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## *At Home in Hollywood: Hope of Heaven as Cultural History, Autobiography, and Fiction*

by KREG ABSHIRE

JOHN O'HARA FIRST INTRODUCED the character James Malloy in the story "It Must Have Been Spring," published in *The New Yorker* in April 1934. Over the next forty years, Malloy appears in eleven more short stories, four novellas, and two novels. Because Malloy is, to a certain extent, an autobiographical character and because he is a writer fond of talking about his trade, he provides a useful critical entrance into O'Hara's immense body of work. The Malloy fictions, for example, share with much of O'Hara's writing a marked tendency to focus on the past. The majority of the Malloy fictions are narrated in the first person by Malloy and recall events that occurred in the distant past—with a temporal "distance" of at least twenty years. The historical distance is important as it relates to O'Hara's need to record his times, his past; he was increasingly an author of historical fiction, and his era was the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. Throughout his career, O'Hara felt compelled to return to this period, to review it, to rewrite it. Much of O'Hara's history is set in his Pennsylvania Protectorate, more simply, the Region, which centers on Gibbsville of Lantlenengo County and to which he returned frequently in his fiction. The similarities between O'Hara's Region and the area around his hometown, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, extend beyond physical geography; the fictional version captures the implicit cultural design of the real town. *Hope of Heaven*, a largely disregarded novel written by a much ignored writer, is a model of this complex mixture of autobiography, history, and social insight; it is, therefore, a measure of John O'Hara's accomplishment.

James Malloy, the central character of *Hope of Heaven*, shares at least the outlines of a common biography with O'Hara. Malloy was born in or around the fictional year 1903—in "The Doctor's Son," Malloy recalls that he was fifteen years old during the flu epidemic of 1918 (11, 13). After a checkered tenure at a nameless prep school and several menial jobs (including his stint as an appraiser for an engineering firm in "The Journey to Mount Clemens") James begins his career as a writer for a Gibbsville newspaper ("In the Silence," "Fatimas and Kisses," and "A Man to Be Trusted"). During the 1930s, he moves to New York where he works as a journalist (*Butterfield 8*) and as a publicity agent for the film industry ("The Girl on the Baggage Truck"). His first novel is

an instant success, and he cashes in on this success in Hollywood writing for the movies (*Hope of Heaven*). James is married briefly to an actress, divorces, remarries, and, in his words, he “stayed married for sixteen years, until she died. As the Irish would say, she died on me . . .” (“We’re Friends Again,” 64). Although John O’Hara was born in 1905, the pattern of Malloy’s “life,” that is, the life which O’Hara wrote for him, roughly approximates O’Hara’s own life.

O’Hara’s use of a straightforward, traditional narrative structure and the close correspondence between his own experience and his fiction has resulted in a common critical misconception that O’Hara is merely a semi-literary journalist or reporter. James Tuttleton claims that “O’Hara’s realistic notation of the character of American social life is perhaps the most striking feature of his compendious body of fiction” (184). By praising O’Hara’s skill as a taker of meticulous notes, Tuttleton implies that O’Hara’s fiction lacks imagination. Edmund Wilson makes a similar claim more directly than Tuttleton: the “social surface,” Wilson writes, O’Hara “analyzes with delicacy and usually with remarkable accuracy. His grasp of what lies underneath it is not, however, so sure” (23). Wilson suggests that O’Hara is handicapped as a writer because he does not expose the “True Reality” beneath the currents of American society. O’Hara does not tell his reader to think about the events which he narrates—his narratives do not lead the reader in the manner of John Steinbeck’s, for example. Consequently, his narratives seem to be objective records of actual events; that is, they seem to be history, not fiction.

O’Hara was aware of this distinction and of his critics’ inability to see his art in the midst of his history. In three lectures at Rider College (1959 and 1961), O’Hara addressed the claim that he was nothing more than a social historian—the lectures are collected as *An Artist Is His Own Fault*. For O’Hara the importance of history was obvious: without the support of accurate historical details, characterization is impossible. For example, as O’Hara told his audience, “it would be out of character for a Buick type of man to own a Franklin” (15). The importance of the two makes of cars is not so much that they were actual makes of cars but that they had social significance, that is, that they had meaning. O’Hara tried to dismiss the label of social historian, a label that he and his critics used primarily in a pejorative manner. Yet he was a social historian in the best sense; he made an accurate record of the spirit of his age, recording the intricate patterns of social signification as well as historical fact. In O’Hara’s fiction, the two are inseparably necessary.

For O’Hara and Malloy, history is not a matter of simply reporting the facts; likewise, the Malloy short stories, novels, and novellas are a complicated mixture of autobiography and fiction without any claims made for their status as autobiography. This formula allows O’Hara a certain degree of freedom. Within an already flexible genre, O’Hara pushes the boundaries of autobiography, chang-

ing fact into fiction and merging fiction with history. History, for O'Hara, is always measured against an emotional correlative, that is, O'Hara's belief in the primary importance of emotional memories above history itself—the importance, for example, of what that old Gershwin tune once meant, not how it went. And with all due respect to Edmund Wilson, this emotional significance is as close as we may hope to approach the “True Reality” beneath the currents of American society.

For O'Hara this emotional truth has as its source the anthracite coal region of eastern Pennsylvania. Although O'Hara's fiction covers a considerable range of subjects and settings, O'Hara is never really too far removed from the Region; consequently, O'Hara's modern American landscape always has a markedly regional character. And Malloy's place in this landscape, his experience in Hollywood, for example, is measured constantly against his memories of the Region. In other words, the past, for O'Hara, can be recorded on a map; and time in O'Hara's fiction always moves back out of the present toward Gibbsville.

In many ways an exception to the rule, *Hope of Heaven*, O'Hara's third novel, is marked by a relatively short temporal distance between narration and the events narrated as well as a relatively large spatial distance between the setting (Hollywood) and eastern Pennsylvania. Malloy, in his mid-thirties, is in Hollywood writing for the movies. Hollywood represents for Malloy the pressures of the present tense. As the final outpost of America's mythic conception of the West, Hollywood is the place where anything is immediately possible. History, in a manner of speaking, is made in Los Angeles; there, at least, myth factories turn history into a marketable commodity that passes for reality. Malloy's experience in Hollywood brings his regional perspective into direct contact with the culmination of the American experience—at least the version of American experience that is manufactured in and distributed from Hollywood. The novel's immediacy represents a challenge for O'Hara's regional perspective. This challenge brings the historical imperative common to much of O'Hara's fiction into heightened relief, making explicit O'Hara's need to make a past in order to make meaning. Also because of this same immediacy, the novel brings O'Hara, his Region, and his perspective into contact with the principle ideological discourses of Depression-era America. Although O'Hara wrote in the past tense, he didn't miss much about the world around him.

With a past that includes Gibbsville, New York, hunger, and economic uncertainty, Malloy, now in Hollywood, seems to have discovered the land of security and plenty. As a scriptwriter, Malloy has a certain degree of financial stability in Los Angeles. Moreover, the western suburbs of Los Angeles seem to hold the promise of unlimited wealth and glamour: Malloy dines at the Vine Street Derby which is “always full of Warner Brothers gangster types” (6) or at the Trocadero, filled with “Fan magazine photographers, trade paper owners,

agents, brothers and sisters of the stars, visiting musicians, producers, press agents, Los Angeles politicians . . ." (98). Malloy has a tendency to compile lists in Hollywood; his lists tend to overwhelm. Hollywood in the 1930s was infamous for its ability to sap the talent from a good writer; for Malloy the more immediate threat seems to be that the glare from all of those Western stars will eclipse his historical perspective.

Somewhat overwhelmed in the midst of Hollywood's riches, the fully realized dreams of American experience as cataloged by the "Fan magazine photographers," Malloy does not always fully understand the significance of his experience; or, at least, he cannot yet make much sense of it. Malloy begins the narrative both explaining its limited historical perspective and introducing his place in the dream that Hollywood represents:

I was sitting in my office in the Studio one warm day last September. My feet were up on the desk, and I was admiring my new \$35 shoes, and my \$7.50 socks, and thinking how nice it would be to go out and get in my \$2200 car and go for a ride. But that was out of the question. . . . I had to stay there and read the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* and try to get my mind off the sound of the dynamo or the generator or whatever it was that made that sound. . . . That sound is in every studio that I've ever worked in, and I never have been able to determine just what it is. . . . Whatever it is, it's always near the writers' office. (3-4)

Malloy is pleased with the spoils of his success (his shoes, his socks, and his car); more central to his experience in Hollywood, however, is a constant, undefined annoyance at every studio and "always near the writers' office." Metaphors are rather uncommon in O'Hara's work; he liked things to be direct and clear. Nevertheless, Malloy introduces his audience to Hollywood with a metaphor for the annoying uncertainty beneath all of the money-laden glitter—that sound, undecernible, but always present just out of sight, or out of knowing, and always closer to the writers than anybody else.

Malloy's story is not really about the glamorous side of Hollywood, however; and O'Hara's novel is not really a "Hollywood novel"—for example, it is not centered on the movie industry like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Last Tycoon*. The Hollywood that interests O'Hara is filled with women who work in bookstores and attend Leftist political rallies at night, a student athlete attending UCLA, and all of those people from Iowa, Gibbsville, and Swedish Haven. Herbert, Malloy's hopeless competition for the attention of Peggy Henderson, explains to Malloy that these less than fantastic people are what Los Angeles is really all about; they are the ordinary foundation of Los Angeles' fantastic appearance. According to Herbert, Los Angeles is:

Fantastic. It's in a semi-tropical climate. It has a Spanish name, with religious Roman Catholic connotations. A rather large Mexican population and Oriental. The architecture, that is, I mean by that the Monterey house and the Mission stuff, is Mexican and Spanish and a little Moorish. And yet, Malloy, consider this: the really fantastic thing about it is that it's the crystallization of the

ordinary, cheap ordinary American. The people. The politics. The cults. These Iowa people that come here and really assert themselves. They do what they wanted to do in Iowa but couldn't, for various and sundry reasons. The crazy clothes they all wanted to wear back in Iowa. And of course it's not a city, except in population. Fantastically ordinary, cheap, commonplace. (52-53)

Hollywood cannot be distinguished from the rest of America; instead, it is the logical conclusion of American society. It is the memories, hopes, and failures of two young men from the anthracite coal region of eastern Pennsylvania, and it is the story of Charlotte, "only a plain ordinary American" (111), "Miss Potter County Texas or something" (99), who becomes one of Hollywood's many cheap, ordinary prostitutes. Their stories, not the stories of film stars, are what make O'Hara's Hollywood fantastic; or at least they are the stories which Malloy is compelled to tell—the stories which, if he does not tell them, no one else will (3).

Malloy's need to see the ordinary beneath the fantastic, his quest for understanding, becomes one of the novel's central themes—it is also one of the main threads holding together the Malloy fictions. But the glare from Hollywood seems to obscure Malloy's understanding. Looking through his mail after a trip to New York, James notes several announcements including:

Something new in supper club entertainment was being offered at the Club Something on Sunset Boulevard. Something new in night club entertainment was being offered at another club on Melrose Avenue. On the other hand, one's perennial favorites wanted to take the liberty of reminding one that it was not too early to make one's New Year's reservations at the Chez Something. Signed: the perennial favorites. There were about a dozen untelegraphed telegrams, written by persons of originality. . . . (61)

The glamour and glitter of Hollywood becomes anonymous and trivial; more precisely, Malloy sees through the Hollywood glitter to the commonplace, certainly unoriginal, "Something" or "Someone." The physical layout of the city shares in this anonymity due to excess: "They would take a name, say, Orchard, and there would be Orchard Road, Orchard Lane, Orchard Place, Orchard Drive, all together, intersecting and merging" (45). The result is confusion, so that "It took at least half a dozen visits before you knew the way . . ." (45). Surrounded by the blinding glamour, or excessive mediocrity, rather, Malloy is without landmarks; he's lost.

The inhabitants of O'Hara's version of Hollywood have the freedom to disappear into "Something," becoming merely "Someone"; they are anonymous, assuming a new identity like another bad suit of clothes. For Malloy, then, the problem is to determine who the someone living at the corner of Orchard and Orchard is. Accordingly, Robert Long suggests that "A problem of identity is intimated in the novel through a number of characters who are uncertain of who or what they are" (71). Don Miller, who shares with Malloy the Region and, therefore, a past, represents at least one "someone" whom Malloy can under-

stand. Well, almost. Originally from Swedish Haven, Pennsylvania, Don Miller's real name is Schumacher; he is, in his own words, "on the lam," having come to Los Angeles in order to escape his past by living out a fraudulent identity which he has acquired along with the real Don Miller's traveler's checks. During his first meeting with Malloy, Miller comments that "This place reminds me of those Western stories I used to read, where they don't ask you your name or where you came from or anything" (40). Miller recognizes the freedom he now has, the freedom to become anybody. Yet as Miller explains, this freedom represents a threat to the idea that he has any real identity somewhere behind the mask: "I don't know what I am, or anything. . . . I'm gettin' so I don't know what's the truth and what isn't" (43). At the westernmost end of the continent, Los Angeles offers Miller the chance to escape or abandon his history; but without a history, without a past, Don Miller escapes so completely that he is in danger of forgetting who he really is. Without a past, Miller is no one.

Just as Los Angeles is extraordinary because it is fantastically ordinary, Miller is an exemplary fraud, assuming his roles with conviction and confidence. Malloy has a grudging respect for Miller; as he explains, Miller "had the kind of courage that made him become Don Miller and stick to it. . . . The kind of courage that it takes to be a certain kind of phony is something I envy. In its way it's wonderful" (58). Malloy continues, explaining that he admires Miller because he has the courage "to make up your mind to be something, even if it is something you're not, and to be it, and to be successful at being it . . ." (58). To be a successful phony is wonderful in a certain way, in the same way that Los Angeles is unrelentingly commonplace. Miller has the type of courage that is required to succeed in Hollywood, the courage to live an illusion, to become something that he is not, and to create this something out of nothing.

Malloy, too, is no stranger to being "on the lam"; and, as he tells Miller, "I write for the movies and whether I was on the lam or not doesn't make any difference" (112). Hiding and writing require the same basic skills; they are both creative. Based on his experience as a writer, Malloy advises Miller to "Change your name, and get a job. Get some kind of job that isn't a white collar job. Car-washer . . ."; "go to some cheap jewelry store where they examine eyes and. . . . Get yourself a pair of glasses with steel rims, not tortoise-shell. Tortoise-shell look phony sometimes"; and, finally, "cultivate a new personality. Dress differently. Get yourself a cheap suit that doesn't fit so well, a coat that doesn't cover your ass" (112-13). With the confidence of someone who has knocked out his share of story treatments, Malloy writes a new identity for Miller complete with a new job, personality, and appearance. Coming to grips with the pressures of Hollywood, Malloy recognizes that identities are nothing more than well-written stories and that these histories are works in progress to be made, edited, previewed, and revised. As a result, Malloy does not believe

that he ever knows anyone's one, true story; all he can hope for is to piece together a plausible version. Accordingly, Malloy's attempt to find the truth beneath the glitter has as its goal constructing the best possible narrative.

The arrival of Philip Henderson, Peggy's father and, coincidentally, a private detective on Don Miller's trail, seems to promise to restore some degree of certainty—as a detective, he brings Miller's past with him. His arrival only serves to introduce another level of uncertainty, however. With Henderson's arrival, *Hope of Heaven* takes on the appearance of a hard-boiled detective novel. For the most part, the shift to detection can be attributed to Henderson's influence; as a detective he brings some genre conventions with him into the novel. Yet Malloy makes a conscious decision to play the role of detective: trying to make sense of Henderson's version of Miller's story, Malloy suggests to Peggy, "Well, let's us be detectives" (128). And Malloy plays a convincing detective weaving together various stories, evaluating motivations, and seeking information from gangsters—or at least the Hollywood equivalent of a gangster, Jerry Luck, who has served as a "technical advisor" on a gangster picture" (130). More subtly, Malloy, responding to the new genre, acquires a new lingo, including "special dick" (108), "gumshoe artists," "hawkshaws," "flatfoots" (133), and "powders" (139). Malloy simply writes himself into the story in whatever terms the story requires. And if the story becomes a detective story, "Well, let's us be detectives." Malloy's confusion is understandable: he and Peggy are detectives; Don Miller's real name is Schumacher; his suit no longer fits him; and his glasses are fake. In the middle of Hollywood's anonymous glitter and commonplace extravagance, characters change in order to fit their environment or merely to tell a better story.

In spite of these obstacles to understanding and his own complicity in their construction, Malloy believes that he can interpret the events and characters around him as long as he can review them—that is, as long as they are part of his past. This historical imperative is evident in Malloy's description of Miller preparing to go "on the lam":

Sitting there in my room he was a frightened kid, the same age as one of my brothers, and he was about as unexciting a figure as there was in Los Angeles County. But the moment he left the room he began to be different. Already I was *remembering* him, not seeing him, and what I remembered was a figure that had passed . . . so that you don't see his face but only his back. (115)

In order to make sense of Miller, Malloy makes him part of the past. But the historical perspective that Malloy creates for himself is important not because it gives him any real knowledge; he achieves no brilliant insight staring at Miller's back. Rather, this historical perspective allows Malloy to complete his picture, to improve his story, to invest Miller, for example, with some emotional importance. Only then, assigned to the past, invested with emotional importance, does Miller begin to make some form of sense to Malloy.



O'Hara's emotional correlative, then, and his historical imperative are really two sides of the same coin; and their connection is further evident in Malloy's tendency to evaluate his immediate experience against a normative set of values defined by his personal relationships and memories. Early in the novel, Malloy explains to his audience, "Whenever I read silly stuff about Reds I would think of Peggy, and not of Mike Gold. Just as, whenever I read silly stuff about Catholics I would think of my mother and not Cardinal O'Connell" (14). These people, the people who inhabit Malloy's memories, are his means to understanding; they are the reality against which he measures the silly, though glamorous, fantasies that surround him in Hollywood. They provide the foundation on which Malloy writes his personal story, always expanding, but always expanding from the same point back East.

As the source of many of Malloy's memories, the eastern Pennsylvania coal Region best represents the certainty which Malloy cannot find in Hollywood. On Christmas Eve, Malloy tells Peggy that "I like to think of old Bethlehem, tonight. Yes, I like to think of old Bethlehem. And old Allentown, and old Easton. And Catasauqua" (147). These thoughts of the Region are precipitated by Malloy's engagement to Peggy, but it is difficult to discern the source of Malloy's turn to the Region at this particular moment. Thoughts of Christmas and thoughts of marriage blend together to form a traditional, though generic, American image reminiscent of the iconography favored by Frank Capra in the late 1930s.

The Depression, however, posed a serious threat to the traditional values that supported these generic images. Responding to the general sense of instability and uncertainty, the marriage rate reached a statistical low point during the early years of the Depression (May 39). Despite this initial response to economic crisis, Elaine Tyler May has documented the beginnings of a domestic revival and a gradual return to traditional gender roles in American culture of the '30s; marriage and the family came back with a vengeance. May points to the findings of a 1937 Roper poll which indicates that "over one-third of Americans favored the extraordinary idea of governmental subsidies to help young couples marry; only half those polled rejected the idea" (40). A similar desire to shore up marriage and traditional gender roles in marriage is recorded in Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd's study *Middletown in Transition*: "By 1935 the sentiment was growing in Middletown against the employment of married women so long as male heads of families remained unemployed" (61). This sentiment, they suggest, was a consequence of increased competition between men and women for employment; "as males move over into more and more direct competition with females, it will not be surprising if we see workmen agitating increasingly for minimum-wage laws for women in the effort to put a legal floor under their own depressed earnings" (62). In fact, by September 1934, the majority of the new NRA codes fixed the minimum wage

rates for women significantly below the rates for men (Wandersee 98). Similarly, the Federal Economy Act of 1932 mandated that no two people from the same family could be employed by the national government. The end result was that 1603 federal employees were dismissed by January 1935; most of those who lost their jobs were women (Wandersee 99). And as May suggests, these measures served to reinforce the “prevailing familial ideology” by curbing “deviations from traditional roles [that, it was assumed,] often wreaked havoc in marriages . . .” (51). To these bureaucratic measures we should add the cultural work done on behalf of traditional images and values by Capra and O’Hara.

Malloy’s attempt to understand his experience in Depression-era Hollywood through the relative certainties of his past resembles mainstream America’s turn during the 1930s toward traditional ideas of family and home. Malloy likes to think of Bethlehem, Allentown, Easton, Catasauqua, and Gibbsville; he also fondly remembers “the house I had had the first time Peggy ever stayed with me” (49-50). Along these same lines, Malloy designs his marriage proposal around his plans to buy a house; as he tells Peggy, “I didn’t buy it [a house]. But I will. If you like it, that is. Contingent on your liking it only” (142). And unlike the many transient movie people in O’Hara’s Hollywood, Peggy has already established a home for her and her brother, Keith; as Carolyn See writes, “One reason he [Malloy] is attracted to his girl, Peggy, is that though she is still very young, she has formed, very precariously, a working family unit” (212).

When the engagement, marriage, and the plan to buy a house all fall apart after Keith’s death, Malloy continues to place his hopes in a working family unit. He ends his narrative of broken dreams and illusions with thoughts about Peggy: “She goes to the Trocadero often, but hardly ever more than two or three times with the same man. I guess we are all washed up.” And as a final note he adds, “Karen thinks so” (182). Malloy presents Peggy’s breakup in terms of her inability to maintain a relationship. In contrast, Malloy and Karen are joined in the narrative equivalent of holy matrimony. Karen has the last sentence of the novel; and, on the same page as Peggy’s breakup and her men, “Karen thinks so” suggests a measure of permanence. She is named while Peggy’s men are anonymous; she is singular while they are a multitude. As his plans crumble around him, Malloy continues to hope for a future that is in many ways a return to one version of the past; his vision of the future is based on the idea that home and family represent a type of salvation or at least a measure of certainty in a world turned upside down by death and depression. Malloy shares this idea with the generation of Americans coming of age during the 1930s.

It is more difficult than it seems to write histories of the present. O’Hara’s ability to make fiction out of the principle currents of Depression-era American culture is a measure of his significance; that he was able to accomplish this with

limited historical perspective is remarkable. Recognizing the difficulty of his task, O'Hara returned to the 1930s throughout his long and productive career as a writer; his was a compulsion to get it right. The relationship between this compulsion, history, and O'Hara's Protectorate is evident in *Hope of Heaven*. What is also evident in this novel is O'Hara's ability to personify the collective hopes, dreams, and fears of Americans in the 1930s. He records the events of this period; but, more than that, he records the culture's collective desire to shape and reshape itself in response to the Depression. And beyond *Hope of Heaven*, O'Hara's fiction captures the changes in American society as it developed out of the Depression, through the Second World War, and into the Cold War. In the experiences and emotions of his characters, O'Hara has left us a record of his time and his place, something very close to the "True Reality" of America during the first half of the twentieth century.

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