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“When I Couldn’t Write”:
John O’Hara’s Lack Of Productivity
During World War II

By STEVEN GOLDFEAF

The war was like college all over again. Glamorous things were happening and John O’Hara was being left out. His friends were being tapped for the military equivalent of Bones and he couldn’t even matriculate.

—Matthew Bruccoli, The O’Hara Concern (183)

Bruccoli’s analogy might seem extreme, but actually it’s not extreme enough.

In the early 1940s, O’Hara’s friends were not just “being tapped for the military equivalent of Bones,” Yale’s elite and secret society, but many of them were being tapped by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor of the current CIA, because they were members of Skull and Bones or had links to the society. The metaphor was really more than a metaphor: for O’Hara, World War II wasn’t like college—in a very real sense, for John O’Hara the war was college all over again.

O’Hara’s college career was extremely brief but highly traumatic, and the trauma lasted a lifetime. The eldest son of a prominent physician in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, O’Hara grew up assuming he would attend a prestigious college as befit his innate intelligence, ambition, and financial resources. The first two stayed constant, but the money dried up when his father suddenly died. Alive, Dr. O’Hara earned enough money to pay for John’s tuition, but his estate proved shockingly barren. Although John had probably passed his entrance exam to Yale by June of 1924, a drunken party celebrating his prep school graduation that month had so enraged his father that Dr. O’Hara withheld the tuition money for O’Hara’s freshman year. Dr. O’Hara wanted John to do a year’s penance before entering Yale in the fall of 1925, but by that time he was already six months dead.

Instead of attending another college whose tuition would be more in keeping with his new income level, or perhaps attending Yale after acquiring scholarships or loans coupled with various part-time jobs, O’Hara chose not to attend college at all; waiting on tables and scrimping on expenses was antithetical to O’Hara’s conception of college life. He had hoped to mingle with some of society’s wealthier young men, not to overhear snippets of their conversations.
with an order pad in his hand. But he regretted the loss so deeply, and so obviously, that years afterward Ernest Hemingway famously teased O’Hara about taking up a collection to send him to Yale in middle age.

The Yale men O’Hara longed to rub elbows with went on to staff the Office of Strategic Services in great disproportion to their numbers. By the summer of 1942, when the OSS was founded, many ex-Yalies around O’Hara’s age leapt at the opportunity to join this organization of gentleman spies, whose initials stood, depending on which wag you heard, for either “Oh, So Social” or “Oh, So Secret.” Either quality impressed O’Hara; joined together, their appeal was total. O’Hara applied, using every connection he could think of, and was accepted. But after a month of training, he was bounced from the OSS for health reasons.

Both Yale University in the 1920s and the OSS in the 1940s—two overlapping organizations in terms of personnel and cachet—had, with tantalizing brevity, admitted O’Hara to their exclusive ranks and then, heartbreakingly, rejected him. (Part of the OSS, it should be noted, was made up of the upper-crust types O’Hara was fascinated by: “If you should by chance wander in the labyrinth of the OSS,” the gossip columnist for the Washington Times-Herald wrote at the time, “you’d behold ex-polo players, millionaires, Russian princes, society gambol boys, and dilettante detectives” [Persico, Casey, 56]). At the same time, it must be noted that the OSS was founded by General “Wild Bill” Donovan, who, like his disciple William Casey, was a poor boy from hardscrabble Irish origins, probably a step lower on the social scale than O’Hara. Lacking the social standing of the well-heeled “white-shoe boys,” as Casey termed the Mellons, Armours, Bruces, Morgans and DuPonts who populated the OSS, he and Donovan more than compensated for that lack with their ferocious patriotism and legal-trained minds. But O’Hara’s combination of suspect social standing and unproven talents at spying made him very unlikely to succeed at the OSS.

John O’Hara’s feelings toward Yale, his would-be “ever alma mater,” as he put it (MacShane 120), are both well known and badly misunderstood, or at least vastly oversimplified, by most observers, but one of the appeals Yale had for him was that it represented a society within American culture that set its own standards, set them high, and actively sought to prevent the broader society from being able to judge them. It doesn’t really matter whether O’Hara longed to have attended Yale and been a member of Skull and Bones primarily because he was insecure about his unaffiliated status, or whether he longed for these things because they represented virtues—loyalty, intellectual rigor, pride, fellowship, stubbornness—that by his nature he admired. It matters only that O’Hara viewed Skull and Bones as admirable. The fledgling OSS, peopled with outlandish proportion by Skull and Bonesmen, could only have swelled O’Hara’s
admiration by adding a fanatic patriotism to the mix above. In short, the OSS was O’Hara’s second chance to reverse the tragedy of his youth when the circumstances of his father’s sudden and early death forced him to withdraw from joining Yale’s class of 1929. Twenty years later, given this near-miraculous chance to undo the past, O’Hara found himself rejected by the OSS, after a month or so of probationary training, for reasons of health, most of which could be traced to preventable causes: O’Hara had stomach troubles, probably brought on by his hard drinking, and a mouthful of bad teeth, which could have been repaired over the years but for O’Hara’s conviction that his teeth didn’t matter since he was going to die young anyway. So now, for reasons that couldn’t be blamed on luck or fate or blind circumstance but rather squarely on his own choices, O’Hara blew this second chance to be a member of an elite and, to him, wholly admirable group of men.

It’s little wonder then that John O’Hara, as World War II drew on, found himself, in a word, depressed. All of his biographers make that point. Though none use that clinical word, all support Bruccoli’s contention that “the war years were bad for John O’Hara.” O’Hara himself describes the period in terms of a major symptom of depression, the inability to work. He blamed this state on the effects of drink: he told the London Daily Express in 1967 that before the war he

was dissipating all my energies in drink and high living. I was drinking a quart of whiskey a day, and that takes time—not just to drink, but to have your hangover and to get better from your hangover. It was a period when I couldn’t write. (O’Hara 221)

A few weeks later, he expanded on this period in a talk he gave at a Foyle’s Bookstore luncheon in London, noting that a writer’s

distractions and diversions ... can be anything from booze to women to greed to too much praise. Between the invasion of Poland and the Japanese surrender, I found I could not write anything longer than a short story. You might say that it took a world war to keep me from my typewriter. (Bruccoli, Checklist, xvi)

Depressed as he may have felt, O’Hara resisted the lure—and the permanent cure—that so many depressives prescribe for their ailment, that of suicide. O’Hara’s wartime letters do suggest, however, that that blighted solution did at least flicker through his mind. More in frustration than despair, he wrote to his friend Joseph Bryan in 1944 that he was so “sick of myself that it’s a good thing I don’t use a straight razor. Or live in a tall building” (quoted in MacShane 124). These remarks followed hard on the repeated rebuffs of his attempts to join organizations performing useful wartime service. According to various accounts, O’Hara tried the army, the marines, then the navy and the Civil Air Patrol; he also considered joining the army specialist corps, the Merchant Marine, and the Red Cross, in addition to serving briefly with the OSS and the
Inter-American Affairs office, where he supervised scripts for the U.S. propaganda films. These rejections were especially painful to O’Hara, whose values had been largely formed by the importance he placed on being accepted by the best such organizations.

O’Hara’s writing [says MacShane (126)] was in effect a war casualty. “It was impossible to write during the war,” he later observed. “Short stories that I could turn out in a few hours were all I could manage.” In the four years of the war, he published fewer than twenty short stories.

An important distinction needs to be made here between John O’Hara and virtually every other working writer. When O’Hara claims, in effect, that in the early 1940s he “couldn’t write” or that the Second World War kept him from writing, or when MacShane cites twenty stories in four years as a sign of depressed production, that means only that he could not write up to the astonishing standards both of quantity and quality of John O’Hara’s better periods. While this was an unproductive period for O’Hara, that last phrase is crucial—it was an unproductive period for John O’Hara. In fact, viewed anything like objectively, this period would have been an extremely productive one for any other writer, and for many it would have measured a high-water mark of productivity.

As if planned for the convenience of scholars, his publishing career spanned four calendar decades, his first short stories appearing just before the 1930s began, and his final short story most likely written in the last few weeks of the 1960s. Between those two points, each decade marked a significant shift in style, ambition, literary influence, and productivity. In the last category, the 1960s and the 1930s were clearly his most productive. The burst of stories published in the 1960s was positively Balzacian in its output, and completely unprecedented in both their artistry and frequency among American short story writers. The stories O’Hara presented to the American reading public in the 1930s are almost equally staggering in their novelty and freshness of style. In the 1950s, on the other hand, O’Hara virtually abandoned short story writing because of a break with The New Yorker, his primary outlet for short fiction, causing him to publish only three short stories in that decade as he nurtured his talents in the drama, the essay, and particularly the novel. O’Hara used his feud with The New Yorker as an opportunity to re-think his career as a novelist, writing his post-war novels with a drastic change in tone, in length, in scope, in subject, in technique and in the very purpose of the novel. And as these vast conceptual changes worked themselves out in his consciousness, his decade-long neglect of the short story makes perfect sense.

The 1940s mark a drop-off in O’Hara’s short story production—not as severe a drop-off as the 1950s, but one without a simple explanation like a break with his primary market either. Numerically, O’Hara’s short story production differs widely from decade to decade:
In the 1920s, 8.9% of O'Hara’s 413 published short stories, mostly tiny sketches taking up less than a column in The New Yorker, appeared in print; in the 1930s, 28.4%; in the 1940s, 25.1%; in the 1950s, less than 1%; and in the 1960s, 36.9%. The interesting part of these dry numbers is the surprising correlation between the novel and the short story, because they might, by surface logic, seem to have competed for O’Hara’s attention, but in fact the opposite is true. That miraculously productive decade for O’Hara’s short stories, the 1960s, far away the most productive of his career, was also the most productive of his career as a novelist, and the least productive decade in which O’Hara was writing short stories, the 1940s, also saw a low in novel production:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of Novels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>3 (Appointment in Samarra, Butterfield 8, Hope of Heaven)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>1 (A Rage to Live)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>3 (The Farmers Hotel, Ten North Frederick, From the Terrace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>7 (Ourselves to Know, The Big Laugh, Elizabeth Appleton, The Lockwood Concern, The Instrument, Lovey Childs, The Ewings)</td>
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With rare exceptions, such as the long title story in his first collection, The Doctor’s Son, a typical O’Hara story of the 1930s or 1940s was less than half the length of his later stories. O’Hara’s very earliest published stories in 1928 and 1929 were virtually single-paragraph character sketches or vignettes, a classification consistent with his training as a reporter. Indeed, one early selection reprinted in The Doctor’s Son as a short story was originally published in The New Yorker as a “profile,” a piece of straight nonfiction writing. O’Hara’s aim here of characterizing a speaker or a situation briefly but sharply allowed him to produce these pieces relatively quickly and, for him, fairly easily.

O’Hara’s stories grew longer and longer as his career grew:

*According to Matthew J. Bruccoli’s chronological numbering in John O’Hara: A Checklist. Inconsistencies, such as Bruccoli’s cancellation of item 156, and omissions, such as the posthumous collection of 14 stories after Bruccoli’s Checklist was published, have been accounted for.
O'Hara's first five collections of short stories, published from 1935 through 1947, averaged under eight pages per story (the shortest average length being the collection written during the war). His next six collections, the last six he would live to see published, averaged nearly twenty pages. Almost as visible a distinction as the average length is the tonal distinction—the early stories are quick, brash, heavily steeped in the vernacular of their time; the later ones are much slower, more thoughtful, and also steeped in the vernacular (although the context differs because this vernacular is that of the Thirties and Forties, which makes it almost historical rather than contemporary).

An obvious reason for the radical change in O'Hara's writing modes is time itself. People change. O'Hara's life certainly changed radically. In the late 1930s, O'Hara was a hard-drinking bachelor, an ardent Democrat, and a masterful writer of brash, fast, sharp contemporary fiction, often criticized for his elliptical brevity. By the early 1950s, he had settled into two successful marriages, had become a loving father, a teetotaler, a cranky and defensive convert to Republicanism, and a masterful writer who was now under fire for writing at ponderous length.

During the transition he had been hoping to make great strides in writing long fiction, but his novels were perceived critically as stagnating: *Hope of Heaven* in 1939 was dismissed by Clifton Fadiman in *The New Yorker* and by Louis Kronenberger in the Sunday *New York Times*, and O'Hara expressed his disappointment in the reception given a "book I worked hardest on, worked longest on, and feel was the best written" of his three novels. Stinging particularly sharply was the perception that O'Hara was tilling the same territory, middle-class Gibbsville, over and over in his novels. Though only *Appointment in Samarra* of the first three novels is actually set in Gibbsville, Jim Malloy is a character in *Butterfield 8* and the central character in *Hope of Heaven*, and O'Hara felt the need to venture further afield than the ground he knew so well.
If O’Hara found his long fiction under-appreciated in the 1940s, he saw his short fiction over-appreciated. While justly proud of his short stories, he was ambitious to push them further. As early as the 1930s, critics had acclaimed him “a master of the short story,” a title he found limiting: he inscribed his infant daughter’s copy of his 1945 collection *Pipe Night* “Your old man will be remembered as a short story writer, if at all” (Bruccoli, *O’Hara Concern*, 190).

Entering middle age, O’Hara sensed that he needed to grow as a writer, that he needed to produce, and was eminently capable of producing, different, longer, more intricate, less limited short stories and novels than he had produced to date, but he didn’t yet know which form his work would take. The 1940s presented O’Hara with a mid-life crisis of the most frustrating sort in which this hard-working, sensitive, gifted writer found himself abundantly equipped to make a difficult journey if only he could find the door out of his comfortable house.

He was also beset by misdirection. The world was sending him signals, but O’Hara did not trust the opinions of others. In addition to heaping praise on him for writing the short stories in the style he had now mastered, O’Hara found himself receiving a good deal of praise, and not a little bit of income, for producing a series of short stories that he saw as the work of his left hand. The *Pal Joey* stories had caught on with *The New Yorker* readership, pleasing and maybe surprising O’Hara with their popularity. In 1940 he thought correctly that if he could extend the series a bit, he could collect an entire book of them; after he did this, he became convinced that “*Pal Joey*” had the stuff to make a musical play, which he achieved as well with the help of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. This play is still being successfully revived. But the *Pal Joey* material, while excellent for what it was, didn’t stake out new territory for O’Hara. If anything, the material staked out familiar O’Hara ground, reiterating some of his very earliest published fiction. Bruccoli describes it well:

Although the *Joey* stories and their spinoffs brought O’Hara his first great popularity, they are not important in themselves. These stories derive from Ring Lardner’s *You Know Me, Al* letters and represent only a slight advance over the Delphian and Hagedoorn and Brownmiller series of 1927-8. [Their] Broadway wiseguy reputation almost certainly impeded the proper recognition of O’Hara’s major work.

Nevertheless the income that *Pal Joey* generated and the need to revamp the short stories into a libretto and incidental Hollywood polish jobs, to say nothing of the demands and joys of being a husband and later a father, did distract O’Hara for better or worse from acting on his ambitious plans.

O’Hara listed “too much praise” among the items ruinous to a writer’s ability to work. He felt that *Pal Joey*’s popularity did his writing some harm, but the praise his short stories received more generally also acted as a brake on O’Hara from following his instinct to experiment. His short stories were constantly
building on new techniques he developed, starting with overheard snippets of
dialogue that he turned into finger exercises, which then grew to various short
stories in the forms of monologue and letters and speeches. These in turn devel­
oped into the fully formed stories that used the detailed voices O’Hara had
trained himself to mimic so adroitly. He never wholly abandoned the techniques
he taught himself in such series as the Hagedoorn and Brownmiller, or the Del­
phian society, or the Pal Joey stories—in the 1950s, for example, his novella A
Family Party uses that technique of thirty years earlier—but generally O’Hara
was under considerable pressure from critics who praised his short stories’ tech­
nique, to readers who wanted him to produce more of the same, to editors who
eagerly bought story after story of O’Hara’s so-called “perfect ear for recording
dialogue.” He in fact only half-jokingly referred to his inclination to experi­
ment in the scientific sense of the word:

Now one of the many experiments I have conducted in my laboratory . . . is to put a sheet of paper
in the typewriter, think of two faces I have seen, make up a scene such as a restaurant table or two
seats in an airplane, and get those two people in a conversation. I let them do small talk for a page
or so, and pretty soon they begin to come to life. They do so entirely through dialog. I start knowing
nothing of them except what I remember of their faces. But as they chatter away one of them and
then the other will say something that is so revealing that I recognize the sign of created
characters . . . . If I become bored in the characters I can [write about them] . . . But while I have
written and published short stories that had such accidental beginnings . . . [a] rule I don’t even
finish the stories I begin that way, and I deliberately destroy what I have done by giving one of the
characters a line of atrocious dialog—humorous, profane, or completely out of character—that
makes it impossible to continue. (O’Hara 7)

This habit of composition, virtually unique among fiction writers, was O’Hara’s
method of getting his short story writing juices flowing. In other words, he
would perform this exercise, usually find that it was going nowhere and so
throw out that evening’s experiment, but often enough he would find he had
written a real story. The unusual part among fiction writers is O’Hara’s claim
that he had no idea where the story was going when he started it. Other writers
start with some idea where their stories are heading. One practical result of
starting with only a pair of faces would be that O’Hara would never lack for
material—there are always an abundance of faces around, and O’Hara’s techni­
cal gifts allowed him to coax successful and even brilliant short stories from
such unpromising material.

What this method lacked, however, was method: conscious planning. In the
passage quoted above, he sounds almost surprised to learn how these stories
eventually develop. In fact, he had written earlier in acknowledgment that The
New Yorker readers and editors would complain about the lack of plot in his
short fiction: “if you understand the meaning of this story,” he wrote to Harold
Ross, mostly in jest, “would you please have someone explain it to me?” To be
sure, themes in stories written like this would manifest themselves—how could
they not?—but O'Hara was mostly spinning dialogue and description writing, with no grand or cohesive philosophy to his short fiction. His mid-life crisis, brought on by his frustrations during the war, forced him to abandon the short story techniques that had proved so successful and yet so limiting.

The secretiveness of the organizations O'Hara yearned to serve in also limited his writing about the war. O'Hara had achieved a high-security clearance early on in the war, mostly by virtue of having highly placed government officials willing to vouch for him. O'Hara took vows and oaths of secrecy seriously, probably more seriously than even their framers intended. A man who felt comfortable inside a secret society might feel free to take some aspects of his oath more seriously than others, while someone like O'Hara who had largely felt excluded from access to insider secrets would feel honor bound to treat all such oaths as equally sacred. At one point, he argued with the writer Budd Schulberg about a private society at Dartmouth which O'Hara felt sure was closed to Jews. After arguing unsuccessfully that it was open to Jews, Schulberg, a Jew, flung his membership key at O'Hara, who promptly rebuked him for treating his membership so casually. In contrast, William F. Buckley, a Yale graduate and a former CIA operative, feels free, to judge by his popular Blackford Oakes series of espionage novels, to fictionalize his experience and that of others, despite any literal vows he might have made decades ago to a strict code of silence. Unlike Buckley or Howard Hunt or John LeCarre or other wellborn habitués of these elite circles, John O'Hara felt severely compromised in using this fascinating material. The little use he did make of it emphasizes the only angle he could reveal: that all other angles are top secret and no one's business.

The theme of mysteriousness combined with patriotic blind obedience recurs in O'Hara's writing about the war. A story first published in the 1966 collection *Waiting for Winter* entitled "Late Late Show" begins as a familiar O'Hara domestic scene: a husband and wife are ensconced in their comfortable apartment watching the credits of a late-night movie—a scene typical of the O'Hara household—when the husband reveals that he knew the movie's screenwriter during the war, and knew him rather well. The wife suddenly interrupts the husband's detailed and relaxed story with the observation, "There are things you're not telling me," to which the husband responds, "That's right."

"Why can't you tell me now, over 20 years later?"
"Because I have no right to."
"All right. Go on with Simpson."
"Well, now that I think of it, I can't. I have to stop right here."
"Because of security?"
"That's right."
"Oh, how aggravating, Sherry."
"I'm sorry, but that's the way it is," he said.
"Why? Is he in the CIA?"
"I have no idea. I have nothing to do with the CIA," he said.
"I wonder."
"You don’t have to wonder about that."
"You wouldn't tell me if you were."
"Probably not."
"You realize of course that I’m going to be suspicious of everything you do. I think you are in the CIA."

This scene has the potential of becoming quite nasty. Marriages have broken up over much less. This couple, which had been as intimate and tranquil as any secret society, is faced with an unexpected conflict of interests. The husband is bound by his wartime vows of secrecy, which he still respects above his vows of marriage. This terrifically tension-packed moment, however, passes—the wife calmly accepts and silently respects her husband’s loyalties, and the pleasant domestic scene resumes. Husbands in O’Hara frequently are restricted by entangling loyalties, though rarely as pointedly as here. Playing by the rules, even or especially when they conflict with one’s own preferences, is important to O’Hara and he has built much of his fiction on that theme.

O’Hara spent his lifetime aspiring to join various societies—men’s clubs, honorary college affiliations, exclusive literary distinctions—the more secretive and exclusive the better, and there were few societies more exclusive and secretive than the OSS. O’Hara’s fiction about the war dwells on this theme of secretiveness and exclusion. Probably his most puzzling war story is the almost impenetrable one entitled simply “The War,” which was published for the first time in the posthumous collection The Time Element, whose editor Albert Erskine found it baffling and intriguing and finally inexplicable. It concerns a hostile late evening encounter that befell a young man raiding a refrigerator at midnight. He is interrupted by a strange voice belonging to a middle-aged man who proceeds to interrogate him and in the end convinces him to join an OSS-like military organization. More elliptical than most O’Hara stories—whose earmark is their elliptical quality—this story is baffling because its purpose seems to be to omit any tangible details from the story, and yet to make the story operate on the nature of the relationship between these two odd characters. While O’Hara often tries to build his short fiction on a few conspicuous but accurate details, here he gives us almost nothing. Outside of a single detail dating the story sometime after 1940, we’re left without a clue.

Another mysterious OSS-related story is “This Time” in which a war veteran is virtually abducted from his pleasant middle-class existence as a husband, father, and attorney to serve in some nameless, quasi-military Washington, D. C.-based organization about which all we and he are assured is that it “has nothing to do with OSS.” What it does have to do with is left unclear.

Probably the most explicit use of OSS material crops up in the character of Hamilton Hackley in the novella “We’re Friends Again.” A minor character,
Hackley has his wartime activities alluded to by others though he remains tightlipped about his exploits. He is portrayed as wholly admirable since he feels perfectly comfortable with Jim Malloy, O'Hara’s alter-ego narrator, yet refrains from discussing espionage explicitly with him. As ever, the secrecy under which Hackley must operate remains all we finally know for sure about his OSS involvement.

Demonstrating that O'Hara had personal dealings with the OSS or with the CIA is a hard task for his biographers, given the secrecy of those organizations and the exaggerated secrecy O'Hara felt such service required. It’s the equivalent to proving a negative proposition. But there is on record one tantalizing bit of tangible evidence in the form of a letter O'Hara wrote his close friend Barklie Henry in 1963 where he casually mentions that “In 1950 I very nearly moved to Washington to work full-time for the CIA.” Perhaps this was bravado, or wishful thinking, but the tone of his letters to Henry is overwhelmingly unguarded and sincere, lacking the bluster of O'Hara’s other correspondence. The idea of O'Hara taking the term “full-time” literally is staggering, since working for the CIA would have meant giving up writing completely, a career he had devoted his complete energy to. (The other possibility is that O'Hara would somehow have continued as a fiction writer, churning out books thematically concerned with satisfying the CIA’s agenda.) O'Hara’s unfulfilled hopes to serve in the OSS can still be seen in the scars they bore on his psyche and in his decreased productiveness during the Second World War.

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