Fiction

THE O'HARA GENERATION

by John O'Hara

Random House, 491, $6.95

THIS LATEST COLLECTION OF O'HARA is long; the *Generation* spans a period of thirty-two years, from 1935-66, and contains twenty-two short stories. Although that represents less than 9 per cent of his total output of stories, it still runs to almost 500 pages. Add to that a page-long list of other credits —a whole shelfful of novels, novellas, plays, essays—and the industry of the man seems staggering. Moreover, it shows no sign of slackening off; after 1960, his editor proudly announces in the introduction, O'Hara produced ninety-six stories in five years.

One day, no doubt, some patient researcher will work it all out in terms of thousands of words per day. Meanwhile, for O'Hara's editor, the facts and figures speak for themselves of a lifetime's inspiration and devotion; he even invokes for comparison the startlingly incongruous figure of John Keats. I wish I could be so enthusiastic. But, alas, O'Hara's remorseless industry promotes in me the same depression that most Europeans feel when faced with the German "economic miracle": a mixture of awe, irritation and despair, which adds up to an overwhelming sense of injustice, a conviction, in the teeth of all the evidence, that in literature as in life hard work should *not* be enough. Yet there is O'Hara—professional, shrewd and vastly successful—to prove that it is.

Perhaps his secret is that he is essentially a writer without a style—which is a curious achievement considering his long triumph with *The New Yorker*. I do not simply mean that he has no rhetoric or elegance or Capote-like daintiness, all perfume and pastel shades, or any of those esthetic preoccupations the Marxists scornfully dismiss as formalism. Given a certain skill, which O'Hara undoubtedly has, it is easy enough to pile on the effects; that he has steadily refused to do so says much for his integrity as a writer. Just as good Communists spurn the seductions of formalism and stick to their plain, common-law wife, socialist realism, so O'Hara has been faithful, in his fashion, to his plain vision of plain America. He is our leading exponent of capitalist realism.

But his peculiar lack of style has less to do with disciplined renunciation than with a fundamental defect of the imagination. It means that you can read through 500 pages of his prose without forming any impression of the sensibility of the man who wrote it all. The stuff is as indistinguishable and repeatable as the paper on which it is written.

His prose has neither character nor inner rhythms. Nor has it designs on the reader; it makes no demands. Perhaps this is why O'Hara's fiction is so popular. It simply goes on and on and on, unchangingly. "It is," someone once said, "like being in a straitjacket with the telephone ringing."

No doubt O'Hara would be delighted by this. He has always avoided guilt even by association with the highbrows, and takes pride in the fact that he never revises or reworks what he writes. He said of another collection of his stories, "The contents of this book came out of the author's typewriters (*zip-zip!* just like that)." *Zip-zip!*: the implication is that to work something over, to care about the precise weight and balance of every word and every sentence, is to cease to be a regular guy; it is to be numbered among the phonies and the arties. *Zip-zip!*: so much for Flaubert, Henry James, and all that crowd. *Zip-zip!*: so much for Pappa Hemingway, who worked like a dog over his prose. *Zip-zip!*: so much even for Dashiell Hammett, who wrote, in comparison, like Flaubert himself. In place of all that, O'Hara gives us inspiration of the people, by the people, for the people: *zip-zip!*

"Give the artist his due," says Evan Reese in "Mrs. Stratton of Oak Knoll," one of the stories included here, "and don't distort what the author wrote." It may be that formal excellence and even an artistic personality of his own have never interested O'Hara. He relies in their place on two strengths. First, he has a total recall of all the details of American life in the opening half of this century: the layout of a display window in a hardware shop in the Twenties, the workings of an old-fashioned overhead change trolley, the war decorations and women's dresses worn for a big night at the Lantenengo Country Club in the early days of Prohibition, the goodies on the shelves of the neighborhood store when he was a child, the coachwork of a Pierce-Arrow, and the headlights of a Simplex. I would guess that a large proportion of his most faithful readers are middle-aged and up, and they go to his books to be reminded of how it was. So it doesn't matter that his eye for the details of America now is altogether less sharp and compelling. As a source of nostalgia he is irresistible.

His second strength is a remarkably good ear for speech, particularly for those subtle variations that denote class differences: the bosses may talk more or less alike but the Irish servants, Negro bellhops and rural handymen are all noticeably distinct. Perhaps this is another reason why O'Hara himself seems so elusive: he speaks only through others. Indeed, the narrative progresses mostly through talk. Everyone is always filling in everyone else on his or her background:

> "What do you like about the doctor?"
>
> "Well, he's a man. All man. He was married before and his wife died of leukemia, the year he went into private practice. Then he went into the Navy for three years, and after that he came back to Gibbsville, reopened his practice. When I got the flu I sent for him, having already been his patient once before. The abortion. He annoyed me by throwing in a piece of advice that I hadn't asked for. It was part medical and part moral. He said that a woman with my record of abortions ought to have periodic checkups for T.B., and I told him to mind his own business. We became friends, and lovers. He had other women, but I was it, he said."
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> "What makes either of you think you'll make a good doctor's wife?"
>
> "You *are* trying to talk me out of it," she said.

It is accurate, serviceable, but also oddly inert, like a flashback in an old-style movie. Time and again, the conversation between O'Hara's characters is interrupted by hazy dissolves into time-past. It is a form of creative laziness, as though the characters were saving their author the effort of dramatizing necessary action. Perhaps this is why the talk seems so insensitive when compared with that of a real master:

> "You wouldn't consider a good offer?" asked Gudrun.
>
> "I think I've rejected several," said Ursula.
>
> *"Really!"* Gudrun flushed dark—"But anything really worth while? Have you *really?"*
>
> "A thousand a year, and an awfully nice man. I liked him awfully," said Ursula.
>
> "Really! But weren't you fearfully tempted?"
>
> "In the abstract but not in the concrete," said Ursula. "When it comes to the point, one isn't even tempted—oh, if I were tempted, I'd marry like a shot. I'm only tempted *not* to." The faces of both sisters suddenly lit up with amusement.
>
> "Isn't it an amazing thing," cried Gudrun, "how strong the temptation is, not to!" They both laughed, looking at each other. In their hearts they were frightened.

That is from *Women in Love*. I quote it not to prove that Lawrence is better than O'Hara (who's arguing?) but simply to show that the novel has a dimension which a play or movie-script lacks: it can shift continually

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and effortlessly between outer and inner world. The novelist can define for his readers all those depths and subtleties that the unfortunate playwright must leave to his actors.

Apparently, O'Hara has never been interested in exploring the inner resources of his craft. Everything takes place on the surface. The way his characters talk *is* what they are. To an extraordinary degree, he dispenses even with physical description. His stories are peopled not by presences but by voices—voices and objects, talk and period detail. In the jargon of the British Passport Office, O'Hara people have "no visible peculiarities."

Invisible peculiarities, however, they have in abundance. The only general in town, poker-backed, immaculately tailored and barbered, dresses up in his wife's clothes before sex; there is something shady between an old man and his nurse in a smart country inn; a local tycoon secretly embezzles his family's money; that dull and devoted old couple on the beach had an only child who hanged herself; this charming young wife is in love with her brother; most of the other charming young and not-so-young wives are adulteresses. Behind the lace curtains and striped awnings of the placid Pennsylvania township of Gibbsville, where the bulk of O'Hara's stories are set, secret scandals swarm like flies around a garbage truck.

"I'm above meanness," says Evan Reese. "However, I'm not above curiosity, and believe me, I'm damn curious." For once an O'Hara character seems to be speaking wholeheartedly for his author, as does the narrator of "Andrea," who calls curiosity his "besetting sin." For O'Hara himself it is the driving force behind nearly every story. He has said, I believe, that he always improvises, never plans in advance. In practice this means that he sets up a situation and then worries it like a terrier until some nasty little secret is shaken out. In the earliest stories there is something sneaky and a little childish in the way everything hinges on a sudden glimpse of the forbidden: a door is opened when it shouldn't be to show a naked girl or a doctor kissing another man's wife, and nothing is ever the same again.

Later this sharp, thrilling sense of the sinfulness of adult life fades away and knowingness takes its place. In a recent story the narrator, thinking back to his adolescent discovery of something nasty in the grocery store, says:

> My discovery was too momentous and mature to confide in the girl who was waiting with her bike. It was too much the kind of thing that I wanted to protect her from, and was indeed eager to protect her from all her life. These were things I already knew too much about . . .

Yet the fact is that it is precisely these forbidden, shameful goings-on which have provided the substance of O'Hara's work. What he lacks in depth and insight he amply makes up for in shrewdness:

> Pat's complacency was more hateful to her than Whit's arrogance. The complacency, she knew, was real; and Whit's arrogance vanished in the humility of his passion as soon as she would let him make love to her. There was proficiency of a selfish kind in Pat's lovemaking; he had never been so gentle or grateful as Whit. From what she could learn of Kitty Hofman it would have been neatly suitable if Pat had become Kitty's lover, but two such similar persons were never attracted to each other. They had, emotionally, everything in common; none of the essential friction of personality.

O'Hara has a remarkable instinct, like that of a good Washington correspondent, for the politics of sex. He understands the intricate power plays involved, and how the balance shifts between parties with each new indiscretion or revelation. As in real politics, a good deal of coldbloodedness is necessary to succeed in the sexual power game:

> . . . though I was the first male with whom she experienced true copulation, she and the boy had gone from fellatio to coitus interruptus, which she was pleased to call heavy necking. It also pleased her (and my masculinity) to regard me as the taker of her virginity, but the distinction was to at least some extent honorary. We had something besides the sexual relationship, and had had it from the start. But, circumstances permitting, we had always had intercourse at some point during our sporadic reunions. It was customary, and we had always taken it for granted.

That is from "Andrea," which, despite a gratuitously melodramatic ending, is the best thing in the book. Believe it or not, it is a love story. Yet, in his manner of speaking, the narrator might as well be discussing stocks and bonds. Indeed, in O'Hara's world sex and money weigh about the same. Most of his characters are well-heeled, and he is as fascinated by the details of their unearned incomes as he is by their secret vices. Money, sex, booze, and the ups and downs of the provincial pecking-order: together these make up the O'Hara universe. Perhaps that is why the novels rely so heavily on talk, talk, talk. It's not art so much as small-town gossip, endless, nigging, shrewd, merciless, monotonous, absorbing.

John O'Hara—"Zip-zip!"

Yet those who survive this trial by malice emerge with a kind of scar-tissue sensibility that has its own reticent, minimal virtue. "Andrea," for example, is the story of a love affair between two equally matched, equally cynical characters who never marry. Or rather, she marries briefly, casually, every now and then, while he slices through the legal profession like an atomic ice-breaker. They meet and copulate intermittently, and invariably before one of her marriages. They have a void in common: their emotional lives are in deep freeze. Both of them are ungettable, uncommitted, narcissistic, and each loves the other for this elusiveness. They may talk about romantic love—in a teasing, plangent way—but it is their frigidity that joins them. (That, incidentally, is why Andrea's suicide seems such a cheap and easy out.) And this suits O'Hara's talents to perfection. It allows full play to his knowingness, his fox's nose for other people's secrets and foibles. Since both the narrator and Andrea share this preoccupation with their author, a genuine balance of power is achieved, and a residual, burnt-out tenderness.

In the end, O'Hara's is a chilly world with very little to recommend it. For all their cash and comfort, his characters lead lives wholly of the surface, as flat and unsubtle as sheet plastic. They play the stock market and with each other's mates; they have their weakness for drink and snobbery and, occasionally, for mild sexual oddities. Above all, they are consumed with curiosity. It is as though they had to be certain that everyone else's life were as empty as their own. O'Hara chronicles it all skillfully, devotedly, and in an appropriately toneless, neuter prose. If the sales are any indication—which they are—this seems to be precisely what the public wants. But if it is also what the public *is*, then God help us all.

A. Alvarez

A. Alvarez's collection of essays, "Beyond All This Fiddle," was reviewed in SR August 2.

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LUNAR LANDSCAPES

by John Hawkes
New Directions, 275 pp., $5.95

THE TITLE OF JOHN HAWKES'S NEW BOOK is deceptive at this particular time, since it has no bearing on the fantastic frontiers opened up for mankind on the wasteland of the moon. *Lunar Landscapes* explores, rather, man's inner desert as experienced by lonely people everywhere.

Lunar Landscapes consists of six very brief pieces and three short novels, written over a period of two decades and published, for the most part, between 1950 and 1963. The collection serves as a valuable sampler of Hawkes's fiction, its strength and its limitations.

His intensely personal universe, like that of many surrealist artists and writers, is dreamlike in its irreality and its unusual angle of vision, which produces grotesque distortions. If his characters do not "come alive" in any conventional sense of psychology and development, it is because Hawkes is concerned solely with their private anguish and their mythic representation. Thus, he seeks primarily not a story line but a mood as the setting for his *dramatis personae* in their isolation and despair. In the early "Charivari," for instance, a novella of some eighty pages and the most successful piece in *Lunar Landscapes*, Hawkes portrays a well-to-do man of forty, Henry Van, who is afraid of life, indifferent to his wife, dominated by his admirably sketched mother-in-law, and bereft of sufficient inner resources to withdraw into himself. If he is, clearly, not a dramatically new subject for fiction, the author does command attention by depicting him with a blend of pity and satire that underlines both his pathos and his absurdity. "These poor people," Henry muses, and one suddenly thinks of the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," marveling at the economy of means with which a mere song creates an essentially similar atmosphere.

The aridity of the landscape is reflected in the prose. It is beautiful, surprising, bathed in an eerie glow that casts long, ominous verbal shadows whose dimness reveals the twilight of the soul. But Hawkes's unquestioned mastery of language turns on itself. The author appears more interested in the poetic charge of his words than in their participation in a fiction. Like some symbolist poetry which it calls to mind, Hawkes's writing seems to sparkle in a vacuum—it may be lovely, but one regrets its failure to attach itself more to life. Perhaps one ought to consider *Lunar Landscapes* rather as prose poetry; it would then have a clearer *raison d'être*, but most of the stories demand to be treated in a context of fiction.

Hawkes has an unfortunate tendency to indulge in exoticism. Some of these tales are set in Germany and Italy, where Hawkes served as a World War II ambulance driver for the American Field Service, and he allows himself to inject German and Italian phrases gratuitously and to give his characters outlandish names: Justus and Sesemi Kümmerlich, Metze, Lebrecht, Mauschel, Pucento, Adeppi, Arsella etc. (These are first names!) At times he succeeds in rendering into an appropriately stilted English the heaviness of German syntax; on the other hand, in "Charivari," where the setting is apparently England, Hawkes is inept at reproducing the pronunciation of lower-class British slang.

One of the most striking aspects of *Lunar Landscapes* is Hawkes's flair for the grotesque. In "The Owl" he tells a chilling tale of the enthusiasm with which the population of an Italian town (darkly named "Sasso Fetore") prepares for the hanging of a prisoner. Like a Ghelderode play, "The Owl" probes the obscure side of the individual and collective soul in a baroque story replete with blood, violence, a hangman, and even a dwarf. Here fantasy significantly reinforces reality, but again the strangeness of the vision stays with us longer than the substance.

Lunar Landscapes proves once more that John Hawkes is one of the finer stylists writing in English today. It does not, however, suffice to mark him as one of the more compelling voices in current American fiction.

Tom Bishop

Tom Bishop is a frequent critic of contemporary fiction and theater.

Personal History

FROM HAYES TO McKINLEY: National Party Politics, 1877-1896

by H. Wayne Morgan
Syracuse University Press, 618 pp., $12.95

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN: Vol. II: Progressive Politician and Moral Statesman, 1909-1915

by Paolo E. Coletta
University of Nebraska Press, 380 pp., $8.95

THE PAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS have seen a revolution. The edict "publish or perish" has produced tidal waves of titles, ranging from *French Absolutism: The Critical Phase, 1620-1629* to *Andrew Law, American Psalmodist.* At best they have thrown new light on dusty dogmas; at worst they have strained to the breaking point untenable theories such as the curious notion that the South lost the Civil War because it wanted to. At best they have given biography new dimensions; at worst they have rendered colorful men dull—as has happened with William Jennings Bryan in the second volume of Paolo Coletta's projected three-volume study.

Coletta's work has already been hailed as definitive, and it does give new stature to Bryan who, although "a great failure," was no figurehead but the architect of neutrality and a driving force behind the New Freedom. Yet it is doubtful whether Bryan requires so exhaustive a biography, with an entire volume devoted to his ten twilight years.

H. Wayne Morgan's *From Hayes to McKinley* is something else. Despite its unfortunate title (at least one historian has quipped that American history would be little different if none of the Presidents from Hayes to McKinley had ever been born), this is a rich, juicy fruit cake of a book, combining historical scholarship and literary artistry. It gives us a panorama of an age that was gilded if not golden: a Washington of palaces and shanties, with Congress governing in "a haze of cigar smoke" and lemonade being served at White House receptions. It was also a time of rather boring Presidents being bored by the job. Harrison called the White House his jail. Cleveland saw the Presidency as "a dreadful self-inflicted penance"; in order to avoid the office-seekers who quadrennially swarmed over Washington like ants, he sometimes worked at his desk from 12 P.M. to 4 A.M. A President had 125,000 non-military offices to fill, of whom fourth-class postmasterships

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