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S.O.B. story

by James Wolcott

A review of The Art of Burning Bridges: A life of John O'Hara, by Geoffrey Wolff.

The photographers were waiting like assassins outside the door on the cold slate street. John O'Hara, the millionaire hermit novelist, sort of staggered down the churchsteps in front of me; his legs buckled as he reached the final step. He looked smaller than I would have thought from gossip about him as a barroom brawler 30 years ago. His Rolls Royce was waiting for him in front of the church. He was wearing a natty doublebreasted grey-check suit, ears sticking out like Gable and Mailer, eyes on the steps, speaking to no one… . Alert, but a stone misanthrope—that was the message.
—Seymour Krim, writing about John Steinbeck's funeral service (1969)

American he-men writers used to pride themselves on their ability to punch their way out of a paper bag. For these bare-knuckled typists, writin' was fightin', to paraphrase Ishmael Reed, and some didn't hesitate to reply to a bad review or a snide comment with a right uppercut. Ernest Hemingway fancied himself a heavyweight champ inside the ring and out ("I beat Mr. Turgenev," he boasted infamously to Lillian Ross, "Then I trained very hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant"), scuffling with the critic Max Eastman after Eastman had mocked him for being a fur-bearing author. Norman Mailer, Hemingway's curly-locked heir, hoisted on the boxing trunks to show his mettle, bobbing and weaving with Jose Torres on "The Dick Cavett Show." Perhaps no literary pugilist in the amateur division wielded his fists of fury more often with less provocation than John O'Hara. He was an impartial slugger. He hit men, some of them quite harmless (he once took a swipe at the sweetest tempered member of the Algonquin Round Table set, Robert Benchley); he hit women, smacking one for arriving late for lunch; he even started a rumble with a midget (the phrase "Pick on somebody your own size" meant nothing to him), going down in ignominious defeat when another midget joined the fray. On page, in person, and over the phone, O'Hara, touchy in the extreme, tussled with nearly everybody, becoming a master of the Angry Ultimatum, the Nasty Kiss-off. Dead for over three decades, his status in American letters a bit moth-eaten, O'Hara now has someone to defend his dubious honor. In *The Art of Burning Bridges*, Geoffrey Wolff gallantly steps forward to fight on O'Hara's behalf against all comers. Unlike his anti-hero, Wolff fights fair, mostly.[1]

This is one of those literary biographies that doubles as a reclamation project. Wolff endeavors to remove the rust and nasty buildup from O'Hara's once formidable reputation and bring out its vintage glow. Even before O'Hara's death in 1970, tarnish had set in. "During the long home stretch of his career, wiseass critics too often wrote him off as a truculent malcontent, a social climber embittered by his exclusion from the world's pickiest clubs," Wolff writes in the preface. O'Hara was derided as a bully, parvenu, and braggart by contemporaries who had been at the receiving end

of his sonic booms. So quick was he to take offence and break off relations that he was known in *New Yorker* circles as the Master of the Fancied Slight. Dwight Macdonald, postwar dean of wiseass critics, delivered a capsule version of the case against O'Hara in a letter to John Lukacs dated January 11, 1956 (not included in Wolff's book), where he uncorks:

> O'Hara is about the most brutal, insensitive, tricked up, sensational novelist we have, at least above the Mickey Spillane level; he is really a bad person—snobbish, aggressive, ignorant, facile, with the sentimentalism that usually accompanies brutality—and it shows in his writing. I used to know him in the early thirties; he could never get over his envy of me for having gone to Yale! Interesting to compare him with [F. Scott] Fitzgerald, his literary father and mentor—F. was a snob too, but a loving one, he makes you feel nostalgic about the Plaza and Princeton of the twenties; there is no love, no charm, no reverence in O'Hara; he is, essentially, a bum.

Wolff wouldn't deny that O'Hara often behaved like a bum. But that was hardly the whole man, the whole writer, and the whole story, and he's had his fill of the "smirkers" and "scorners" who want to reduce O'Hara down to their own piddling level. "My aim," he writes, "is to restore to John O'Hara's complicated history those human and occupational particulars that make him such a writer worthy of attention." He takes as his credo the words of O'Hara's friend and editor William Maxwell: "Good writers deserve to be remembered."

Wolff also had a personal angle in taking on the task. The author of the bestselling memoir *The Duke of Deception*, he was drawn to O'Hara because his father and O'Hara seemed cut from the same gabardine. Both were sons of doctors. Both were obsessed with Yale, a university neither attended. Both were classic-automobile buffs, owning the same make of MG touring car. Both were Anglophiles, carried blackthorn walking sticks, drank like demons, had fiendish tempers, and pretended to be members of private clubs, swiping stationery and playing cards to carry off their impostures. "In short, from such an extraordinary—or is it?—alignment of tastes and circumstances I expected to write about a character not my father's fraternal twin, but at least a version of my father. Added to my own preoccupation—perhaps unwholesomely persistent—with accounts of revered objects and anxious manners, I expected that I was an appropriate teller of John O'Hara's tale."

After this awkward throat-clearing, Wolff lets drop that after years of research he realized he was sorely mistaken. These two old crocks wouldn't have been able to stand each other had they ever met—they would have eyed each other like a couple of ex-cons. So there went Wolff's lyrical quest for the literary dad he never had. This left him to plow ahead on the more conventional biography/defense argument described in his preface. But this approach too may be based upon a misconception, one of which he still seems unaware. *Is* O'Hara's literary achievement truly undervalued, the victim of elitist disdain? Does he roast in a "special place in litcrit hell," as Wolff contends? Suppose John O'Hara isn't underrated or overrated but ranked right where he ought to be?

Veterans of previous O'Hara biographies —Finis Farr's *O'Hara*, Matthew J. Bruccoli's *O'Hara Concern*, Frank MacShane's *Life of John O'Hara*—will be able to tick off the familiar stops on this time-machine trip through the lost duchy of O'Hara Country. The highlights and lowlights are all here. O'Hara's childhood in the Pennsylvania mining town of Pottsville, which he immortalized in print as Gibbsville. The house calls he made accompanying his doctor father. His apprenticeship at the *Pottsville Journal*. His father's death. The family's ruined finances following the father's death. His initiation into newspaperdom upon meeting Franklin Pierce Adams, whose column "The Conning Tower" was the chief transmitter of Algonquin Round Table lore. His cub reporter days at the *Herald-Tribune* and less stately rags. His entry into *The New Yorker*. His early sketches and stories. The explosive success of his first novel *Appointment in Samarra*. The even more scandalous reception of *Butterfield 8*. Hollywood. The Broadway triumph of *Pal Joey*. Marriage. Divorce.

Marriage. Divorce. Marriage. Countless babes in between. The rupture with *The New Yorker* over Brendan Gill's demolition of *A Rage to Live*. His squiredom in Princeton. Death in 1970. His final resting under a gravestone whose inscription reads, "Better than anyone else, he told the truth about his time, the first half of the twentieth century."

If *The Art of Burning Bridges* is a standard swing through the speakeasies, country clubs, and Cadillac showrooms of O'Hara Country, our tour guide does everything he can to spice up his spiel. The author of *Black Sun*, the acclaimed biography of Harry Crosby, Wolff forgoes the lofty judicious deliberation of the Leon Edel/Michael Holroyd/Michael Reynolds slow-processional approach. His manner is the opposite of magisterial. He digresses, tosses off asides, wrestles with the burning questions that torment O'Hara fans ("Did O'Hara wear a pith helmet in Bermuda when he met Simonds's boat? I don't know, but would guess that he didn't; and I also imagine that if he did, it was by way of a joke"), and interjects his own experiences with editors, fellow authors, and the enticement of Hollywood ("When I was a greenhorn novelist, beckoned from New York to that palmy colony … "), all of which makes for a bouncier, chattier read. It also pitches the tone of the book all over the lot. Slangy phrases such as "pissed off," "snotty proposal," and "ur-pain in the ass" jostle uncomfortably with arch locutions like "evidentiary patina of validity" and "a chimera of theoretical, psychological, or sociological consistency." At other times Wolff seems to be flailing, reaching, putting down whatever popped into his head.

Take one sorry incident from O'Hara's life. The night before he was to graduate from Niagara Prep, his father's old school, he and a couple of classmates got blitzed at a roadhouse, detained by state police, and marched across the campus the next morning in full view of the authorities. His graduation suit filthy and torn, O'Hara was denied his academic honors and diploma, a humiliation not only to him but to his father, who had driven "to the old alma mater with imaginable pride, and arrived just in time to witness face to face his son's most flamboyant disgrace." The father never forgave the son or spoke an affable word to him again. Plainly told, this chasm between a headstrong son and a hurt, disappointed father might make for a primal scene out of an O'Neill play, but Wolff buries it under a mound of cud-chewing commentary. "My way or the highway is merely the most recent dumb version of Creon's intractable ruling against the burial of Antigone's brother… . The emotional charge of the Doctor's righteous shame and fury at his screwup son was better suited to Medea's response to Jason's want of gratitude, Orestes' to Clytemnestra's murderous treachery." A clunky way to make the simple point that the father overreacted.

The door-busting entrance of O'Hara on the literary stage still makes for racy reading, no matter how many times it's been rehashed. A sentence in *The Art of Burning Bridges* such as "O'Hara first met Dorothy Parker, later his loyal pal and admiring fan, listening to the Hawaiian house band at an all-night joint called the Dizzy Club, which served the hardest of hard-core soakers, patrons who showed near dawn and drank till noon" captures the Jazz Age in a flashbulb burst, and Wolff conveys the lurid jolt caused by O'Hara's debut novel *Appointment in Samarra* in 1934. "*Appointment in Samarra* comes out of the gate with the speed and authority," he writes, and his analysis of the book gallops too. He's less taken than I am by the rude smack of O'Hara's second novel, *Butterfield 8* (1935), whose tawdry opening pages carry even more velocity than *Samarra*'s, the rest of the book barrelling erratically on and off course before arriving at the smash-bang finale where O'Hara's prize hussy—Gloria Vandrous—is chewed up by a ship propeller after tumbling overboard, her mangled body sharing the polluted waters with "dead dogs and orange peels." (*Butterfield 8* was later made into an overstuffed cologne-ad of a film starring Elizabeth Taylor, who lolled around in a slip and snarled camp howlers such as, "Face it, mother, I was the slut of all time!")

Impressed as the more intelligent reviewers were by the nerve, narrative drive, sexual frankness, and social versimilitude of O'Hara's early novels, they puzzled over the opaque motives and

compulsions of his protagonists. A psychological vacuum yawned at the core of his self-destructive hotheads. What propelled them over the brink? In his study of the hardboiled school of Hemingway and Hollywood, "The Boys in the Back Room," Edmund Wilson went fishing without bait to deliver his own diagnosis: "The girl in *Butterfield 8* is a straight case of a Freudian complex, somewhat aggravated by social maladjustment; but we don't really know her well. Julian English of *Appointment in Samarra* is apparently the victim of a bad heredity worked upon by demoralizing influences… . As for Mr. O'Hara's latest novel, *Hope of Heaven*, a story of Hollywood, I have not been able to fathom it at all—though here, too, there seems to be discernible a Freudian behavior-pattern." (As if to allay Wilson's confusion, O'Hara's later fiction would lay out the Freudian behavior-patterns as baldly as a plumbing manual, as the following jawbreaker in *From the Terrace* attests: "What had happened to her was that she unconsciously abandoned the public virginity and, again unconsciously, began to function as a woman.")

Completely lost as a lay analyst, Wilson was more astute on the literary side of the ledger, correctly identifying the central theme of O'Hara's work as "the cruel side of social snobbery," and noticing with concern the flab collecting around the waistlines of his fiction. "Each of his novels has been less successful, less ambitious and less well-disciplined than the one that went before; but while the long stories have been deteriorating, the short stories have been improving."

Had O'Hara taken Wilson's hint and rationed the word-intake on his novels, he might have spared literature the gobs and blobs of undigested matter his later work became. Instead, he harkened to the tremulous bugle call of another illustrious critic, Lionel Trilling. Reviewing the collection *Pipe Dream*, Trilling granted that O'Hara's stories had gotten "neater, tighter, and more economical," but, unlike Wilson, he found this slimming-down regimen unfortunate. "I cannot observe the development with pleasure, not merely because the span, tempo, and rhythm of the stories in *Pipe Dream* need to be varied to avoid monotony … but because this increasing brevity seems to tend away from the novel and it seems to me that for O'Hara's talents the novel is the proper form." Here was the criticism's most eminent ruminator counseling O'Hara to be bold, stretch his wings, and flap. "O'Hara was not promiscuous in his gratitude for admiring reviews, but this time he laid out his heart for a stranger to see," Wolff writes. "He wrote Trilling three days after the review appeared, thanking him effusively." More important, he took to heart Trilling's call to glory, removing his girdle and banging at the typewriter unrestrained. [2]

The bestselling quartet of blockbusters that eventually followed—*A Rage to Live*, *Ten North Frederick*, *From the Terrace*, *Ourselves to Know*—were a boon to O'Hara's bank account and a bane to fiction, so galumphing, tediously spelled-out ("A master of inference in his short work," Wolff writes, "O'Hara steps all over punch lines in his tomes, explaining puns as well as anecdotes"), and so sardine-packed with for- gettable, extraneous characters that the cumulative impact of their collective dead weight left many wondering what it was they had ever liked about O'Hara's stuff in the first place. Boredom on an epic scale can have that amnesia effect. (A similar mist descended on the reputation of James Jones, the blaze of *From Here to Eternity* dimming with each dud like *Go to the Widow-Maker* and *The Merry Month of May*.)

The larger O'Hara's fictional canvas became, the fewer the grace notes its owner bestowed, choking O'Hara Country with crabgrass and complaint citations. He laid down the law to his characters rather than let them live, giving female characters the harshest sentences, pun intended. The young aspirant who could do a quiet, character sketch about a Polish girl who works in a cafeteria—wiping tables, filling water glasses, collecting dime tips, and coming home to a rented room each night with sore feet and hurt feelings ("Pleasure," first published in *The New Yorker*, March 10, 1934)—coarsened into a misogynist who wrote about women as if they had fallen off the meat truck. Typical is *The Instrument*, a 1967 novel that Wolff charitably ignores, where a Broadway producer waxes nostalgic about a former lover, once slim. "[S]he didn't have that big fat belly then.

You didn't have to have a thing ten inches long to get the red part in."

It would be unfair to lay the blame for O'Hara's sprawl entirely on Trilling's troubled lap. O'Hara had inner limitations that he fortified over time rather than confronted. Unlike Hemingway or Dreiser, who also began as reporters, O'Hara never broke through to a deeper, suppler level of perception about people and power relations. He remained on the journalistic surface, which became thicker and thicker as he deposited all of the inside dope and amateur sociology he had squirreled away since busting out of the womb. And unlike Hemingway, a voracious, receptive reader despite his Man of Action persona, O'Hara had a skimpy appetite; great literature didn't nourish and inspire him, as it did Hemingway. The personal and critical articles on writers and writing collected in*An Artist Is His Own Fault* reveal a very utilitarian mind. When he does move beyond the mechanics of the writing process, the results are risible, as witness his notorious hallelujah for *Across the River and into the Trees* in *The New York Times Book Review*, where he anointed Hemingway "the most important, the outstanding author out of the millions of writers who have lived since 1616"—i.e., since Shakespeare. One raging bull of the literary ring toasting another, O'Hara warned all those young punks out there sipping their sissy drinks to think twice about challenging Papa for the post-Shakespeare crown. "[H]e may not be able to go the full distance, but he can still hurt you. Always dangerous. Always in there with the right cocked. Real class." Hemingway, no fool, greeted O'Hara's garland with a wounded groan, wondering how O'Hara could be so dumb.

Saul Bellow once said in an interview that talent takes a writer only part of the way. After a certain point, character takes over. O'Hara's character was mostly crust. The older he got, the more he seemed to stew in his own resentments and stir up quarrels. He became a monster about money (when *Collier's* magazine was interested in serializing *A Rage to Live*, O'Hara told them it would cost $15,000 just to *look* at the manuscript), and a petty despot in his personal dealings, almost incapable of gratitude. A writer who had achieved so much seemed to appreciate so little. He even took numerous little digs in print at Gene Kelly, to whom much of the Broadway success of *Pal Joey* was due. "Gene Kelly got his big break in a musical show for which I wrote the libretto, but I never had any trouble restraining my enthusiasm for him."

OHara's spite makes even his sympathetic biographer run out of excuses and patience. More than two-thirds of the way into *The Art of Burning Bridges* (is it really an art or a pathology?), Wolff confides, "[S]ometimes I can't like this man… . [W]hatever provocations can be debited to his enemies among editors, critics, night-club patrons, and unrequiting women, there is no excuse for his self-indulgent brutality, his sullen refusals to discuss with his antagonists the very grievances he brought to their uninvited attention." Yet Wolff cannot bring himself to begrudge O'Hara the ponderous flatulence of the later phase. "Even one brash enough for the biographical enterprise knows better than to presume to dictate the dreams of another." Wolff is always his least convincing when he goes lofty on us.

It's an odd shuffle Wolff does throughout *The Art of Burning Bridges*, defending O'Hara from hostile attitudes that he ends up having himself, only to hop back on defense. In the ten years it took to do this biography, Wolff didn't warm to his subject, he chilled, yet he insists on chastising others for feeling the chill before he did (and with better justification, since their opinions were shaped by actual awful contact with the man). He's particularly—peculiarly—peevish about Katherine White, fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, who recorded her memories of O'Hara in a sketch written a year after his death. "She remembers him condescendingly as an importuning young cub, 'difficult' and 'drinking badly' and 'making his way in the big city by his talent, plus arrogance and bravado.'" Since the evidence of Wolff's own book testifies that the young O'Hara was indeed a brash, hard-drinking handful, it's unclear what's condescending about her recollection. He gets sniffier in the next sentence—"Then, tempering disapproval with justice, Mrs. White notes that he quickly developed into one of 'our' most brilliant short-story writers, and I assume 'our' refers possessively

to a magazine rather than to the perhaps grander universe of American literature"—and quotes from a letter she wrote to O'Hara upon rejecting a story of his: "I sound so violent because I am so disappointed, and I don't mean to be rude for you to know I really do think you are a first-rate writer and only suffer from haste or something." White's sweet reason has Wolff spitting tacks.

> It is the combustible combination of dismay expressed with regretful and self-justifying delicacy that inflames rejected writers beyond any pain rejection itself can cause. To be told no—nope, not for us—is disappointing and can bring a flush to the cheeks. But when rejection comes bundled with hand-wringing, how-can-I-tell-you and what-can-I-say-to- make-you-understand and have-you-any-idea-how-unpleasant-this-is-for-me, well—the correspondence is soiling.

Soiling? It's as if we've been suddenly pulled out of the saloon into a Victorian parlor. Katherine White may have been a genteel priss as an editor—it was to her that Edmund Wilson addressed his magnificent outburst over the fiction department's dainty, nitpicky treatment of Vladimir Nabokov—but her knuckle-rapping letter seems to me a model of modesty and tact in dealing with a prickly author who wrote fast and regarded what came out of his typewriter as the hot gospel.[3] (Wolff himself cites an interview where O'Hara boasted of never spending more than two hours to knock out a *New Yorker* story.) And recall that White's boss at *The New Yorker* then was that roaring, testy, puritan genius Harold Ross ("What I'm running here is a goddam bughouse"), who disliked O'Hara personally and waged constant war against obscurity, indirection, fuzzy meaning, and sloppy usage. She understood what would get past Ross and what wouldn't. Yet when she balances her dismay over the lax hurry she spots creeping into O'Hara's work with encouragement to continue submitting to the magazine ("We wish you could send us some more stories. Can't you bring yourself to write some?"), Wolff accuses her of hypocrisy: "Behind his back she wrote her colleagues that she'd 'stake [her] reputation … that both O'Hara will not go down as a first-rate writer unless he reforms on both dirt and clarity.'"

Well, was the old bat wrong? For all of his extenuations, Wolff recognizes that something did go woefully askew with O'Hara and his work. Near the end of *The Art of Burning Bridges*, he has an audience with William Maxwell,*The New Yorker*'s other legendary fiction editor of the Harold Ross-William Shawn era and O'Hara's chief ally at the magazine. Maxwell is cast in the book as the good angel to Katherine White's bad angel: tolerant, understanding, benign. Wolff asks Maxwell what part alcohol consumption may have played in O'Hara's choice of literary expression, but he's probing for something profounder. "[W]hat I none-too-subtly meant was, What happened to John O'Hara? Maxwell stared at me, turned to his typewriter, and typed with bravura speed, 'It would be indecent to speculate.'" This courtly rebuke (to me it sounds as schoolmarmish as anything out of Katherine White's prim lips, but never mind) subdues and satisfies Wolff, who lists a number of fine stories from O'Hara's late period as proof that he hadn't lost his crisp touch or junked his craft. "So at the very time the tomes were bloating … , O'Hara was writing—about many a thing under his and your sun—some of the best and best-finished of his fiction. Speculation, then, is not only indecent; it is futile and unnecessary." A conclusion intended to close the lid on O'Hara's casket and send all those smirkers and scorners home chastened.

Wolff's laments leave the impression that O'Hara received a raw deal beyond the grave. I would contend that posterity dealt this sour pickle a fairer hand than most. Compare his literary afterlife with Irwin Shaw's. Like O'Hara, Shaw was associated with *The New Yorker*, established himself as a short-story writer ("The Girls in Their Summer Dresses," "The Ninety-Yard Run"), caused a sensation with his first novel (*The Young Lions*), did the obligatory Hollywood novel (*Two Weeks in Another Town*), turned to potboilers (*Rich Man, Poor Man*), catted around, and drank too hard. (What Isaac Rosenfeld wrote about Shaw could have been said about O'Hara: "He knows everything; that is to say, sex and liquor.") Since his death Shaw has slid off the radar, the subject of

sympathetic biography in 1989 but otherwise adrift in limbo, just another name in the rollcall of postwar novelists. O'Hara has never been housed in purgatory, much less "litcrit hell." He's had a staunch advocate for decades in his fellow Pennsylvania native John Updike, and the core holdings in his list of credits— *Appointment in Samarra* and *Butterfield 8*, both of which have just been reprinted in Modern Library editions with forewords by Fran Lebowitz; *Pal Joey*; the novellas in *Sermons and Soda Water*; the strongest of his short stories—still compel, keeping their period flavor and hotblooded ferocity. Among his contemporaries in American letters, O'Hara belongs today where he always did, lodged below the trinity of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, bracketed in the second tier with such durable pros as James M. Cain, Dawn Powell, and John Cheever, not exactly shabby company. No critical or historical injustice has been done to O'Hara and needs rectifying. William Maxwell is right, good writers *should* be remembered. O'Hara is—just not affectionately—and there's little that Wolff has done or can do that's going to change that. Some S.O.B.s just can't be cuddled.

Notes

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1. *The Art of Burning Bridges: A Life of John O'Hara*, by Geoffrey Wolff; Alfred A. Knopf, 400 pages, $30. Go back to the text.
2. Interestingly, Diana Trilling sided with Wilson against her husband, preferring the more tucked-in O'Hara. Reviewing the stories of *Pipe Dream* for *The Nation*, she commended "their craft, their precision, and their economy of means, all of which should teach a lesson to the vague and garrulous." Go back to the text.
3. "It is appalling that Nabokov's little story, so gentle and everyday, should take on the aspect for the *New Yorker* editors of an overdone psychiatric study… . It would only appear so in contrast with the pointless and inane little anecdotes that are turned out by the *New Yorker*'s processing mill and that the reader forgets two minutes after he's read them …" Go back to the text.

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more from this author

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