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MORLEY CALLAGHAN AS THINKER

READERS FAMILIAR WITH MORLEY CALLAGHAN will find a touch of the paradoxical in the title of this paper. He is a writer who has taken pains to separate himself from the company of (as he might say) rarefied intellectuals, sophisticated egg-heads, and barren academics. While not necessarily casting himself as an anti-intellectual, he has certainly preferred to take his place beside the ordinary man. Moreover, he is a novelist, and therefore by no means committed to the practice of systematic cogitation that the word "thinker" suggests. And yet, if we take the nine novels and two books of short stories all together and in their chronological order, we cannot help concluding that Callaghan is an artist who, to the extent of his abilities, has attempted what Matthew Arnold asserted was the real artist's task—to make a powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life. (The ideas, you will recall, do not have to be original, and are more likely to be simply as strong or as weak as the artist's *milieu* permits.) It will be a revealing and a salutary procedure, if only because critics have usually done the opposite, to try to see Callaghan's novels as a coherent, developing *oeuvre* in which leading ideas of the 'twenties, 'thirties, and 'forties are used in exploring individual and social life in this country and in shaping it into artistic patterns.

It may be of some use first of all to outline baldly a scheme of what appears to be the central dialectic running throughout Callaghan's work, and then to follow with the qualifications and adjustments that concrete illustration inevitably brings with it. In his earliest work Callaghan appeared in a role perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the "critical revolt" of the 'twenties, which marked the end of Canadian Victorianism and in which Smith, Scott, Klein, Kennedy, and the *Canadian Forum* and *Canadian Mercury* took a leading part. Callaghan turned his eye upon the less smiling aspects of urban life in the twentieth century, encouraged to do so, no doubt, by Hemingway's influence, and saw there men and women reduced to unhappy and often degenerate straits through the force of overwhelming

necessity in one form or another. The early stories and novels are full of "strange fugitives" from society whose condition is explored, who are portrayed sympathetically because they suffer at the hands of their society, and who are scarcely responsible for their lot because they are at the mercy of forces that are greater than themselves—biological, psychological, social—and that are beyond their comprehension or control. Callaghan's approach is therefore that of naturalism, in the sense that his subject-matter is often ugly and sordid, his characters are seen as moulded by their environment, and both the supernatural and humanistic qualities of experience are absent or submerged. The human spectacle from this vantage point is of course pathetic, and the characteristic mood of these early works is that of pathos. From the point of view of orthodox Catholic doctrine, this attitude is at best partial, and at worst a denial of the essential nature of man, his free will and his responsibility for his own moral and spiritual condition. It may be that Callaghan's naturalism was a result of an early reaction against an orthodox Catholic interpretation of the lives of people like those who were his models: an interpretation which would stress their grave personal responsibilities and their sinfulness for not living up to them. The figure of the priest in this connection is significant. Callaghan's priests in the earlier work are likely to be men troubled in their faith by what they see or experience and disturbed by the rigour of the orthodox Catholic application to men and women about them. But the tendency to naturalism in Callaghan's writing can be seen in turn giving way in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties to a more complex view, and political radicalism was apparently a factor of some importance in this transition. Catholicism emphasizes man's spiritual condition and his responsibility for that condition, whatever it may be. Social circumstances are a secondary matter. But naturalism tries to substitute for the rigorous judgment of religion upon man's shortcomings a sympathetic account of the forces that go to make a man what he is. Political radicalism, however, has a third point of view to present. In the socialism and communism of the 'thirties Callaghan undoubtedly was able to see a picture of man excused for his weaknesses in so far as he was a victim of an oppressive and perverting society, but nevertheless capable of meaningful action towards the bettering of his lot—and, indeed, responsible in the eyes of history for taking up the duties that the course of social development was laying upon his shoulders.

The resemblances and differences between naturalism, radicalism, and Catholicism make a bewildering picture, and Callaghan's work in the early 'thirties no doubt exhibits the bewilderment that, along with so many others, he himself felt. In Canada as in other countries the leftward swing encouraged by the Great Depression strongly affected contemporary writing of every sort. While it never for

long drew Callaghan's commitment, we may suppose that the pressure to become *engagé* helped to emancipate and to deepen the workings of Callaghan's imagination and creative talents. In particular, it helped to free him from a merely pathetic response to the life he was portraying, and to restore from the eroding effects of naturalism a conviction that men have powers of decision and action. In a negative way, by acting as a profounder antithesis to Catholicism than naturalism, it helped to bring back to light again some of the essential qualities of the religious view of man—that he is not, as socialism and communism would have him, a unit of society merely, a part of a whole that is more important, but rather a person whose individuality is of the ultimate importance. Finally, it made possible a more serious intellectual grasp of the inter-relations of individuals and society than naturalism, with its excessive simplification in terms of scientific determinism, or Catholicism alone, with its emphasis on spiritual matters, could provide. There can be seen emerging from such a novel of discussion as *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935) a fourth position which carries with it vestiges of the other three, but which is different from any one of them—a kind of new individualism, or, so to speak, "personalism", a term that may exclude any suggestions of aggressive self-assertion or self-centredness. It is the result of a renewed awareness of the plight of the individual's heart or soul as ultimately primary; for each man has his salvation to some degree in his own hands to achieve as best he can whatever social forces are at work upon him, and, above all, whatever are the external judgments of society (including the Church's) as to the true condition, moral and spiritual, of that hidden inner life.

It would be difficult, as well as impertinent, to try to chart or verify in detail this dialectical scheme in terms of the author's own experience. But an author's writing belongs to its readers; and the elements here described are all to be found in Callaghan's published novels and short stories. As early as 1931, a reviewer made the association with naturalism by describing Callaghan as "the Zola of Toronto". The title is perhaps a little too grand, and yet it is true that the author of *A Native Argosy* (1929), *Strange Fugitive* (1928), *It's Never Over* (1931), and *A Broken Journey* (1932) dealt with more of the seamy side of Canadian life, especially urban life, than had any previous writer. The corrosive effect of a naturalistic view of human experience can be seen, moreover, in the whole conception of such a novel as *Strange Fugitive*—Harry Trotter is displayed as a kind of automaton, unable to express himself, scarcely conscious of the passions and social forces that mould and impel him—as well as overtly in such details as the following conversation between Trotter and Julie, his sometime mistress:

'Listen, do you believe in God?'

'Cut it out.'

'No, I want to get a rather natural point of view. Tell me.'

'I don't know.'

... She insisted all theological systems were absolutely impracticable. 'God knows, for example, that a man born a cripple in this world will suffer terribly, why is it?'

'Because of original sin, I guess.'

'It doesn't appeal to me.'

'Me either.'

The theme of helpless, scarcely culpable suffering runs through the two later novels as well. In *It's Never Over* the figure of the priest appears prominently in the action, mainly, it seems, in order to reveal the great difficulty his orthodox religious position has in accounting for and accepting the manifest evils, injustices, and suffering that make up the story. Similarly, in *A Broken Journey*, Marion Gibbons is eventually led to speculate that both her mother and herself are victims of psychological and social forces they could not resist. She says of her mother's life, "Maybe things beyond her control have spoilt it", and assumes that she herself has inherited degenerate impulses. And the young priest in that novel is shaken in his comfortable faith in himself as priest and in the uprightness of the leading parishioner, Mrs. Gibbons, by his inability to cope with her incipient alcoholism. A similar situation disturbs Father Francis in the story, "A Predicament", from *A Native Argosy*, though Callaghan's tone is more comical this time as he describes the unfortunate young priest's humiliating descent into worldly trickery in order to eject discreetly and peacefully an obstreperous drunk who has unwittingly invaded his confessional box. Thus in the early portraits Callaghan's priests are likely to appear as limited in their imagination and sympathies by their strict Catholic training or disturbed by experiences that seem to be inadequately dealt with by their doctrine, while other characters are painted as being victims of their natures or their environment, and therefore pitiable rather than culpable.

By the end of the 'twenties a more serious anti-Christ appeared to be threatening the religious view of man than any simple naturalistic philosophy. Political radicalism, like naturalism, depreciated the idea of sin and attributed evil to impersonal forces greater than the individual; but at the same time, unlike naturalism, it dignified human life by asserting that decisions and social actions of a meaningful kind were possible. In Callaghan's first two novels of the 'thirties, *Such is My Beloved* (1934) and *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), socialism and communism replace naturalism as an antithesis to religious faith. Father Dowling in *Such is My Beloved* is himself something of a radical, described as a preacher of social ser-

mons and a visitor at meetings of a "league for social reconstruction", and he is so far impressed by his own experiences, and possibly by the arguments of his Communist friend, Charles Stewart, that he comes to believe "that moral independence and economic security seemed very closely related." He is prepared to recognize the validity of some Marxist criticism of the Church, though not to abandon his faith in that Church:

What a great pity Marx was not a Christian. There's no reason why a Christian should not thirst after social justice. The Church is not tied up to any one economic system, in fact, all systems tend to degrade the Church by using it to pacify discontented people. They would make religion an opium for the people, and we must be ever on our guard to see that the laity and the clergy, too, are not becoming the tools of designing rulers and class interests . . . it is indeed a disordered world. God help us all. There are so many remedies offered. Try our Lord, why don't you?

In particular, he becomes aware of just how cruelly "impersonal" and unjust are the judgments passed by the Church he represents on the two prostitutes he wants so much to help. The Bishop feels it necessary to uphold an unsympathetic position, finding the priest's interest in the girls merely suspicious, unseemly, and dangerous. This is little more satisfying to the young priest than the "social welfare" view taken of girls like these—that prostitutes are, like all other immoral agents, simple-minded, and should be sterilized to prevent reproduction of their kind. The Communist analysis of such situations, on the other hand, seems to hearken back to a conception that Saint Thomas himself might have acknowledged:

There was a whole economic background behind the wretched lives of these girls. They were not detached from the life around them. They had free will only when they were free . . . St. Thomas Aquinas had said we have not free will when we are completely dominated by passion . . . If he properly understood the lives of these girls, he thought, he might realize they were not free but strongly fettered . . .

In terms of its action, *Such is My Beloved* is ironic, for its hero finds no way out of the clash between the law of the Church and his personal gospel of love. Stewart the Communist offers no solution ("Your mistake is seeing this as a religious problem. It's really an economic problem. Do you see, Father?"), though Father Dowling can accept its partial truth. He can merely withdraw from the troubled world into the sanctuary of his own now deranged mind. Artistically the novel is weakened by the author's uncertainty (or so it appears) as to whether Father Dowling's mad innocence at the end is sufficiently and truly a state of grace to make up for his complete failure as a sane member of society and as a priest of the existing Church.

The priest figure is absent from *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, but his place in

the dialectic, as we shall see, is fully taken up. However, the ground of the novel is more secular; its world is more completely and especially that of the mid-thirties depression years in the city of Toronto. In this setting the ideology of radicalism is appropriately given its freest play. It is true, of course, that in almost all of Callaghan's writing the social actualities are prominent, and in particular the familiar features of the late 'twenties and the 'thirties—unemployment, poverty, strikes, public demonstrations. *Now That April's Here*, published in 1936, draws together a body of Callaghan's short stories of the 'thirties among which there are few that do not use the social conditions of the depression era as a backdrop, if not as a major factor in the action. So much was this true that the left wing *New Frontier* was able to congratulate Callaghan at that time for his "protest against injustice", and to assert, as though Callaghan were a comrade-in-arms: "So long as Callaghan voices this cry his writing will fill an immediate need. . . . When poverty is seen poisoning the springs of human love, the compassionate artist has no need of a political platform to move the indifferent. He has simply to tell his story, which has in itself the power to rouse those who construct alternatives to action." In the earlier works the figure of the social radical or revolutionary recurs, but in minor roles, usually as a two-dimensional figure whose naive position is satirically portrayed. *They Shall Inherit the Earth* treats more directly and fully and sympathetically the themes of social disorder and radical ideology. The argument of the novel—the term is appropriate in several senses, since in no other work are the characters so given to overt debate—finds Michael Aikenhead caught in a position of intellectual and moral bewilderment between the clear-cut Christian doctrine of the convert Nathaniel Benjamin and the Communism of William Johnson. Michael's own need for some general understanding is on two levels: the social, for he is himself, along with Anna his mistress, a victim of the Depression, and he sees the injustice, the evil, and the poverty experienced by his fellow-sufferers all around him; the moral and spiritual, for in having deliberately allowed his step-brother Dave Choate, whom he detested, to drown he carries an inescapable and irrevocable action always with him in conscience, and with this he must come to terms. On both levels the solution offered by the ideology of the Communist William Johnson is attractive: "You're an individualist," Johnson tells the troubled Michael. "You're immersed in your own petty problems, and you're a social fascist." Michael begins to find his friend's point of view tempting:

He began to see his friend as a man who had succeeded in giving order and dignity to his own life. He began to feel a surge of new life in his friend . . . ; it seemed to Michael that the history of all men, through the faith of men like William Johnson,

was given at last a splendid meaning, that there in their own time such men were directing it toward a goal. Bewildered people like himself, Michael thought, found only silliness and confusion in their lives, yet there was William Johnson proclaiming that a human being could find dignity carrying on the struggle of all the humble people who ever lived on the earth And he thought, too, 'Dave Choate's death would be simply an economic matter for Bill Johnson.'

It is worth noting the extent to which Michael is willing to go along with Johnson's view, and the point at which he has reservations:

Listen, you don't think you hate the way things are any more than I do, do you? Drive along your band-wagon and I'll get on it. I'll go with the parade right up to the big tent. But I've learned something else. I know it will help a lot to clear the land away and so it'll be easier to live, but there's more to it than that. The personal problem will begin all over again. You seem to think that you just have to have an economic house cleaning and we'll all get justice. None of us will get justice, personal justice, and we'll start hungering for it all over again.

In another mood and another situation Michael rebels against the antithetical view of man's predicament put forward by Nathaniel Benjamin. "You're a guy who believes in free will and the responsibility of the individual soul, and the soul's destiny, and all that crap, aren't you?" Michael says to him insultingly, and then asks Benjamin the rhetorical question, "I just want to know if you believe there's usually a chain of causes going back that shape the most trivial event."

Michael cannot rest in the confusion of these contradictory claims. He is driven towards some social and metaphysical resolution not only by his guilty conscience but by a genuinely rational need, a desire for "unity". He felt obliged to cry out "against the meaningless confusion of whatever he had known of living" Michael's endeavour to understand reaches a climax on the northern hunting trip when he sees the spectacle of large numbers of deer slaughtered, apparently ruthlessly and wantonly, by wolves. The wolf becomes a symbol for him:

A wolf is an individualist They kill out of the sheer lust of killing, and they kill without sense If you want it to be clear that a man is ruthless and an enemy of society you call him a wolf, don't you? Any enemy of the race you call a wolf because he knows no moral law and that's why you can't organize society, because it's full of wolves, and they don't know justice, and don't want it. The financial brigands and labor exploiters and the war profiteers and the Wall Street sharks and nearly anybody who tries to put his head up in a world of private profit, what are they? Wolves I tell you.

And yet even at this moment Michael's thinking leads him to a more positive conclusion, still tentative and incomplete as it is:

But there might be unity in life on the earth, and it might be only vanity to try to understand the meaning of the single parts. 'Maybe justice is simply the working out of a pattern,' he thought. 'The deer and the wolf have their place in the pattern, and they know justice when they conform to the pattern . . . And there would be a justice for all things in terms of the things themselves. There would be justice in art, the justice of form, and there would be social justice, the logical necessity of preserving the pattern of society. If society was what it was today, and there was class striking at class, it was like a jungle, and there was no pattern and no unity and no justice. That's the best I can do,' he thought . . .

Justice is obviously not a simple matter. Michael comes at last to see himself as responsible for his step-brother's death, and guilty of allowing his estranged father to be ruined morally and financially by the misdirected suspicions of society. At this point it is Anna—one of the meek who shall inherit the earth, embodying as she does the simplest and most natural kind of love—who clarifies for Michael what justice in his situation means: "The only justice you owe is to your father . . . What has organized justice to do with the feeling that's in your heart? What have the police to do with justice, and you, and your father?" Michael thereupon accepts his inescapable responsibility and opens the way to the reconciliation with his forgiving father. The resolution is in neither Johnson's nor Benjamin's terms, but is an individual and personal amalgam of elements of both.

From this resolution of the complex of actions and ideas in *They Shall Inherit the Earth* it will be seen how far Callaghan had travelled from the work of his first stories and novels. Looking back from the vantage point of this novel's conclusion, the reader can see a remarkable alteration from those various earlier pictures of helpless victims, unable to speak or act effectively, caught in the trap of their circumstances, and from those pictures of troubled and bewildered men and women struggling with little success to understand their lives in the face of conflicting ideologies. Looking ahead, it is possible to see the conceptions embodied in the conclusion of *They Shall Inherit the Earth* developed and carried forward in Callaghan's later novels. Michael's sense of personal responsibility, vital and subtle, but without the satisfaction of a direct social correlative, is embodied in Kip Caley of *More Joy in Heaven* (1937), whose personal salvation is achieved regardless of his society's complete misunderstanding and condemnation. "I found that the thing I got hold of belongs to me—it doesn't depend on anyone else," Caley says, and accepts scorn, shame, and death with that private faith alone to sustain him. This is the predicament and conviction of the saint, the traditional martyr to society's ignorance and cruelty; and the figure of Peggy Sanderson in *The Loved and the Lost* (1951), explicitly associated with the concept of sainthood, shows the latest stage in the growth

of this archetype. It is an artistic gain, I think, that the centre of attention is shifted from the saint, Peggy, to the man whose faith fails her at the crisis, McAlpine, who loves and loses her. Like Shaw, Callaghan apparently wanted to make all of us as readers feel implicated in the death of his saint, but he perhaps went a little too far in presenting her as a provocative, puzzling, and ambiguous character. Doubt is cast on the validity of that independent personal righteousness and faith which presumably Peggy possessed, like Dowling and Caley before her, and for which McAlpine is left searching at the end. But perhaps, after all, Callaghan intended it so. He may indeed have moved to that more complex and difficult view of life already more than hinted at in the earlier books, in which all the saints are ultimately ambiguous and unrecognizable if not demonstrably false, all the white snows melt away and all the peaceful little churches are lost in the labyrinthine cities of fallen men.

Looked at as a whole, Morley Callaghan's novels and stories take on a more impressive range and solidity than any one of them alone, except possibly *The Loved and the Lost*, would lead one to expect. There is no original philosophical thinking, nor should we demand it. A good deal of Callaghan's strength arises from his endeavour to carry out, over a period of two decades, a serious artistic exploration of human experience that makes use of the intellectual tools and weapons of the time. Sometimes, as in *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, the exploration continues too long on the level of rational discourse for the good of the novel, but at other times the dialectic of ideas finds an effective imaginative embodiment. In this Callaghan was aided, to a degree not previously known in Canada, by a wide range of discussion and argument in his society, by the critical reappraisals and the intellectual ferment of the 'twenties and 'thirties. He shared in both the radical insights into the nature of the social structure, and the profound and forceful responses which conservative institutions and individuals were obliged to make in the face of serious radical challenges. What richness there is in the thought and feeling of Callaghan's work beyond that of earlier Canadian urban novelists (and that is considerable) may be attributed, at least in part, to the greater vitality and diversity of opinion in the society depicted, and to a generally less inhibited play of thought. I am inclined to think that as an artist Morley Callaghan has given his society what it merited, though no more than that, and that in return his readers, with honourable exceptions, have given him rather less.