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Julian English Outside of Samarra

By PHILIP B. EPPARD

OF ALL THE MEMORABLE characters in John O'Hara's fiction, surely none is as intriguing as Julian English, the protagonist of *Appointment in Samarra*. The events of the three days surrounding Christmas 1930 which culminate in Julian's suicide in his garage by his Cadillac motor car continue to have a gripping effect on readers. Part of the staying power of *Appointment in Samarra* lies in the tantalizing question of the motivations for Julian's suicide. On the book's publication in 1934, reviewers questioned these motives, and they have been the subject of ongoing critical debate ever since.¹

O'Hara's Pennsylvania novels and stories can be examined together as an attempt to create a larger fictional landscape. Other chroniclers of fictional regions such as William Faulkner have made use of the same characters across several books. Similarly, O'Hara incorporates many of his principal Gibbstown characters as minor figures in much of the fiction set in what he called "my Pennsylvania protectorate," even though he made no attempt to integrate his works into a comprehensive story. Careful readers of the O'Hara canon will be aware of the fact that Julian English makes cameo appearances, or is the subject of discussion, in other O'Hara novels and stories. If we accept the notion that O'Hara has created a distinct and coherent fictional landscape that extends over numerous novels, novellas, and short stories, it then seems useful to examine his treatment of Julian English in these other works in order to see what additional light, if any, can be shed on the somewhat enigmatic portrait we have of him in *Appointment in Samarra*.

Julian makes his first appearance outside of *Appointment in Samarra* in *A Rage to Live*, the 1949 novel that marked O'Hara's return to life in Pennsylvania as a source for his fiction. Near the end of the book, Grace Caldwell Tate, now a widow, visits Gibbstown to attend the Summer Assembly at the Lanteno Country Club. The year is 1920. Julian English is a twenty year old college student who meets, dances, and flirts with the thirty-seven year old Grace. This brief encounter with Grace Tate reinforces much of what we know about Julian from *Appointment in Samarra*. First, he has had too much to drink. Furthermore, it is also painfully evident that his relationship with his parents, espe-

1. See, for example, R.P. Blackmur, "A Morality of Pointlessness," *Nation* 139 (22 Aug. 1934): 220-21.

cially his father, is severely strained. When he tells Grace that he is a student at Lafayette College, she tells him, “My father went there.” Julian replies, “He did? How nice. Well, my father went there too. But how nice that *your* father went there.”²

Julian’s profound disappointment at not having been in military service in the Great War, a fact that contributes to some of the conflict in *Appointment in Samarra*, is also made evident when he tells Grace, “I’m twenty, but that’s not old enough to do a lot of things. I wasn’t in the damn war. . .” (536).³ As they talk while dancing, Grace quickly picks up on a wild streak in Julian, telling him, “I imagine you’re a handful and always have been.” Ever the wisecracking charmer, Julian replies, “You’re a nice armful and I hope you always will be” (537). Shortly thereafter Grace gives a hand signal to Ned Minor, her nominal escort in Gibbsville, and Ned cuts in on Julian and Grace. Grace feels bad for fear that she has hurt Julian’s feelings, but Ned then gives her the official position of proper Gibbsville society on Julian: “I live in Gibbsville, and we Gibbsville people don’t have to be so careful of his feelings. He’s riding to a fall. Wild, fresh—I don’t see how his father and mother put up with him” (538).

When Grace later seeks out Julian to apologize for abruptly terminating their dance to rejoin Ned Minor, she finds him caught up in a game of craps. She asks to speak with him for five minutes. Julian won’t give her even a few minutes of his time to talk, but he does urge her to stick around, saying that she is bringing him good luck. All in all, this is a Julian English familiar to readers of *Appointment in Samarra*—drinking too much, charming with the opposite sex, constantly at odds with his parents, flouting conventional behavior in ways that lead him to be perceived by respectable society as something of a bad seed, and ultimately self-centered and insensitive to others.

The next time we see Julian is in *Ten North Frederick*, O’Hara’s powerful story of the tragic life of Joe Chapin that is also his fullest depiction of Gibbsville society. Dr. William Dilworth English, Julian’s father, is the Chapin family physician, and Julian shows up at the Chapin home as the chauffeur for his father on a visit to Joe Chapin who is laid up with a broken leg. The year is 1929. During this brief visit to the Chapins, Julian is amazed to find out that Joe and Edith Chapin are ignorant of their son Joby’s real skills as a jazz pianist. Not only are they unaware of his talent, but they are such a pair of hidebound traditionalists that they cannot even appreciate it. Joe Chapin says, “But it’s only jazz, Julian. He never plays anything worthwhile.”⁴ Julian explodes upon hearing

2. John O’Hara, *A Rage to Live* (New York: Random House, 1949), 536. Subsequent page references are given in the text.

3. For a discussion of the impact of World War I in *Appointment in Samarra* see Jesse Bier, “O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samarra*: His First and Only Real Novel,” *College English* 25 (Nov. 1963): 135–41.

4. John O’Hara, *Ten North Frederick* (New York: Random House, 1955), 317. Subsequent page references are given in the text.

Joe's remark, responding, "Worthwhile! I've heard about prophets without honor et cetera. But this is almost fantastic, your not knowing about Joby. The sad part is, I don't think you'll appreciate him even after my outburst"(317). Dr. English quickly excuses himself after this exchange, obviously angered and embarrassed by his son's behavior. Julian calms down and does apologize, but then adds significantly, "The fact of the matter is, Joby's what I wish I'd been. He's a great jazz piano player, whether you like it or not"(317).

After Julian and his father leave, the reader is treated again to the official Gibbsville opinion of Julian:

"And that's what Caroline Walker has to put up with every day," said Edith.

"He makes it very difficult to defend him," said Joe.

"Not many people try any more. And those that do, they're like you, fond of his father."

"No, not altogether that, Edith. He has that certain indefinable thing called charm. And the whole thing started over his well-intentioned overpraise of Joby's piano-playing. His motive was all right, but his enthusiasm and impatience got the better of him. Impatience, that's what it is."

"Oh, rot. It's common, ordinary bad manners by an ungrateful spoiled brat. Caroline can be glad they have no children. That's going to make it easier when the time comes." (318)

Joe Chapin's insightful and kindly interpretation of Julian's behavior contrasts nicely with Edith's harsh judgment, and their opinions are perfectly in accord with their respective personalities. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that O'Hara's introduction of Julian is not just a gratuitous insertion for sentimental reasons. Julian's introduction could be seen as a bit awkward. After all, why would the president of Gibbsville's Cadillac dealership be driving his physician father on house calls? But through this exchange between Joe and Edith, O'Hara turns the scene to the purpose of further illuminating their characters. The most interesting point in the scene, however, is Julian's suggestion that he had aspirations to be a jazz piano player. We are familiar with Julian's appreciation of music from the final scenes in *Appointment in Samarra* when he drinks himself into a stupor while playing Paul Whiteman on the Victrola and ends up breaking some of his favorite records. That he really aspired to be a jazz pianist is a new bit of information, suggesting at the very least that the gulf between Julian and his father was even wider than suggested in *Appointment in Samarra*.

Our final direct glimpses of Julian English are in two brief scenes in *From the Terrace*. In the first scene Alfred Eaton, driving in unfamiliar territory, stumbles on the Lantenengo Country Club during a party late in 1919. As Alfred watches the party from the porch of the club, Julian appears and cordially invites him inside, even though he isn't wearing the formal attire that club rules require for the event. They introduce themselves, exchange a few words, and Alfred decides to move on. About eight years later they meet again on the golf course at the country club when Alfred is in Gibbsville ostensibly on business, although his chief business is carrying on an affair with Natalie Benziger, who

happens to be a friend of Caroline Walker English.⁵ These encounters between Alfred Eaton and Julian are really too brief to shed much light on Julian's character, but it is in *From the Terrace* that O'Hara begins to provide some further perspectives on Julian's suicide.

From the Terrace contains the first extended commentary on Julian English's suicide outside of *Appointment in Samarra*. Subsequent references to English in O'Hara's work are secondary comments of this type. While they do not give the reader a direct picture of Julian, they do provide interesting perspectives on the question of what ultimately brought Julian McHenry English down.

Because of Natalie Benziger's friendship with Caroline English, Julian's suicide has an effect on the relationship between Alfred Eaton and Natalie. Julian's suicide not only killed the gayety of the 1930 holiday season, but it also frightened Natalie "with her first doubts of romantic love" (528).

She went to Caroline because she had known that Caroline had left Julian in protest against a scene he had caused at the club dance, and she was the only one who knew that Caroline was determined to separate herself permanently from the only man she loved.

"You ought not to be here. You ought to be in New York," said Caroline.

"Why?"

"You've asked the right person why. Because no matter what they do, we have no right to desert them. Desert your family, Natalie. Go live in New York. What am I now? What shall I ever be? I'm a girl who had good and just cause to walk out on her husband, and now for the rest of my life I can sit here with my good and just cause." She held out her hands as though the good and just cause lay in them. "He was nice, and God help me he was nice to me." It was the only time Natalie saw her weep. "I loved him, I loved him." (528-29)

Caroline Walker English, it seems, came somewhat belatedly to the realization that she should have followed the advice of country music star Tammy Wynette. She didn't "stand by her man."

The final references to Julian's suicide are found in the novellas *Imagine Kissing Pete* and *A Few Trips and Some Poetry*. Both of these works are narrated by Jimmy Malloy, O'Hara's fictional persona. In *Imagine Kissing Pete*, Malloy reminisces in terms that echo what several critics and reviewers have had to say about Julian when he observes that his "shortcomings seemed out of proportion to the magnitude of killing himself."⁶ Malloy was aware of difficulties in the English marriage, but confident that they could have been no worse than those in the marriage of Bobbie and Pete McCrea, the central characters of *Imagine Kissing Pete*. To Jimmy Malloy in 1930, the suicide seemed a fact of life not easily explained, but better interpreted in terms of its effect on those left behind. It was a wake-up call that signaled the end of Malloy's youth.

A Few Trips and Some Poetry, published in 1968, contains O'Hara's final

5. John O'Hara, *From the Terrace* (New York: Random House, 1958), 316-17, 476. Subsequent page references are given in the text.

6. John O'Hara, *Sermons and Soda-Water II: Imagine Kissing Pete* (New York: Random House, 1960), 52.

commentary on Julian English. This highly praised novella tells, again through the eyes of Jimmy Malloy, the story of Isabel Barley's journey through life and a variety of lovers of both sexes. At one point Isabel tells Jimmy, who is one of her sporadic lovers, that she will before too long have slept with ten men, and in fact has only four to go. Malloy asks her if she has the four picked out.

"No, but I could name four that wouldn't have the slightest trouble. Three, now that Julian English is dead. I could never understand why he didn't fall madly in love with me. Don't say it was because he was in love with Caroline."

"That's what I was going to say," I said.

"That's what everybody says. But if he was so much in love with her, why did he kill himself?"

"Because the roof fell in, and part of it was the fear of losing her."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe that," she said. "If she hadn't been so possessive he would have had lots of girls, me among them, and we'd have made life a lot more interesting than that prissy little wife of his."

"Prissy?"

"Yes, she was prissy. One of those prissy Bryn Mawr types. I've never heard a man say a single word against her, and very few girls. But she sucked the life out of him."

"A nice way to die."

"The spirit, the independence. She made him into something he was never meant to be. A carbon-copy of his father and my father and all those men at the Gibbsville Club. She reminds me of my mother-in-law—and of my mother, for that matter. I hate good capital-G women." She stood up and pulled my shirt over her head. "Aren't you glad I'm not Caroline English?"

Well, I was.⁷

If this were Jimmy Malloy voicing *his* opinion of Caroline English's effect on her husband, we might accept the comments with some confidence as representative of O'Hara's own opinions. We must consider the source, however, and in this case the source is a decidedly unconventional woman who is the virtual antithesis of Caroline English. Isabel's comments suggest that Julian was fundamentally ill-suited for a role in traditional Gibbsville society. This rings true, for he was, after all, as we now know from *Ten North Frederick*, a jazz piano player manqué. His rebellions might be petty—joining Delta Kappa Epsilon instead of his father's fraternity Theta Delta Chi, for example. Or they might be more socially disastrous—throwing a drink in Harry Reilly's face or repairing to his car in the parking lot at the Stage Coach with the mistress of Gibbsville's leading mobster. Julian thought he loved Caroline, but in fact his behavior suggests otherwise. Real love in *Appointment in Samarra* can be seen between Lute and Irma Fliegler, whose marriage forms a nice counterpoint to the Englishes'. Isabel Barley, a kindred unconventional spirit to Julian English, may well have been on target in her assessment of Caroline's effect on Julian. Perhaps Caroline even sensed this herself. When Dr. English informs her of Julian's death in *Appointment in Samarra*, she turns on him, calling him a pomp-

7. John O'Hara, *And Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1968), 95.

ous old man and high and mighty. ““You made him do it, not me,”” she cries out defensively.⁸

Isabel’s comments must be weighed against the testimony of Caroline herself in *From the Terrace*. Caroline’s words to Natalie Benziger recall the scene in *Appointment in Samarra* where Julian pleads to her, ““Blind, without knowing, you could stick by me. That’s what you’d do if you were a real wife, but, what the hell.””⁹ Julian *needed* Caroline, and read against the backdrop of the rest of O’Hara’s fiction it is hard not to avoid the suggestion that this need which enabled Caroline to “suck the life out of him” (in Isabel Barley’s words) reflects a fundamental weakness in men themselves. O’Hara’s works are notable for their portraits of strong women, and his men do seem to be easily in thrall to them. One might even speculate that the interest in lesbianism manifest in some of O’Hara’s later works is a variation on his fascination with the strong woman. It represents a logical extension of a world in which the women subtly dominate the men—a world in which men are in fact virtually expendable.¹⁰

John O’Hara’s work is a never-ending exploration of human character. This was an endlessly interesting endeavor for O’Hara, whose manifest fascination with his fellow man yielded a remarkable body of realistic character studies. John Updike has suggested that O’Hara’s obsessive fascination with life contributed to shaping his unadorned prose style. Commenting on O’Hara’s use of language he wrote, ““But the interest of the human life in his mind’s eye was so self-evident he saw no need to *make* it interesting.””¹¹ O’Hara also knew, however, that the nature of life itself would make this study ultimately an unsatisfactory exercise because there were never conclusive answers to the puzzles of human character. As Jimmy Malloy reflects, ““What, really, can any of us know about any of us . . . ?””¹² One of the hallmarks of John O’Hara’s realism, therefore, is that it faithfully reproduces the inconclusiveness of life itself, and this has sometimes been frustrating to critics, reviewers, and readers. The case of Julian English does not and never will have a neat explanation. This exploration of O’Hara’s treatment of Julian outside of *Appointment in Samarra* can help enhance our understanding of his character, but it cannot provide a clear-cut answer to the complex questions of motivation that impelled this ostensibly attractive young man to resort to suicide. Julian’s reappearance in the later novels and the several references to his suicide do suggest, however, that O’Hara shared with his readers a continued fascination with one of the most unforgettable characters in twentieth-century American literature.

8. John O’Hara, *Appointment in Samarra* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934), 291.

9. *Appointment in Samarra*, 256.

10. In his review of *Selected Letters of John O’Hara*, John Updike comments on O’Hara’s portrayal of strong women, suggesting that in some late stories he became “virtually a feminist writer.” See *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 185.

11. Updike, *Hugging the Shore*, 185.

12. John O’Hara, *Sermons and Soda-Water III: We’re Friends Again* (New York: Random House, 1960), 110.