

Selected
Short Stories
of
John O'Hara

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Lionel Trilling

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Introduction

The thing that we all know about John O'Hara's fiction—whatever else we may know—is that it is preeminent for its social verisimilitude. The work of no other American writer tells us so precisely, and with such a sense of the importance of the communication, how people look and how they want to look, where they buy their clothes and where they wish they could buy their clothes, how they speak and how they think they ought to speak. It is thus that they protect themselves with irony; it is thus that they try to wound with sarcasm; thus they mispronounce the weighty word they have somewhere read, thus they retrieve or obscure the error when once they have become aware of it. This is how they talk to the waiter.

But of course it isn't "they" who talk to the waiter. It is a particular person from a particular state and a certain town in that state, who was brought up in a certain part of the town which had well-defined feelings about all the other parts of town; he went to a certain college which favored certain manners, tones, affectations, and virtues. It is all this, and ever so much more, that makes a particular man speak to a waiter in the way he does,

and O'Hara is aware of every one of the determining circumstances.

In the man's mode of address to the waiter there is, to be sure, something that is generally or "typically" American. But O'Hara's peculiar gift is his brilliant awareness of the differences within the national sameness. It is commonly said that American life is being smoothed out to a kind of factory uniformity, that easy and rapid communication and an omnipresent popular culture have *erased our particularities of difference*. Perhaps this process actually is in train, but it is not so far advanced as people like to say it is, and O'Hara directs his exacerbated social awareness upon what differences among us do still remain.

The passionate commitment to verisimilitude which is so salient a characteristic of O'Hara's work is a very important trait in a writer. It is a good deal more important than we sometimes remember. "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri Negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with the several forms of speech." Mark Twain's anxious pedantic pride in the accuracy of the dialects of *Huckleberry Finn*—what part can it possibly have played in creating the wonderfulness of the book? What can it possibly have to do with the *truth* of the

book? The relation between accuracy of detail and the truth and beauty of any book would be difficult, and perhaps impossible, to demonstrate. Yet we know with all our feelings that the writer who deals with facts must be in a conscientious relation to them; he must know that things are so and not some other way; he must feel the necessity of showing them to be as they really are.

This commitment to fact—to mere fact, as we sometimes say—is not of equal importance for all writers. But for some writers it is of the very essence of their art, however far beyond the literary fact their art may reach. This may be said of writers of quite diverse kinds. Without his devotion to the literal fact, Kipling would be nothing; the same is true of Hemingway. It is no less true of Flaubert. Melville could not have ventured the sublimities of *Moby Dick* had he not based them on the hard facts of the whaling business; whatever the heights of meaning to which Proust and Joyce may soar, they take off from a preoccupation with literal reality.

I speak of the specifically literary importance of detail and verisimilitude because I detect a tendency of our critical theory to belittle it; and also because I detect a tendency in some of the judgments that have been made of O'Hara to suggest that his devotion to the detail of social life is gratuitous and excessive. I think that there are occasions when it can indeed be said of O'Hara that he is excessive in the accumulation of the minutiae of social observation. His novel *A Rage to Live* is an example of this. In this work (which certainly has much to recom-

mend it to our interest) the passion for accuracy is out of control, and we feel that we miss the people for their gestures and intonations, and the enumeration of the elaborate gear of their lives, and the record of their snobberies, taboos, and rituals. But if O'Hara's use of detail can sometimes be excessive, it is never gratuitous. It is always at the service of O'Hara's sense of the startling anomaly of man's life in society, his consciousness of social life as an absurd and inescapable fate, as the degrading condition to which the human spirit submits if it is to exist at all.

O'Hara has no lack of responsiveness to the elemental in human nature. Quite the contrary indeed—there are few contemporary writers who undertake to tell us so much about the primal facts of existence. But his characteristic way of representing the elemental is through its modification by social circumstance. What, we might ask, have death and snobbery to do with each other? In "Summer's Day," one of O'Hara's most striking stories, they are brought together in a very brilliant way. The elemental datum of the story is bereavement: an aging man has lost his only child, a daughter; she has committed suicide. But the story proceeds on a series of small observations which include the protocol of an exclusive beach club and the question of who is sitting on whose bench; the social position of Catholics; the importance of election to a Yale senior society; the kind of epicene gossip that well-brought-up adolescents might take pleasure in. And the elemental fact which we confront when the story comes

to its end is a good deal more elemental than what we blandly call bereavement, it yields an emotion much more terrible than grief—the father's knowledge that he has reached the end of manhood and that the nothingness of life has overtaken him.

I have alluded to the objection that is sometimes made to O'Hara's degree of preoccupation with the social distinctions among people and with the details of behavior and taste that spring from and indicate these differences. The principle behind the objection is, I suppose, that these differences do not really matter, or at any rate that they ought not to matter. And perhaps especially that they ought not to matter at a time when all decent people are concerned to wipe out distinctions that lead to privilege, or to lack of privilege, or to conflict. The implication is that the awareness of the differences, and the belief that they have an effect on personality and behavior, constitute an enforcement of their existence; if we didn't think they were significant, they wouldn't exist and make trouble. It is not hard to have sympathy with this attitude, and certainly it proposes the right rule for personal conduct and for political conduct. But the good writer has a more complicated time of it than the good man and the good citizen. He has to serve not only the ideal but also the reality. He will be happy to say—and no one is happier to say it than O'Hara—that a man's a man for a' that, and a' that. But then he will have to go on to say that a Catholic's a Catholic, and a Jew's a Jew, and a Protestant's a Protestant, for a' that, and a' that. Not to

mention an Irish Catholic, an Italian Catholic, a German Catholic; not to mention a Lithuanian Jew and a German Jew; and an Episcopalian and a Methodist, and a New York Episcopalian and a Boston Episcopalian, and a Northern and a Southern Methodist. And none of these people, if they tell the truth, will say anything else than that being of one group or another has made some difference to them down to the very roots of their being. The difference is not equivalent to their total humanity, but it is never trivial. It cannot be trivial, for its determinants are not trivial—religion is not trivial, national or ethnic tradition is not trivial, class is not trivial, the family is not trivial.

The differences among us have mixed moral results, good ones as well as bad ones. At the moment we are rather more conscious of the bad results than of the good. We ought not be concerned with our particularity, we ought not be proud of it, we ought not be resentful when it does not get its due share of consideration, we ought not “over-compensate,” we ought not be self-protective, we ought not worry about prestige, we ought not think in competitive terms, we ought not fret about status. We ought not, but alas we do. This is the social fact and O'Hara is faithful to it.

When once we have conceived the idea of a general essential humanity, nothing can seem more irrational than the distinctions which people make among themselves. They are absurd, and the society which makes up the sum of the distinctions, and has the duty of con-

trolling them and of adjusting them to each other, shares their absurdity. Like most writers who effectively represent society in the full detail of its irrational existence, O'Hara is half in love with the absurdity. The other half of his feeling is fear. I suppose there are no two writers who at first glance must seem more unlike and less likely to sustain comparison than O'Hara and Kafka. Yet there is a recurrent imagination in O'Hara that brings him very close to the author of *The Trial*. It is the imagination of society as some strange sentient organism which acts by laws of its own being which are not to be understood; one does not know what will set into motion its dull implacable hostility, some small thing, not very wrong, not wrong at all; once it begins to move, no one can stand against it. It is this terrible imagination of society which is the theme of O'Hara's first novel, the remarkable *Appointment in Samarra*; it recurs frequently in the short stories, in, for example, "Where's the Game?," "Do You Like It here?," "Other Women's Households," "A Respectable Place." This element of almost metaphysical fear in O'Hara's view of society is indeed impressive, and it is important to take account of it in any general view of his achievement. But it must not be thought to be more of a warrant of his seriousness than is his love of the absurdity of society for its own sake, his wonder at the variety which human pretensions can take, and his delight in its comicality.

Lionel Trilling

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Selected Short Stories of John O'Hara

The Decision

The home of Francis Townsend could have been taken for the birthplace of a nineteenth-century American poet, one of those little white houses by the side of the road that are regarded by the interested as national shrines. In front of the house there was a mounting block and a hitching post, iron, with the head of a horse holding an iron ring, instead of a bit, in its mouth. These, of course, had not been used in the last thirty years, but use did not govern the removal of many objects about the Townsend place. Things were added, after due consideration, but very little was ever taken away.

The Townsend place was on the outskirts of the sea-coast village, out of the zone where the sidewalks were paved. In the fall of the year and in the spring, the sidewalk was liable to be rather muddy, and Francis Townsend several times had considered bricking the path—not that he minded the mud, but out of consideration for the female pedestrians. This project he had dismissed after studying the situation every afternoon for a week. He sat by the window in the front room and came to the conclusion that (a) there were not really many pedestrians during the muddy seasons, since there were few summer people

around in spring or fall, and (b) the few natives who did use the sidewalk in front of his place were people who had sense enough to be properly shod in muddy weather. Another and very satisfying discovery that Francis Townsend made was that few people—men, women, or children—came near his house at all. For a long, long time he had entertained the belief that the street outside was a busy thoroughfare, more or less choked with foot and vehicular traffic. "I am really quite alone out here," he remarked to himself. This allowed for the fact that he had made his study of the muddy-sidewalk problem in the afternoon, when traffic was presumably lighter than in the morning, when, for instance, housewives would be doing their shopping. The housewives and others could not have made *that* much difference; even if the morning traffic were double that of the afternoon, it still was not considerable. It was, of course, impossible for Francis Townsend to make his study in the *morning*, except *Sunday morning*, for Francis Townsend's mornings were, in a manner of speaking, spoken for.

Every morning, Francis Townsend would rise at six-thirty, shave and have his bath, and himself prepare first breakfast, which consisted of two cups of coffee and a doughnut. In the winter he would have this meal in the kitchen, cheerful with its many windows and warm because of the huge range. In the summer he would take the coffee and doughnut to the front room, where it was dark and cool all day. He would run water into the dirty cup and saucer and put them in the sink for the further

attention of Mrs. Dayton, his housekeeper, who usually made her appearance at eight-thirty. By the time she arrived, Francis Townsend would have changed from his sneakers and khaki pants and cardigan to a more suitable costume—his black suit, high black kid shoes, starched collar, and black four-in-hand tie. He would smoke a cigarette while he listened to Mrs. Dayton stirring about in the kitchen, and pretty soon would come the sound of the knocker and he would go to the front door. That would be Jerry Bradford, the letter carrier.

“Good morning, Jerry.”

“Good morning, Francis. Three letters an-n-nd the New York paper.”

“Three letters and the paper, thank you.”

“Fresh this morning. Wind’s from the east. Might have a little rain later in the day.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Well, I might be wrong. See you tomorrow, in all likelihood.” Jerry would go away and Francis would stand at the open doorway until Jerry had passed the Townsend property line. Then sometimes Francis would look at the brass nameplate, with its smooth patina and barely distinguishable name: “F. T. Townsend, M.D.” The plate was small, hardly any larger than the plate for a man’s calling card, not a proper physician’s shingle at all, but there it was and had been from the day of his return from medical school.

He would go back to his chair in the front room and wait for Mrs. Dayton to announce breakfast, which she

did in her own way. She would say, "Morning," as greeting, and nod slowly, indicating that breakfast was on the table. Francis then would take his paper and letters to the dining room and partake of second breakfast—oatmeal, ham and eggs, toast that was toasted over a flame, and a pot of coffee. Mrs. Dayton appeared only once during breakfast, when she brought in the eggs and took away the cereal dishes.

Francis Townsend's mail rarely was worth the pleasure of anticipation. That did not keep him from anticipating Jerry Bradford's knock on the door or from continuing to hope for some surprise when he slit the envelopes with his butter knife. The reading of his mail did, in fact, give him pleasure, even though it might be no more than an alumni-association plea, a list of candidates for membership in his New York club, or an advertisement from a drug or instrument company. Francis Townsend would read them all, all the way through, propping them against the tall silver salt-cellar, and then he would take them with him to the front room, so that Mrs. Dayton could not see them, and there he would toss them in the fire or, in warm weather, put a match to them.

Then, every day but Sunday, Francis Townsend would take his walk. For the first thirty of the last forty years, Francis Townsend had had a companion on his walk. The companion always had been a collie; not always the same collie, but always a collie. But about ten years ago, when the last Dollie (all of Francis Townsend's dogs had been