

Remarks delivered before The Banshees on 13 March 1954  
at the American Association of University Women Clubhouse  
1634 I Street, N.W.

Last November the well-known house of Farrar, Straus and Young published Silent Years by J. F. Byrne. Just why I was asked to say a few words about it tonight will soon be clear.

Let me begin by reading what a reviewer said about the book in the 9 January 1954 issue of The New Yorker:

sound "The author sat in the same classroom with young James Joyce in Belvedere College, Dublin, back in the nineties, and later on, at University College, they became intimate friends. Joyce called him Cranly, and as Cranly, Stephen Dedalus's intelligent, honest, and contentious friend, he figures in 'Stephen Hero,' 'Portrait of the Artist,' and 'Ulysses.' Cranly is now an old man, but, to judge by the writing in this memoir of their friendship, he is still much as Joyce depicted him. ... Apparently resolved that this is to be his last book as well as his first, Mr. Byrne, a veteran newspaperman, has crammed in some unrelated writings and a long, cranky endpiece describing his difficulties in trying to sell the Army a cipher system that can 'simultaneously disintegrate and integrate the ~~soul~~ of any language.' Be that as it may, this is an engrossing book."

Note that the reviewer states specifically that Mr. Byrne "apparently resolved that this is to be his last book as well as his first." This reminds me of two stories, and in telling them I hope you will bear in mind that my remarks tonight will deal exclusively with the last chapter of Mr. Byrne's book - not the whole of it.

The first story I'll steal from the piece by Aaron Sussman in the Trade Winds section of last week's issue (13 March 1954) of the Saturday Review, (page 5). The story told by Mr. Sussman is about an advertising concern which had spent a good deal of time and effort on a task involving

the composition of a "blurb" for a publishing-house client on a recently-published romance entitled Thunderclap. Upon completion of the task, the boss went on vacation, but no sooner had he arrived at his destination when in great distress he placed a telephone call to his office. To his underling he shouts:

"Just let me read you the first few lines of the review that faces our ad. Listen to this: 'Not since Alexander Woollcott confessed that he had seen a play under adverse circumstances, because the curtain was up, have I been so tempted to plagiarize. Last night I read a novel called 'Thunderclap' under equally unfortunate conditions; it was in print. A dreadful experience...' Well, what do you think of that, you tin-plated promotion genius?"

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Perhaps Mr. Sussman got the idea for his little story from actual life: an ad on the book-review page of the New York Times for 23 November 1953. Here are side-by-side extracts from that page:

The Review

Shirley Barker, whose command of the resources of the English language is exceptional, is one of the most disappointing of modern American novelists. Each of her novels is worse than its predecessor. ... Not since Kenneth Roberts made the hero of "Lydia Bailey" fall in love with a portrait have I encountered so improbable a romance in a historical novel. Mahlon Doan was a horse thief, highwayman, traitor and outlaw. But Lass loved him and vibrated with passion like an outboard motor. When she looked at him, which she didn't get a chance to do often, "the skies trembled and the earth shook and a great wind went over her." I say it's spinach.

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The "Blurb"

A love that echoes down through time ... Men and women have loved since mankind began. And all loves have something of greatness in them. But a wondrous few have the power to hold the human mind in thrall and bondage. They become the beloved legends of the race. This is the story of such a love, as it came to pass in the days of America's Revolution. ... This is the brooding, blazing story of their fight for a kind of freedom they did not realize man had already lost. ...

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So much for the first story, the point of which seems to be that sometimes it would be better if things didn't get to the final stage of appearance before the public.

My second story has somewhat the same point as its theme. I've been enjoying dipping into a book that was quite popular in the gay nineties. It's title: Literary Curiosities, by William S. Walsh. You can see that the Library of Congress copy (here) shows that it was and apparently still is popular. I'll read my story as it appears in the book on page 643, under the subject Lipograms:

"LIPOGRAMS:— a form of literary trifling in which the author carefully excludes from his composition some letter or letters of the alphabet. A good story is told of Jami, the Persian critic, which seems applicable to all these useless tours de force. A certain poet had read him a copy of verses, but Jami seemed unmoved. 'You will at least allow it to be curious,' said the author, slightly nettled, 'for you will observe that the letter A does not occur in it from beginning to end.' To which Jami replied, 'It would have been a great improvement had you left out also all the other letters.'"

Well, so far as I'm concerned, Mr. Byrne's autobiographical account in his Silent Years would have been improved had he omitted the last chapter. That one comprises some 20 pages of explanatory text about his cipher invention, followed by 23 pages devoted to setting forth the text of four lengthy specimens of messages in his cipher system. He challenges all comers to solve these messages and promises to give \$5,000 "to the first person or group of persons who within three months after date of publication of this book succeeds in deciphering them." In fact, he requires only the solution of but two

specified lines in several hundred lines of text, and these two lines represent, he says, "a little over a dozen words." Mr. Byrne says this "this sum (is) to be paid by me out of the royalties accruing to me from Silent Years during the said three months."

Now, ladies and gentlemen, walk - do not run - to the nearest exit, to buy a copy of this book so as to earn that \$5,000 award. I say walk - do not run - because you're too late! No, I haven't solved the messages - you're too late because the three-months' time limit expired about a month ago.

Now it's time I got down to my task, which, as I've already said, is to comment on only the last chapter of Mr. Byrne's book, the one that deals with his great cipher invention. He named it the CHAOCIPHER, presumably because it makes chaos of the words, or, as he puts it, his cipher affects the written word "so as to result in its chaotic disruption."

Certain reviewers of the Byrne book have been puzzled by the miscellany of subjects it contains. What have Mr. Byrne's frustrations in endeavoring to interest government bureaucrats in his cipher invention got to do with Joyce? There seems to be no relationship whatsoever between ciphers and the writings of Joyce - or is there? I, for one, think there is-but let's not go into that just now. All I have time to say here is that as a cryptologist I, like Julius Caesar, who divided all Gaul into three parts, divide the world of literary works into three parts:

- (1) That part that I choose to designate the realm of "every-day books" - those we read for recreation, study, self-improvement, etc. This realm takes in by far the greatest part of the

whole field of literature.

- (2) The part that comprises writings which constitute the very greatest monuments of literary creations, and in which certain people claim they find hidden stories or ciphers. For example, the late Walter Conrad Arensberg found ciphers not only in the Shakespeare Plays but also in Dante's Divine Comedy. But the great majority of readers - and all scholars or experts - find no cryptography or ciphers in these great works.
- (3) Finally, there is the rather small but very important realm of literary works comprising writings which according to their authors and their champions are perfectly intelligible or in plain language - but which, for the great majority of readers, are partially or even wholly unintelligible. For the latter group of readers, Joyce's Finegan's Wake, for example, is wholly unintelligible; it is, in fact, in cipher so far as they are concerned.

Mr. Byrne's book interests me as a cryptologist not only because I am interested in Joyce, but also because I find that Mr. Byrne is, like myself, a devotee of Joycean literature - in fact, he practically grew up with Joyce - and is also deeply interested in cryptography as a science. Unfortunately however, the resemblance stops right there, because Mr. Byrne's chapter devoted to cryptography is, I'm sorry to say, not very sound. In fact, I cannot resist the temptation to characterize that chapter in words that an expert once used in reviewing a certain book dealing with an alleged solution to a manuscript - the so-called Voynich Manuscript - which is said to be in cipher. The book, said the

reviewer, is "A study ... that has the rare distinction of being nonsensic from the first through the last page."

Well, now, I don't mean to say that Mr. Byrne's chapter on his CHAOCIPHER is nonsensic from the first through the last page of that chapter. But it's nearly so, because he, like most laymen when the subject of cryptography is involved, rely upon the weakest of the so-called "authorities" on that subject - Edgar Allan Poe. It was Poe, indeed, who propounded that most popular fallacy in the cryptologic field, viz: "It may be roundly asserted that human ingenuity cannot concoct a cipher which human ingenuity cannot resolve."

Mr. Byrne, in fact, himself contested the validity of Poe's dictum and thought he had invented what is sometimes called a holocryptic cipher, that is, one that cannot be solved by pure analysis. Maybe Mr. Byrne did invent a holocryptic cipher, but I doubt it. I doubt it not because I think it impossible to devise such a cipher but because the record which remains as to what Mr. Byrne presented to me about 32 years ago shows that I then believed his cipher system susceptible of solution if employed for practical purposes. I still believe this to be true of Mr. Byrne's invention but I am in no position to prove my contention - nor do I wish to, even with the \$5,000 bait hung in front of my eyes.

In a field so hedged about <sup>with</sup> ~~the~~ secrecy as is the field of official cryptography, or rather, the field of cryptography as it is employed for official purposes in governmental communications, it is only to be expected that popular fallacies will abound. You can't buy on the

open market books which contain authentic information on the subject - governments don't as a rule allow such information to be published.

As a result, the American public has to rely upon what Poe wrote about the subject - and Poe never had a day's experience in a cipher office. He got his information and I'm sorry to have to say this - almost entirely by cribbing without credit from other writers who cribbed from their predecessors, who used their imaginations.

I won't undertake to examine each paragraph of Mr. Byrne's chapter and point out the error or fallacy it contains. Perhaps it will be sufficient merely to refer you to a paper by Professor Wimsatt, of Yale University, dealing with the technical competence of Poe, the writer on whom Mr. Byrne relies for his information. One need hardly do more than read that paper to learn how very small was Poe's quota of real knowledge. That being the case, it is not to be wondered that Mr. Byrne should have been led astray because he put his trust in a rather weak authority. And the same can be said, too, of another authority cited by Mr. Byrne - "a pretentious book written by one Herbert Yardley, and bearing the title of The American Black Chamber." But I am unfortunately unable to refer you to a critique of Mr. Yardley's book - you'll just have to take my word for it: Mr. Yardley is also unreliable as an authority.

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Wimsatt, W. K., Jr. "What Poe knew about cryptography." PMLA, Vol. LVIII, No. 3, Sept. 1943, pp. 754-759.

I am sorry not to be able to say more than I've already said on this subject, because our government has taken care, by means of a special law, that its cryptologic secrets will be kept. And that, I think, is all to the good of our general welfare and security.

*William F. Friedman*