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# A Lion at Bay

## *The Life & Art of James T. Farrell*

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It first came upon James T. Farrell (1904–1979) as a possible subject for a book around 1990, in a memoir by Sloan Wilson, the author of that emblematic novel of the 1950s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Wilson had encountered the older novelist, whose work he'd long admired, during a brief stay at a New York hotel in 1961, and in his 1976 memoir he made Farrell seem an interesting character. Wilson looked upon the author of *Studs Lonigan*, which was still regarded as a modern classic, as “a lion at bay,” roaring defiance at publishers and editors. Saluting Wilson, to his great delight, as “a real writer,” Farrell advised him to hang on to his “vitality,” as he asserted he himself had done, boasting that he'd undergone surgery for stomach ulcers—“and four days later I laid the night nurse.” “That's vitality,” Wilson responded, though he didn't believe Farrell's boast.

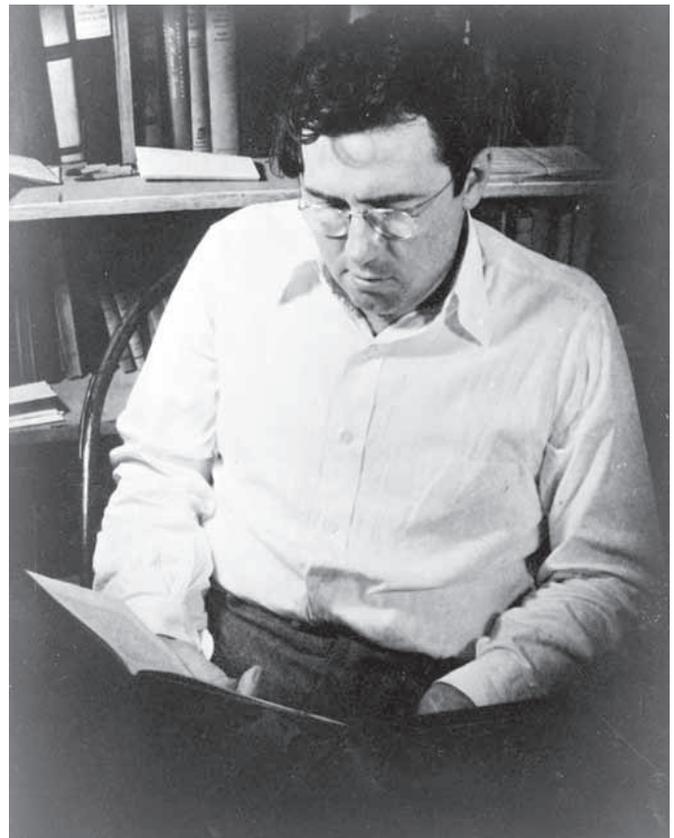
From Wilson, I proceeded to *Studs Lonigan* (1935). I'd become aware in college of Farrell's best-known work, but had never read it. I discovered that the trilogy about a swaggering young “tough guy” from a lower-middle-class Irish family on Chicago's South Side had retained *its* vitality. I also read some of Farrell's novels in the O'Neill-O'Flaherty series (based on his own family), which I thought in certain respects were even better than the Lonigan books. Besides his literary accomplishments, and adding to his appeal as a potential subject, he had been, I knew, a significant figure in the radical left-wing politics of the 1930s, a fierce foe of the Stalinists. I hunted down the few books that had been written about Farrell. And then, after acquiring an agent and a publisher, I embarked on his biography.

The book took much longer to appear than I had imagined it would, in part because of the sheer quantity of Farrell's writings, both published (more than fifty books) and unpublished (more than a thousand boxes in his archive at the University of Pennsylvania). I was able to work on the project only part-time, and after a conflict developed with the original publisher, the search for a new one lasted several years beyond my completion of a (too long) draft of the book. But finally in 2004—by fortunate coincidence the centennial of Farrell's birth—*An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of*

*James T. Farrell* appeared (along with a handsome Library of America edition of *Studs Lonigan*), and it was greeted, for the most part, with warmly enthusiastic reviews.

Despite the flurry of interest in James T. Farrell in his centennial year, he is still a largely forgotten writer today, with even his best-known work, American classic though it may be, unknown to most Americans under sixty-five. He and his finest achievements—*Studs Lonigan* and the five-novel O'Neill-O'Flaherty series that began with *A World I Never Made* (1936) and concluded with *The Face of Time* (1953)—deserve better.

*Studs Lonigan* and other vivid characters in the O'Neill-O'Flaherty series were rightly declared by the pioneering critic Joseph Warren Beach in 1941 to be “among the memorable people in English fiction.” But Farrell's naturalistic novels provide more than memorable characters. They af-



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ford a rare look at life in an American city as it was actually lived by ordinary people, particularly Irish Americans, in the early decades of the twentieth century. “You forget that you are seeing this life through the eyes of a selecting novelist,” observed critic Carl Van Doren. “It seems merely to be there before you.”

Inside those eight novels was Farrell’s great subject: the world of his boyhood and youth. Blessed with a prodigious memory, he re-created that world in immense detail. When the three Lonigan novels (*Young Lonigan*, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, and *Judgment Day*) were brought together as *Studs Lonigan* in 1935, *Saturday Review* editor Henry Seidel Canby hailed Farrell as “an excellent storyteller” and “a first-rate artist in current speech.”

His descriptions of the cheap squalid streets of Chicago, the poolroom bums, the smells and sounds of the animal life of vicious children trying to be sports, are vivid and convincing. So objective is he in his narrative that on the rare occasion when he allows himself to make a comment the effect is of a scratch in a perfect realistic painting.

In the O’Neill-O’Flaherty series (once known as the “Danny O’Neill novels,” after Farrell’s young alter ego in them), he immortalized the members of his family—the parents from whom he was separated at an early age, and his grandmother and the other relatives with whom he lived when he was growing up. These family members remained at the forefront of his consciousness his entire life. He wrote about them in fictional form again and again, in most of his best novels, and in later works as well. (In “The World I Grew Up In,” an essay in *Commonweal*, February 25, 1966, Farrell recalled his family members in nonfictional form.)

As one book followed another in the O’Neill-O’Flaherty series with the same basic cast of characters, critics began to complain that there was not enough difference between the novels, that there was not enough *drama* in them. Diana Trilling, reviewing *My Days of Anger* (1943), the fourth (and seemingly, at the time, final) volume in the series, faulted Farrell’s “preference for the actionless, the plotless, and the unvarious. He seems to believe that to intensify by dramatic action or by the invention of plot is to falsify; but this is as if, telling the story, say, of Othello, he should think it more truthful to record a lifetime of Othello’s emotional insufficiencies and racial inferiorities than to introduce an Iago to precipitate Othello’s uneasy innocence into violence.”

Yet the very absence of obvious plot in those novels helped create the illusion of life in them. John Dos Passos made that point after reading *Father and Son* (1940), the third novel in the series. “I always feel, when I’ve read one of your books, that I’ve been boarding with the family,” he told Farrell. “I thought it was excellent. Sometimes I wish you staged the situation a little more, but if you did you might lose the feeling of daily actuality. I guess it’s a question of the defects of a virtue.”

Notwithstanding Farrell’s great accomplishment in his best works, there is no denying (despite the efforts of his small band of worshipful admirers) that as a writer he had serious faults. He was a writer not by nature but by force of will, and what a mighty will it must have been, for the words poured forth almost without stop. Yet he found it difficult to refine and polish his prose. He was not a stylist. This defect, too, had a virtue, at least in his best works: by seldom calling attention to itself, his unvarnished language furthered the illusion of life unfolding without the presence of an author. But the defect’s virtue was less evident in later works, where evocation of a time and place was less important.

Farrell wrote far too much, and worked over his prose far too little. Many of his published books deserve the oblivion into which time has cast them. But not all of them, certainly not *Studs Lonigan* and the O’Neill-O’Flaherty series. “In spite of the longueurs and occasional flatnesses of the naturalistic method, the cumulative effect of Farrell’s work is impressive and powerful,” historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once rightly observed, with *Studs Lonigan* and the O’Neill-O’Flaherty novels chiefly in mind. “He has re-created a segment of America in our time and peopled it with characters...who are part of our literary heritage; he has thus transfixed a moment of history.”

In so doing, he inspired other authors. “[Farrell] taught me and other city writers,” Pete Hamill has said, “to look with pity and terror and compassion at the people we knew and at ourselves, to give value to the casualties of the urban wars, to speak in some way for those who have no voices.” And many of the voiceless responded to Farrell’s works with great enthusiasm. When an Army corporal lent his favorite book to young draftee Frank McCourt (later the author of *Angela’s Ashes*), called up after the Korean War began, it turned out to be the second volume in the Lonigan trilogy, “a paperback, falling apart,” as McCourt recalled in his memoir *’Tis*:

The corporal tells me I’m to guard this book with my life, that he reads it all the time, that James T. Farrell is the greatest writer that ever lived in the U.S.A., a writer that understands you an’ me, kid, not like those blue-ass bullshit artists they have in New England. He says I can have this book till I finish basic training and then I have to get my own copy.

But while “do[ing] battle so that others did not remain unfulfilled as he and his family had been” became Farrell’s aspiration (as it became the budding writer Danny O’Neill’s), that lofty desire proceeded from a profound alienation from the voiceless he knew—from his family, his people, his community. When Farrell, having lost his faith and found his vocation at the University of Chicago, was a young writer in the 1930s living in exile in New York, his alienation from the Irish Catholics of Chicago was extreme. They lived in

what he called “spiritual poverty.” They did not love knowledge and beauty as he did; they did not strive to understand the world or yearn to create a lasting work of art as he did; they did not share his lofty aspirations or appreciate his own determined, even heroic, efforts to fulfill them. His people, he believed, had held him back: their limitations had become his limitations, which, as he became aware of them, he had to fight all the harder to overcome. And so he resolved, as Danny would, to fight all the forces that he believed had spiritually impoverished his people, including the Catholic Church.

Yet his naturalistic portrayal of the church and the Chicago faithful, and of the racism then rampant among them, is quite restrained in the Lonigan and O’Neill-O’Flaherty novels, hard as it may have been for Chicago Catholics to see this at the time. Farrell—who was drawn to the Communists in the early 1930s, and then, after Stalin’s first spectacular public show trial in 1936, turned toward Trotskyism—came to regard the church as “potentially a threat to progressive forces” in America and “a staunch ally of capitalism, whether the latter takes the form of bourgeois democracy or fascism.” It was fortunate for the novels that he mostly kept such abstract political language out of them. Communist readers of *Studs Lonigan*, written before Farrell’s disillusionment with Stalinism, had to be content with the Communist parade near the trilogy’s end, which pointed the way to the future.

Indeed, the strongest standard of judgment implicit throughout the novels may not have been Marxist at all. In Farrell’s works, the critic Philip Rahv wrote in 1942, there is “an underlying moral code which, despite his explicit rejection of the church, seems... indisputably orthodox and Catholic.” Decades later, having long since left his Marxist illusions behind and become an anti-Communist liberal or social democrat, Farrell seemed almost to agree. He said that though he was “not a religious person,” he had come to appreciate his parochial school education, of which he had once been so critical. It had taught him some important lessons, he said, about truth and values, “mystery and reality,” and tragedy and sin—and he had put his sense of these things into his fiction.

Whether in praise or in disparagement, it was often said of Farrell’s best works that they were “sociology” as much as art. And so indeed they were. Novelist Gerald Green, the author of *The Last Angry Man*, once declared: “Nothing in modern sociology, no journalism... can ever tell us anything new or enriching about the urban Irish, once we have read James T. Farrell. A giant.” The sociology in his best works enhanced the art, and vice versa. And as the decades in which he grew up have receded further into the past, the sociology has become social history. Without their close correspondence to the actual Irish-American experience of the period, his naturalistic novels, for all their vivid characters and cumulative power, would deserve far less of our attention. With it, however, they deserve far more than they have recently received. “Sooner or later,” Canadian novelist

Morley Callaghan predicted in 1976, “people will want to know what life was really like in Farrell’s time...and then they will read him.”

That day, unfortunately, has not yet arrived. “Part of the reason for the eclipse even of the early Farrell,” Alan M. Wald, a professor of English at the University of Michigan and the author of *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (1978), suggested recently, may be that “Irish-American culture has failed to catch the imagination of academe as have Jewish-American and African-American.” To the extent that the Holocaust and slavery are responsible for the outsized interest in those cultures, one can hardly object. Ireland’s Great Famine simply does not have the moral relevance today of the one or the central importance in American history of the other. But that, of course, does not mean the Irish-American experience is unimportant, or that Farrell’s fine works arising from that experience deserve their current neglect.

An obstacle in the way of even a modest revival of critical or popular interest in Farrell may be the sheer number and the length of the novels. The three Lonigan novels add up to 961 pages in the Library of America edition, and the five O’Neill-O’Flaherty ones total some twenty-five hundred pages. Writing perceptively about Farrell in a *New Criterion* review of my biography, Carl Rollyson, himself a noted biographer, suggested that Farrell’s forte was really not the novel form at all but “the epic, a series of interconnected narratives portraying the lives of the same characters in the same setting. As his most sympathetic critics noted, Farrell’s authority was cumulative.” But few critics and reviewers, Rollyson observed, have had the patience to read through his massive oeuvre to get its cumulative effect.

Where, then, might a reader go to sample Farrell at his best without feeling any implicit obligation to read through all the other interconnected novels? I suggest going to the middle of the O’Neill-O’Flaherty series, to *Father and Son*, the novel that prompted Dos Passos’s comments to Farrell. In it, Jim O’Neill and Danny O’Neill, estranged father and son, take center stage. The novel tells of Jim’s sad decline as a result of several strokes, of Danny’s erratic progress toward maturity during his high school years, and of the deepening gulf of misunderstanding between them.

“What grows in the mind” of the reader, commented Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Stephen Vincent Benét in a searching appraisal of *Father and Son*, “is the stature of the man himself. For Jim O’Neill is a man, not a symbol, a slogan, or a piece of propaganda. There is dignity in him. Through him you can see the hard life of the people, for he is one of the people. But his struggle is man’s old struggle against time and fate—the struggle that ends in defeat with every death and continues nevertheless.”

This novel is indeed excellent, as Dos Passos said, and I think any reader curious about Farrell’s works would find “boarding with the family” in *Father and Son* a rewarding experience. ■