

Literary Horizons

Granville Hicks

Frank O'Connor, who died in 1966, wrote some of the finest short stories in the language. He also wrote two novels, several critical studies, a brilliant life of Michael Collins, and a touching memoir, mostly about his mother, *An Only Child*. (I am happy to hear that a second autobiographical volume, *My Father's Son*, will be published in the fall.) But it is for his short stories that he is and will be remembered.

His last collection, *A Set of Variations* (Knopf, \$6.95), contains twenty-seven stories written in the last decade of his life. At least a dozen of them are as good as anything he has written, and I cannot give much higher praise than that. He wrote about people of Ireland—priests and occasionally doctors and lawyers but mostly unsophisticated workmen or farmers and their mothers, wives, and daughters.

O'Connor's great art was in taking a situation, as a rule one that seemed to be quite simple, looking at it from this point of view and that, and finally bringing the reader to see it in a new, startling and revealing way. Almost any story in the book would show what I mean, but the first one, "A Set of Variations on a Borrowed Theme," will serve my purpose nicely. (In order to make my point, I shall have to tell how the story ends, and, that, I know, will disturb certain readers, but I promise not to reveal the ending of any of the other twenty-six stories.)

The story begins: "Kate Mahoney was sixty when her husband died and, like many another widow, she had to face the loss of her little home." O'Connor describes her: "Her hands and legs were knotted with rheumatics, and she had a battered, inexpressive countrywoman's face, like a butcher's block, in which the only good feature was the eyes, which looked astonishingly girlish and merry." She has two daughters, but she would not want to live with either of them even if they could have her. So she decides to take a foster child: "It was a terrible comedown—more particularly for her, a respectable woman who had brought up two honest transactions of her own, but at her age what else could she do?"

Eventually she has two foster children, Jimmy and James, both the illegitimate sons of young women of good family who were "taken advantage of." Her daughters, indignant when she accepts the first—"making a holy show of us"—are infuriated by the second, and

one of them, Nora, upbraids her mother:

"You love it, woman [she says]. And you care more about that little bastard than you ever did about Molly or me."

"How dare you?" Kate cried, rising with as much dignity as the rheumatics permitted. "What way is that to speak to your own mother? And to talk about a poor innocent child in my house like that, you dirty, jealous thing! Yes, jealous," she added in a wondering whisper, as though the truth had only dawned on her in that moment. "Oh, my! Ye that had everything!"

In a characteristic way, for he always sees a situation in all its complexity, O'Connor presents each of the two boys as an individual, and describes their relations with one another and with Kate. Jimmy, the older, comes to suspect that there is something strange about his origins, and at last he learns the truth. When he is reclaimed by his mother, who has married, Kate's feelings are ambivalent: she is glad that he is to have the advantages to which he is entitled, and she is afraid of the responsibility of bringing him up, but she misses him. And eventually he returns. James, meanwhile, has decided that he wants to become a college professor, and is steadily and quietly working towards that end.

On her deathbed Kate addresses her farewell to the two boys and not to her



Frank O'Connor—"an illusion of spontaneity."

daughters. Nora says to Molly that their mother's mind was wandering. Molly replies: "It was *not* wandering. She knew perfectly well what she was saying, and Jimmy knew it, too. They were her real children all the time, and we were only outsiders." This is true, but O'Connor does not want the reader to think that it is the whole truth or even the most important part of the truth. At the wake Kate's old crony and confidante, Hanna Dinan, says, "Wisha, wasn't she a great little woman! She had them all against her and she bested them. They had everything and she had nothing, and she bested them all in the end." And this is it, of course: the theme of the story is Kate's greatness.

O'Connor arrives at his conclusion so naturally and easily that one could almost believe it was an accident. He had a wonderful gift for creating an illusion of spontaneity. Of course there really was nothing casual about any of his stories. In her brief introduction his widow says, "For Frank O'Connor the most important single element in any story was its design." O'Connor himself wrote Harvey Breit of the *New York Times* that he revised his stories again and again. If he was lucky, he said, "I may get it right in six revisions. If I don't, I may have to revise it fifty times." As he worked it over, a story might change, for form and content developed together. It was insight that made the story and perfected the design. In the story I have been examining it is right, in terms of both form and content, that Hanna Dinan should have the last word and say what she says.

As for the other twenty-six stories, a dozen or more are as good as this or better, and I can only urge readers to find out for themselves how potent was the magic O'Connor practiced. For an Irishman he was extraordinarily lacking in partisanship. In his stories about priests, for example, good priests and bad priests, he never speaks out for or against the Church, though his characters are likely to be hot on one side or the other. He says things about Ireland that are bound to offend the professional Irishmen, but he says them without bitterness. Human behavior often struck him as ludicrous, and he wrote some very funny stories, such as "The School for Wives" and "Androcles and the Army" in this volume. He was endlessly interested in human beings, and firmly convinced that there was more in almost any person than could be seen on the surface. Nothing in the human condition seemed to him more prevalent or more pathetic than loneliness—movingly portrayed in the three stories that conclude the volume. Although his manner was usually cheerful, as he wanted it to be, his feeling for life was essentially tragic.

The Publishing Scene

David Dempsey

The Arkville Press consists of two officers, fifteen published books, no full-time employees, a deficit and a millionaire backer. It has a friend at Bankers Trust and is programmed at the Columbia University Graduate School of Business. The books are sold by The Free Press, which in turn is owned by Crowell-Collier-Macmillan. Complicated? Not by modern publishing standards. But it does remind us of the old anatomy song: the shin bone is connected to the knee bone, the knee bone to the thigh bone, the thigh bone to the hip, and so on. Except in this case, Arkville isn't very hip. Its major function is to publish books on the role of the American corporation in modern society.

The unusual thing about Arkville is that it has persuaded a number of these large corporations to help underwrite the Press's annual budget. In a sense, this parallels the efforts of Arts Councils throughout the country to get "business" money for cultural purposes. (A sizable proportion of the \$27 million funneled through the National Council on the Arts in 1968 came as gifts from corporations.) If Arkville expands its list to include poetry and books on general cultural subjects, as it plans someday to do, corporate subvention will hopefully be phased out, but at present, as Director Richard Eells points out, the money is a pump-priming operation designed to get Arkville moving. U.S. Steel, Bankers Trust Co., and Standard Oil of New Jersey were among the first sponsors, back in 1965, and the blue-chip angels have since increased to fifteen; IBM, for example, has just committed itself to a seven-year grant totaling \$35,000. In addition, five private foundations have added their support.

It takes a financial genius to think of something like this, and such a man was at hand in Armand G. Erpf, general partner of Loeb, Rhoades & Co., who got a taste of publishing as chairman of the executive committee of Crowell-Collier-Macmillan, went on to invest in *Atlas* and *New York Magazine*, and is now president of Arkville. Parenthetically, it is Erpf who is credited with reviving the moribund Crowell-Collier Co., combining it with Macmillan, and boosting annual sales from \$28 million to \$400 million in just ten years.

But there's no use being a publisher if you can't lose money, too—at least in a good cause—and Erpf started Arkville as a "loss" corporation. The name comes



from Arkville, N.Y., up in the Rip Van Winkle country of Delaware County, where Erpf maintains a home. An old building, circa 1800, has been purchased as a headquarters and will be remodeled for future use. In the meantime Director Eells, who is Adjunct Professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Business, works out of his university office and his apartment. Columbia has put its imprimatur on the project by setting up a Studies of the Modern Corporation to oversee the editorial work, and it also acts as trustee for the corporate gifts.

Officially, the publications are "designed to stimulate inquiry, research, criticism and reflection. They fall into four categories: works by outstanding businessmen, scholars and professional men; prizewinning doctoral dissertations relating to the corporation; annotated and edited selections of business literature; and business classics that merit republication." Probably the most widely noted—and quoted—of the books to date is Daniel P. Moynihan's *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*.

The "studies" are far from being an apologetics for corporation behavior, and one book (*The Political Imperative: The Corporate Character of Unions*) is written by Gus Tyler of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Erpf says frankly that neither the universities nor business executives really know much about the modern corporation; the former are too far from the woods, and the latter too close to the trees. "In view of the enormous morass of ignorance about the methodology of modern business, we thought it important to put some light on it," Erpf explains.

He also sees Arkville as a counterforce to John Kenneth Galbraith, who he believes has given business a bad name. Yet the project makes no attempt at "image building" for the corporation, or

promoting the company histories so beloved of trade publishing. "Our sponsors are surprised to find that their names are not even mentioned in the books," Professor Eells says.

Beautifully designed and printed, they are far above the average in appearance. On a budget of about \$125,000 a year, the venture is still a shoestring operation as these things go; but it's a golden shoestring, and, as a way of getting business to pay for its own examination as a force in American life, an innovation in publishing as well.

For those to whom innovation is all, we draw attention to the latest example of electronic publishing, the new *Annals of America*, a six-years-in-the-making, computer-set, twenty-volume, million-dollar project sponsored by the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Edited by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, the *Annals* contains more than 2,000 historical documents by some 1,200 authors, ranging from Columbus to Martin Luther King, Jr., plus a two-volume conspectus of "Great Issues in American Life," a bibliography, cross references and much, much more.

The secret of the *Annals*—and their prime selling point—is that you don't have to "look things up." On the contrary, you leave this to a computer in Chicago, merely sending in your order for whatever material you want assembled. In due time a custom-made "book" comes back to you which has been retrieved, quite possibly, from all twenty volumes. Indeed, our first thought was why own the set at all? Why not just establish a direct line to the computer service? Alas, inspection of the sales literature indicates that this is not possible.

The Britannica people point out that the *Annals* is "the first large set of reference books ever conceived for electronic composition and publishing" and that "it is pointing the way toward a more versatile publishing industry." What this will do for general trade publishing—novels, for example—we can't say. Our guess is, not very much. But the advantages of the electronic availability of educational material is obvious, and the *Annals* underwent field trials in several schools before being published in its final form. As now programmed, the *Annals* invites an educator to select any combination of subjects in the areas of history, social studies, and political science, and have them "packaged" for his class. It's a little like computer dating.

Since retrieval costs money (the amount depends upon the number of pages), schools and college will doubtless form the largest market for the *Annals*. But there is no reason why individuals can't buy the set (at \$149.50), ignore the computer, and use it as an old-fashioned sourcebook in U.S. history.