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# Rediscovering James T. Farrell

by Charles Fanning

No major American writer has been worse served by criticism than James T. Farrell. After the publication in 1935 of his first fictional series, the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, Farrell labored for four decades under an unjust and unfounded critical accusation. During these years, many influential critics dealt with his fiction as it appeared by mechanical citation of a party line which ran as follows: "James T. Farrell is that sad case, a one-book writer. *Studs Lonigan* is credible fiction, albeit in the limiting and dated naturalistic mode pioneered by Theodore Dreiser. But his subsequent novels have been obsessive reworkings of the same materials, and nowhere near as good as *Studs*." The primarily New York-based writers who mouthed this line became the American critical establishment of the 1940s and 1950s, and their dismissal of Farrell was repeated in the academy by the next generation of scholar/teachers, many of whom never took the trouble to read the books in question.

In the 1970s, this unconscionable situation finally began to change. In the last year of his life (he died at seventy-five in 1979), Farrell received unmistakable signs that the tide was turning. These included the television mini-series of *Studs Lonigan*, several honorary degrees, and the Emerson-Thoreau medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. I want here to urge the continued reevaluation of Farrell's work by suggesting the importance, in particular of his second series of novels, the O'Neill-O'Flaherty pentalogy, which bore the brunt of critical

Photo by Robert Ward



ostracism and misreading, because the five novels appeared between 1936, the year after *Studs*, and 1953, at the beginning of the lowest ebb of Farrell's reputation.

James T. Farrell was born in 1904 and raised in a South Side Chicago neighborhood that became the setting for much of his remarkable body of fiction. Filling to date some fifty volumes, this work includes hundreds of stories and four large fictional cycles; the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, the *O'Neill-O'Flaherty* pentalogy, the *Bernard Carr* trilogy, and the *Universe of Time* sequence, of which nine volumes were published before Farrell's death. The first two groups, the three Lonigan and five O'Neill novels, share a setting (the South Side neighborhood around Washington Park where Farrell himself grew up), a time frame (roughly, 1900 to 1930), and several characters. These eight "Washington Park" novels actually comprise one grand design with two contrasting and complementary movements: the downward, negative alternative embodied in Studs Lonigan, who dies pointlessly, and the upward, positive possibility embodied in Danny O'Neill, who lives to become a writer. The great tragedy of the wholly inadequate critical response to Farrell's work is that *Studs Lonigan* has been seen as the whole story, when, in fact, it isn't even half of the story about Washington Park.

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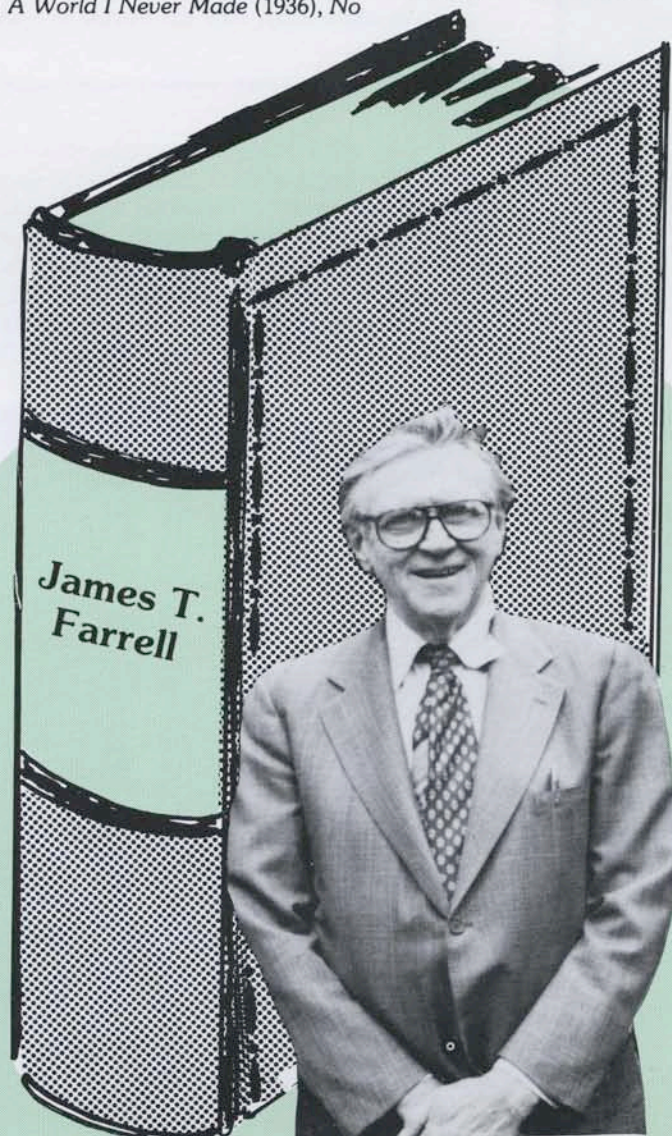
With a wisdom uncommon in beginning writers, Farrell knew that before he could tell the second part of the story, so much closer to his own experience than Studs's, he had first to deal with an attitude that, had it been applied to autobiographical materials, would have negated his aim of objectivity; that is, the young artist's exaggerated hatred and rejection of his background. In part, *Studs Lonigan* is the exorcism desired by young Danny O'Neill when, in the middle of the Lonigan trilogy, in which he is a minor figure, he vows that "Some day, he would drive this neighborhood and all his memories of it out of his consciousness with a book." Beginning with *Young Lonigan: A Boyhood in Chicago Streets* (1932), these novels trace the downward drift to death of their hapless, misguided protagonist. A

normally inquisitive boy, Studs shows signs of intelligence, even imagination, in early scenes. And yet he assumes the facile and corrupting "tough guy" values of the Chicago street-corner society to which he is drawn after graduation from eighth grade. As a partial explanation of the boy's failure of judgment, the trilogy chronicles the breakdown in the twentieth-century city of the previously directing institutions of family, school, and church, and Studs's origin in a well-fixed, middle-class family makes the indictment of urban "spiritual poverty" (Farrell's phrase) all the more severe. The result is a powerful narrative, terrifying in its seemingly inexorable progress to *Judgment Day* (1935).

Instead of the tight, fatalistic narrative drive of the Lonigan trilogy, the five O'Neill-O'Flaherty novels are more open and episodic, and in this looser structure is embodied a broader, fuller, but still unsentimentalized view of urban society. Moreover, in his complex creation of the interrelated lives of the O'Neills and O'Flahertys, Farrell has provided the most thoroughly realized embodiment in American literature of three generations of Irish American life. The novels are as follows: *A World I Never Made* (1936), *No*

*Star Is Lost* (1938), *Father and Son* (1940), *My Days of Anger* (1943), and *The Face of Time* (1953). Taken together, they are a great achievement in characterization, setting, and structure, one that has not been sufficiently acknowledged.

The portraits of three generations of Irish Americans, from the nineteenth-century immigrant laborer to a twentieth-century intellectual and artist, are compelling in their fullness and definition. A strong-willed immigrant matriarch, Mary O'Flaherty dominates the early novels. An aging, retired teamster, her husband Tom is a quiet man who comes to life only in the concluding volume, *The Face of Time*. Their children live out a range of responses to the second-generation ethnic dilemma at the turn of the century: cut off from faith in their parents' culture by shame and pressure to assimilate, they have had to make sense of the world on their own. Sho-salesman Al O'Flaherty embraces Horatio Alger's dream of success by hard work and self-education. His brother Ned puts his faith in the simplistic anaesthesia of a hazy, pop philosophy, "the power of the wish." Margaret O'Flaherty is caught painfully between her Catholic training in the



neighborhood and the jazzy hedonism of the Loop, where she works as a hotel cashier. Her sister Lizz, married to poorly-paid teamster Jim O'Neill with a new child every year, retreats into a concentrated piety that insulates her from the constant crises of her daily life. A decent, pragmatic working man, Jim O'Neill fights tough odds to make a better life for his children, and loses to three paralyzing strokes. In *Father and Son*, he faces uselessness, boredom, and death with heroic courage and dignity.

In the third generation, the main character is Lizz and Jim's son, Danny O'Neill, a slightly younger South Side contemporary of Studs Lonigan who takes another road -- out of Chicago and toward

areas such as Washington Park provided and lacked for working and lower-middle-class urban Americans, and how this world changed over time, specifically from the late nineteenth century to the summer of 1927. Indeed, the choice of setting provides one of the classic and complementary elements connecting the O'Neill-O'Flaherty novels and *Studs Lonigan*. The *street* and the *park* emerge in the two series as archetypal opposing options for the city child. Each represents a possible way of growing up, with its own pantheon of heroes. The choice of Studs Lonigan, *the street*, is the destructive element, characterized by gang life with its brutalization of finer instincts by pressures to conform: to fight, drink, dissipate energy and time, all in the service

*park* and practices baseball by the hour through his childhood years. Significantly, the recurrent, ever-receding dream of Studs Lonigan's short, unhappy life is of his one afternoon in Washington Park with Lucy Scanlan during their eighth-grade summer. So the twig is bent for both boys, and the opposition of *street* and *park* as settings is central to Farrell's complementary delineation of the mix of character and environment that brings Danny to his vocation as an artist and Studs to his grave at twenty-nine.

After characterization and setting, the third, and the least critically recognized, element of Farrell's achievement in the O'Neill-O'Flaherty series is its thematic structure. Farrell has made this 2500-page



A lazy game of croquet whiles away the day in Washington Park around the turn of the century.

understanding and control of his life. Danny's environment is less stable than Studs's -- the O'Flahertys are raising him because the O'Neills are so poor -- but he is more intelligent than Studs, and he is driven by a persistent dream of accomplishment that crystallizes into the desire to be a writer. His story is the first American portrait of the artist in which the young man emerges from the Catholic working class.

As to setting, Farrell's characters exist in a place as fully and vividly presented as any in fiction. These books tell us in concrete detail what it looked, sounded, smelled, and felt like to live in Chicago apartment-house neighborhoods, what

of an ideal of being "tough and the real stuff." The center of street life in Washington Park is Charley Bathcellar's poolroom on Fifty-eighth Street near the El station; its heroes are the gamblers, drinkers, and loafers who congregate there. The *park*, on the other hand, is the creative and liberating element, the setting for a pastoral dream of release from the disorders of the streets and the claustrophobia of apartment living. The center of park life is the athletic field, a lined-out grassy place where rules are clear and enforced and success and failure are unambiguous. Its heroes are sports figures, from park league stars to the Chicago White Sox, the pride of the South Side. Danny O'Neill chooses the

sequence a single, coherent work of art without impeding its realistic narrative flow, by means of his brilliant organization of the material around two powerful themes. Two streams of experience mingle in these pages: the outer stream of social life, a chronicle of the works and days of three generations of Chicagoans, and the inner stream of consciousness, the perceptions of that chronicle and of themselves in the minds of the individuals living it. Throughout the series, the same two watershed experiences recur, always embodying major themes. These are death and illuminating revery. Deaths in the family constitute the central events of the outer stream and emphasize the most important social theme

of the series, what Farrell in his introduction to *Father and Son* called "the tragedy of the worker, the central social tragedy of our times." Solitary reveries are the central events of the individual inner streams of consciousness in the series, and these emphasize what I take to be the most important internal, or psychological theme -- the inability of these people to articulate to one another their real perceptions, insights, and feelings. Clarifications of life and honest self-assessment come only in dreams and daydreams, and they are never shared. This theme gathers force in the three last volumes of the series, in which three major characters die without having spoken their minds to anyone. Crippled by three strokes, Danny's father, Jim O'Neill, spends his last days in silent reverie by the parlor window, unable to share his struggle for meaning with another living soul. Throughout the series, Danny's grandmother, Mary

**Farrell perfected an urban American plain style, as the fitting mode for registering the self-consciousness of ordinary people living relatively uneventful lives.**

O'Flaherty, has held back from expressing her softer emotions, and the only full sense of her character and concerns comes in a last, beautiful daydream in which she admits the pains of emigration, family deaths, and suffering that she has kept to herself for sixty years. Finally, her husband, Old Tom O'Flaherty, dies of a painful stomach cancer in *The Face of Time*, and reveals only in a last, lonely soliloquy his own sad secrets -- he has never felt at home in America, he is puzzled and embittered at having worked so hard and ended up with so little, and he wishes he were dying in Ireland.

**D**anny O'Neill's movement in the direction of art provides effective counterpoint to the clarifying but unshared reveries and unprotesting deaths of his relatives. He comes to understand the social tragedy of his family's thwarted lives and the psychological tragedy of their failure to communicate, and with understanding comes the resolution to use writing as a weapon against both tragedies: "His people had not been fulfilled . . . Yes, he was the first of his family who could go forth fully armed and ready to fight." Danny's isolated battling toward significant speech in *Father and Son* and *My Days of Anger* serves, by its uniqueness, to underscore the problems -- some internal, some imposed from outside -- of the Irish-American working-class culture in which he grows up. The O'Neill-

O'Flaherty series is a major literary achievement by any measure, and the fact that all five novels are currently out of print is nothing less than a scandal.

**I**n addition to the Lonigan and O'Neill complementary cycles, the Farrell canon contains many other riches. Published between 1946 and 1952, the Bernard Carr trilogy continues the action of the O'Neill novels in dealing with the young manhood of a working-class Chicago Irishman with literary ambitions who has fled to New York in search of experience and perspective. His emergence as a successful writer takes place in the context of a vivid rendering of the lives of New York left-wing intellectuals in the 1930s. Farrell also published several isolated novels including *New Year's Eve/1929*, a matchless study of modern man's retreat from the fear of death into a life of voyeurism, and over 250 short

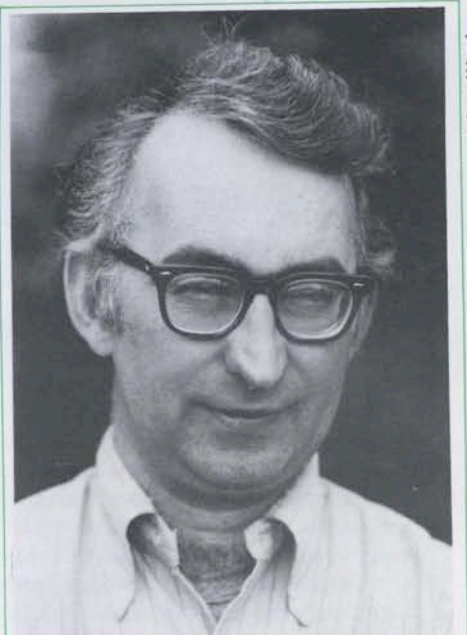
stories and novellas, in which his presentation of twentieth-century life became even more inclusive.

In 1963, Farrell published *The Silence of History*, the first novel of his fourth fictional cycle, *A Universe of Time*, which, in his heroic projection, was to have run to thirty volumes. Integrated by the central recurrent character of Eddie Ryan, another Chicago writer, born, like his creator, in 1904, the *Universe* cycle embodies a reassessment of Farrell's life-long concern with the experience of the artist in the modern world, as well as a continuation of the "lifework" that he defined in an introduction to the new cycle's sixth unit, *Judith* (1969), as "a panoramic story of our days and years, a story which would continue through as many books as I would be able to write."

**F**arrell's critical writings also fill several volumes, beginning with *A Note on Literary Criticism* of 1936. These contain useful explanations of the relationship between his life and his work, and unfailingly perceptive appreciations of writers and thinkers as diverse as Marx, Dewey, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Ibsen. Of particular interest to students of Irish culture will be the recently published collection of Farrell's writings *On Irish Themes* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, edited by Dennis Flynn).

**I**n his fiction, Farrell perfected an urban American plain style, as the fitting mode for registering the self-consciousness of ordinary people living relatively uneventful lives. In his best work, a hard-won, minimal, eloquence emerges naturally from the convincingly registered thoughts of characters such as Jim O'Neill and Old Tom O'Flaherty. The authentic eloquence of their daydream/soliloquies remains one of Farrell's greatest achievements.

Farrell was first and foremost an American realist: fiercely and scrupulously honest, immune to sentimentality, and committed to giving serious literary consideration to the common life. The themes of his fiction are embedded in the contest of a fully realized narrative world, consistent with what he saw as "my constant and major aim as a writer -- to write so that life may speak for itself." Because these themes are so important and so thoroughly grounded in American, urban, and ethnic realities, it will become clear to more and more readers that James T. Farrell has done for twentieth-century Irish America what William Carleton did for nineteenth-century Ireland. Thomas Flanagan's placement of Carleton applies also to Farrell: "From the broken land of gunmen and gallows, of bent men upon bitter soil and lovers 'scattered like nosegays' across the meadows, came a writer so gifted that he could show us everything at once."



Charles Fanning teaches Irish and American Literature at Bridgewater and is the author of several articles and three books. Supported by fellowships from the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation, his main research interest has been the Irish immigrant experience in America.

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