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# Colby Library Quarterly

Series VI

December 1963

No. 8

## A CONSIDERATION OF FRANK O'CONNOR'S SHORT STORIES

By GEORGE BRANDON SAUL

### I

FRANK O'CONNOR, born Michael O'Donovan to grueling poverty in Cork in 1903, has said (*An Only Child*, 1961) that he adopted his mother's family name while in public service in order to avoid involving his employers in his literary activities. By profession a librarian, he has also been a teacher and a director of the Abbey Theatre. As promptly appeared, the threatened involvement should have been a proud one, for O'Connor is that rare author whose creative work has been almost invariably both significant and exciting. Certainly literate Americans take a just pride of association in the fact that he came to live in the United States in 1952, the year of his second marriage.

His output has been phenomenal, but he is one author whose genius justifies his productivity. Of his not-purely-creative work, *An Only Child* is particularly charming. This autobiography to his release from prison at twenty (as a somewhat innocent member of the Irish Republican Army) is one of the finest things of its kind, modestly and genially told and especially moving in its unsentimentalized tributes to his mother. But his travel-writing (*Leinster, Munster and Connaught*, 1950) is also full of piquancy, independence ("Ireland is not a nation, but a bad case of arrested development"), original judgment, and good storytelling — even literary criticism. And his translations from the Irish — conveniently to be examined in *Kings, Lords, & Commons* (1959) — also deserve special mention: the Cuala Press, of Yeatsian association, published two volumes (*The Wild Bird's Nest*, 1932; *Lords and Commons*, 1938), followed by *The Fountain of Magic* (London, 1939).

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The creative work ranges widely, from dramatic writing (two collaborations with H. Hunt: *The Invincibles* and *Moses' Rock*; and one play solely his: *Time's Pocket*), through prose fiction (including two novels: *The Saint and Mary Kate*, 1932; *Dutch Interior*, 1940), to verse. *Three Old Brothers* (1936), which seeks to net lights of the sort caught by the later Yeats, fails in some degree in its high challenge and has technical flaws of accent and rhyme; but it is very readable, has some gratifying phrases (like ". . . the/ Lancelight of the rustling branches"), and reaches a peak of humility and ecstasy in "Prologue and Epilogue, 2" whose concluding cry "From magic we come, / To magic we go" is not only a haunting statement but a suggestion of the mental and spiritual cognition which enriches O'Connor's work in the short story, where his finest poetry may be found. It is this latter work which is to be considered here.

### II

Since O'Connor is unquestionably a major figure and the fabled "general reader" can not readily obtain all the volumes in which his short stories have been collected, and since the ostensibly collective editions are really selective, it seems useful to list these books and give their contents in the American editions, with a few comments and the warning that they do not rescue all the stories their author has published in periodicals since he began to appear in *The Irish Statesman* as a "discovery" of George Russell's.

*Guests of the Nation* (London, Macmillan; N.Y., Macmillan, 1931).

Guests of the Nation  
Attack  
Jumbo's Wife  
Nightpiece with Figures  
September Dawn  
Machine Gun Corps in Action  
Laughter  
Jo  
Alec  
Soirée chez une Belle Jeune Fille  
The Patriarch  
After Fourteen Years

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The Late Henry Conran  
The Sisters  
The Procession of Life

*N.B.*: Title story included in *More Stories . . . (inf.)* and *Stories* (1956).

*Bones of Contention and Other Stories* (London, Macmillan; N.Y., Macmillan 1936).

Michael's Wife  
Orpheus and His Lute  
Peasants  
In the Train  
The Majesty of the Law  
Tears — Idle Tears  
Lofty  
The Man That Stopped  
The English Soldier  
Bones of Contention  
What's Wrong with the Country?  
A Romantic

*N.B.*: Second story reprinted in *More Stories . . .* and *Stories* (1956); 3rd, 4th, & 5th in *The Stories . . . (inf.)*; 4th & 5th also in *Stories* (1956).

*Three Tales* (Dublin, Cuala Press: 250 copies. "Finished in the first week of December 1941").

The Bridal Night  
The Long Road to Ummera  
The Grand Vizier's Daughters

*N.B.*: All included in next volume.

*Crab Apple Jelly* (London, Macmillan; N.Y., Knopf, 1944).

The Bridal Night  
Old Fellows  
The Grand Vizier's Daughters  
Song without Words  
"The Star That Bids the Shepherd Fold" ["The Shepherds"  
in *More Stories . . .*]  
The Long Road to Ummera  
The Miser  
The House That Johnny Built

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The New Teacher ["The Cheapjack" in *The Stories* . . .]  
The Luceys  
Uprooted  
The Mad Lomasneys

*N.B.*: 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, & 11th reprinted in *The Stories* . . .; 5th & last in *More Stories* . . .; 4th, 6th, 10th, 11th, & 12th also in *Stories* (1956).

[*Selected Stories* (Dublin, Fridberg, 1946). Not seen by me.]

*The Common Chord* (London, Macmillan, 1947; N.Y., Knopf, 1948).

News for the Church  
The Custom of the Country  
Judas  
The Holy Door  
Don Juan (Retired)  
The Babes in the Wood  
The Frying-Pan  
The Miracle  
A Thing of Nothing  
The Stepmother  
Friends of the Family  
Don Juan's Temptation

*N.B.*: 1st, 4th, 6th, & last reprinted in *The Stories* . . .; 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 7th, & 8th in *More Stories* . . .; 1st, 2nd, & 3rd in *Stories* (1956).

*Traveller's Samples* (London, Macmillan; N.Y., Knopf, 1951).

First Confession  
The Man of the House  
The Idealist  
The Drunkard  
The Thief ["Christmas Morning" in *The Stories* . . .]  
My First Protestant  
The Mortal Coil  
Old-Age Pensioners  
Legal Aid  
The Masculine Principle  
The Sentry

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Jerome

The Lady of the Sagas

Darcy in the Land of Youth

*N.B.*: 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 9th, & 10th reprinted in *The Stories . . .*; 2nd, 6th, 11th, 12th, 13th, & 14th in *More Stories . . .*; 3rd, 4th, 9th, & 10th also in *Stories* (1956).

*The Stories of Frank O'Connor* (N.Y., Knopf, 1952; London, Hamilton, 1953). This adds to the inclusions indicated ("N.B.") in the listings above:

My Oedipus Complex

My Da

The Pretender

First Love

Freedom

*N.B.*: 1st & 3rd of these reprinted in *Stories* (1956).

*More Stories by Frank O'Connor* (N.Y., Knopf; Toronto, Collins, 1954). This adds to the inclusions indicated above:

Eternal Triangle

The Face of Evil

Masculine Protest

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

The Romantic [*N.B.*: This *title* duplicates that of the last story in *Bones . . .*]

The Little Mother

A Sense of Responsibility

Counsel for Oedipus

A Torrent Damned

The Old Faith

Vanity

Father and Son

Unapproved Route

Lonely Rock

*Stories by Frank O'Connor* (N.Y., Vintage Books, 1956). Inclusions (18) indicated above.

[*Selected Stories of Frank O'Connor* (London, ?, 1956). Not seen by me.]

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*Domestic Relations* (N.Y., Knopf; London, Hamilton, 1957).

The Genius  
The Study of History  
The Man of the World  
The Duke's Children  
Daydreams  
Private Property  
A Bachelor's Story  
The Pariah  
Expectation of Life  
The Ugly Duckling  
Orphans  
A Salesman's Romance  
Fish for Friday  
Pity  
The Paragon

If my count is accurate, O'Connor's collections through *Domestic Relations* contain ninety-nine stories. Of these, *The Stories . . .* and *More Stories . . .* add nineteen to a stringent selection of thirty-seven of the sixty-five previously collected. This means that O'Connor rejected a third of the stories available through 1954. One wishes his self-criticism had permitted him to spare from the rejected group the following: "Attack," "Jumbo's Wife," "The Late Henry Conran," and "The Procession of Life" from *Guests . . .*; "Michael's Wife" from *Bones . . .*; "The Grand Vizier's Daughters" from *Crab Apple Jelly*; and "The Stepmother" from *The Common Chord*. Whether or not he counts them among his best, these stories are all among the clearly superior fictions of their period. But it is refreshing, however distressing in this instance, to find an author capable of O'Connor's severe self-judgment.

Now to review the separate volumes.

### III

The majority of pieces in *Guests of the Nation* appear to be rooted in the author's youthful experience as a member of the Irish Republican Army in southern Ireland. All are very readable, but not a few seem less fictions than historical episodes of guerilla warfare isolated into fictional posture. However,

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the almost weird "Attack" and "Jumbo's Wife," the tale of a pathetic woman who unwittingly betrays her abusive husband to death as an informer on "the 'dirty Shinnners [*Sinn Féiners*],' " are touching exceptions. Also outstanding is the much revised title piece, one of several which O'Connor says (*Stories*, 1956) were "written under the influence of the great Jewish storyteller, Isaac Babel," and a tragic suggestion of the occasional emotional cost of enforced fraternizing among captors and captives and of the stupid cruelties of retribution. And "The Procession of Life," in which a sixteen-year-old lad learns the taste of liquor and tobacco, and barely escapes seduction by a street girl; and "The Late Henry Conran," of one who returns in a fury from Chicago after twenty-five years to charge his wife with "defamation of character" because he has been so labelled in his son's wedding announcement in a newspaper — are very delightfully Irish. Incidentally, the returning ghost of "The Patriarch" whose fingers burn marks in a panel has a fellow in the later "First Communion."

Entertaining as this book is, its successor, *Bones of Contention*, is clearly major by comparison, though the complications of the ironic title story seem less lucidly integrated to the plot than desirable. For here is evident the O'Connor who sees common things in a new way and expresses what he sees with lyric freshness, as an extract from "Michael's Wife" will suggest:

It may be also that she gathered something from those hours on the water, in silent coves on grey days when the wind shook out a shoal of lights, or in the bay when the thunderous light moved swiftly, starting sudden hares of brightness from every hollow, blue from the hills, violet from the rocks, primrose from the fields . . . so that she no longer felt a stranger when she walked in the morning . . . or from her window saw the moon plunge its silver drill into the water.

Where is the author to surpass that passage, with its "shoal of lights," its "thunderous light," its "hares of brightness," its "silver drill"? — or readily match such masterpieces as "In the Train" (in which witnesses and policemen are returning home with a woman who has just escaped hanging for poisoning her husband merely because none of her scornfully disapproving neighbors will "inform" against her — a woman whose last disclaimer is a confession of utter desolation), or "The Majesty of the Law" (in which old Dan Bride elects to "suffer" jail



against his enemy — as the ancient *filid* might have starved themselves for similar vengeance — rather than pay a fine for opening the fellow's skull in an argument), or "Orpheus and His Lute" (whose Irishtown band, having pawned its instruments on the provocation of thirst, beats up a rival band for its instruments during a parade, gives a remarkable performance, and then marches quietly off to jail)? Yet these, we are told (*Stories*, 1956), were the products of "a phase in which I was fumbling for a new style."

Even most of the lesser tales of this volume are rewarding, not least the touching "The English Soldier," in which Tom Donegan asserts that women "are more religious than men" because "they try to take advantage of God on account of Him being a man." But "Lofty" is essentially just a character sketch; "What's Wrong with the Country?", a series of ironical exchanges to no conclusion on the Irish conundrum; and "A Romantic," a triviality by O'Connor's usual standards.

*Crab Apple Jelly*, in turn, is one of those rare volumes of short stories which, like Stephens's *Etched in Moonlight* or Coppard's *Black Dog*, isolate themselves as completely luminous experiences in a lifetime of reading. Why its "The Grand Vizier's Daughters," whose climax comes close to achieving the accents of epic tragedy, was not included in either of O'Connor's collective volumes is hard to understand. Hard, too, would it be to forget the pathetic two monks — bound to silence — and their harmless vices in "Song without Words"; or the avaricious priest, Father Ring, who figures in more than one tale, almost ghoulishly diverting legacies from rightful heirs to the Church and making himself otherwise obnoxious; or the gently mad lad of "The Bridal Night," a haunting masterpiece indeed; or the bitter, tormented girl, and her perverse marriage, of "The Mad Lomasneys"; or the "uprooted" Tom and Ned Keating, priest and schoolteacher respectively, lonely for the peasant life they have forsaken — men "hunted down" each "by his own nature" and, perhaps, the crimson-streaked "apple-green light over Carriganassa." It was with the tales of this volume that O'Connor began his effort, obviously a most successful one, at what he later called (*Stories*, 1956) "putting back the narrative impulse" into stories, since broadcasting had shown him that storytelling had lost "the tone of a man's voice,

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speaking." Nor is he unjustified in feeling that tales like "The Mad Lomasneys" and "The Luceys" "describe for the first time the Irish middleclass Catholic way of life with its virtues and its faults without any of the picturesqueness of earlier Irish writing which concentrated on colour and extravagance." Despite this he tells us in the preface to *The Stories* . . . (1952) that he questions whether "The Luceys," "struggled savagely with over twenty years," is yet in final form.

*The Common Chord*, which has less-varied subject matter than an O'Connor volume usually shows, deals largely with sexual preoccupations (inevitably complicated by Roman Catholicism), malcontent marriages, and illegitimacy, the unpalatable priest Father Ring reappears, and an irony veering between amusement and tragedy is not unapparent. Most compelling among the shorter pieces are "The Stepmother" (remarkable tale of a good, and unjustly treated, specimen); "The Frying-Pan" (concerned with the amorous, and essentially tragic, complications that result when the wife of a priest's friend appeals to that priest, actually in love with her, for sympathy, her husband being spiritually a "spoiled priest" who never proceeded to ordination and now regards his monthly coition as adultery); and "Judas" (in which a young man resigns his love at the tugging of the "silver cord"). "The Miracle" is a delightful account of a doctor's revenge in which we meet Bill Enright, "prepared to treat the Canon as a bandit of similar dignity to himself." But the most impressive item in the book (which — see "The Custom of the Country" — does not lack evidence to suggest that few could match the Irish Roman Catholic in uttering strictures on his church or "clericalism") is really a novelette, "The Holy Door."

This tale — with its just aphorism "There is nothing a good-living woman likes better than confessing her husband's sins" — poses the priest-approved dodge of conquering a mental block by imagining sexual substitution of the sort indulged by the absurd wife in O'Faolain's very different "Woman Who Married Clark Gable." But results are not farcical in the case of O'Connor's Polly, childless despite a pilgrimage to Rome to witness the once-in-seven-years opening of "The Holy Door." Religious neuroticism and stupidity do not in the end prevent the then-widowed husband from winning romantic love, and prompt progeny, from his first wife's ex-confidante, Nora, and

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thereby foiling his almost incredibly vicious mother, jealous of his paternal inheritance for her other son — an unnatural example of her category and O'Connor's most malevolent figure. The nocturnal episode in which the son returns from walking Nora home and has a scene with this mother after finding she has placed his dead wife's photograph between two candles on a mantel is one of the most powerful in modern literature.

*Traveller's Samples* returns us to the more usual variety, and the quiet laughter, characteristic of O'Connor. From the wholly delightful and greatly worked-over opening tale, "First Confession" (on some of whose matter *An Only Child* is illuminative, as it is in respect of certain other O'Connor tales), through "The Thief" (later "Christmas Morning," and as touching as any of Coppard's fine tales of children), to "Darcy in the Land of Youth" (in which two Irish boys lose their inhibitions with a couple of English factory girls during wartime), there is great plenty, including something like an echo of epic tragedy in Old Mike's boast of his ancient greatness ("Old-Age Pensioners").

Not least touching here is "The Man of the House," of a lad sent to get his mother cough medicine and egged into sharing it with a little girl, consequently returning home heartbroken. Not least ironic is "The Lady of the Sagas," in which the teacher Deirdre Costello, bemoaning the provincialism of her town (Cork?) and remembering the sagas (she was named for the Irish "Helen"), actually rejects a solicitor she had wanted to marry when he admits he has never bedded a girl or had a particular amorous interest previously pretended. But irony, too, garnishes "My First Protestant," of whose Joe Daly it is said, "Drink was his trouble and he bore it with great dignity." And here, too, are such personal favorites of O'Connor's as "The Idealist," "The Drunkard," "Legal Aid," and "The Masculine Principle."

As previously indicated, O'Connor's first collective volume, *The Stories . . .* (1952), adds only five to a gathering of previously assembled tales, but those five include "My Da," the story of a poor boy (eventually a priest) and his drunken mother with which the author was on publication still unsatisfied, and the wholly delightful "My Oedipus Complex" (O'Connor admits in *An Only Child* that as a boy he "was jealous"

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of his father, which implies a healthy retort to neurotic psychiatrists. Reflecting on this volume and its complement, *More Stories . . .*, one is reminded of Dryden's comment on Chaucer, "Here is God's plenty."

*More Stories . . .* is a parallel book filled with people subtly, but gently and smilingly, observed; and it is noticeable that "pious" is frequent among the descriptive adjectives applied to the women. The interest generally lies not in startling or novel situations, but in how the characters conduct themselves in their human predicaments. O'Connor is completely candid throughout, never "smart," never given to misjudging by fooling himself through sentimental misreading. As usual, he tells his stories with an air suggestive of personal experience as their source. In this he again recalls A. E. Coppard, whose work he admires. More than once he appears to imply that the Roman Catholic religion in its postures runs counter to an honest reading of actual human experience: *e.g.*, in presenting Una's reflections after coition with a married man in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." Here, too, in "A Romantic," is to be found one of his rare descents to sarcasm, in "In a small place like Cork funerals are frequently less harrowing than separations: one has no illusion that the dead are enjoying themselves in one's absence."

*More Stories . . .*, as shown in my tabulation, adds fourteen fresh tales to its reprinted fifteen, and at least nine of these rank with O'Connor's best, with "Unapproved Route" and "Lonely Rock" ("Ladies of the House" in its *Harper's* printing) superlative. The former is a tale of love crossed by friendship through an unwanted pregnancy. One remembers it no less surely for such segments as "woman's vanity, the main-spring of her character" - O'Connor may well have been remembering his mother as he wrote this (see *An Only Child*) and "Rosalind and Kate could have been sisters, they had so little in common." "Lonely Rock," with its "Women like their own mystifications, which give them a feeling of power; they dislike other people's, which they always describe as slyness," is particularly notable for the sensitivity which makes the author observe, in reporting a tense emotional situation, "I noticed as if for the first time the billows of wind break over the house." The "lonely rock" appears to be the old mother in this triangle

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of a husband's open unfaithfulness and a wife's almost incredible reasonableness.

Among the other good things not previously collected should be instanced "Eternal Triangle" (hilarious account of the involvement of a watchman, a prostitute, and a drunk in an abortive Irish "rising" that turns petty tragedy into roaring comedy), "Masculine Protest" (of a returned runaway and his understanding father), "The Little Mother" (a quietly sardonic masterpiece concerning the oldest of three wild girls, who becomes a responsible tyrant to her sisters and father after her mother's death puts her in control), "A Sense of Responsibility" (basically the definition of a thoroughly good man: without moralization, almost a Morality), "Counsel for Oedipus" (an amazing tragicomedy), "Vanity" (on an aged bishop's hopeless effort to keep a personal secret, though "The essence of authority consists in keeping your secrets"), "Father and Son" (a tender revelation of the understanding consideration of a present for a former wife), and even "A Torrent Damned," if only for "Moustaches on young men are always a sign of neuroses," and "He was beginning to discover, as every man does sooner or later, that one woman is not enough . . . that even two women are not enough; a man needs one for stability, one for sympathy, and a third for inspiration."

*Domestic Relations*, finally, is not O'Connor's most impressive volume, though still far beyond the scope of most of his contemporaries, and memorable for at least two tales — "The Ugly Duckling" (of Nan Ryan, a girl "whose decisions seemed all to have been dictated by some inner torment" and who, after breaking two betrothals, ends in a convent; a tale, entitled "That Ryan Woman" in the *Saturday Evening Post*, containing the perceptive "No man is ever as anti-feminist as a really feminine woman"), and "A Salesman's Romance" (a humorous masterpiece in which a man wins a legal case but loses his fiancée to the opposing lawyer, then finds his experience crystalizing into a saleable story).

Half a dozen of the stories here are written in the first person. All but one were gathered from the *New Yorker*, *Madoiselle*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Esquire*, mostly the first. The book title itself suggests something of a compromise. And here, in "Expectation of Life" (the story which has the

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ugly colloquialism *enthuse*), we find one of O'Connor's very few clichés; in "Fish for Friday," one of his few trivialities. But even so, there are still characters, e.g., Mrs. O'Brien, in "The Study of History" — "there was something about her high spirits that made her more like a regiment than a woman," and one suddenly thinks of a female in Coppard's *Handsome Lady* so vast that she could be thought of only as a circumference.

In his preface to *The Stories . . .* (1952), O'Connor confesses to additional revision of his inclusions in that volume despite habitual rewriting over long periods: "some of the stories had been rewritten twenty, thirty, even fifty times," though a few — perfect things like "My Oedipus Complex" and "The Bridal Night" (one of his most intensely lyrical) — remain "more or less what they were when first they came into my head." Yet all this rewriting leaves no impression of violated freshness or lamed spontaneity. Witness especially such thoroughly recast matter as "My First Communion."

But even assiduity is no ultimate explanation of the effects an artist like O'Connor achieves. Nor are models and "influences." O'Connor accepts Turgenev as his "hero among writers," acknowledging indebtedness also to other Russians, and to Goethe, Heine, and Whitman. But I think his clearest indebtedness is simply to the good God who gave him his gift, part of which is his laughter, and to his own integrity in respecting it. His is his own Bill O'Donnell's ("The Mad Lomasneys") "smile, which seemed to well up from depths of good humour with life rather than from any immediate contact with others." For O'Connor has the good sense to know that "earnest people rarely are fair to themselves" ("Orphans"), which may explain why his readings of life are even more casual than Robert Frost's.

In the end, it is perhaps sufficient merely to recognize that O'Connor is a poet whose keenest lyricism is in his short stories. This is the fact that places him with such men as Coppard (whom he most frequently parallels in my own mind) and James Stephens, for though he is less buoyantly mercurial than the latter, he is equally clear-eyed and honest. And *that* is to imply that he stands with the richest and most refreshing talents of his age, and to explain how he can stroll into and out of the mazes of middle- and lower-class Irish experience, aware —

and making his readers aware — of all its casual graces and cruelties, always with a curious air of innocence about him. For his subject matter practically always involves the everyday life of ordinary Irish folk, whether of rural or urban type — ordinary, that is, in the extraordinary way of their kind. About these people he finds real stories to tell, not merely beguilements of what now passes for psychological analysis, though he manages to expose character in startlingly clear outlines. Yeats, it is recalled, felt that his stories were doing for Ireland what Chekhov's had done for Russia, but I think the intended compliment underrates O'Connor, who is never guilty of Chekhov's sometimes clinical approach or near sentimentality.

Be it added that O'Connor's tales are what they should be in length, true "short stories" for the most part. There is not a sign of commercial motivation, or yardage, in any. Even when the organism demands the breathing space of a novelette, it is never inflated. And each story is simply, directly, and — most generally — quietly told. The language is without affectation, without dishonesty of overtone; is worthy of both the teller and his tale, and their burden of humane comprehension, of sympathy, of unsentimental poetry.

Honesty is the quality I recognize constantly in pondering O'Connor, honesty and a genuine sort of wise innocence. I remember the lad in "Daydreams" who, since it implied payment for chivalry, could not retain his reward from a prostitute whose £5 he had rescued from a "protector"; and the boy who felt he could never be sophisticated "because always beyond the world of appearances I would see only eternity watching" ("The Man of the World"); and that other youth ("The Face of Evil") who reflects, "Not to become involved, to remain detached — that was the great thing; to care for things and for people, yet not to care for them so much that your happiness became dependent on them" — always assured that the boy is the young O'Connor himself, since his work reflects just such fineness and philosophy. Then I remember the admitted boy of *An Only Child* who once gave his only Christmas toy, an engine, to the Jesus of a convent crib because he knew the loneliness of a giftless child — and realize that something of this kindness and sympathy conditions the tales of that boy grown, one who with Robert Gibbings may well prove Cork's proudest claim to literary distinction.