

Review

Christine O'Neill, ed., *Joycean Murmoirs. Fritz Senn on James Joyce*. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2007. 330 pp.

Joycean Murmoirs is a subtle title for a book dealing with the latest decades of Joycean studies. These fruitful years have proved to be crucial in consolidating a still growing industry all over the world. The man who tell the story/history is one of its main protagonists, a fine observer and willing actor at the same time. What one finds in the book is previously announced in the title, *Murmoirs*, an exercise of controlled ambiguity. A word semantically connected with murmurs and memoirs that respectively bring to our mind synonymous words such as whispers or soft speaking, and an autobiography or life story/history, among other things. The reader is invited to find out the right answer, an attractive guessing game worthy of a man who has been working with words and meanings throughout his life.

A primary doubt is as to whether we are dealing with a fixed past and present facts, where second thoughts may leave an open door to an unfinished reminiscence. The protagonist is still alive and luckily very dynamic, and this fact may be a valuable foundation for and an open gateway to both future revisions and people to be revisited. At present what we have in our hands is a book by Christine O'Neill who conducts an extensive question and answer exercise, dealing with all sorts of topics that Fritz Senn answers with his usual subtlety. We can find objectionable situations or people in them, but not bitter remarks. There are not, or it seems there are not, any exclusions. Moreover, readers are invited to read between lines to find other responses to the proposed questions. There are omissions of people and facts, yes, but Senn already foresees in the preface that they are inevitable.

That Senn is a suitable subject for scholarly work nobody can deny. If the theme is like the one in this book, Joyce and Joyce-related topics, this work becomes a very welcome idea. O'Neill's angle in preparing and posing the questions becomes a gratifying experience for the reader, especially when we know it is done by someone who first met

Senn 25 years ago, in 1982, who has worked for years in the Zürich James Joyce Foundation and who edited a selected collection of Senn's essays called *Inductive Scrutinies: Focus on Joyce* in 1995. As regards this, the reader praises the description of the interviewer given in paragraphs sixth to eight in Senn's Preamble. She restricts herself to Senn's personal view on Joycean matters, a premise that one appreciates as oddly rich and not claustrophobic. Her multifaceted approach to Joycean studies, and the number of places, men, situations, likings and aversions, etc., appearing in this focus are praiseworthy.

The number of Joyceans Senn has met is amazing, including those directly mentioned in the book and those who are not. Excellent individual descriptions and good quality photographs of many of them are offered in the book. One has to recognize, to Senn's credit, that it is not an easy task to take someone's picture (I still remember the odd experience of being the shy subject of one of these photographic sessions in the Zürich James Joyce Foundation). We all know it is an old hobby of Senn's, and how, with his camera, he has witnessed many remarkable moments. Maybe a picture book with a wide selection of his pictures would be an attractive idea to help establish a visual history of activities such as symposia and workshops, and to put a face to so many relevant Joyceans in his personal archive.

The book may be read systematically from the first page to the end. Besides that, we may choose to read individual sections, or just go directly to individual topics or names included in the Index. However one thing seems obvious to us: from the first to the last page the book is going to be read in its entirety. One is inevitably caught in an exercise of witty and controlled answers on subjects and people, "the Joyceans are like a big family where everyone has something nasty to say about everybody else" (5). However, do not be afraid of too much control, readers in general are not going to be deceived even if, as Senn confessed in the Preface, inevitable self-restraint "or call it internal censorship" (IX) has been used here and there in his answers.

The coincidences that brought him to Joyce, how he came to know and start to read his works, and began to build his impressive web of personal Joycean connections are explained in the section "Beginnings." Here we come to know about his early approach to Joyce as a reader of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and his first steps as a researcher on the *Wake*, which eventually took him to his first invitation to talk in front of a class, and to the editing of *Wake Newslitter* together with Clive Hart (16-19). His friendship with Thomas F. Staley is connected with the creation of the *James Joyce Quarterly*, and the key role

played by him at the University of Tulsa in the consolidation of this pivotal Joycean journal. Staley's responsibility is also underlined when the first symposium in Dublin in 1967, and the first North American conference in Tulsa in 1972, started periodical gatherings of Joycean researchers and scholars (20-24). Especially in this section, but also in the other sections of the book, we are introduced through his account of his personal relationships to many of those big names known by everybody, but who happened to be his acquaintances, and to the ventures he embarked on with most of them.

Among the activities that Senn managed to put forward, alone or more frequently together with other people, one must emphasize those related to researchers' gatherings. The latter makes him swell with pride, "I have 20 symposia under my belt" (ix), the 21st is going to take place in Tours in 2008. Taking place every two years since 1967, the symposia have gathered people together from both sides of the Atlantic to talk about Joyce: Dublin, Trieste, Paris, Zürich, Frankfurt, Copenhagen, Venice, Monaco, Seville, Rome, and London, are the European places where these symposia have taken place, in some of them on more than one occasion. Senn refers to all of them in the book in one way or another; such as his embarrassment in the 1994 Seville symposium when, after a journalist had interviewed him, he discovered that his words about Joyce and the Pope were altered (141). This important Seville symposium, organized by Professor García Tortosa, offered Spanish Joyceans the opportunity to meet colleagues from all over the world. Together with appealing academic activities a memorable visit to Gibraltar was included.

The conference in Tulsa in 1972 is referred to in the book, which was followed by those in Honolulu and Buffalo, where its fixed periodicity was decided. Professor Archie Loss organized the first of these meetings in Behrend College, Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1978. From then on, every odd year Canadian and American researchers and scholars meet at different universities in both countries. Senn also encourages and is an active participant in workshops, summer schools, international conferences and other similar activities in different European countries. Among these activities we can include references in the book to the annual workshops held every year in August, in the Zürich James Joyce Foundation, which deal with different, previously-set topics. They have become an established activity in Europe. We should not forget the Trieste and the Dublin Summer schools which offer the opportunity to work and to listen to well-known scholars. With regard to other occasional gatherings in Europe, one should mention his reference to the Seville centenary conference, held in 1982, which "assembled about 400 Spanish scholars and students"

(267), a meeting that played an important role in consolidating the Spanish Joycean tradition.

Of course a recognized parallel consequence of all these meetings is the development of a “Joyce Industry,” something that has become a much talked about topic in recent years. Senn provides an answer to a direct question on this. In a short and clear explanation of a phrase first used by himself, he states that the “Joyce industry was never a powerful centralized organization as some think, but that its various origins were due to personal involvement” (49). Readers are invited to discover his personal opinions on this and other Joycean topics throughout the pages of the books they can agree or disagree with them, but ultimately it is a gratifying experience. One of these topics could be *Finnegans Wake*, with many motivating and generous references; or just translation, a subject where his opinions are seasoned by his work for years as a professional proofreader. He is the author of essays and has participated in talks about translation, and here and there in the book his views can be found and interesting ideas are expressed; even if as he declares he has only done minor translations, for example the German version of *The Cat and the Devil*.

The Zürich James Joyce Foundation deserves special attention. An institution identified with Senn since its creation in May 1985, it has become a must among European students and researchers. There are inevitable references to the Zürich James Joyce Foundation throughout the book, and a whole individual chapter is devoted to it that is appropriately called “Our Zürich James Joyce Foundation” (212-239). This specialized centre on Joyce has an excellent library and, what is to be appreciated much more, a familiar atmosphere where the researcher feels comfortable and is sure of receiving any necessary help from Senn himself or from the able members of and/or collaborators present in the institution. It is interesting to read his account of how it all started, its financial basis, the role of banks and bankers, and his personal responsibility in the whole venture. He adopts a caustic approach, which should be much appreciated by the reader. Indeed, he sometimes uses a mordant approach, and tries successfully to avoid an easy emotional approach when talking about the relevant aims already achieved by the institution. An exception is when he refers to the members of his team, when in his rather dry depiction, warm adjectives are used to highlight their dedication. It is clear that a great leader or institution needs an even greater team; the people who have had the opportunity to deal with them can corroborate this. Senn mentions some of them individually but a particular emphasis seems be given to Ruth Frehner, a Phd graduate who is an expert on

languages and administration, and Ursula Zeller, who worked as a proofreader and reviewer. Both also pursue their own lines of research (218-222). The fruitful scholarship traditionally undertaken by the Foundation is explained and also names are given of proficient students who later have followed their own careers publishing and working at universities in their own countries (224-228). Not only them, but also many other occasional researchers in the Foundation, can witness the helpful part which the institution plays in their research throughout the year, and activities such as the weekly reading groups; many essays, PhDs, and books published have reached fruition thanks to the Zürich James Joyce Foundation. Finally special attention is given by the interviewer to the periodical workshops organized there that Senn considers “our highlights,” and details are offered on them in his answer to O’Neill’s questions (229-231).

As has been repeated previously, in the book one can find many other topics and remarkable opinions about Senn’s personal development as a Joycean scholar, and about the incredible number of well known Joyceans from all over the world. It is impossible to refer to all of them here in this general overview of the book, as a result readers are invited to discover them. *Joycean Murmoirs* is a must for any Joycean or any reader wanting to know not only about the interviewee, but also about the Joycean industry and research done in America, Europe, as well as all over the world.

Coming back to the initial question about how we can define this book, Senn emphatically does not agree with, among other possible labels, identifying it as an autobiography (X). In any case no autobiography can ever end for someone who is alive and very dynamic. Inside the book we can find aspects of his life presented in actual terms, and how these “spots of time” are evoked as a kind of medley of moving pictures. We envisage a gap between Fritz Senn’s mortal and immortal nature that Christine O’Neill skilfully attempts to discover, and which Senn tries to fill with his words in the book.

Carmelo Medina Casado