. 3*d*.) is due in part to their author's strict musical training. We have here the lyric in some of its best traditions, and one pardons certain trifling inversions, much against the taste of the moment, for the sake of the clean-cut ivory finish, and for the interest of the rhythms, the cross run of the beat and the word, as of a stiff wind cutting the ripple-tops of bright water.

The wording is Elizabethan, the metres at times suggesting Herrick, but in no case have I been able to find a poem which is not in some way Joyce's own, even though he would seem, and that most markedly, to shun apparent originality, as in:

Who goes amid the green wood
With springtide all adorning her?
Who goes amid the merry green wood
To make it merrier?

Who passes in the sunlight
By ways that know the light footfall?
Who passes in the sweet sunlight
With mien so virginal?

The ways of all the woodland
Gleam with a soft and golden fire——
For whom does all the sunny woodland
Carry so brave attire?

O, it is for my true love
The woods their rich apparel wear——
O, it is for my true love,
That is so young and fair.

Here, as in nearly every poem, the motif is so slight that the poem scarcely exists until one thinks of it as set to music; and the workmanship is so

delicate that out of twenty readers scarce one will notice its fineness. Would that Henry Lawes were alive again to make the suitable music, for the cadence is here worthy of his cunning:

O, it is for my true love,
That is young and fair.

The musician's work is very nearly done for him, and yet how few song-setters could be trusted to finish it and to fill in an accompaniment.

The tone of the book deepens with the poem beginning:

O sweetheart, hear you
Your lover's tale;
A man shall have sorrow
When friends him fail.

For he shall know then
Friends be untrue;
And a little ashes
Their words come to.

The collection comes to its end and climax in two profoundly emotional poems; quite different in tonality and in rhythm-quality from the lyrics in the first part of the book:—

All day I hear the noise of waters
Making moan,
Sad as the sea-bird is, when going
Forth alone,
He hears the wind cry to the waters'
Monotone.

The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing
Where I go.
I hear the noise of many waters
Far below.
All day, all night, I hear them flowing
To and fro.

The third and fifth lines should not be read with an end stop. I think the rush of the words will escape the notice of scarcely anyone. The phantom hearing in this poem is coupled, in the next poem, to phantom vision as well, and to a *robustezza* of expression:

I hear an army charging upon the land,
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees;
Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battle-name;
I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter;
They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long green hair;
They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore:
My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

In both these poems we have a strength and a fibrousness of sound which almost prohibits the thought of their being "set to music," or to any music but that which is in them when spoken; but we notice a similarity of technique with the earlier poems, in so far as the beauty of movement is produced by a very skilful, or perhaps we should say a deeply intuitive, interruption of metric mechanical regularity. It is the irregularity which has shown always in the best periods.

The book is an excellent antidote for those who find Mr. Joyce's prose "disagreeable" and who at once fly (*à la* Mr. Wells, for example) to conclusions about Mr. Joyce's "cloacal obsessions," &c. I have yet to find in Joyce's published works a violent or malodorous phrase which does not justify itself not only by its verity, but by its heightening of some opposite effect, by the poignancy which it imparts to some emotion or to some thwarted desire for beauty. Disgust with the sordid is but another expression of a sensitiveness to the finer thing. There is no perception of beauty without a corresponding disgust. If the price for such artists as James Joyce is exceeding heavy, it is the artist himself who pays.

If Armageddon has taught us anything it should have taught us to abominate the half-truth, and the tellers of the half-truth, in literature.

"THE CRESCENT MOON," by F. Brett Young, author of "Marching on Tanga" (published by Martin Secker), is a story of love and adventure in the African wilds, local colour, devil worship, wicked German, possible reminiscence of manner of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."

"MY ADVENTURES AS A GERMAN SECRET SERVICE," by Capt. Horst von der Goltz (Cassell & Co.), give reputed secret history, perfidious German methods in America, relations with Mexico, German-American, &c., exciting and possibly based on facts. Nothing so very improbable as current improbabilities go.