

JAMES JOYCE

When his faith went, he made a religion of his writing and ruthlessly sacrificed all else to it. Through years of exile, poverty, and difficulties getting published, he persisted, and eventually recognition and fame came.

The movie made of "The Dead," the longest story in James Joyce's collection *Dubliners*, had a nostalgic attraction that might have surprised its author. His short stories do not so much tell a story in a traditional, i.e. De Maupassant, manner, as they put before us events in such a way that an 'epiphany' occurs, and the characters are revealed as banal, trapped, thwarted. Gabriel Conway, in "The Dead," is Joyce's portrait of himself as he would have become if he had remained in Ireland.

Joyce (1882-1941) was one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, whether greatness be gauged by influence or achievement. He was an occasional poet, a one time dramatist, content with a single collection of stories, and the author of three novels that move from autobiography, through myth, to a self-contained linguistic universe.

James Joyce was obsessed with Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church, both of which he left, but neither of which would let him go -- at least as an artist. The apostate and exile could only write by brooding about his native land and the faith he had abandoned at the age of 16.

Hugh Kenner, in a magnificent book entitled *The Pound Era*, a

loving and sympathetic account of literary modernism, perhaps gives Ezra Pound more credit than he deserves for the movement's success. Were one to pick a patron of its poetry it would be T. S. Eliot and the uncontested master of modern prose fiction is James Joyce. (Kenner wrote books on both, as it happens, and I am not suggesting he would think otherwise.)

The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man tells the story of Stephen Dedalus from infancy to the attainment of his university degree. An earlier version of the novel was called *Stephen Hero*. It is autobiographical and may be read as Joyce's imaginative reconstruction of himself. So obsessed is the book with Stephen that we never learn the names of his many brothers and sisters, although his parents, particularly his father, are vividly portrayed, both unflatteringly. Stephen cannot believe that he is the true son of such parents,

Through long years of Jesuit education, Stephen moves from 'college' (Joyce entered Conglows College at the age of six and a half) through the university when Stephen is poised to take flight from Ireland, from family, from faith, "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

Whatever intellectual difficulties Stephen has with the faith are consequent on a plunge into carnality which, at sixteen, seems phenomenally precocious. Solitary sins, the frequenting of prostitutes, an obsession with sex that clouds his mind and heart, are brought to the

magnificently presented retreat featuring the Four Last Things, heaven, hell, death and judgment. The sermon on hell in the *Portrait* will touch the heart of the most hardened sinner -- and it touches Stephen, bringing him back to the sacraments by way of a confession characterized by a considerate and compassionate Capuchin.

If one were to compare this confession scene with the hundreds of others written by floundering Catholics, for example, that in Fitzgerald's story "Absolution," he would be struck by Joyce's artistic integrity. His Jesuit preacher is given pages of the book and there is not a false note in his sermons. Stephen, having repented, throws himself into an orgy of religious practices which he cannot sustain, and then it is back to the fleshpots. Only then are dogmatic doubts entertained.

In recent years, there has been a flood of fiction by discontented or lapsed Catholics, a dominant note of which is to blame the Church for her teaching on sexual morality. Since this is the morality of the Old as well as the New Testament, the complaint often seems uninformed. But sex is at the center of the discontent. The suggestion seems to be that once a person is free from all those Shalt nots, from the humiliation of acknowledging one's sins and asking God's forgiveness in confession, well then life can begin.

Sure. Joyce was an honest apostate. He does however put one in mind of Dr. Johnson's remark that the Irish are an honest race -- they never

speaking well of one another. With Joyce, lack of charity began at home. I do not mean the way he treated his parents -- they come through as poignantly sympathetic -- but the way he presents himself. It is difficult to believe that he did not, in later life, see the arrogant romanticism of his youthful self. Stephen is the least attractive figure in the story.

Joyce was fated to become very much like the father he had scorned and in a lovely poem "Ecce Puer," written about the birth of his son and the death of his father he begs the old man's forgiveness. A painting of John Joyce by Patrick Tuohy hung in Joyce's apartment; in it, the old man has the look of someone about to tell a lie, or sing a song, or ask for another drink. Like his father, Joyce drank to excess, was a sentimental parent and a sometime philandering husband who forced his own irreligion on his wife, whom he didn't legally marry until 1931.

It is not surprising that Joyce, having been so extensively educated by them, should have considered joining the Jesuits and becoming a priest. When his faith went, he made a religion of his writing and ruthlessly sacrificed all else to it. Through years of exile, poverty, and difficulties getting published, he persisted, and eventually recognition and fame came.

The development from the *Portrait*, through *Ulysses*, to *Finnegan's Wake* is usually taken to be one of artistic advancement. Seen in another way, it is a pathological progression toward greater and greater self-absorption. The fairly straightforward autobiographical novel was followed

by *Ulysses*, which takes its structure from Homer and is set on a single day, June 16, 1904, in the life of Leopold Bloom. If Ellmann, Joyce's biographer can be trusted, the author returning from a night on the town fed into the manuscript incidents the meaning of which could be known only to Joyce or to a researcher as assiduous as Ellmann. Joyce produced a novel all but unintelligible without a commentary.

With *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce creates a private language to go with his private universe. He had an extraordinary gift for languages, classical and modern -- he earned his living as a Berlitz instructor -- such that the work is the apotheosis of the view that the artist is the subject of his art.

Norah outlived him, went to Mass, said her beads, received the last sacraments. No doubt she prayed for the bibulous, skeptical, loving genius who was her husband.