

[1968]

December 15

Dear Dan,

I am houseridden with Hong Kong ~~flu~~ flu, which just about every other person in Chicago seems to have, and am groggy from the side effects ~~ms~~ of antibiotics, Contac, aspirin, bourbon, orange juice (not together), and watching television. The latter is particularly depressing; I usually don't watch it at all for weeks at a time, and I seem to have missed nothing. In any event, please excuse me for waiting so long to answer yours of the 19th; in fact, I was in San Francisco at the time on a bit of vacation, tramping through the hills above Berkeley and drinking beer with such as [redacted] and her husband [redacted], the former Daily Illini [redacted], and [redacted]. Generally my interest ran toward the wives in these two cases, and it was apparent (to me certainly) that they would have done better to hold out for a really promising type like me instead of settling for the kind of young man who ~~man~~ would get married when hardly 21 or 22. My notion is that anyone who marries that young is a masochist. The wives have both developed in ways apart from their husbands (and their husbands the same, I suspect) and already marriages which seemed promising have become the yoking of incompatibles. One should not get married until one is finished growing up; else one risks retarded development or disaster, I think. I don't know if you remember [redacted] (he was in a couple of your classes) but he is also in Berkeley and it was he and I (and his wife) who went tramping through the hills. I liked the hills very much, and also San Francisco, although it struck me that San Francisco has a little too much smugness about it, as if to say that it is really superior to everyplace else on earth, and San Franciscans go about congratulating themselves for living in the most liberal, colorful city of all, unaware that one of these days ~~hmmmm~~ it will slide into the sea. San Francisco is all flash and no substance; I ~~man~~ greatly prefer London, which sets about its business of being a city first and is a groovy place, etc., ad nauseam, only secondly.

I will most certainly be going into the Army on or about January 29, unless I get another stay of execution (and since my original induction date was July 8 you can see this is a possibility). You are possibly right that it is the Army that gains from getting me so late; still, at 18, I might have been impossible enough to have won a discharge. Eight years later I may have been so buffeted by the world that I may stick it out. I'm rather glad I ~~man~~ waited for a Nixon Administration; I could hardly consider going into the Army ~~man~~ under anything else.

I have been reading a lot ~~whhwhh~~ while stuck in the house; I've finally gotten around to Mark Twain's Roughing It, a most engaging book, and last night I struck a line that seemed such an uncanny echo of Thoreau I marked it. Twain comes across a

little stream up in the mountains and learns it is the headwaters of the Missouri: "I freighted a leaf with a mental message for the friends at home, and dropped it in the stream. But ~~mm~~ I put no stamp on it and it was held for postage somewhere." The whole tone seems to be Thoreau and not Twain.

I continue to write about the movies. I think a lifetime of such work would make a moron. I did sell a free-lance article to The New York Times (an interview with Lee Marvin that seemed almost naturally to take the shape of a John O'Hara short story, if not precisely the quality). I was surprised to learn how little the NYT pays, incidentally. Another sad development of my Army service, however, is that Mr. Gelb, the metropolitan editor of the NYT, wanted me to come to New York to talk about filling the vacancy as second-string drama and movie critic *that was* left when Dan Sullivan went to the LATimes. Naturally, I couldn't, because of the god damn Army. If the NYT summons one only once in a lifetime, then I blew it.

Just read John O'Hara's new book, "And Other Stories," and liked it very much, ~~mm~~ especially the long story "A Few Trips and Some Poetry," which is a very slow and natural narrative about a woman who becomes a lesbian over the course of a lifetime. As I recall, we debated O'Hara in London in January 1966 ("The Lockwood Concern," etc) and you expressed a mild dislike for his work. O'Hara really is at a tangent from your own work and style, particularly in his slapdash way of ~~m~~ hurrying into a story with pages of dialog; and I cannot imagine a Curley story that would concern itself with one approach and character for most of its length and then suddenly ~~mmmm~~ change characters and get to the end of the story and make a point based entirely upon the late comer. Anecdote: Herman Kogan, editor of our book supplement, was drinking ~~mm~~ sherry with O'Hara one night at O'Hara's home (at a time when Kogan was at the Daily News and O'Hara wrote a column for them). They touched on a topic and O'Hara said that would make a short story. He then and there repaired into his study, ~~mmmm~~ from which came the sound of furious typing. Twenty-one minutes later O'Hara emerged with 11 pages, first draft, without a single typing error. The ~~mm~~ story later appeared just like that in The New Yorker. If that will confirm any suspicions.

I like your poem very much. One of the areas of your work I know nothing about is your poetry; I think this is only the second I've read. The idea of it is good, and the way you segue into "to read his Bible with or saw a board." Also, of course, "and all the things we chose/ before we knew we had to choose." Which is exactly the idea, although I've never seen it pointed out anywhere before: That the items to which we now attach nostalgic or camp value are precisely those that represent an era in our own associations before we had developed conscious taste. It ~~mm~~ also strikes a melancholy note in a time of altogether too many

3

choices, doesn't it?--When questions of ethics and morality press on all sides (should I resist the draft?) and the growth of college education has created a generation which, for the most part, has no particular standards but has been brainwashed into believing that ~~many~~ standards exist and that one could make a fool by taking the wrong choice. At the very most fundamental level you can see this in the schlock advertising aimed at the lower-class furniture market. On the late-late movie, for example, they seriously advertise "decorator approved" plastic furniture covers! Conclusion: Even those so out of touch as to imagine that having your furniture covered with plastic is chic--still want the plastic covers to be. Plastic covers of course are a fine thing as anti-dog and -child measures, but I get the definite impression that a lot of people have them installed because they think they're fashionable! Which all has to do with your poem, I believe.

Three issues ago the New York Review of Books switched ~~m~~ from letterpress to offset. At the time I actually composed a letter of protest, but I didn't send it because it seemed ridiculous. But now my new issue has arrived and (in addition to an unreadable typeface) the pages are filled with grey spots, smudges, creases and illegible areas. God damn it! You would think that a publication which sets such stock in literacy would understand, without being told, just why a tabloid newspaper-size offset publication invariably looks (typographically) like something they give away at the supermarket.

As to the Grand Union ~~Canal~~ Canal ("through a melancholy industrial landscape"), have you ever read New Grub Street by Gissing? I began it by no special design not long ago and read it straight through: grisly and fascinating. The idea of the Grand Union Canal, in the terms you use to describe it, somehow brings Gissing to mind. As to why you no longer fish: Orwell has something to say about that in a ~~h~~ novel titled "Coming Up for Air," which may also to some degree be about the filthy water you observe in the Grand Union Canal. But perhaps the fact that you no longer fish would make a story; I still remember the one you did about the fisherman, ~~and~~ the one with the subterranean motif of Excaliber running through it.

I see my ribbon is giving out (probably, in fact, the typewriter) and so. . . but no, before I could close, the ribbon staged a comeback. Many a punch line thus is lost. Another letter at this address will reach me before the Army does, I fancy.

2
102

P.S. On rereading, this letter seems rather disconnected and feverish (particularly my discussion of plastic furniture covers), but since I am running 101 I make no apologies on that ground.