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Charles W. Bassett

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NATURALISM REVISITED: THE CASE OF JOHN O'HARA

By CHARLES W. BASSETT

Death, in April, 1970, seems to have slowed the appearance of the fiction of John O'Hara only slightly. Readers worldwide, accustomed to the annual O'Hara book, have been obliged by Random House, long O'Hara's publisher, with three posthumous works: *The Ewings* (1972), a novel; *The Time Element and Other Stories* (1973) and *Good Samaritan and Other Stories* (1974), collections of short fiction. O'Hara's editor, Albert Erskine, estimates that the author wrote a short story every month for the last ten years of his life; still another volume of stories is forthcoming.¹

Moreover, interest in O'Hara the man and writer has spawned two biographies since 1970: the first, *O'Hara*, by Finis Farr, got a lukewarm reception in 1973; the definitive biography, *The O'Hara Concern*, by Professor Matthew Bruccoli, is due in October, 1975, too late to be considered here. Bruccoli, however, has lauded O'Hara's work in the past, and it is known that *The O'Hara Concern* makes the case for ranking John O'Hara among the major writers of American fiction.

Bruccoli's enthusiasm notwithstanding, reactions to O'Hara's posthumous fiction vary little from the general critical consensus of the '50's and '60's.² The preponderance of reviews (O'Hara once put it at 90%) had always featured phrases like these: "the limitations of phony naturalism . . . I stopped reading naturalism some years ago . . . no depths, no subtleties . . . he mistakes facts for truth, statistics for reality." This litany is continued by Anatole Broyard, a *New York Times* reviewer, in

1 Foreword to *Good Samaritan and Other Stories*, p. ix.

2 Bruccoli's thesis in *The O'Hara Concern* justifies O'Hara's life-long paranoia: the "critical-academic axis" or Literary Establishment conspired consistently to underrate O'Hara's fiction. O'Hara himself had made the same argument many times, most cogently to John Hutchens in a letter cited by Farr, *O'Hara* (Boston, 1973), p. 254: "Perhaps that's one reason I don't get Their approval: I do go back to work, which is a sign that They have been unable to knock me out as They did Fitzgerald. . . ."

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a recent appraisal of *The Time Element and Other Stories*: "O'Hara's people . . . don't have emotions; they have some sort of Pavlovian reflexes invented by the author."³

This annual set-to between critics and audience, traditional since the appearance of *A Rage to Live* (1949), became in time a kind of ritual: critics deplored and readers bought O'Hara's books religiously. In point of fact, everyone knew that O'Hara's work would not change, that his audience would continue to read him respectfully, and that the critics — aesthetic sensibilities assuaged — had done nothing to disturb a relationship that was one of the most profitable and enduring in recent American literary history.

For John O'Hara was an enormously popular writer, perhaps the most popular *serious* writer of his time. Even O'Hara's most virulent critics (Gore Vidal, John W. Aldridge) refused to rank him with Spillane and Fleming; no one called him a hack, ever. Readers loved his stubborn sensibility, his plain style, his scorn for fictive actions consciously mirroring archetypal patterns. Indeed, the fiction of John O'Hara stands as probably the most obvious contradiction to those critical analyses which declare old fashioned and psychologically unacceptable the methods and insights of literary naturalism.

And it is true that even O'Hara himself seemed to have become an Establishment. During the ten years before his death, he became a vocal exponent of political, social and literary conservatism. In the '60's, his newspaper columns, "My Turn" (later collected in a book with the same title), anathematized radical long-hairs and boosted de Gaulle, Goldwater, and the Policeman's Benevolent Association. By then, his fiction had made him an authentic millionaire, wealthier after each sale to Hollywood or to the paperback reprinters. Living regally with his third wife (a Whitney cousin) at "Linebrook" in Princeton or on the beach at Quoque, O'Hara had no time for "fads."

"When you pass sixty," he told his last interviewer in 1969,

3 *New York Times*, 18 December 1972, p. 37.

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"you just naturally become conservative. It's a lot easier to be conservative . . . You can't concern yourself with all the problems of the world. My concern right now is right here, writing."⁴ As a young man, O'Hara had considered his writing a "form of protest" and himself "in rebellion." But his most rigorous battles had occurred when censors attempted to ban his or others' books for frank depictions of human sexuality. Comparing himself to Dreiser, he asserted: "At least *some* of the liberties that younger writers enjoy today were paid for by me, in vilification of my work and personal character."⁵

At the same time, O'Hara scorned young writers, who "haven't learned their business" and "lack intimate knowledge of people." His juniors took the easy way, he told the *New York Times*, "without putting in an apprenticeship of observation and diverse writing. . . ."⁶ O'Hara had earned his own way (no "God damn foundations" had supported him while he wrote) by battering away at his craft until the public was forced to pay attention. Self-discipline and dedication had won him his place in the world.

It was not easy becoming an author of stature, a dream that O'Hara had pursued unswervingly for years. He felt that his talent was "God-given" and that he owed devotion to it. "The way I feel about writing, which is practically a religious feeling, would not permit me to 'dash off' a story."⁷ As early as age 20, he had told readers of his hometown newspaper that he intended to write *The Great American Novel*.⁸

Irving Howe once pointed out the contradiction between the religiously dedicated author and the relentless low-brow whose

4 Quoted in Don A. Schanche, "John O'Hara Is Alive and Well in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Esquire*, Aug. 1969, p. 142.

5 Acceptance speech, presentation ceremonies of the Award of Merit Medal for the Novel, joint meeting of the Amer. Acad. of Arts and Letters and the Nat. Inst. of Arts and Letters, 20 May 1964. Reprinted in Farr, pp. 277-78.

6 Quoted in Alden Whitman, "O'Hara, in Rare Interview, Calls Literary Landscape Fairly Bleak," *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 1967, p. 45. Ironically, Brucecoli's scholarly biography of the self-made O'Hara was aided by a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

7 Foreword to *Assembly* (New York: 1961), p. x.

8 "A Cub Tells His Story," *Pottsville Journal*, 2 May 1925. In O'Hara file, Pottsville (Pa.) Public Library. Reprinted with a Preface by Brucecoli (Iowa City, 1975).

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literary opinions were those of an authentic redskin. O'Hara's aesthetic judgments added little to his stature as a thinker. Samples: "For stubborn cases of insomnia, following days when rain has kept me off the golf course, almost any volume of verse will do the trick."⁹ On Shakespeare: "So I didn't like *Twelfth Night*. So more than that I am always bored by Shakespeare's plays. What is more, I don't even admit that they're good to read (that is, all the way through)."¹⁰ On love: "I don't take love or oxygen for granted, but I'll bet you that if I'd praised love publicly more than I have, people would not think that all I approve of is fucking. . . . Statements on Love and Man, delivered in tones and terms that perish the thought of fucking and pederasty, automatically put the speaker among the majority of gentlemen who attended the Last Supper. . . ."¹¹

Despite these literary gaucheries, Howe concludes that "in his own stolid way [O'Hara] seems driven to the consecration to art we associate with a Flaubert or a James . . . diagramming all the hidden channels of our social arrangements."¹² On a less grandiose scale, O'Hara defended himself this way: "Being a cheap, ordinary guy, I have an instinct for the ordinary guy's taste."¹³

As an Ordinary Guy, O'Hara knew that his readers would not be impressed by spurious high culture. Neither great novelists of the past nor touted contemporary experimentalists impressed him much. "I should admit," O'Hara once told an audience at the Library of Congress, "or confess, or simply state that there is probably no one in this room who is more than thirty years old, who has not read more novels than I have."¹⁴ Determinedly his own man, he claimed: "For more than two years I have not read any current fiction . . . because

9 *Sweet and Sour* (New York, 1954), p. 131.

10 "Entertainment Week," *Newsweek*, 2 Dec. 1940, p. 46.

11 Letter to Charles Poor, quoted in *Catalogue of Charles Hamilton Auction*, No. 56, 9 Mar. 1972, p. 45.

12 Review of *Lovey Childs: A Philadelphian's Story*, by John O'Hara, *Harper's*, Feb. 1970, p. 114.

13 "Entertainment Week," *Newsweek*, 13 Jan. 1941, p. 52.

14 "Remarks on the Novel," in *Three Views of the Novel*, Irving Stone, John O'Hara, and MacKinley Kantor (Library of Congress, 1957), p. 18.

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I have been at work on my own novel. The reason is not only that I have wanted to avoid being influenced, however slightly or subtly, but because I am an extremely slow reader of fiction. . . ."¹⁵ The theme became obsessive: "I'm not some hairy philosopher. I'm just an ordinary guy who happens to write well."¹⁶

On the other hand, Ordinary Guys rarely publish thirteen novels, five novellas, fourteen collections of stories, six plays, and two books of essays. Ordinary Guys do not ordinarily work for *Time*, write football for *The New Yorker*, do a column for *Newsweek* and *Newsday*, or contribute pieces to such disparate journals as *The New Republic* and *Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey Circus Magazine & Program*. Never has a truly Ordinary Guy been awarded the Medal of Merit for the Novel by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

O'Hara disaffiliated himself from the rest of the Ordinary Guys by styling himself a "pro," a lonely and embattled toiler whose life was his craft. "If you're a pro you keep going; if you're not a pro, you get the hell out." A pro is sustained by "sensitivity, alertness, active intelligence, and work."¹⁷ The Puritan ethic burned in the lapsed Roman Catholic from Pottsville, Pa.: in 1956, O'Hara claimed, "I'm probably the hardest working author in the U.S."¹⁸ Twelve years and ten books later, he wrote his daughter: "It is pretty hard for most authors not to be jealous of me, because I make it look easy and they know it is not."¹⁹

It most assuredly was *not* easy, particularly for O'Hara whose last twenty years were dedicated to writing as few other men's lives were. With Trollopian regularity, he would closet himself in his Princeton study, following his old working habits by writing every night from midnight until dawn. Much has been made of O'Hara's refusal to re-write his fiction, his "page-proof

15 "The Novels Novelists Read or 'Taking in the Washing,'" *New York Times Book Review*, 3 Aug. 1949, p. 3.

16 Quoted in Schanche, p. 142.

17 *Sweet and Sour*, pp. 160, 118.

18 "Appointment with O'Hara," *Collier's*, 22 June 1956, p. 6.

19 Quoted in Farr, p. 266.

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prose," but a marvelous memory, a tape-recorder-like ear, and a highly developed narrative sense allowed him to get it right the first time.

Literary critics were consequently baffled by John O'Hara. Confronted with a writer whose sincere dedication to his art they had to honor, they had also to contend with a rather mean-spirited and highly competitive anachronism. O'Hara knew that he was out of date; he said as much in his Medal of Merit for the Novel acceptance speech: "in the context of present-day writing I am regarded as obsolescent, and rightly so."²⁰ Reviewers ultimately came to look upon O'Hara as they might a skilled producer of buggy whips. They admired the independent doggedness but sneered at the product as passé. Why, in the name of Pynchon, did all those middlebrows continue to read O'Hara?

A partial answer was O'Hara's style, called by John Cheever "a splendid baritone voice — a persuasive and perfectly pitched organ."²¹ That style — flat, prosaic, exact, authoritative, knowing — was an achievement wrought from scrupulous attention to traditional language and a desire to make that language embody a reality that is irrefrangibly physical. No solipsistic word-play or interposition of internal values for O'Hara. Let John Barth use a rhetorically complex style calling attention to itself as the principal meaning of his work; O'Hara's words stood for *things* — precise, familiar, "ordinary" things.

John O'Hara's attention to things — particularly to things historical, verifiable, statistical, and factual — struck a chord for millions. Numbed by the chaotic eschatology of a Burroughs or a Hawkes, O'Hara's readers found in his work a serious commitment to the details of familiar reality. And O'Hara knew how comforting this could be: "a big block of type which contains a lot of detail is restful. The reader . . . sees a lot of nouns and relaxes, but he remembers."²²

²⁰ Farr, p. 278.

²¹ Review of *The Ewings*, by John O'Hara, *Esquire*, May 1972, p. 14.

²² Quoted in Farr, p. 274.

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Yet O'Hara's ubiquitous catalogues of details — to his critics "purposeless and insignificant" — have a reality of their own. More than a novelist's trick, O'Hara's catalogues pile brand name on statistic, clinical description on calendar date, in an attempt to reveal hitherto concealed interrelationships and their socio-psychological consequences. Irving Howe sees them as attempts to "discover the secret of all that moves us and emerge . . . into the blazing light of meaning."²³

The fictional world of John O'Hara, jammed with details demonstrably similar to those in the "real" world where his readers must spend the major portions of their lives, turns out to be dominated by failure and misery. Nevertheless, the *post hoc* explicability of the relationships between men and things in O'Hara's fiction, tragic though it often proves even to the most alert, wary character, affords some pleasure to the reader. Before reading O'Hara, readers could only wonder at the confusing dissociation of men from their history so often the subject of other contemporary American novelists. Perhaps no other American writer of this generation was so committed to the implications of the social fact as John O'Hara.

O'Hara's commitment arises from two sources: his experiences as a journalist and his engagement with historical method (emphasizing causal relations between concrete facts).

October 1924 marked John O'Hara's first reporter's job; only several months later did he get \$6 a week on the Pottsville *Journal*. But O'Hara early on learned to treasure accuracy and thoroughness. Getting "the facts" became his quintessential mission, the more the better. Elderly *Journal* staffers recall O'Hara as something less than a dedicated researcher (he was unhappy at home, drank excessively, and loved a young woman he could not marry), but O'Hara's later short stories celebrate the indefatigable "digger," an ever-curious reporter who keeps after a story through musty courthouse records and clandestine meetings with unsavory sources.

²³ Howe, p. 114.

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Such a journalist was a pro, a man who met a writer's responsibilities. "It's been about thirty years that I've been a pro," O'Hara told his readers in 1954, "and in that time, I have not missed a single deadline."²⁴ Writing under pressure seemed beneficial to him: "The newspaper influence is a good one for a writer. It teaches economy of words. It makes you write faster. When you're on re-write as I was, you can't fool around at half-past nine trying to write beautiful lacy prose."²⁵

As a re-write man for newspapers like the *New York Herald Tribune*, O'Hara learned to organize and reshape the farrago of data fed him by colleagues. Comely rhetoric had to give way to clear, readable prose, the style subordinate to the facts themselves. Literal precision and concrete diction became O'Hara's watchwords: "Prose writing in 1949 I don't think should be anything but accurate. I keep away from figures of speech."²⁶ His prejudices marked his fiction, both in style and substance, as this passage from *Butterfield 8* indicates:

There was a time in a man's life when he has a secret so dirty he will never get rid of it. (Shakespeare knew this and tried to say it, but he said it as badly as anyone ever said it. "All the perfumes of Arabia" makes you think of all the perfumes of Arabia and nothing more. It is the trouble with all metaphors where human behavior is concerned. People are not ships, chessmen, flowers, racehorses, oil paintings, bottles of champagne, excrement, musical instruments, or anything else but people. Metaphors are all right to give you an idea.)²⁷

True to his theory, O'Hara rarely used metaphors in his own fiction, difficult as it was not to. "It's almost impossible," he once said, "in ordinary speech to avoid metaphor and simile. They're so convenient. You have to care a helluva lot about the written word to avoid putting them down. Before I use a word, an ordinary word, I look it up in the dictionary."²⁸ While some critics objected to the poverty of imagination this theory demonstrates, others called him "the master of a frugal, penetrating style." Most importantly, however, O'Hara's disavowal

²⁴ *Sweet and Sour*, p. 111.

²⁵ Quoted in Harvey Breit, *The Writer Observed* (New York: World, 1956), p. 82.

²⁶ Quoted in Breit, p. 82.

²⁷ (New York, 1935), p. 298.

²⁸ Quoted in Schanche, p. 86.

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of figurative language represents his belief that words *are* things, to be used objectively in the service of reality. One does not need metaphors "to give you an idea" if reality itself is palpable in those thing-words.

Also attributable to O'Hara's journalistic experience is the tone that vitiates the vaunted objectivity of his style. The accuracy of O'Hara's language cannot mask an underlying irony so often attributed to the cynical reporter. O'Hara suspected that people did not want the whole truth about a "story," and social pressure often forced even the best of reporters to equivocate. But the reporter knew, even if he could not tell, the truth. Therefore, O'Hara's reportorial tone is often ironically superior; he is an omniscient observer whose objectivity demarcates the distance between himself and the consistent venality and dishonesty of his sources.

Distance is necessary for another reason as well. When "the story" is tragic, a reporter's ego defenses demand non-involvement. To empathize would be to fail, and that way lies despair and pessimism. Knowing the inevitability of disaster, the reporter has a duty to report it but not to be caught in the conflagration. Several of O'Hara's more trenchant critics have pointed out that the tense objectivity of his tone inadequately conceals his real feeling for the pathetic victims of his fiction.²⁹ Yet that feeling ought never to be obvious, most of all to the one who feels it. Held in check, sympathy could allow O'Hara this boast: "I'd say I wrote the story of my times better than anyone else."³⁰

For O'Hara it was a short jump from journalist to social historian. Perhaps the clearest (and most often quoted) statement of O'Hara's feelings about his mission as historian is his Foreword to *Sermons and Soda Water* (1960):

29 See, e.g., Edmund Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," in *A Literary Chronicle: 1920-1950* (New York: Anchor, 1956), p. 222; but see Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (1942; rpt. New York: Anchor, 1956), p. 304. Kazin denigrates O'Hara's tone as "excessively knowing," a defect of "metropolitan journalism."

30 Quoted in obituary story syndicated by United Press International on 12 April 1970.

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I want to get it all down on paper while I can. I am now fifty-five years old and I have lived with as well as in the Twentieth Century from its earliest days. The United States in this Century is what I know, and it is my business to write about it to the best of my ability, with the sometimes special knowledge that I have. The Twenties, the Thirties, and the Forties are already history, but I cannot be content to leave their story in the hands of the historians and the editors of picture books. I want to record the way people talked and thought and felt, and to do it with complete honesty and variety.³¹

With a credo like this, it is little wonder that O'Hara began *Ten North Frederick* (1955) with this Foreword:

This, of course, is a work of fiction, but I have also taken liberties with those facts which sometimes help to give truth to fiction. To name one: the office of Lieutenant Governor was created by the 1873 Constitution, so it would have been impossible for Joe Chapin's grandfather to have been Lieutenant Governor at the time I state. There are one or two other deliberate errors of that kind, but I hope they will be pardoned by the alert attorneys who are sure to spot them. If this were straight history, and not fiction, I would not ask to be pardoned.³²

Obvious, then, is the fact that O'Hara considered social history an integral part of his function as a novelist.³³ "Those facts which sometimes help to give truth to fiction" held, for O'Hara, an almost mystical power. His library crammed with reference books and almanacs, the recorded minutiae of history, O'Hara searched for the ineluctably accurate long after most imaginative writers gave up and trusted to the reader's indulgence.

John O'Hara's overwhelming fictive preoccupation was "rightness." Praising the fiction of A. Conan Doyle for its realism he wrote: "It is literature of a high order. The sights, sounds, smells, social customs, conversation — all so right and good that you don't have to read anything else to get the feeling of a period."³⁴ Scorning abstract "messages" in fiction, he praised Booth Tarkington's Penrod stories and Sherwood Anderson's

31 (New York, 1960), p. x.

32 (New York, 1955), n.p.

33 O'Hara told the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (28 Jan. 1963) that he was particularly interested in the interplay of history with fiction. A record of his remarks is in the Univ. of Pennsylvania Library, but O'Hara barred direct quotation of his statements.

34 "Appointment with O'Hara," *Collier's*, 1 Apr. 1955, p. 8.

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Winesburg, Ohio: "Their message — which will be news to a lot of people is: That's how it was."³⁵

As literal precision was important to style, absolute accuracy was the keystone of realism. Errors in fact were not simply sloppy, they were illusion-shattering lies: "... I am extremely critical, and I have never been able to get beyond the first page of one of the most famous novels of our time because the author has made a 'weather' mistake (something about snow on the ground) that proves to me that he isn't a good writer."³⁶

Combining remorseless research for the factual with the historian's desire to render "the way it was" meaningful, O'Hara seems to be defining his work as the best possible picture of the social construction of reality specific to America in the second, third, and fourth decades of this century. His given social world is highlighted by the tensions and terrors attending the process of socialization by which American society confers identity on its members and struggles to maintain some semblance of social continuity. O'Hara's work, from his early *New Yorker* short stories in the late '20's through the posthumous fiction, is all of a piece: as a social historian, critics like Malcolm Cowley assert, O'Hara is "less interested in making each book a unified and balanced work of art in itself" than in "flow."³⁷ Aware of the formal demands of art, O'Hara nonetheless subordinated them to the demands of history — recording and analyzing the past. Some, like Matthew Bruccoli, thought this successful: "There is no working writer who matches O'Hara's importance as a social historian."³⁸

Whether or not historians class O'Hara as a social historian is immaterial here. For our purposes, it is enough that John O'Hara saw himself as a historian; the form and content of his fiction, the very nature of his fictive world, is greatly influenced

35 "Appointment with O'Hara," *Collier's*, 25 June 1954, p. 6.

36 "The Novels Novelists Read . . ." p. 3.

37 Review of *O'Hara*, by Finis Farr, *New York Times Book Review*, 18 Mar. 1973, p. 4. In a review of *The Horse Knows the Way*, George P. Elliott had presaged Cowley this way: "Each story is a segment of [O'Hara's] world, not a little work of art to itself." *Harper's*, Apr. 1965, p. 112.

38 "Focus on *Appointment in Samarra*," in *Tough Guy Writers of the 1930's*, ed. David Madden (Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 129.

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by his perception of his function. O'Hara's work, then, is best read *in toto* with the reader aware of the sense of historical inevitability that characterizes his fiction.

A perhaps more telling criticism of O'Hara's range as a social historian has been leveled at his concentration on the American rich or near-rich. *Ad hominum* denigrators explain this penchant by styling O'Hara as an incurable snob and social climber, cherishing grudges begotten of his social ostracism as the oldest of eight children in an Irish Catholic family in Protestant, Anglophile Pottsville, Pa.³⁹ Amateur psychologizing aside, it is true that O'Hara liked to call himself "a student of the manners and the customs of the rich."⁴⁰

O'Hara tried to disarm critics who objected to his fascination with the wealthy by reversing the coin: Americans traditionally have been ambivalent about money, and those who found fault with *his* obsession should examine their own. Further, O'Hara was not the first to realize that Americans seem insatiably curious about the rich. Beyond this banality, however, O'Hara had several reasons for writing about money:

(1) the conflict between the secure, inherited-money rich and the ascendant *nouveau riches* provided O'Hara rich material for the dramatization of the destructive effects of socialization on the individual. Security in a society without hereditary class distinctions is tenuous, so the American rich fight even harder to preserve their ascendancy in the face of pressure from below. No one — save fools and mystics — is unscathed in this struggle, and nowhere but among the rich is the battle so pitched, so subtle, so lethal. O'Hara also believed that in a country where most means best, money conferred identity, security, even personality on its possessors. More graphically than its poor, America's rich are its representative figures, captives in the plush dungeons of their own money.

(2) As a result of their guilt about being wealthy, many Americans rationalize by justifying the money in terms of cus-

39 See William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York, 1963), pp. 244-49.

40 "Appointment with O'Hara," *Collier's*, 13 Apr. 1956, p. 6.

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toms, rules, rites, and other arcana of exclusivity in order to generate the conclusion that wealth is somehow indicative of social worth. Still, as prisoners of an inflexible social rubric, the rich experience conflict when beset by their instinctual human natures, particularly their sexual drives. John Cheever summed up the resulting rift this way: "This then was O'Hara's vision of things, the premise of money, generated by a ceremonial society and an improvisational erotic life."⁴¹ O'Hara's rich, convinced of their superiority, assert themselves sexually with freedom and impunity, but their creator knows that they will eventually be crushed beneath the strictures of their own self-generated conventionalism.

As a social historian, therefore, O'Hara could control his research by specializing in a certain socio-economic class, while at the same time he could achieve a novelist's range by implying the symbolic representativeness of his wealthy Americans. O'Hara's rich lived everywhere (Park Avenue, Beverly Hills, Palm Springs, Hobe Sound, Southampton, Philadelphia's Main Line, Texas), but despite seeming differences, O'Hara cursed them all with a strong deterministic fate, the sure defeat that awaits their misguided attempts to redefine themselves. Of anyone, the rich should know that only manners are truly definitive, but the monied are no smarter than the impoverished. Unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tom and Daisy Buchanan, O'Hara's rich cannot "retreat back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . . ."⁴² The envious will always spy the mistake, the violation of the sanctity of class solidarity.

For that reason, punishment is inevitable because O'Hara knew that society enjoys nothing more than a righteously indignant slash at a miscreant. Bloody and bowed, the rebel understands too late that even in bed he is not in control of his own destiny. Because *every* act has social consequences, society's

⁴¹ Cheever, p. 114.

⁴² *The Great Gatsby* (1925; rpt. New York, 1953), pp. 180-81.

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ubiquitous voyeurs will sniff out the slightest deviance and harshly condemn the deviant.

Even when society momentarily withholds its censure, an O'Hara character might still be a victim of hereditary weakness. Often walking exacerbations of the sins of their fathers, an O'Hara protagonist — even the most glamorous, vital one — must contend with the character disorders humming down the genetic chain.

Finally, to compound the agonies of O'Hara's doomed heroes, he made them all universally unlucky. In *Ten North Frederick*, an O'Hara character completes his formula for success in life this way: "Seventh, figuratively speaking, carry a rabbit's foot." Crucial to anyone, luck is absolutely beyond human control, and O'Hara's men find that to carry a rabbit's foot is to die of tularemia. Still another character, this one in *Ourselves to Know* (1960), accurately divides O'Hara's world: "He was one of the good people in the world. You must know that there are some people who are lucky. In the same way, some people are good. And some are unlucky, and some are bad."⁴³ Good and bad may in part be matters of free moral choice, but luck never is. Some men's fates are determined by whim.

Small wonder, then, that O'Hara's work was considered troglodytic; his ideas and techniques put him firmly among the practitioners of literary naturalism. Like the tradition from which he rose, he depended to a major extent on an accurate and literal observation of reality; he purported to present human experience honestly and convincingly; and his best work reflected a deterministic view of events — scientific in its preciseness — that was represented in the operation of biological and social forces.⁴⁴ Strongly pessimistic about loss of the human freedom he depicts, O'Hara never completely accepts the view of a universe wholly amoral and predatory. Yet only the author's tight-lipped superiority of tone stands between the read-

⁴³ (New York, 1960), p. 407.

⁴⁴ Characteristics of naturalism used by Haskell M. Block, *Naturalistic Tryptich: The Fictive and the Real in Zola, Mann, and Dreiser* (New York, 1970), p. 78. See also V.L. Parrington, *Main Currents of American Thought* (1930; rpt. New York, 1958), III, 323-27.

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er and the everpresent disasters of the fiction. And O'Hara's enormous popular success at home and abroad — in the face of mostly negative reviews — is clear evidence that contemporary naturalism bores only the critics.

Yet most of those who loathed his naturalism admit that *Appointment in Samarra*⁴⁵ — O'Hara's first novel — raises documentation/verisimilitude/determinism to the level of solid imaginative art. This novel, full of the deadly effects of social snobbery and impulsive sexual appetite, is set in the small Pennsylvania city of Gibbsville, a street-by-street recreation of O'Hara's native Pottsville. *Appointment in Samarra* was an immediate popular success when it appeared in August, 1934, and over the years has worn best of all O'Hara's novels.

The fatally deterministic atmosphere of the book commences with O'Hara's epigraph, repeating the legend of the man who seeks to avoid Death in Bagdad by escaping to Samarra, only to find that Death in fact expected to meet him there. Influenced by this clue, critics have stressed unnecessarily the force of Fate in *Appointment in Samarra*, asserting that Julian English, the protagonist, is caught in the jaws of cosmic irony. O'Hara's conception of his hero, however, admits determinism while maintaining the potential exercise of free will (and escape) throughout the novel. Never unaware that Julian English might, by using common sense, slip away from the forces of heredity, environment, and bad luck that dog his every act in Gibbsville, O'Hara still concentrates on the unavoidable captivity of a character whose self-identity is completely formed by the opinions of his society. Moreover, in a society both morbidly insecure and still hypersensitive about its class structure, Julian — Gibbsville's own — is inevitably a victim of the vindictiveness with which he so closely identifies.

John O'Hara sets up Julian's predicament in Chapter I. Structurally, the chapter is in three parts, the introduction of Julian English sandwiched between scenes of the Lute Flieg'ers (Gibbsville's solid, pedestrian, "safely" aspiring middle class)

⁴⁵ (New York, 1934). Subsequent page references are to this edition.

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and Al Grecco (an ex-con and petty gangster from the lower class). Each of these classes poses no immediate threat to Julian, even though we see the latent envy and possible violence that characterize the class consciousness of each group. Irma Fliegler is a flaming anti-Semite, and Al's feelings for his economic betters are expressed in his holiday greeting: "Merry Christmas, you stuckup bastards." Still, tradition, fear, and torpor are able to keep class lines intact in Gibbsville until a real victim appears.

Julian's own scene in Chapter I is set in the smoking room of the Lantenengo Country Club, exclusive province of the "secure" rich in Gibbsville, and it is here that Julian begins his rapid and terrifying decline by throwing a highball in the face of the enemy: Harry Reilly, a "witty Irishman . . . [who] had gone pretty far in his social climbing" (p. 15). This drunken, silly, fatal gesture is based in part on Julian's jealousy of Reilly's attentions to Caroline English, his pretty and conventional wife, but it is also Julian's violent attempt to show everyone that *he* can repel a maladroit outsider and get away with it.

Nevertheless, the times are not right for such snobbish gestures, particularly for Julian McHenry English. His name a symbol of his WASP status in Gibbsville, Julian has had to borrow \$20,000 from Irish Catholic Harry Reilly who ". . . now practically owned the Gibbsville Cadillac Motor Car Company, of which Julian was president" (p. 15). With his usual patrician financial abandon, Julian has borrowed \$10,000 more than necessary, blowing the extra money on an impractical concrete driveway, *two* motorcycles, and \$1766.45 worth of trees. "Julian knew to the penny what they cost, but he was still not sure of the name of them" (p. 216). No economy measures for Julian English, especially when dealing with the despised Reilly: "he figured he might as well get a good hunk while he was at it" (p. 215).

Analysts of *Appointment in Samarra* have pretty much ignored the Depression as a force in the novel, even though the action takes place on 24-25-26 December 1930. And O'Hara

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is not primarily concerned with capitalism's failures. Yet the gathering storm of economic disaster hangs over Gibbssville, a coal-mining community. "The anthracite industry was just about licked" (p. 64), and even though the inherited-money rich and the professional men in Gibbssville still had money, many were spending principal. "Mr. Hoover was an engineer, and in a mining country engineers are respected. Gibbssville men and women who were in the market trusted that cold fat pinched face as they had trusted the cold thin pinched face of Mr. Coolidge, and in 1930 the good day's work of October 29, 1929, continued to be known as a strong technical reaction" (pp. 64-65).

However, O'Hara's novel makes it clear that English might have been able to pass off his tactlessly violent insult to Reilly as a gesture of warped *noblesse* or Ivy League horseplay had he thrown the drink in 1925. Then the rich bought his Cadillac or lent him money. The Black Thursdays and Tragic Tuesdays of 1929, on the other hand, are forcing lords of the Country Club smoking room to take money wherever they can find it, and many have borrowed from Harry Reilly. Accordingly, Julian and his cohorts must pay sullen attention to the Harry Reillys, to Harry's clannish Irish Catholic friends, to "all the Christiana Street kind of people who he knew secretly hated him . . ." (p. 219). In the 1920's, Julian's Lantenengo Street paralleled Christiana Street; in 1930, Julian finds that the streets cross.

The stringency of the incipient Depression is likewise reflected in the hangover motif that runs through *Appointment in Samarra*. The frothy champagne of the Twenties has begotten the dull headache of the Thirties, despite Julian's frantic attempts to maintain the old gaiety, the heedless party, the adolescent rituals. In fact, the Reilly loan is symbolic of English's pursuit of a buoyant dream now turned nightmare. The dumb dismay that gripped many Americans during the early Depression is mirrored in English's halting realization that the party is over at last: "Julian, lost in the coonskins, felt the tremendous

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excitement, the great thrilling lump in the chest and abdomen that comes before the administering of an unknown, well-deserved punishment. He knew he was in for it" (p. 182).

Gone are the days when charm, attractive looks, inherited social position, and carelessness could allow Julian a reflection like this: "... servants, cops, waiters in restaurants, ushers in theatres — he could hate them more than persons who threatened him with real harm. He hated himself for his outbursts against them, but why in the name of God, when they had so little to do, couldn't they do it right and move out of his life" (p. 198). After the Reilly incident, Julian is in financial jeopardy, marital difficulty, and social insecurity. He has begun to understand the jealousy and outrage of one of those hated cops who stopped him for speeding: "'You'd think you owned the road,' the patrolman had said; and Julian could not answer that that was exactly what he had been thinking" (p. 214).

The cops and servants and secretaries used to be good for laughs, but the very impermanence and insecurity of class lines based on money in a Depression — indeed, the insecurity of any position in a venal and materialistic society in which prestige can be conferred for owning a Cadillac and taken away for failing to replace divots on the golf course — drives Julian into wild emotional gyrations.

Insecurity in any event has been his lot from the beginning. Julian's grandfather an embezzler and a suicide, his father a righteous hypocrite, his mother a faceless weakling, English himself seems heir to hereditary character weaknesses. As the son of Dr. English, physician to the "good" families in town, Julian can inherit a place in the upper stratum of Gibbsville society, but his family has neither the money nor the real social confidence to make him feel at home there. Therefore, Julian rebels. As a boy, he steals, runs away, courts disaster, and of course is punished.

However, Julian loves to be punished. His very insecurity leads him to seek chastisement, in effect proving to himself that others care enough about him — as one of their own — to want

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to "correct" him. Throwing the drink in a creditor's eye, trying to seduce a gangster's mistress, punching a one-armed war veteran at the Gibbsville Club, and reviling his wife are Julian's naughty pranks, but Gibbsville, always alert for a victim, will have no more of them.

Though English only too late comes to know it, O'Hara's persistent references make the reader aware that a war is raging in Gibbsville, a violent and deadly war. Julian had sat out World War I at Lafayette in the S.A.T.C.; he has never really left Gibbsville. At the same time, others were wounded in France (Lute Fliegler's scarred back, Froggy Ogden's missing arm). These men have returned, proud of their survival, yet they have been made aware that violence is man's fate. They know — as Julian does not — that beneath the surface of society's reactions to apparently inconsequential breaches of etiquette hides revenge and envy and mayhem. "The war's over," Julian tells the angry Ogden at the Gibbsville Club. The reply — "Yeah, that's what you think" (p. 236) — underscores the permanence of the latent violence informing all social relations in *Appointment in Samarra*.

Julian eventually does realize that he cannot escape Gibbsville, for Gibbsville is everywhere. The Cadillacs that he drives and sells — symbols of assertiveness, mobility, freedom — are on a circular track. Pressed on all sides, Julian does run, but "you did not really get away from what he was going back to, and whatever it was, he had to face it" (p. 242). So he aborts his flight and returns to the no man's land that Gibbsville has now become for him. Like a child, he reasons, "He was too tall to run away. He would be spotted" (p. 243).

And Julian has managed to close all the doors in Gibbsville. He has estranged his wife, Caroline, who, even though she has compounded his immaturity by using her sexual favors like a carrot and stick, has been a strong stabilizing force in his life. He has outraged his morally punctillious father. He has made enemies of Lantenengo County's mobsters, war veterans, Irish Catholics, clubmen, and sober citizens. He even fails, in a last

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desperate maneuver designed to shore up his masculine sexual self-esteem, to seduce a gauche society reporter from the Gibbsville *Standard*. Finally, in an alcoholic haze, English can recall only "a slang axiom that never had any meaning in college days: 'Don't buck the system; you're liable to gum up the works'" (p. 276). His world in shards about him, he decides to punish himself: aptly ironic, his suicide weapon is the carbon monoxide from his own Cadillac in his own garage.

But O'Hara does not end the novel with Julian's suicide. Comparing the death to the explosion of a grenade, O'Hara charts the sorrow and face-saving and revenge and self-pity that Julian's suicide means for Gibbsville. The war continues in the violent little city, even though Caroline English mourns her dead husband as "some young officer in an overseas cap and a Sam Browne belt" (p. 293). Julian was "like someone who had died in the war," for, she concludes, "it was *time* for him to die" (p. 294).

O'Hara buttresses his study of the neurotic, doomed hero with endless documentary detail: menus for the 2.50 dinner at the Country Club (filet mignon); Reo Speedwagons, Condax cigarettes, Delta Kappa Epsilon, "Is it a real Foujita or a copy?" All of these *things* — the badges of status in Gibbsville — have enormous power and relevance for an understanding of Julian's world. O'Hara's ear for dialogue — acknowledged by all critics as flawless — produces an endless and ungrammatical verisimilitude, the accurately reproduced accents marking the speakers as members of a specific social class. And despite O'Hara's objective tone, board-fence irony intrudes often enough to demonstrate the author's opinion of the hypocrites and fools of *Appointment in Samarra*.

Best of all, O'Hara manages to make most readers care a great deal about Julian English. Perhaps, as Edmund Wilson once wrote, O'Hara never knew what a heel Julian was. But heel or tragic victim, Julian English is more than a sociological case study; he has the attributes of a fully rounded character. For years the people of Pottsville, Pa., Gibbsville's prototype,

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have been trying to identify the model on whom Julian was based. John O'Hara, defending his artistic realization, claimed that they never would: "They try to pinpoint the figures, but unsuccessfully, because the characters have two patterns. One is superficial — clothes, schools, social positions, jobs. The other is psychological. Julian English of 'Appointment in Samarra' was superficially two or three fellows. On the psychological side, he happened to be a guy I knew living on the wrong side of the tracks."⁴⁶ O'Hara's novel demonstrates how well he integrated the "superficial" with the "psychological," for Julian's shallow self-pity and lack of moral resource is directly determined by his society's obsessive concern for the superficial. No one knows the name of a tree in Gibbsville; no one admires a Lantenengo County hill unless it contains coal; no one can laugh until he has had three whiskeys. Julian English — Gibbsville's finest — seems real enough.

O'Hara produced several brilliant short stories and at least two first-rate novels after *Appointment in Samarra*. The irony of determinism and fatalism marks them all, but nowhere else in the O'Hara canon are his naturalistic values and techniques translated into more noteworthy imaginative expression.

The French naturalist Emile Zola once wrote: "I take my documents where I find them, and I think I make them mine."⁴⁷ A century later, O'Hara told an interviewer: "Within my limitations and within my prejudices, I wrote down what I saw and heard and felt. I tried to keep it mine, and when I was most successful, it was mine."⁴⁸ *Appointment in Samarra* had John O'Hara's stamp of success.

Colby College
Waterville, Maine

46 Quoted in Lewis Nichols, "Talk with John O'Hara," *New York Times Book Review*, 27 Nov. 1955, p. 16.

47 Quoted in Block, p. 91.

48 Quoted in Schanche, p. 142.