

Streets of Life: Novels of Morley Callaghan

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THE capacity which could produce Morley Callaghan's clipped, significant short stories, studies of the mysteriousness of the ordinary and the bewildering discrepancies of human fact, is not very evident in the early novels, *Strange Fugitive* (1928), *It's Never Over* (1930), and *A Broken Journey* (1932) which are muddy in texture and melodramatic in action. It revealed itself first in *Such is My Beloved* (1934), a novel of which the whole air and idiom belongs to the 'thirties, the 'thirties of the depression, of insecurity, unemployment, malnutrition, meanness. Father Stephen Dowling is an assistant priest at a Cathedral — down-at-heel, North American Gothic in a district rapidly crumbling into slumdom. He shines with a special bloom of innocence, health and sincerity. He performs his priestly duties with an eager devotion. He is rapt at the altar, patient in the confessional, conscientious in visiting, eloquent in the pulpit:

Last Sunday, for instance, at the ten o'clock mass, Father Dowling had preached a sermon on the inevitable separation between Christianity and the bourgeois world, and he spoke with a fierce warm conviction, standing in the pulpit and shaking his fist while his smooth black hair waved back from his wide white forehead and his cheeks were flushed from his glowing enthusiasm.

The separation of the two worlds, Christian and bourgeois, is the initiating contrast of the novel. Father Dowling speaks of it in his sermon in a lofty, generalizing way. The novel shows it becoming biting and personal — 'inevitable' in this way — in his own life. For all his spiritual and social conviction, and in spite of his working-class origins, he himself, because of his education, his status, his looks, his popularity with the parishioners, has a recognized position in the bourgeoisie. Officially he is on the side of religion against bourgeois convention; in

reality he has at least one foot in both camps. The point at which the antagonism of the two orders becomes incorporated into his own life, the point at which he starts to be harrowed by the necessity for deciding between them, comes when he meets the two young prostitutes, Ronnie and Midge.

The girls' suspicions — the reaction of anyone in their role — correspond to Father Dowling's ostensible purpose — his official aim to convert them from their dissolute lives. But the relationship on both sides moves on from this stereotyped posture. Prostitution is only part of the girls' lives, their work, and hard, ill-paid, dirty, dangerous work at that. But it cannot, Father Dowling gropes to realize, be right to identify the person with the function and so to cancel out the girls' essential humanity. On his side, his professional concern with the girls' sinfulness, and his anxiety to redeem them from it, is, at its finest, his own interpretation of a more profoundly human preoccupation, his will to make a human presence available to them. The distinction between the religious and the bourgeois orders, which was implicit, but so ambiguously, in Father Dowling's consciousness at the beginning of the novel, is explored in the light of a similar perception. The point of religion is the expression and refinement of humanity. But many of its attitudes are only ritualistic endorsements of bourgeois prejudices. In the same way, the bourgeois world itself is seen to be larger than a system supported by middle-class morality and comfortable plushness. It stands, indeed, for what is worldly and immoral in a human sense and its membership is by no means limited to the middle classes. Its norm may be the wealthy parishioners Mr and Mrs Robison, its freer, more liberal side may exist in Father Dowling's friend, Charlie Stewart, but it also includes its formal spokesman in the conventional clergy, and a great range of others stretching from the more dubious functionaries necessary to sustain it, like Mr H. C. Baer, or the ghastly Lou, pimp and boy-friend of Ronnie, all the way up to its most eloquent voice, the subtle and impressive Bishop. Religion, during the course of the novel, becomes fined down to a single representative, Father Dowling, whereas the bourgeois world expands to include the proletariat and the aristocracy.

Immediately I write this I find myself, in trying to report on my response to the novel, wanting to correct what may give a

misleading impression of neatness. The two worlds, religious and bourgeois, do not fall apart in this absolute way. The standard of human goodness embodied, or painfully achieved, in Father Dowling, is not totally separated from the grubby life of which it is the measure. Just as in Father Dowling himself there is, as I suggested, a clogging residue of bourgeois beliefs, so in the members of the bourgeoisie — in the larger sense — there lurk hints and distorted manifestations of the ideal which burns in Father Dowling. That this should be so, that there should be a distribution of quality over the whole human range, fits the manner of a novel which is governed not by natural law — certainly not that, nor by any Marxist dialectic — but by an economy of naturalness.

The economy of naturalness — which is a reconstruction of movement rather than a Zolaesque realism of detail — is best realized in the principal relationship of the novel, that between Father Dowling and the prostitutes. Its growth, like that of all complex human feeling, is checked, troubled, backsliding, never wholly smooth or continuous; and yet it moves irresistibly onward, obeying and balancing an inward initiative as well as outer circumstances. At first, it is sympathetic but embarrassed on one side, suspect and then irritated on the other. As the priest begins to understand the economic forces beating on the young women his attention is less firmly concentrated on the rescue from prostitution and more on bringing a spontaneous human response from them.

Father Dowling is a normal man with the customary ration of sensuality and other faults, but there is also a lambent quality in his nature, a glowing capacity for love, or for charity in theological terms, which slowly burns its way through his ordinary human shabbiness to make its presence felt by others. Even the dim and the malicious become aware of it, even the least sympathetic answer to it. It shows itself not in any extreme spirituality or other-worldliness, but in the power to enter into the lives of others. When he walked about the streets on a mild evening with the snow nearly gone, and freshness in the air 'he passed a young man and a girl walking very close together and the girl's face was so full of eagerness and love Father Dowling smiled'. And it is with Midge and Ronnie, the extravagantly

inappropriate whores, the ones at the remotest distance from him, that this gift flowers. Its essential achievement is not to 'save' the girls, who will, it is clear, never leave their profession, not to mediate to them the grace of religion but more miraculously still to communicate the grace of life.

The contradiction between the donors and the deniers of life is at the heart of *Such is My Beloved*. It is the conclusion to which the original division between the religious and the bourgeois worlds finally leads. Father Dowling in his efforts to be as richly a donor as he can becomes a scandal to the deniers. The novel makes it quite clear why; and not only clear but convincing. It has nothing to do with any sentimental falsification of the girls or of prostitution. The angular Ronnie with her hopeless dependence on her hideous lover, Lou, and the soft, neurotic Midge are thoroughly credible, whether 'loafing or hunting'; and their mechanical promiscuity appears as a flat denial of a fundamental law of life. Father Dowling's offence is caused by a nature with a genius for generosity which can be satisfied only with an immediate, personal relationship with the prostitutes, and which, as a condition of that relationship, acknowledges in the girls an uncrushable human quality; and acknowledges it the more positively the more he gets to know *them* rather than just their shiftless, disorganized lives. The offence is to go outside the routes for treating with such people sanctioned by the Church and the State. The approved institutional modes are those of rescue, punishment, and, in the last resort, banishment. Their common note is one of detachment from an object, kindly or severe or even ruthless as the circumstances require. But Father Dowling's vocation by nature and profession is to personal engagement with a subject. By the end of the novel the two attitudes have been completely exposed and opposed in an angry antinomy. The resolution is uneventful and muted, a quiet, ordinary close to the agitation. A word from the Bishop to Mr Robison, and from Mr Robison to the authorities — all, it must be said, acting with a kind of social sincerity in defence of public propriety — and the police bring the girls before a tired, not inhuman magistrate, who again with much sincerity and even a degree of kindness, banishes them from the city. Father Dowling, too, suffers his own banishment. In his case it is an internal one,

banishment from self and reason. He has a total mental collapse which leaves him only an occasional interval of sanity, and this he promises will be devoted to writing a commentary on *The Song of Songs*: a nice example, this, of a simplicity of character becoming an irony of situation.

Poetry and religion have a universalizing effect in *Such is My Beloved*, making it appear to the British reader more accessible and less off-puttingly embedded in alien ground than, say, *More Joy in Heaven* (1937), which wears an aspect — I can only put it like this — of continental parochialism. *More Joy in Heaven* is irremediably indigenous, North-American in a limiting way. It is the story of a paroled criminal's effort to re-enter the society which has first punished and then forgiven him. Behind it stands an ethos of violence and the myth of the heroic gangster. Its setting is the brutal North-American city, ugly and unhistorical and very much 'a machine for living', the sense of which is conveyed with confident incisiveness.

The style of the characters is just what this *milieu* prepares one to expect: the local political boss, Senator McLean, 'investment banker, mining magnate', and his spoilt, grasping daughter; the central figure himself, Kip Caley, in whom there struggles some Rousseauistic worth the progress of which is blocked, the novel suggests, by an uncomprehending society; Caley's dying mother and his prim lawyer brother who has changed his name in order not to have his career destroyed by his relationship with a notorious gunman and bank robber; two or three local gangsters and near-criminals, including the fat, sinister hotel-keeper, a warm-hearted all-in wrestler and a ferret-like Iago who is appalled by the idea of Caley's falling for the good life and who hopes against hope that his transformation is all a front; another rather dim good girl, Julia, who is working as a waitress but is really a model resting — a conventional combination of jobs, this; and inevitably 'the big, raw-boned, sandy-haired prison chaplain'. One's expectations about the characters in this novel come not only from the *milieu* but, one realizes on reflection, from a succession of American films of the 'thirties and 'forties. And how positive and important in shaping expectations was the cinema for those growing up in this period. Its images seemed to them to represent reality with a peculiar point and

fitness, its themes and situations to be exactly level with their experience. The paradox of one's reaction to *More Joy in Heaven* is that while its pure Americanism is so remote (it is, it seems to me, markedly more American than Canadian, unlike *Such is My Beloved*) its cinematic conception, technique, imagery and characterization are intimately familiar, part indeed of the history of one's own life. So much so that it is impossible to think about *More Joy in Heaven* without seeing it as a film and without casting its characters from those familiar names: Victor McLaglen, William Bendix, Janet Gaynor, Veronica Lake, Humphrey Bogart, Richard Widmark, Sidney Greenstreet, Franchot Tone, Edwin Arnold, Edward G. Robinson. *More Joy in Heaven* would make — perhaps, for all I know, it has already made — a superb film script.

I have stressed what I take to be the essential limitation in *More Joy in Heaven* but it remains a strong piece of work and an impressive example of its *genre*. It is solid, vigorous, lean and precise, the product of a serious mind. It has more weight than the documented but insubstantial study of a university institution, *The Varsity Story* (1949), more bite than the more vaguely organized *A Passion in Rome* (1961). *More Joy in Heaven* is a member of the group of novels which includes *Such is My Beloved*, *The Many Colored Coat* (1960), and *The Loved and the Lost* (1951) to which I turn now. These novels, different in theme and setting, have in common a pre-occupation with what I should like to call self-preservation, as long as I may remove from the term any hint of selfishness or over-personal concern. Morley Callaghan is fascinated by what Henry James in the Preface to *What Maisie Knew* called a character's 'truth of resistance', the gift of genius that some have for preserving intact the lineaments of their nature. It is a power which has at its heart a certain insistent simplicity: not self-confidence but trust in self. In *Father Dowling* it shows itself as a steady flame of goodness impervious even to the most high-minded opposition, in Kip Caley as the persistent, and finally desperate, trust of an abrasively independent identity. In *The Loved and the Lost* it is the girl, Peggy Sanderson, who possesses this faculty. It reveals itself in conduct which ignores or evades — rather than defies — the acceptable canons of behaviour in her world. The well-disposed think her capricious,

the suspicious perverse. Her strangeness lies in her unpredictability, in her assumption that she is not caught in the same net as everybody else. She is described by his friend Foley to James McAlpine, a University teacher and would-be newspaper columnist, who is our source of awareness during this novel, in a fumbling conversation which tries to define her strangeness, as a blue jay, a bird which flies off at crazy and unpredictable angles.

The substance of the novel is the search for the true nature of the girl's odd, disconcerting individuality. It is conducted against the quietly insinuated but effectively established presence of Montreal. In no other novel of Morley Callaghan is the city context so significantly part of the story and — at least to a British reader — so attractive. Incidentally, unobtrusively and, at every point, relevantly, the dimensions of the city appear, from the mountain with wealth clustered round its sides, the river and the boats whistling all night long, to the North-American towers and hotels, the antique stone office buildings and the old French town and its church steeples spreading eastwards, down to St Henri's along the canal where Peggy Sanderson lives in a bare room in a run-down apartment house, and St Antoine, the negro quarter crammed with tawdry taverns and cafes, pool parlours, delicatessen stores, cleaning establishments, railway yards. The detail carries with it a pure Canadian quality. One has a sense of a city, neither American nor European, with an authentically separate style of its own, of a place in which a complete human life can be lived and where an immense range of experience is available. It is the universal language with a unique accent. From a rapid touch here and there — there is little extended description — comes a sense of the form and condition of the place: space, snow, and air heavy with unbearable cold, the sound of church bells and sleigh bells, the varying manners of different races and nations and their tense relationships, the chime of different languages, the characteristic bluish winter light, the typical great occasion like the ice hockey match, the glimpses of a fastidious French-Canadian priest helping his sister from a taxi, a fat Jewish tavern keeper, negro jazz players, a rich man contemplating his Renoir, a University professor with his marbles-in-the-mouth accent.

It is in the freshly realized setting of Montreal, then, that the search for a definition of the girl's identity is undertaken. There is a kind of symmetry between the exact notation of the city and the effort more and more precisely to reveal the quality of her individuality, although, I must add, the symmetry is unusual in that what is explicit and achieved on the side of the city is suspended and enigmatic on the side of the girl.

The instrument of exploration is the consciousness of James McAlpine which becomes as the novel progresses, the mind and the approach of the reader. McAlpine is well-suited to be the honest searcher and, in his normality, to stand for the engaged reader. He is open-minded, intelligent, sensitive and warm-hearted, with a rather obvious ambition to which he is consciously inclined to allow more weight than his fundamentally generous nature warrants. At first puzzled and then fascinated, and at last uneasily in love with Peggy, his feelings at each stage have in them an element of wonder at the girl's originality — which is shown, ironically enough, to be no more than an intimate fidelity to her own nature. Other people in the novel live, as it were, at a distance from themselves, under the influence of principles, prejudices, conventions, formalities, imposed from outside. Most of their conduct and their feelings are imitated, not self-initiated: they are shown as activities and functions set in motion from the outside. But Peggy Sanderson has the strange power of being — herself. She is the standard, a mild, quiet, rather humble standard (remembered by her university teachers as merely a mediocre student) by which we judge the other characters; and so strong is the sense of general human truth in this novel, the standard by which we judge ourselves.

Peggy Sanderson lives directly from her own centre, and in a world where most live indirectly or deviously, this makes her an object of bewilderment and hostility, and since she is an attractive young woman, attitudes towards her are also clouded with sexual desire or sexual envy. The genuine goodness in her nature, hinted at in a variety of forms, and yet teasingly suspended as to certainty till the end of the book, leads her to seek out the poor in whom she feels the response her temperament naturally requires. The poorest in Montreal are the negroes. She seeks them out not to do them good but simply to be with them. So that

there hangs round her the dubious reputation of a woman with perverse sexual tastes, a reputation which is a projection of perverse white feelings, and all the stronger for being a matter of guess and inference. She has the same reputation among negro men and women, too: among the men because they half-share the feelings of white society, among women because they see their men turning from them to her. Her negro-haunting life costs her a respectable job — she is now working in a miserable textile factory and is known to James McAlpine as Peggy the Crimp — costs her as well her friends and reputation and ultimately her life. She is raped and murdered by a degenerate white man. The reasons for the shape of her life are partly that the negroes are what they are in Montreal, and partly the events of her own past. She had loved, as the repressed child of a grim Methodist minister, a negro family where the gaiety matched the poverty and where she had her chief experience of human warmth. She also had had her first sexual pang at the sight of a nude negro boy. But these sociological and genetic circumstances, while their importance is recognized, are never offered by Morley Callaghan as total explanations or causes. They are occasions and conditions of spontaneous feeling. There is always in his account of the girl's motives a shaded ambiguity which, while it may be lacking in abstract logic is, one feels, closely in correspondence with the complications of reality.

The Many Colored Coat is one of the finest of Morley Callaghan's novels, and the one I take to represent his latest, and most developed work. The medium is in the same mode, quiet, unpretentious, close to speech and movement and with much of the flexibility and versatility of the spoken language. The medium, at once masculine and unpretentious, is in accord with Morley Callaghan's attitude, which is, characteristically, both self-effacing and positive. The theme of *The Many Colored Coat* is that of Joseph, the gifted and beloved young man. The novel rehearses the theme of the fortunes of the fortunate man. The biblical reference comes through, as the novel unfolds, without the least touch of impropriety or tactlessness, and it testifies to the steadiness Callaghan sees in human nature and to his perception of the permanent content of the varying crises it has to face. At the same time the pretentious absurdity of the hero's job, Public

Relations man to a distillery, an ambassador of alcohol, in fact, has an almost clinically exact contemporary flavour, that of business modified to suit the entertainment industry and surrounded by a mist of dubious scientific management.

The novel has a pleasingly simple shape. It falls into two parts, each of which concludes in a critical and brilliantly conducted court scene. In the first we see Harry Lane as Joseph the blessed, blooming with health, beauty, riches, success, courage — he is modest about his fine war record — popularity and love. He deals with radio and television people, speaks at banquets, organizes golfing tournaments, spends his employers' money right and left to sell whisky. Why then didn't all the phoniness rub off on him? It was because he radiated an essential air of well-being. People lived off him, but they loved to live off *him*.

Harry's golden years are shattered when a friend, out of gratitude, offers him the chance of making a fortune in oil shares. He needs to borrow money to buy them and the banker, Scotty Bowman, persuades him to arrange a large loan at Bowman's bank. The consideration, the banker suggests, will be some shares for himself. The disconcerted Harry has brought home to him what has already been tellingly indicated for the reader, that Bowman has rapidly succumbed to the financial morality of the world around Harry. Harry agrees, the money is passed over, the shares turn out to be worthless, and the Bank Manager is tried for fraud since he had, although Harry had not realized this, insufficient cover for the loan. He is found guilty in a trial scene which has all the elegance of a ballet and the excitement of a film. The damage to Harry's reputation is done by Mike Kon, Bowman's devoted friend, whose testimony in defence of Bowman makes Harry out the chief though not legally responsible culprit. The disgust with which all his friends now look at Harry, turns to horror when Bowman, who to all appearances was duped into committing a crime by the sophisticated Harry, kills himself in prison.

The second part of the novel traces, with an unemphatic, wandering but expressive line, the dissolution of personality worked in Harry Lane by his loss of reputation. The process, a passage from incredulous fury when his innocence is not recognized, through self-pity and disorientation to despair and revenge,

is one partly of drift, a flinching accommodation to circumstances, partly of defiant self-destruction. Callaghan has the realist's talent for rendering the densely conditioned movements of life and their peculiar combination of limpness and drive. In *The Many Colored Coat* the characteristically solid evocation is strengthened and filled out by a second parallel movement, the break-up of Mike Kon who in his truculent, dumber way, mimics the disintegration of Harry Lane. The *finesse* of the design lies particularly in the combined parallelism and friction of these two movements. The twisted logic of the novel's design fits the perverse will, itself the function of a distorted consciousness, which in each of the two men turns persecutor into victim, victim into persecutor, and makes punishment and crime change places.

The importance attributed in this novel to pride, not in any doctrinal way but by suggestive, concrete pointing, is justified not only by the facts of the case in this novel and the intelligent psychological investigation of them, but by a certain habit of sensibility in Morley Callaghan himself. He has, as Edmund Wilson pointed out in a perceptive and sympathetic essay, 'an intuitive sense of the meaning of Christianity'.¹ The human vision of these novels depends on a Christian style of feeling, of a particular tradition of religious sensibility which is present not as dogma or metaphysic but as a mode of perception and reaction.

I speak of Callaghan's Christian response, but, of course, that response and the whole economy of feeling of which it is a part, are sunk deep in the constitution of the novelist. If Callaghan is a Christian novelist, this is the way in which he is one. He is not the spokesman of religion, but the artist who possesses it as part of his personal nervous equipment. This traditional steadiness blends in Callaghan with that acute feeling for contemporary society, which to a European at least, seems very natural to an artist working in the New World, and the combination makes him a novelist of an impressively serious quality. The contemporary flavour appears everywhere in his work, in themes, situations, characters and procedures. A single notable example of it in *The Many Colored Coat* is his treatment of the life of the streets. The street in a modern industrial society presents itself to him as an

¹ Edmund Wilson, *O Canada*, 1967, p.20.

image of that society and its experience. His skill in rendering the flow of life through the street, the brutality and ugliness, the glimpses the street provides of other, less tangible experiences, the altercations, the moments of communication, show the street not only as a place but as the analogue of human vitality and representativeness. 'That night,' he writes of Harry Lane after his fall, in words which are apt to describe the impression all Morley Callaghan's best work makes, 'he walked through the streets for hours feeling he was wandering through his own life.'

Fashion Fit

We are practised and perfect
 In the day of telegrams and excuses.
 The typist invites us to letters,
 The telephone squats at our side
 Like a grinning memento of life.
 It punctuates our sentence, it rhymes
 Through the times of the week.

The bosses are just.
 We die of pleasant vices
 As efficiently as possible. We kick
 The wastepaper basket. Triteness
 Is all. We are signed for, and folded
 Away, we are laid in filing cabinets.

We have our victories.
 There comes a translation of *Beowulf*
 Anew in paperback. There is the stir
 Of new novels, gone to new worlds
 Of fellatio and the mysteries of
 Sodomy. The smoke-room story
 Is lost to smokers, is become an
 Epiphany. We are intimate in cinemas.
 And in the comfortable countries
 Students are inventing unease
 And disposable woes.

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