OndtHarriet, PoldyLeon and Shem the Conman

David Norris

The deposit of the Léon/Joyce correspondence with the National Library of Ireland bears eloquent and moving testament to the friendship of two remarkable men and to the qualities of integrity and dedication that each of them possessed in different ways. The basic elements of this story have been known for some time, and it is not for me, today, to rehearse these details. I would like, however, to take this opportunity once more to reiterate my profound respect for both the principal protagonists in this affair. Neither do I seek to use this occasion to ventilate in any extended way my own personal position in the controversy that regrettably surrounded the ceremony revealing this important cache of material to the public, which took place at the beginning of April this year.

However it is not, I think, entirely inappropriate for me to summarize the grounds of my reservation as a preamble to what I have to say about the contents of the correspondence itself. At the opening it was revealed that a certain number of papers of what were described as a purely personal family nature had been released to Stephen James Joyce, grandson of James Joyce, and also that another section of the correspondence was placed under a further embargo until 31 December 2050. This announcement shocked me, and I was further disturbed by the tone of the contribution made by Mr. Stephen Joyce and consequently left the library. I felt it to be ironic that this announcement should be made in the very place where, in the “Scylla and Charybdis” section of Ulysses, James Joyce—in the person of his alter ego, Stephen Dedalus—made what amounts to a strong plea for full access to the most private and intimate details of an artist’s life in order to understand the nature of human genius and its impact upon literary creation. Moreover, the material involved was the property of the Léon family and not the Joyce family. Indeed, a reading of the accompa-
nying notes from Paul Léon and Constantine Curran, which I have before me, does not seem to me to require the action that was taken by the Library and that, indeed, established a very dangerous precedent in dealing with such items.

On the other hand, I would like to pay tribute to the very careful, painstaking and scholarly work undertaken on behalf of the Library by its staff and, in particular, by Catherine Fahy. The collection itself is divided into sixteen sections ranging from a detailed correspondence between James Joyce and Paul Léon and Léon acting on behalf of Joyce and Harriet Weaver, Joyce's benefactor, down to bundles of gas bills, sheafs of bank accounts, documents relating to home insurance, Joyce's many moves, the decoration of his flats, and his daughter Lucia's medical bills and receipts. The principal sections are

1. Direct correspondence between Joyce and Léon
2. Correspondence between Joyce, Léon and Harriet Weaver
3. General correspondence
4. Business correspondence with
   a. agents and solicitors,
   b. publishers, broadcasting corporations, etc., and
   c. film proposals, translation rights, etc., and
5. Manuscript and typescript drafts of poems and pages from "Work in Progress."

I propose to deal almost entirely with the first two sections, which, from a biographical point of view, considerably amplify our understanding of Joyce's personality.

The correspondence with Léon opens and closes with Léon employed on errands regarding the money, clothing, health, and publishing problems that beset Joyce and his family. The correspondence with Weaver follows a parallel pattern. I have to say at the outset that I retain with some modification my profound respect for Joyce and his single-minded devotion to his artistic mission. I have also, however, to state that the picture of Joyce presented by the late Richard Ellmann—of Joyce's qualities, of James Joyce as a man—seem now to me more representative of that gentle and humane scholar himself than of James Joyce, and that we may, perhaps reluctantly, have to modify our view of Joyce somewhat in the direction of the long-held popular image of Joyce as manipulative, arrogant, and, in times of crisis, frequently indifferent to the feelings of those who became his helpers.

Each of the three letters referred to in detail on page 1 of the Library's catalogue starts with a peremptory order to Léon to make telephone calls on Joyce's account. This is strikingly reminiscent of the opening scene of Ulysses, in which Buck Mulligan conducts his relationship with Stephen Dedalus by barking out a series of commands. "Come up, Kinch! Come up, you fearful
Norris

jesuit!” “lend us a loan of your noserag,” and finally, “give us that key,” a scene that probably echoes real life and Joyce's resentment at what he felt was his cavalier treatment by Oliver St. John Gogarty. Throughout this correspondence there are ironic distorted echoes in Joyce's own personality of traits that in literature he held up to disdainful examination.

On the other hand, endlessly patient and good humoured, Paul Léon emerges from the correspondence as an incarnation of some aspects of the spirit of Leopold Bloom. It is clear throughout that Léon had a genuine affection for Joyce the man, and in an early letter of 14 July 1932, Léon engagingly acknowledges, like Yeats and Mrs. Joyce before him, that he has not yet read Ulysses but he does promise to try. What Joyce made of this admission was not recorded in the correspondence, but in an obvious assertion of power, Joyce seeks from the beginning to control the tone, form, and content of the correspondence: 20 July 1932, Léon should type his letters to Joyce; 31 July 1932, Léon should not write funny messages; 8 September 1932, Léon should not employ "such phrases." The balance of power is very clearly indicated by the fact that the blizzard of commands for Léon to make telephone calls is curiously counterpointed by Joyce's instruction of 20 September 1932 that Léon should not telephone Joyce unless the matter is of exceptional importance because the phones of the Hotel Metropole were located on the ground floor. The master, it seems, was not to be inconvenienced in the carrying out of Léon's largely self-imposed duties. However on 16 February 1933 Joyce did, at least—acting, perhaps, as the new womanly man—send Léon a valentine!

Léon was a man of profound common sense who frequently gave Joyce good advice with regard to legal matters concerning agents and publishers. For example on 4 May 1937 he writes to Joyce, who wanted to dismiss J. Ralph Pinker as his agent, and demonstrates that severing the connection with Pinker's firm would result neither in any saving nor in any simplification of procedures for collection of royalties. Pinker's had been Joyce's agents for twenty-one years, and now, as Léon points out, their files were useful and Pinker was not in a position to damage Joyce's interests, as he was not involved in any negotiations with publishers. Moreover, as Pinker would continue to draw commission in any case, there was little practical value to be obtained by firing him.

When, as frequently happened, Joyce became coy about direct contact with his patroness, Miss Harriet Weaver, Léon was used by both as an intermediary. This appears from time to time to have irritated Nora Joyce, who may, indeed, have been slightly jealous of the fact that another woman was secretly in communication with her husband through a third party. A letter of Joyce dated 6 October 1939 thanks Léon for a letter and an enclosure that he has not seen, since Nora tore up the enclosure, which was a letter from Harriet Weaver. Joyce also relays to Léon a message from his wife indicating that it was her intention to tear up any other letters that Weaver enclosed in future correspondence.
Both the Joycees, in fact, appear frequently to have placed an interdict on correspondence between their friends and relatives. In 1935 Joyce made substantial use of his sister Eileen Schaurek in dealing with his daughter, Lucia. Mrs. Schaurek generously, if a little foolishly, took Lucia into her home at Bray, where for a time Lucia seemed to settle down in the company of her cousins Nora and Boezema. She ran away on several occasions and she appears to have made at least one attempt to burn the bungalow down. Joyce seems to have felt that his sister did not sacrifice herself sufficiently in looking after his daughter and was angry with Miss Weaver for presuming to have suggested any resemblance between Lucia and her aunt. On 15 April 1935 we find Harriet Weaver grovelling to Joyce with an apology for having failed with Lucia and for appearing to compare Lucia with Eileen. A few months later, on 17 August 1935, she writes to Léon, confirming that a final set of instructions had been relayed to Eileen and that, presumably on Joyce's direct instructions, she has agreed to a complete termination of correspondence with Mrs. Schaurek.

Toward the end of the direct Joyce/Léon correspondence comes one of the saddest items, recounting an incident already known through Ellmann's biography, when, after a disagreement occasioned by Léon's refusal to be partisan in the divorce between Giorgio and Helen, Joyce demanded the return of all his business papers and contracts. A letter of 19 November 1939 in response to this request from Joyce encloses the dossier on Lucia, an envelope containing cuttings about *Finnegans Wake* and all the contracts that were then in his possession. However, characteristically, the last dated letter from Léon to Joyce, of 5 February 1940, shows the good and faithful friend in his familiar posture of service. It ends by stating that he "will be glad to do anything urgent that Mr. Joyce wants."

The three-cornered correspondence of Joyce, Léon, and Weaver, which forms the second main division, consists of 213 letters exchanged between 1930 and 1939. It thus covers the period of composition and revision of much of *Finnegans Wake*. Comparatively early in the correspondence, by 1 March 1932, it is clear from remarks contained in a letter of that date from Weaver to Léon that he has been imposed as an intermediary: she writes to thank Léon for having sent her so many letters on Joyce's behalf. This hint was presumably taken on board by Joyce, as a reply is forthcoming by return from Léon in which he indicates that Joyce is overwhelmed by dealing with simultaneous offers of publication for *Ulysses* by four separate American publishers and that he asks Léon to apologise for him for not having written personally.

Inevitably, we come early to the basis for the financial situation between Weaver and Joyce. In a letter dated merely as 1933, Miss Weaver writes that she has instructed Joyce's solicitors to sell £100 of stock. This is a recurrent theme of the correspondence, the sums becoming rapidly larger and the demands more frequent. It is clear that Joyce was determined to live on the capital that Miss Weaver had transferred to him rather than attempting to live
within the income provided by interest and dividends, an extremely foolish strategy for someone in his position and one that Miss Weaver was later to blame herself for permitting. The tone of Miss Weaver’s letters is sometimes like that of a hybrid of sympathetic nanny and professional victim. She was clearly looking for a cause, a need that Joyce was quite capable of adequately satisfying. She seems indeed, in these letters, to live vicariously through the exciting vicissitudes of the Joyce family and their doings. She did not always do so, however, without the occasional mild Quakerish protest, asking on 4 March 1933 could the Joyces not manage to stay in Zurich longer than seven days for 4,000 francs, which she points out was more than double for each of them what she had paid herself for her stay in Paris.

Relentlessly, however, the selling went on. On 30 March 1933 Léon writes to Weaver to announce the departure of the Joyces for Zurich and to request the sale of another £200 worth of stock. This is followed immediately by a letter of 31 March, in which Léon gives details of the proposed expenses necessitating the sale, suggesting that Miss Weaver’s Quaker instincts had once more asserted themselves and she was requiring justification—a justification that appears to have been satisfied, since the same day, 31 March 1933, she writes to Léon indicating compliance with the request. However, on 2 April 1933 Léon is bewailing to Miss Weaver the inevitable consequence in terms of a reduction of Joyce’s income. Just under a month later she is agreeing to sell another £100 of stock, the last in this portfolio, and offers to pay £100 herself for the Joyces’ trip to Zurich, although she remarks ominously that her own finances are not good. On 13 May 1933, apparently to demonstrate the strength of her friendship for Joyce in the teeth of his accusation that he was being treated like a schoolboy, she increases the Johannesburg stock that she made over to him to £500. Joyce, meanwhile, celebrated the Bloomsday of 1933 by selling yet another £100 of stock. August of that year finds the public trustee expressing concern at the constant realization of capital and the beginning of a long and unsuccessful campaign by Weaver to get Joyce to sign the official application for funds together with details of Lucia’s expenses.

On 26 September 1933 Harriet Weaver wrote to Léon a letter whose import was principally addressed to Joyce and that is poignantly reminiscent of a letter addressed to the young Joyce in the same city some thirty years previously by his mother. In this letter Mrs. Joyce wrote to her son, “My Dear Jim, If you are disappointed in my letter and if, as usual, I fail to understand what you wish to explain, believe me it is not from any want of a longing desire to do so and speak the words you want. As you so often said, I am stupid and cannot grasp the great thoughts which are yours much as I desire to do so.” In her letter Miss Weaver pathetically asks Léon, if he ever finds Joyce in a mood to listen to a message from her, to tell him that she is “trying very hard to understand and appreciate Work in Progress despite [her] slow, dull and unimaginative mind.” Miss Weaver, in fact, was part of a scene in which Joyce con-
tinually reconstructed the psychological elements of his childhood and youth in Dublin, reconstituting her as archetypal mother, his own favourite role being that of wayward son.

There is little doubt that Joyce enjoyed manipulating his circle, and the tripartite correspondence between Léon, Joyce, and Weaver indicates Joyce's considerable skill as a ventriloquist. While alternately sympathising, empathising, scolding, and, like many victims, ultimately being induced to blame herself, Miss Weaver provided the perfect audience for his talents. As Christmas approached, Léon himself appears to have been in trouble with Joyce, apologising to Miss Weaver for not being able to keep her au courant with the doings of the Joyce household and explaining that he has seen Joyce only rarely and that his visits have often been short and curt. When the spring of 1934 "sprang" the "gracehoper" was troubled in mind rather than "hoppy" on "akant" of his "Joyicity," and was actually writing lines of dialogue for Miss Weaver at a second remove. On 11 March Léon writes that Joyce is adamant in his refusal to sign the letter for the public trustee and indicates that instead Miss Weaver should write directly to Mr. Joyce saying that she has not forgotten him and that she will always assist him. She should also send over Joyce's books, which were in storage in London. On 17 March 1934 she acknowledges to Léon that she has performed the required contortions. Miss Weaver's unselfishness conveniently knew no bounds.

By autumn (5 October 1934) she is resigned to Joyce's obduracy in refusing to write to the public trustee and offers instead to exchange some of her own stock for the Canadian and Pacific stock. She points, however, to the fact that this will lead to a reduction in her own income and render her less able to help in the future. Her thought, as usual, is ever for Joyce rather than herself. Matters continue to deteriorate until 29 January 1936, on which date a worried Weaver writes to Léon about the financial situation. She fears that if she has to subsidize Joyce from her own resources these will be exhausted in less than ten years. In the light of the prevailing circumstances, it was perhaps optimistic of her to think that even her considerable means, which she placed virtually entirely at Joyce's disposal, would have lasted another decade. She also indicates that she has been secretly providing money for Joyce to make up for the fact that some Canadian and Pacific stock has not been paying dividends for three years. By 7 February, shortly after Joyce's birthday, she is offering to sell more of her own stock, although she insists that Joyce must economize, stating quite flatly that she herself cannot economise any further unless she parts with her flat, an astonishing suggestion. Characteristically, she takes the blame on herself and castigates herself for not having made the capital more inaccessible to Joyce, saying very sensibly that it should have been available only for needs and not for luxuries. She further reproves herself for not having protected Joyce from himself. On 18 February 1936 Joyce in a rather grand gesture declines to accept the transfer of stock, which he had not realized
“meant any sacrifice on Miss Weaver’s part.” This does not, however, prevent him “directing” Léon to write to Munro Saw for £200 to be realized out of her benefaction instead. This has curious and ironic echoes of Joyce’s early short story “Eveline,” in which the young woman of that title surrenders her wages to her dissipated father, who then responds to her request for housekeeping money by retorting that he does not intend to give her any of his hard earned money to throw about the streets.

Once more Miss Weaver masochistically obliges by abasing herself, writing on 19 February 1936 to Léon requesting him to ask Mr. Joyce to allow her to visit him in Paris. She apparently hoped to be allowed as a supplicant into the presence in order to “clear up misunderstandings.” Things did not improve immediately, for on 22 March 1936 we have a letter in which she inquires plaintively whether Mr. Joyce is still too antagonistic toward her to send a message. A letter of 18 September discloses that, unknown to Joyce, she has made good her suggestion of 7 February and acquired Joyce’s Canadian and Pacific stock, which has fallen in value and which she would hold to in the hopes of its rising again, at which point she would sell out and make good the difference to Joyce.

Léon, at least, appreciated the nature and extent of Weaver’s patronage and vicariously expressed gratitude on behalf of Joyce, a gratitude that she deprecates in a letter of 21 December 1938 while heaping praise on Léon for his assistance to the writer. Joyce apparently did not, however, at this time attempt to offend her by his gratitude, for on 30 December 1938 she tells Léon that she has received a series of registered envelopes but is afraid that she has upset Joyce in some way, as for the first time in twenty-three years he has not sent her Christmas greetings nor did he inscribe the copy of the U.S.A. Matisse edition of *Ulysses* that he had sent to her. The last letter in the collection carries no date but imposes an artistically satisfying symmetry—Paul Léon to Harriet Weaver, money to be sent from Munro Saw.

As the four volumes of Joyce’s correspondence amply illustrate, Joyce could be a witty, charming, and engaging correspondent. He was also very human, in addition to being an artist of heroic determination. The letters in the Léon Collection at the National Library of Ireland amplify our knowledge of Joyce, although they do not place him in a flattering light. The baldness of the summaries given in the catalogue minimizes the charm of expression as it exposes the degree of exploitation involved in many of the transactions recorded. Joyce himself might have been surprised at this interpretation. When Beckett, stung by Joyce’s rebuff of a growing intimacy between them, stated gloomily that Joyce had no human feeling, Joyce replied, “no feelings, I, My God,” indicating that such an attitude showed an incomprehensible misunderstanding of his life and works. The Joyce-Léon-Weaver correspondence gives us an additional context within which to place some of the letters already known to scholars. Nevertheless, despite some negative impact of that context, nothing
could diminish the humanity and profound feeling of Joyce's letter to Harriet Weaver in which he defends the expense of his desperate attempts to save his daughter's sanity:

I believe I can cover most of the expenses of publication of my daughter's alphabet. My idea is not to persuade her that she is a Cézanne but that on her 29th birthday . . . she may see something to persuade her that her whole past has not been a failure. The reason I keep on trying by every means to find a solution for her case (which may come at any time as it did with my eyes) is that she may not think that she is left with a blank future as well. I am aware that I am blamed by everybody for sacrificing that precious metal money to such an extent for such a purpose when it would be done so cheaply and quietly by locking her up in an economical mental prison for the rest of her life.

I will not do so as long as I see a single chance of hope for her recovery, nor blame her or punish her for the great crime she has committed in being a victim to one of the most elusive diseases known to men and unknown to medicine. And I imagine that if you were where she is and felt as she must you would perhaps feel some hope if you felt that you were neither abandoned nor forgotten.

Whatever reservations one may have about Joyce, either as a writer or a man, one is inevitably reminded of the old proverb "show me your friends and I'll show you your worth." There must have been some very remarkable quality in the living reality of James Joyce that drew devoted friendship from people such as Paul Léon and Harriet Weaver. Of Joyce it can be said with truth that part, at least, of his glory was that he had such friends.