T. S. ELIOT

A MESSAGE TO THE FISH

On January 14, having read the obituary notice of James Joyce which had appeared in *The Times* of that morning, I addressed to the Editor of that paper the following letter:

Sir,

I hope that you will permit me to submit one or two cautious qualifications to your interesting obituary notice of my friend Mr. James Joyce. That Joyce failed to appreciate 'the eternal and serene beauty of nature' can, I think, be disputed by reference to several passages in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake;* but being separated from my books, I cannot quote chapter and verse. As for his inability to appreciate 'the higher sides of human character', this stricture would, perhaps, be more applicable to Jonathan Swift, and I should ask the reader, before accepting such a judgement, to consider 'The Dead', in *Dubliners*—one of the finest short stories in the language.

What I chiefly question, however, is the importance at this date of the opinions of men older than Joyce, holding the views of an older literary generation, such as Edmund Gosse, Arnold Bennett, or Æ. To some of Joyce's younger contemporaries, like myself, *Ulysses* still seems the most considerable work of imagination in English in our time, comparable in importance (though in little else) with the work of Marcel Proust. I do not believe that posterity will be able to controvert this judgement, though it may be able to demonstrate the relative insignificance of the literary achievement of the whole period.

Your obedient servant, etc.

As this letter was not published, I wrote a fortnight later to say that I presumed myself free to publish it elsewhere, and received a polite note from the Obituaries Department returning the letter, and expressing regret that restrictions of space had made publication impossible.

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It was not a well-written letter, partly because I was ill with influenza when I wrote it. But its oddity is rather more due to the fact that I wished to write something that *The Times* would print, and I entertained the hope that it might get by as an 'Appreciation'. Had I not been hampered by illness and a sense (however imperfect) of the possible, I might have written in somewhat the following vein:

SIR,

I have read with stupefaction your obituary notice on the greatest man of letters of my generation. It is usual, I believe, for editors of newspapers to have ready obituary notices of all notable men and women. This practice is wholly to be commended; but the notices should be written by the right persons in the beginning, and should then be kept up to date. The impression given by your notice of Mr. Joyce is that it was written by someone considerably older than he—someone who by now must be well over fifty-nine. That it was in some sense brought up to date I must believe, since, being an obituary, it mentions the date and place of Joyce's death; but this does not cover the requirements. I am not alluding to oversights such as the failure to mention that 'Work in Progress' was eventually completed and published under the title of *Finnegans Wake:* I refer to the inclusion of trivialities about the man, and the failure to show any understanding of the significance of his work in its time.

I am quite aware that at the present time considerations of space are of first importance. For this reason I venture to point out how you might have saved space. Whatever the various distinction of Sir Edmund Gosse, Arnold Bennett and Æ in other fields, none of them could lay claim to any authority as a critic; and phrases taken from what they said about Joyce many years ago could well have been spared. So could the estimate of your obituary writer. The first business of an obituary writer is to give the important facts about the life of the deceased, and to give some notion of the position which he enjoyed. He is not called upon to pronounce summary judgement (especially when his notice is unsigned), though it is part of his proper function, when his subject is a writer, to give some notion of what was thought of him by the best qualified critics

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of his time. I suggest also, in view of your limitations of space, that to mention that Joyce was one of 'a large and poor family' was unnecessary; and that a silly remark of his when a young man may give the reader the mistaken impression that vanity was the most conspicuous trait of his character, and the equally mistaken impression that we have the authority of Yeats for permission to ignore Joyce's work. And, as you did not have space to mention that *Ulysses* was eventually published in both England and America, it would perhaps have been better to omit mention of its previous suppression.

I must try to make quite clear that the issue which I raise has nothing to do with the difference between my valuation of Joyce's work and that of your writer. I am not concerned with matters of opinion, but with matters of fact; and were my opinion of Joyce still lower than that of your biographer, my condemnation of your notice would be the same. My motives in writing this letter extend much further than loyalty to a friend or desire to see justice done to a particular author. The name and fame of Joyce were known throughout the world: *The Times* has an equally wide reputation. I do not believe that your notice will much affect the world's opinion of Joyce; but I fear lest it may be used as evidence by those who choose to believe that England has lost respect for that one of the arts for which it has been chiefly renowned.

I am, yours, etc.,

T. S. Eliot

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WAR SYMPOSIUM—III

OURS NOT TO REASON WHY

By A PRIVATE

CIVVY STREET

In the Condemned Row the greatest breach of taste is to protest innocence. Moral questions are meaningless after the verdict. In the ante-chamber of death there is only one hope for innocent and guilty alike—Reprieve.

The change from civilian to Army life is almost as great. For the civilian there exists a complex of moral and political motives. Am I a coward? Am I right to seek exemption? How best can I serve my country, class, family or self? The civilian is an agent.

Strip off that mufti; put on the battle dress; make the agent a mere executant; and all these problems vanish, like cobwebs in candleflame. Conscript or volunteer, it makes no difference. The fish is hooked and struggles to get away.

It is not just mufti that we put off and pack in our bags to take home on our first leave: it is a hundred things, which civilians do not treasure because they take them for granted. Career, for example. I do not mean only the young architect or sculptor, taken from the work to which he has devoted years of thought, at the moment when he is beginning to find himself. I mean also the careers of the lorry-drivers and clerks and commercial travellers and bricklayers, personally as important as an artist's life work. Few civilians realize how much the casual contacts of their daily life mean to them: the friendship with the paper boy outside the suburban station, the waitress in the café, the regulars in the local pub. They make a social landscape in which the humblest civilian can freely move, an individual, sketched by his clothes, possessions and habits.

The same man, conscripted, is a number, two identification discs on a string round the neck, a uniform, and a military haircut. His dress, his feet, his hair, his face and his penis are inspected by authority. His standard of living is reduced, and what is even more important psychologically, his spending power is curtailed. Liberty of action is replaced by the authoritarianism of the detail

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