

Something of Himself and Mr. Joyce

THE SILENT YEARS: An Autobiography. With Memoirs of James Joyce and Our Ireland. By J. F. Byrne. Foreword by Harvey Breit. 388 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Young. \$4.

By FRANK O'CONNOR

If any reader of this section wishes to be a greater writer let him first find himself an interpreter. That I fancy is not so easy as it sounds, for a good interpreter is a peculiar blend of qualities. He must be intelligent or he will not understand what you wish him to interpret, but, on the other hand, he must not be too intelligent or he will be bound to ask, "Mr. Smith, why on earth do you write in this peculiar way?"

James Joyce was lucky in his interpreters who did what they were told and asked no awkward questions. It is we who ask the questions, for of course a really great writer like Joyce never dreamed of telling all the answers. And our position is really difficult when we have to deal with books written before Joyce became famous and interpreters tumbled over him. What of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," for instance? It is an exceedingly difficult book, more difficult in some ways than "Ulysses" be-

Irish short story writer and critic, Mr. O'Connor recently published a volume of his collected stories.

cause intellectually less immature.

"Portrait" begins with what seems a hodge-podge of childhood impressions, like a snatch of song which the child repeats as "O the green wothe botheth," and an incident like "When you wet the bed, first it is warm then it gets cold," and a vague memory of Irish politics. "The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet back was for Parnell." Yet all these are closely related to the general scheme of the book, which is a study of differentiation in Aristotelian terms—hence the emphasis on touch.

THE child changes "wild rose" to "green rose" because he has wet the bed and green represents cold as rose represents hot. In the same way the split in the Irish parliamentary party is represented by the green brush for Parnell, the maroon for Davitt, while the whole first chapter describes a small boy with a high temperature feeling waves of hot and cold run over him and all worked out in analogies like the York and Lancaster sections of his class at school. In the process he discovers in himself the organ of touch in Aristotelian terms—the heart, as later he will discover the existence of mind in terms of justice, and of soul in terms of sin.

Now this is only a slight ex-

ample of the extraordinary construction of a most extraordinary book and it is not easy to interpret unless we recognize the peculiar way in which Joyce's mind functioned, by association rather than by logic. What we need at the moment is less textual studies and more biographical information. That is why so many of us have waited eagerly for Mr. J. F. Byrne's autobiography, for Mr. Byrne is "Cranly" of the novel; the stout, big-hearted fig-chewing Wicklow man whose humanity and common sense come as such a relief after so much literary gas and gaiters. "Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world a mother's love is not." I have always felt that somewhere or other I had known the man who said that, and, when one day in The New York Times office Mr. Harvey Breit let me glance at the manuscript of Mr. Byrne's autobiography, I wanted to know at once what he had become. A police chief? A Bishop? Not quite.

I could have guessed of course that he had nothing but contempt for Joycean commentators, for, though he may not be a Bishop, infallibility runs in his blood and his own inaccuracies are uttered with Olympian authority. He spares us nothing; his views on Aquinas, or English misgovernment; he prints one of his stories and a number of his poems.



James Joyce (right), the author, and George Clancy (left), in 1905.

And he finally goes to town on a terrific defense of his own invention—an unbreakable code which mysteriously has been slighted by Washington to the world's great loss. So there it is! Inventor of an unbreakable code with an unrectified grievance. It is an odd book; cantankerous, infallible, perverse, repetitious, but the character of the man, as Harvey Breit draws it with a masterhand in the foreword, does emerge. It is the portrait of an honest man.

Where the book disappoints is in the lack of information about what sort of person Joyce was. "During Joyce's absence in Paris something had occurred which hurt me deeply. I cannot go into detail about this."

Mr. Byrne is interesting on one section of "Ulysses" and gives us as well as a previously unpublished poem of Joyce's, some facts which the future biographer will need to remember. But for the rest there is too little about Joyce and too much about Mr. Byrne.

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