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John
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BY CHARLES CHILD WALCUTT

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JOHN O'HARA

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✧ John O'Hara

AN AUTHOR whose books have sold over fifteen million copies and whose popularity has maintained itself firmly since 1934, who has won the National Book Award, and who nevertheless is savagely treated most of the time by most of the critics presents an unusual challenge to the student who undertakes to survey his whole career. The problem is compounded by the fact that, whereas, in my opinion, O'Hara is an extraordinarily good and important writer of short stories and an inferior novelist, his reputation and financial success depend upon his novels.

O'Hara was born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, in 1905, the eldest of eight children of a successful doctor. The family was prosperous, Irish, and Roman Catholic. Regardless of the prosperity, the latter two elements seem to have put John O'Hara at a deep psychological disadvantage in conservative, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant eastern Pennsylvania. His privileged youth carried him to the point of admission to Yale University, at the age of twenty — and then his father died and the security vanished. Instead of going to Yale, O'Hara worked as a reporter on various Pennsylvania newspapers, went to New York in 1927, and for a year ran through various writing and secretarial positions until, in the spring of 1928, he began to publish stories in the *New Yorker*. He married Helen Pettit in 1931, was divorced in 1933, and became suddenly famous with the publication of *Appointment in Samarra* in 1934. This success took him to Hollywood, where he worked as a film writer and reviser until the mid-1940's. During this period he moved back and forth between Hollywood and New York and continued to write novels and short stories. His

second novel, *Butterfield 8*, came in 1935 along with *The Doctor's Son and Other Stories*. He married socially prominent Belle Wylie in 1937, published a third novel, *Hope of Heaven*, in 1938, and in the same year began to publish the famous "Pal Joey" stories in the *New Yorker*.

The musical *Pal Joey* by Rodgers and Hart, based on these stories, was a great success in 1940; and the stories were collected in book form that same year. During World War II O'Hara served as a correspondent with the Third Fleet in the Pacific. Two further volumes of short stories, *Pipe Night*, 1945, and *Hell-box*, 1947 (the last until *Assembly*, 1961), were followed by a big novel, *A Rage to Live*, in 1949. *The Farmers Hotel* appeared in 1951, *Sweet and Sour* in 1954, and a major novel, *Ten North Frederick*, in 1955. A revival of *Pal Joey* won the Drama Critics' Award in 1952, and *Ten North Frederick* was given the National Book Award for fiction for 1955. This period of triumphs was accompanied by deep personal troubles. O'Hara almost died of hemorrhaging stomach ulcers in 1953, and his wife died of heart disease at the age of thirty-nine, in 1954. His third marriage, to Katharine Bryan, came in 1955. Since then he has published a flow of successful novels and volumes of short stories. *From the Terrace*, 1958, was his largest and most successful novel. Others are *A Family Party*, 1956, *Ourselves to Know*, 1960, *Sermons and Soda Water*, 1960, *The Big Laugh*, 1962, *Elizabeth Appleton*, 1963, *The Lockwood Concern*, 1965, and *The Instrument*, 1967.

The subjects of this considerable output are (1) eastern Pennsylvania, (2) actors and movie people in New York and Hollywood, and (3) a Philadelphia-New York-Washington triangle of business, war, and society. O'Hara's special virtues are an eye for significant detail and an ear that catches not only all the rhythm and style of dialogue but also its nuances of tone. He can bring to life in two or three sentences any character from the crudest

illiterate up through the vast lower middle class of semiliterates and on to intellectuals and socialites. At the same time his dialogue can reveal the rise and fall of temper, the ploys of one-upmanship, the abrasions of marriage, the pomposities of rich gangsters, and the simplicities of the well-bred. These virtues come to play supremely in the short story, where with just these skills O'Hara has given us glimpses of modern life as subtle and controlled as anything by such masters of the genre as Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield. This is a high accomplishment; the American short story may well be our best literary achievement in prose — and O'Hara stands close to our top.

The weakness of O'Hara's novels is related to the excellence of his short stories: America lacks the manners to sustain what Aristotle called a "significant action of some magnitude" — not that there is no cultural tradition or social context of manners, values, and customs; but that our writers have generally not been willing to assume a position of acceptance within it and create from its values an action that dramatizes its typical problems. The serious American writer more generally rejects the standard American values of business and status — without which the relations among individuals, already more intricately various and slippery than they might be if our manners were more uniform, become difficult to manage in the sustained action of a full novel. Here is where the short story can explore and illuminate endless varieties of situations in which individuals struggle for understanding, mastery, trust, or love. O'Hara has written well over 350 short stories, and in this impressive gathering he has hardly repeated himself. He has brilliantly explored the manners of America on many levels.

More than with most of our outstanding novelists, in fact, O'Hara's subject is that of the novel of manners, but a number of qualities in his novels limit his achievement in the genre. First,

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the range of conduct that O'Hara records is enormous. All degrees of violence, scoundrelism, selfishness, cruelty, pride, ruthlessness, and decency appear. Second, such conduct is boldly unpredictable. The most faithful wife will suddenly cuckold her husband, or turn from loving him to despising or hating him. The confirmed bachelor will marry a young girl. The gangster will act honorably. The unusual reaction is more likely than not. Third, O'Hara records all such conduct with the detachment of a photographer. He does not establish a moral frame of reference, and hence there is no pattern of rewards or punishments, no ideal scale, whether moral, philosophical, or religious; some people get away with murder while others suffer for the smallest errors or none at all. Some violate the basic decencies with impunity; others are done in for a lapse of manners. O'Hara *seems* to admire style, candor, and integrity in character, but he does not reward these qualities in action. Fourth, O'Hara does not *dramatize* a substantial *action* in which various life patterns are enacted, with developed problems and conflicts resolved by crucial decisions leading to serious consequences. Instead, he surrounds his dramatic action with great tracts of historical exposition and discussion, plus tireless descriptions of How It Was in style, fashion, travel, politics, saloons, rackets, houses, servants, clubs, food, horses, automobiles, and so on. Fifth, his tone is often so cold, sardonic, hostile, or contemptuous as to reduce his people to absurd or malignant monsters. Sixth, he is, paradoxically, so involved with the rich in his stories that he loses sight of the large patterns in which they move. He shows the nuances of power, of one-upmanship, and of arrogance among them without showing the general social frame that defines their significance. Rather, he is himself present talking to them with insightful questions or demonstrating that he knows what makes them tick better than anybody, including themselves, so that his

own display of insight reduces their freedom and subordinates their problems — problems already reduced by the confinement of O'Hara's preoccupation with sex, power, and status. The qualities listed here, nevertheless, constitute a special and remarkable contribution to modern American literature.

Many of O'Hara's stories could be described as exempla of anger and aspiration — or as pictures of the conflicts generated by the friction between personal irritability and status hopes. There are some people who are born with status, and then there are others who are aware of it, who think about it a good deal and reach out for it, but who never quite, down in the depths of their own hearts, make it. There are so many variations played on the theme that it is not easy to isolate the factor that makes the aspirant unsure and uncomfortable. It may be two or three generations back in his forebears; it may be some youthful error that continues to gnaw at his self-image; it may be simply that his wife has a little more status than he. Whatever it is, it figures prominently in the hero's consciousness.

It is tempting to seek some pattern, some development, in O'Hara's use of this theme, but doing so brings one directly into the complicating factor of O'Hara's own relation to the problem. The point can be illustrated with a parallel circumstance in the life and work of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's early problem was fear, a nerve-shattered terror brought about by wounds in World War I. The terror apparently came clothed in a shame of what he felt as cowardice; and he set to work writing about his horrors in order to exorcise them. And step by step Hemingway did master his fears. For this conquest he paid a price. He became identified with violence — boxing, hunting, bullfighting, war — to the point where it sometimes seemed that he could not age gracefully but must keep on breaking bones and having sprains and concussions until death set him free. He achieved various

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degrees of objectivity while dealing with or circling round his theme. Hemingway worked his way from such a fear of cowardice that he only hinted at violence to the point where he could anatomize courage and fear in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and on to the later books where he could treat them from a higher level entirely, almost free of the early anguish.

O'Hara's theme of social status moves in and out of autobiographical focus in the same way. In *Appointment in Samarra* the hero has status but destroys himself by not living up to it. There is a *very* great deal of discussion in the novel about who belongs and who does not, what clubs count, what prep schools, what colleges, and how people make the grade in Gibbsville. The laborer, the mobster, the well-born hero, all think about status and how they relate to it. Almost three decades later, in *Sermons and Soda Water*, a character from *Samarra* reappears. He is Jim Malloy, who is clearly a persona of O'Hara. Having come up from the wrong side of the tracks in Gibbsville, he is now a rich and famous writer, a celebrity in his home town, where he moves occasionally among the elect, terribly at ease in Zion, going to the Club, the big dances, the most established family circles. He is now higher than Gibbsville and can generously condescend to the old town. A few years later in *Elizabeth Appleton*, O'Hara brings a very well born and well bred lady to a small college town and shows how she constitutes a different order of creature, with her own laws and morals; yet he shows her serious limitation, too. By the time of *The Lockwood Concern*, he has mastered the problem so completely that he can write a novel avowedly about the upstart's search for status, showing how a family tries through three generations to found a feudal domain in which it will be the baronial family — but fails because the effort destroys the meager spirit of the chief aspirant. He lacks the heart to become a true baron.

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Like Hemingway, O'Hara has paid a price for his victory. He has sacrificed his story line, again and again, to his extended expositions of *Who Has the Upper Hand*. His issues seem gradually to have faded, to have lost their vitality, so that the novels have the authenticity of detail but lack the problems that make for strong plots. They relax into gossipy reportage, into scenes of edgy friction and violence between friends or lovers, and into the painstaking chronicle of bygone works and days.

The latest work, *The Instrument*, explores the same depths of sex and status where a soulless hero "fulfills" his stark drives in incidents that would not seem to make a self. The hero this time is a playwright who eats up other creatures and disgorges them in his art, yet he will compel the reader's interest and almost complete identification. Current reviews of this book have compressed the thesis of the present pamphlet into witty sentences: The people, writes Charles Poore in the *New York Times*, "are modernity's resident worldlings. . . . They are jetters from the boondocks; their ambition is to be affluent and in. What they do apes more styles than it sets. . . . At the bosky end of a New York-Vermont axis trust Lucas to find gentry. The Atterburys give him a cramming course in good-gracious living and the art of the cultivated put-down. . . . the money-musky cadenza on the vulgarity of talking about money." Josh Greenfeld, also in the *Times*, speaks of ". . . the vaunted O'Hara skills . . . arched eyebrows snobbery . . . the fine O'Hara eye . . . the celebrated O'Hara ear. . . . There is also the coy O'Hara evasion . . . the shallow O'Hara depth-analysis."

The bad-tempered quarrel in which one or both parties evince a stubborn nastiness is the keynote of the O'Hara action. Stubbornness is close to the heart of it. The quarrelers seem eager to establish an impossible line and then refuse to budge an inch from it. There is never any persuasion, any compromise, any

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reconciliation. They would rather take umbrage than second thought. They would rather give a blow than an inch. They will not think anything less than the worst of each other. The wounds of *amour propre* never heal. When the continuation of the action demands a working reconciliation, it has the quality of two steel rods bending a millimeter or two toward each other.

For one who has read a good deal of O'Hara, the prevalence of bad temper comes to be related to the instant insight, because both suggest his anger at an unmanageable world — an anger that is satisfied by dreams of power and the vicarious exercise of it. Rather than reason and explain, one reacts to a slight with a blow or an insult. From impotence and insecurity (buried in the unconscious, surely) one adopts the pose of a seer who can divine exactly what makes people tick, in a flash of pure understanding. The narrator in *Ourselves to Know*, who is a thinly veiled persona of O'Hara, at one point creates by sheer vision a whole sequence of events that nobody living could know. He suddenly knows that Parson Betz raped Zilph Millhouser fifty years ago and later committed suicide from shame. He has to know to fill these details into his story, but more important he *chooses* to know as a demonstration of psychic power. Versions of this sense of phenomenal insight pervade the whole corpus of O'Hara's work, a basic strategy of his art being the creation and exercise of power. These qualities also animate a large area of contemporary society, into which O'Hara has *felt* perhaps more deeply than any other important writer.

The lifelong concern with status springs from the same set of attitudes. The writer knows just how everybody relates to everybody else. He has privileged communications from the highest, whom he sees in their most unguarded moments and whom he evaluates from a position that is insightfully superior even to theirs. They are willing to tell him things that they did not

know about themselves until he asked them the perfect question; and even as they articulate these interesting discoveries one must feel that the author knew the answers before he phrased his inquiries. Every gleam of insight reveals the author's grasp of the great social world. He can love a jewel like Polly Williamson at first glance and take two novellas to show us how she was more wonderful than he could have known — but he did know at first glance. At the same time he can anatomize her aristocrat husband for the stupid arrogant bully he is.

The pen is the mightiest sword, which is another way of saying that the author's voice resounding in these works rings with assumed power, insight, judgment. It is the voice of a super-aristocratic seer, a person superior in experience, in knowledge, in tolerance, and in all the details of social punctilio. It is also, unfortunately, a voice which gives off overtones of resentment, insecurity, and pride whenever it speaks.

Appointment in Samarra is a story of *hubris* in a modern setting. Whom the gods will destroy, they first make mad, said the Greeks, expressing their sense of the headstrong, blind infatuation that drives some people on a course of action that can only lead to their destruction. This story takes place in 1930, after the stock market crash of 1929 but before people realized what the Great Depression was going to mean. It is laid in Gibbsville, Pennsylvania, a town of 24,000 inhabitants in the eastern Pennsylvania anthracite region, which is to become the spiritual focus of a great many of O'Hara's stories. I say focus rather than site, because the influence of Gibbsville is felt in many stories that are laid in surrounding towns.

The *hubris* of the protagonist, Julian English, derives in an ambiguous way from the prime condition in all of O'Hara's work — social status. Julian comes from an established Gibbsville

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family. He is in with the in crowd. His father is a doctor, his mother a lady. There is money in the family on both sides. Julian has always had great success with the ladies, and when he took the step he married one of the very best girls in town. Caroline Walker English is a beauty with character and charm.

Julian's problems are people and alcohol. People — are they for him or against him? Do they respect him properly? Do they trust him? Can he trust them? Again and again a scene will turn upon such feelings. It is a continuous game of one-upmanship — who makes the slipperiest allusions, who needles without being caught out, and who understands best what makes for status in the community. Everybody is dependent on a complexity of values: Jews are out. Catholics are powerful because they stick together, but they cannot have top status. Poles are aggressive and successful, but they are excluded from the highest circles. Money counts tremendously, but not absolutely. Service in World War I is important. Julian didn't have to go, because he was not old enough, but he could have lied about his age and got in. He will never be quite up to those who served. Then there is Ed Carney, the bootlegger and mobster who flourishes in Gibbsville because the prosperous people do a good deal of drinking. His power stimulates social ambitions, and we see him beginning to move up. He likes Julian English because the latter has always treated him like a human being, and he regards him with some real awe, as a "gentleman."

Julian is a Cadillac dealer; he belongs to the right clubs; he has a wife whom everybody praises. But he is a heavy drinker and irascible. It is no secret that heavy drinkers go up and down from high spirits to deep gloom. Of course, O'Hara is not writing a case study of a drinker. On the contrary, drink seems to be a condition of life for people in Julian English's class. It's just that he drinks more than others and plunges into deeper glooms.

One night at a big dance at the Lantenengo (the name rings through most of O'Hara's stories) Country Club, Julian is sitting at a table with an upstart named Harry Reilly, from whom he has borrowed twenty thousand dollars. Julian resents Harry because he is an upstart, because he owes him money, and because Harry has a "crush" on his wife, Caroline. So, some time after three o'clock in the morning, through a rich haze of drink, and for no immediate reason, he throws his highball in Harry's face — throws it so hard that the ice cube gives Harry a black eye.

Mortally humiliated, Harry will surely seek revenge. He is the only one with a lot of ready money, and Julian's "friends" will not stand by him because, as Caroline reminds her husband, " 'practically every single one of your best friends, with one or two exceptions, all owe Harry Reilly money.' " What follows is more senseless than tragically inevitable — yet tragedy today can in a minor key be made of *hubris* and circumstance, just as it was in Greek times. Julian has some of the nobility and splendor (the climbers all regard him with a certain awe) that mark the tragic hero. He is too sure of himself to take care, and so he arrogantly contributes to the coil of events that gathers rapidly around him. Dancing late at a roadside place, the next night, he goes out to his car with the mistress of Ed Carney, who sings at the place, for a half-hour of lovemaking. That afternoon Caroline had promised to go out in the car with him, at the intermission of the dance, and start a baby, if he didn't get drunk. But he did get drunk and irascible, partly because Harry Reilly had refused to see him that afternoon when he called to apologize, but largely because One Thing Leads to Another whether in Thebes or Gibbsville. The next afternoon, consumed with guilt and remorse, he gets into a bottle- and fist-fight at the Gibbsville Club, where he learns that one of his oldest friends has always hated him. Caroline cancels their big party for that evening and goes

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home to her mother. That night Julian gets very drunk and commits suicide by letting his motor run in the garage. When Harry Reilly learns of the suicide, he says, "He was a real gentleman. I wonder what in God's name would make him do a thing like that?"

Between the incidents, which occupy perhaps a quarter of the book, there are episodes that fill in the life around Gibbsville by going up and down the social scale as well as back and forth in history to establish personal relations, memories, triumphs, and defeats. A substantial number of episodes detail the life of Caroline, showing how a fine girl drifts along, narrowly missing two marriages that might have been good, falling in love with Julian when she was twenty-seven, and now trying to make the best of what she has come into. Everywhere the driving forces are money, status, and sex, with the latter getting a sort of detailed attention that marked O'Hara as a voice of new freedom. High indeed in the appeal of this book was the candid immediacy of its realism. The details of business, finance, society, and crime are as accurately and minutely presented as the inflections of speech in dialogue, and they convey a sense of people drifting through a haze of convention, boredom, and despair. In this haze the people are depressed and bad-tempered, quick to take offense, unsure of their loves and hates, able to damage themselves irretrievably by a gesture or a whim of desire. Nobody seems to be quite centered inside his skin, sure of where he is and who he is. The conventional things they do in Gibbsville do not satisfy their yearnings for Reality, whatever it is. Life is not only passing but also blurring and shifting around them. They drift through sports, business, sex, conversation, drink, but they are able to upset the easy ride with an uncontrollable outburst of rage. This is, perhaps, another way of saying that the manners do not suffice: the forms which presumably embody their spirits do not fulfill them.

These brilliant penetrations of the American spirit are O'Hara's particular achievement.

If Gibbssville and *Samarra* mark the base of the O'Hara triangle, his first volume of short stories starts us at the bottom of one side, which is his theater and cinema complex. *Pal Joey* is a special and famous example of sardonic reportage. It consists of a series of letters from "a glittering, two-bit, night-club heel" to a pal who is also in the entertainment business and is coddled and flattered because he is clearly doing better than Joey. The letter writer sings in cheap joints, charms the ladies as best he can, and trusts no man or woman. They are all prey in the moral jungle he inhabits, and they are not always easy prey: Joey has to scramble to stay even.

The first letter sets the tone and style: "Well I heard about this spot through a little mouse I got to know up in Michigan. She told me about this spot as it is her home town altho spending her vacation every year in Michigan. I was to a party one nite (private) and they finely got me to sing a few numbers for them and the mouse couldn't take her eyes off me. She sat over in one corner of the room not paying any attention to the dope she was with until finely it got so even he noticed it and began making cracks but loud. I burned but went on singing and playing but he got too loud and I had to stop in the middle of a number and I said right at him if he didnt like it why didnt he try himself."

The mouse gets him this night-club spot in Ohio. He is soon on the radio and entertaining at private parties. He buys a fine car and charms the daughter of a bank president, meanwhile giving the mouse the cold shoulder. But Joey is a careless predator. He tells his pal too much, and his pal goes somewhat hastily after the mouse, who has left Ohio for New York, and she writes "this annonamous letter" to the banker's daughter that brings Joey's romance — and his job — to a disastrous conclusion.

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Next he is in Chicago at a new spot, scrounging for money and exploiting girls, working for mobsters and getting into trouble because his cynical activities produce resentments. Joey is as mean as men come. Recounting his exploits, he is never apologetic, scarcely indignant at the outrages he elicits from stronger predators. He is unusual in that the reader does not generate an ounce of sympathy for him. Among the dogs where he lives, he is the coldest, warmed only by a naive enthusiasm that makes him interesting if not lovable.

Pipe Night is another collection of stories and sketches that display the familiar characteristics bordering on reportage, glimpses of all sorts of American people caught with their blinds down and their frailties glaring. Thirty-one sketches in a small volume concentrate on showing literally just *how* people talk, try to communicate, and usually fail because they do not have the language or the manners and knowledge of manners that would enable them to think below the surface of the clichés among which they live. They are epiphanies of the moral and cultural underworld that prevails in our time. Brittle tableaux of empty people. Voices perfectly heard and reproduced, echoing emptinesses. Here there are no rich, yearning, inarticulate inner selves striving to communicate, but rather the jangling, brassy notes of cheap instruments that have never been tuned toward gentleness or understanding.

The range and accuracy of O'Hara's observation compensate richly for the bleak deprivations of spirit upon which his eye consistently lights. Their qualities can be felt if we review several of them. "Walter T. Carriman" is a verbose, fatuous "tribute" by a friend, whose prose style is represented by the following sentence: "Not having been surrounded in his childhood by great riches, which have been known to disappear overnight, leaving their possessors with memories to dwell upon to the boredom of

less comfortably placed friends of later years, Walter, on the other hand, was not raised in poverty and squalor, the details of which can, in their recital save in the hands of a Dickens or an equally great artist, prove equally boresome." The peaks of eulogizing rhetoric are regularly separated by valleys (if not crevasses) of qualification. Walter was fond of sports in the required American fashion until the high-school "training rules proved irksome to a lad of Walter's spirit and he dropped the sport in freshman year. (The truth is that Walter took his first cigarette at the age of fourteen and from then on was a rather heavy smoker.)" The resonating pomposities carry Walter from theater usher to classified-ad taker ("a post requiring infinite patience, a good ear, a cheery speaking voice, and a legible hand, the last, by the way, an accomplishment of Walter's which I seem to have overlooked in my 'roundup' of the man's numerous good points") to food checker to freight clerk, after which "Walter next returned to the transportation field, serving briefly as a conductor on the street railways of Asbury Park . . ."; thence to night clerk in a hotel and so on to obesity and an early death by heart failure. The banality of the life glows in the falsity of the tribute, and the two combine to convey a sense of barrenness that would be hard to exceed.

Until we move on to the following sketches. "Now We Know" is the brief exchange between a bus driver and a girl who gets on his bus first, at the end of the line, every morning. He makes jokes like not opening the door till she bangs on it, conversations follow, and presently he declares his love along with the news that he has asked for a transfer to another line. He has a wife and children that he cannot leave, but he can think of nothing but the new girl. So now they know. The moment of anguished confession escapes from the life sealed in the quiet desperation of routine. "Free" tells of a lady from Pasadena arriving at her hotel