

MORLEY CALLAGHAN

A Broken Journey

1932; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1976. Pp. 270.

A Broken Journey was Callaghan's seventh book, and its republication is in the tradition of making all of an admitted "Master" accessible, whatever the embarrassment attending. Its story is uncomplicated. Marion Gibbons, returned to Toronto, finds her romance with lawyer Peter Gould failing through her mother's attraction to Peter as a surrogate for a former dead soldier-lover. Peter is driven to the arms of a tart but, reconciled with Marion, suffers broken vertebrae when deserting his companion. Together with his brother, Hubert, Peter and Marion idealistically retreat to Lake Superior's northern shore where, at a decaying "Mission," Peter grows steadily worse. Despite her desperate protests of happiness Marion surrenders to a local guide and, allegedly seeing in herself her mother's sensuality, returns to Toronto. The brothers remain, dislocated and inert in a now poisoned paradise. The novel has few other characters: an inexperienced priest unable to resolve Mrs. Gibbons's spiritual turmoil, an eager high-flown Anglo-Catholic minister, a bloated and ineffective doctor.

Callaghan's story labors stylistically in contrast to the narrative and emotional crispness of his earlier short stories, but it also agonizes through characters who are uninteresting, reduced as they are to degrees of passive suffering. None is particularly compelling: Mrs. Gibbons is consistently typed by her attempts to stave off evidence of aging, Hubert remains a functional conciliator and dogsbody, and Steve, the epitome of the wilderness environment, is too expressionless to be either human or "perfectly a part of this country" (p. 247). Only Peter begins to develop some personality in his paralysis. However, the episode of the priest, Father Sullivan (Chapter 12), is an excellent self-contained short story; the character is given depth and the incident is dramatically coherent.

A Broken Journey has appreciable "literary" touches, notably in fairly obtrusive symbolism: city-country, roses and gardens, a graveyard, weed-clogged water, making fire, mountain peaks. But the story is worked out doggedly, and ends in nullity;

the irony of human aspiration is a constant factor, as is the motif of breaking (vertebrae, marriage, relationships, proposed escapes, any sort of fulfillment). The novel does come alive in evocations of the Algoma Hills region, but successive and repetitious psychological-philosophical-ethical dialogues and ruminations often overload the environment. Peter, for instance, "seemed to feel by his own silence that his small lean body and his determination were suddenly pitiful on such a wide water with the vast reddening sky and the black rocky faces of the great rugged hills. The country could not give him the strength he had expected" (p. 159). Or Marion, *solus*: "It was like watching the night come on for the first time in a new world. . . . As the northern lights began to sweep vastly across the sky, she felt a strange harmony and peace all around her, and she felt herself groping toward it and trying to become a part of it" (p. 208). The country is vaguely menacing, or harmonizing, and it is the subject of some forced, thesis-oriented conversations; but instead of being convinced of their own significance, the characters stress their unimportance and frustration. The ideal of escape is impersonally defeated, in a very Canadian fashion, through talk of human smallness in Nature.

Marion, at least, is somewhat assertive within this self-imposed garrison. The country is a threat to her self-awareness and optimism; it saps her identity, while Peter exults in this erosion of his personality. Marion leaves, not because of an inheritance of sexuality, but because inactivity, metaphysics, and nature's vastness are erasing her self-definition. She reaches out for life and significance, while Peter wants "to have in him some of the loneliness of the country" (p. 182). He is left lonely and in shadow, a reminder of a man.

The psychology of *A Broken Journey* is valid, but its situations seem somehow inadequate to such a perspective. The novel turns from minimal action and interaction into thesis, the opposition of concepts, without an evolving consistency and with a curious flatness. Callaghan's recent *A Fine and Private Place* (1975) shows, among others, how far he has travelled in greater human variety and depth from such comparatively early fiction as the work in point.

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