

J.G. Farrell – In His Own Words: Selected Letters and Diaries (2009)

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Less than three months before his untimely death on 11 August 1979, J.G. Farrell wrote a letter dated 8 May to Robert and Kathie Parrish detailing the ongoing domestic chaos at his new home in rural county Cork. Farrell records passing a month by candlelight; “the absence of post”; “a petrol shortage”; and a dysfunctional bathroom (p. 357). The disorder and ill luck, however, cannot negate the genuine contentment that the novelist feels at, finally, arriving at a sense of homeliness in the coastal recess on Ireland’s Atlantic seaboard. His domestic frustrations may be inconvenient, but they belong to him and they are temporary; the final missives from Farrell’s authorial station by the sea, then, reflect both the general temper of uncertainty that characterized his life up to this point, and an impending sense of stability in the months and years ahead. Naturally, with the benefit of hindsight, reading the final letters of 1979 and noting the renovations and the plans outlined therein by Farrell is an experience tinged with pathos. Indeed, the letter immediately prior to that cited above adds to such a feeling, when Farrell, writing to Claude and Anna Simha, enthuses: “The countryside is just beautiful. I haven’t had a chance so far to go fishing, but the locals say that you can catch mackerel right beside me here” (356). And again these last letters document Farrell’s subsequent dedication to fishing on nearby rocks (with some success); fishing competes with his writing for his attentions at various stages in the final months.

Besides these minor local triumphs and distractions in later years, as Lavinia Greacon’s copious volume catalogues, Farrell’s correspondence is suggestive of a dynamic and humorous personality, and of a life rich in cultural experiences and international travel. Following her 1999 biography *J.G. Farrell: The Making of a Writer* (Bloomsbury), Greacon performs an act of editorial collations that is becoming anachronistic in the contemporary digital age. Whether reading recently published volumes of letters, such as those at hand or those of Saul Bellow, or, indeed those of long deceased literary figures, one thing is abundantly clear, the appearance of such volumes is in terminal decline. The publication of the letters of a relatively contemporary author such as Farrell is, and will become ever more, a rarity in literary studies. Letter writing is a dying, if not a dead, form of communication; the

physicality of pen on paper, dispatch and receipt, as well as the artefact itself have been etherised in the epoch of digital correspondence and self-fashioning. This is not to appear as a neo-Luddite, but simply to remark upon the precious rarity of substantial volumes such as that edited by Greacon. In fact, one of the limitations of the volume stems from the one-sided nature of the letters reproduced here; we only receive Farrell's voice in the collection, and can only guess at the replies from his subsequent responses. The dialogic electricity of the lettered exchange, thus, is unfortunately lacking in this volume. Nevertheless, there is sufficient material collated by Greacon for both academic scholar and general reader to yield significant value from the selection.

As mentioned, Farrell led a peripatetic life with periods of residency in the U.S, England, Ireland, and France, as well as research trips to India and Singapore and visits to his parents in Malta. Of course, the volume is, naturally, a symptom of such a lifestyle, but the international theme is also an informant of Farrell's literary tastes, evidenced in these letters. His international consciousness is also palpable in the transhistorical and transcontinental ethic of his fiction writing, which encompasses a range of geographical and historical contexts. In his 1965 application for a Harkness Fellowship to Yale University, Farrell writes: "I am deeply interested in trying to write universal, as opposed to regional, novels; the sort of books in which people trying to adjust themselves to abrupt changes in their civilization, whether it be in Ireland or in Japan, may be able to recognize themselves" (p. 87). There is an empathetic quality to Farrell's authorial ethic here; the materials may be local but the resonances and the vision are universal. This ethic is tangible, in particular, in his celebrated 'Empire' trilogy: *Troubles*, *The Singapore Grip* and *The Siege of Krishnapur*. And it is something that he prized when *Troubles* was first published – he records that the specific details of the novel resound beyond the narrow context of the plot, and he was both heartened and disappointed that only one significant reviewer appreciated his intentions. Elizabeth Bowen's review, Farrell writes in his diary on 1 December 1970, "pleased me very much because she was the only person who noticed, or bothered to say, that I was trying to write about now as well as then" (p. 217). Farrell had met and spoken with Bowen at a literary dinner party in London earlier the same year, and such company becomes more evident in the letters as Farrell's career gains upward momentum. In a similar vein, the letters chart the quirks, irritations and mechanics of the publishing industry and its hinterlands, to which Farrell becomes accustomed, though not without outbursts of extreme anger. Anticipating royalties, Farrell writes to his agent Deborah Rogers in December 1969 that: "For the past week I've been seething with impotent rage at the non-appearance of £200 which, in my innocence, I imagined I had coming to me from the p'back of *A Girl in the Head*" (p. 187). But with such moments of feverish anger, we also witness Farrell's good-humoured wit; his

professions of youthful romantic ardour; and impressions of the erstwhile corners of the British Empire in India and Singapore. The most extended dispatches from international travel are from India, and it is signally illuminating when we re-consider Farrell's writing back to British imperial history. From these letters the most arresting details are personal responses to the subcontinent and its burgeoning urban centres. We read of the author's incapacity to process the abject impoverishment and incessant human decrepitude on display in Bombay and Delhi. India is refreshing and welcoming to Farrell but is frightening and repulsive at the same time: "One feels v. safe here, in spite of the horrors one sees...Even heartless old me finds it hard to get used to," he informs his girlfriend Bridget O'Toole from Bombay in January 1971. The difficulties of this subcontinental research trip are part of the greater authorial trials listed by Farrell, the most persistent being financial troubles. The freedom to purchase solitude and time to write can be tracked from his early twenties onto the preparation for his formidable 'Empire' trilogy. But the financial strife is often leavened by intermittent love letters to girlfriends such as Bridget O'Toole; Sarah Bond (in the U.S.); and an early romantic attachment, Gabrielle (in Germany). These love letters veer from matter of fact details of daily life to mawkish professions of love; and also allude to his consistent devotion to authorial success. One gets the impression that the chase was Farrell's energiser, that he sought communication rather than permanent consummation.

These are just a fraction of the topics addressed in Greacon's handsomely produced volume. The letters have an ambiguous valence, in that they suggest a dialogue and a sense of communion between correspondents, but they also emphasize the solitude of the individual letter writer. Greacon's edition permits a valuable insight into one of the English language's most accomplished and enigmatic figures in recent times, supplementing her excellent biography. Farrell emerges as a figure that needed people but that for whom letter writing seems to have been an ideal form – communication without absolute commitment.