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JAMES JOYCE BROADSHEET

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS ARTIST

Herbert Read's review of Joyce in *Art and Letters 1* (1917)
by Richard Brown

AMONG THE REVIEWS written by Joyce's contemporaries of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* on its publication in 1916, little attention has been given to the short review written by the prolific English art critic, literary critic, First World War poet, novelist and anarchist, Herbert (later Sir Herbert) Read (1893-1968).

Read was deeply involved in the mainstream of modernist literary and art historical culture of the century, as the enduring interest in his own literary production and collaborations with so many contemporaries attest. Yeats included many of his poems in the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Eliot consulted him on *Four Quartets*. Whilst he may be most known for his contributions as art critic and curator from the First World War period up to the post-Second World War Institute of Contemporary Arts (of which he was co-founder in 1947), his literary influence and achievement was considerable.

As James King describes it in *The Last Modern* (1990), early in the war Read was 'a very advanced young man' who enrolled in the new University of Leeds in 1912 and immersed himself in the radical Nietzschean intellectual and artistic atmosphere of Storm Jameson, Alfred Orage, the Sadlers and the *New Age*. In 1915 he published his first volume of poems, *Songs of Chaos*. Called to war service with the Yorkshire Regiment, as his *War Diary* records, his intellectual development was still rapid and in April 1917 he co-founded with Leeds Gallery Director, Frank Rutter, and artist, Charles Ginner, the journal *Art and Letters*. Rebecca Beasley, in her chapter on the journal in the *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Little Magazines*, explains that, after its move to London, the journal retained these early Leeds connections. It was interdisciplinary, with coverage of music, dance and the visual arts from this opening issue. The literary content was to include early essays and poems by writers as significant as Eliot and Pound, stories by Wyndham Lewis, Richardson and Mansfield. An opening editorial illustrates a striking early use of the word 'modernism' declaring that its 'message, of course, is the expression of modernism in art'.

Read's own contribution to the first issue of the journal and first published review is his review of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. A fascinating document for Joyce's reception at the time, this is not among the contemporary reviews reprinted in Robert Deming's 1970 *Critical Heritage* collection. It is now reprinted in this issue of the *James Joyce Broadsheet*.

A first point to record is that the review registers the extent to which the title of Joyce's novel recommended it for review in this opening issue of a journal devoted to both the visual arts and letters and to some extent this connection shapes Read's response. It is directly in the spirit of a modernism, drawn from the visual arts as well as Pound's Imagism and the modernist interest in psychology, that Read immediately celebrates the 'literary method' of the novel, its 'style of clarity and even of radiance', its 'exactness of description' and 'purity of phrasing'. He places it in the high European company of Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, his 10-volume *roman fleuve* (translated in 1911-13 and for which he had won the Nobel Prize in 1915), praising the 'elan' of Joyce's version of the artist novel and the depiction of Stephen's character as 'a psychology, abnormally sensitive to the aesthetic appeal and repulsion in things'. His account of the novel, which quotes freely from it, emphasises Stephen's dynamic oscillation between 'the fierce longings of his heart' and fears of damnation, before endorsing his 'awakening' and 'declaration of independence' as an artist in the final chapter and diary section. Brief as it is, the review communicates a vivid sense of Joyce's novel, which Read will already have known from its serialisation in *The Egoist*, which he knew well.

primacy of the sensual

READ'S QUOTATIONS reflect Joyce's distinctive typography, though some lack of proof-reading in the no-doubt-straitened war-time circumstances for the journal leads to such errors as 'turned' for 'burned' in the first quotation. More significant and more challenging in his approach for the Joycean reader is Read's balancing of his praise for these modernist features against his less unqualified enthusiasm for the 'pathetic note' that he finds alongside the radiant style of the novel. The war-time atmosphere may also serve to contextualise his uneasiness with this aspect of the novel in which Joyce's revelatory psychology exposes Stephen's emotional vulnerability which may have been less to Read's Poundian, war-time

taste. At any rate, a robust critical and political contentiousness is quite typical of the review culture of the time and unlikely to have produced unqualified praise. Also typical of the time, if disappointingly cautious for such an 'advanced' champion of artistic expression, is Read's rather cool reaction to Joyce's 'undue attention on the merely sordid facts of life' and his determination to 'adorn his tale with a Rabelaisian embroidery' and 'invest his hero with a halo of obscenities'.

The review ends with an interesting recognition of the primacy of the sensual in Joyce's method: 'He is apt to make sensual perception the reality of life, and to neglect the intenser spirituality of our being. With his eyes to heaven, he must yet consider the stench in his nostrils.' It is tempting to wonder whether this formulation may have indirectly or directly influenced Virginia Woolf in the wording of her famous vindication of Joyce in the 'Modern Fiction' essay that 'Mr. Joyce is spiritual'.

A further perspective on the review can be gained by examination of the pencil emendations that appear on Read's own copy of the issue of *Art and Letters* that survives in the extensive Read Collection in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, that includes such treasures as Read's Shakespeare and Company *Ulysses* and his proof copy of *Finnegans Wake*. The words 'but with no little skill for characterisation' become 'and with great attention to characterisation'. Instead of 'given' he is 'subjected to all the tortures of a crude actuality'. The description of 'three rather wearisome sermons (reproduced verbatim)' is sharpened to 'the sermons of a priest'.

Square brackets, beginning between 'Of course' and 'the theme' at the start of the second paragraph of the review and ending after the final quotation, would appear to indicate that someone, presumably Read himself, considered reprinting the review without these qualifying remarks about the 'pathetic note'.

Read's long-term championship of Modernism in the arts in Britain and awareness of art and politics inevitably involved him in later involvements in Joycean judgement and debate. He defended Joyce's politics, as opposed to those of Pound and Lewis, in a letter to Richard Aldington in 1926 and, as necessarily distinct from those of



Richard Hamilton's folding poster/catalogue for the ICA exhibition *James Joyce: His Life and Work*, London, 1950.

Marx, in a letter to Henry Miller in 1935. In June and July 1950, following the Paris exhibition in the previous year, he hosted an exhibition on the life and work of James Joyce and his influence on the visual arts with drawings by Frank Budgen and Matisse's illustrations to the 1935 New York edition of *Ulysses* on display. This exhibition was partly the work of the younger generation of artists or 'Young Turks' of the ICA and, in particular, Richard Hamilton, who designed the exhibition poster and whose career-long fascination with illustrating Joyce's *Ulysses* is well documented. It was, however, Read's long-time associate T. S. Eliot who opened the exhibition, confirming that his supportive involvement on behalf of Joyce was still maintained some thirty-three years after the publication of the 1917 review. The exhibition interestingly predates the first annual Bloomsday celebrations though it is celebratory in its flavour and registers the growing critical and academic interest in Joyce. By this time both Joyce's reputation and Read's own were becoming well established and the 1917 review in *Art and Letters* does not appear. For all that, it sits so interestingly alongside better-known early reviews such as those by Wells and, in *The New Age*, it could already have seemed a little dated in the cautiousness of its praise.

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN. By JAMES JOYCE. The Egoist Ltd. 6s.

IT is the literary method to which we would first draw attention. Here is a style of clarity and even of radiance, an economy and exactness of description, and a purity of phrasing which make us wonder at the possibilities. "Dubliners" told us that Mr. Joyce *might* write; and here he has written. And we wish we could leave this praise unqualified; but, on the whole, the effect of this book is rather pathetic.

Of course the theme — the childhood of an artist and the *malaise* of his adolescence — has been attempted before, notably in "Jean Christophe" (a book to which Mr. Joyce cannot altogether escape a debt being imputed), but never, perhaps, with such élan as here. In the character of Stephen Dedalus we have a psychology, abnormally sensitive to the aesthetic appeal and repulsion in things, traced to the verge of manhood. The early environment is reported faithfully, but with no little skill for characterisation. The sensitive soul of our hero is given all the tortures of a crude actuality, both in his school life and with a sordid family stricken by poverty and misfortune. And there is a resultant riot arising from this unwelcome reality. "He turned to appease the fierce longings of his heart before which everything else was idle and alien. . . . Beside the savage desire within him to realise the enormities which he brooded nothing was sacred." So he sins — in the usual way, but at rather an unusual age. And from his sin he comes with a mind cleansed of its sensual "enormities," but now in the toils of the rigid discipline of his religion. Eternal damnation haunts him in vivid horror. He knows the agony of mental fear: he is tortured none too delicately by three rather wearisome sermons (reproduced verbatim). He weeps for his lost innocence. He prays for peace to lull his conscience — but all in vain. He is driven to the confessional, and the scene there is a triumph of narration. Our hero confesses and is pardoned, and his soul is "made fair and holy, holy and happy." Then it is suggested that he should enter the priesthood of his church, but the appeal falls on listless ears. "His destiny was to be elusive of social or religious

orders. . . . He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others, or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world."

The remainder of the book deals with the awakening of the artist. Ever sensitive, he becomes acutely aware of the appeal of beauty in the world around him, and the development of this awareness is dominant through his university career — with a theory to explain it. Then there is the hopelessness of human love, inadequately treated, but rising to a fine poetic ecstasy. And gradually Stephen is finding himself. "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can, as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning." Such is his declaration of independence. This is the grand revolt of youth, youth wild and magic, soul free. Now our concern is with the future, in the true idealistic way. "I desire to press in my arms the loveliness which has not yet come into the world." And we leave Stephen peering down this high romantic vista: —

"The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone — come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsman, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth. . . . Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

But there is this pathetic note. In spite of all the wealth of material, in spite of all the radiance of artistic style, the author thinks it good to concentrate an undue attention on the merely sordid facts of life, to adorn his tale with a Rabelaisian embroidery, to invest his hero with a halo of obscenities. He is apt to make sensual perception the reality of life, and to neglect the intenser spirituality of our being. With his eyes to heaven, he must yet consider the stench in his nostrils.