Such Is My Beloved as Novelistic Parable

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This paper analyzes Morley Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved* as a parable-like novel, a designation commonly applied to it. Considering parables in their New Testament context, the form in which Callaghan would most frequently have encountered them, I explore parables' interpretative challenges and address critical disagreements over the novel in relation to parable theory. Focusing on a few key scenes, I explore how Callaghan's novel might read those who encounter it in the same way, that is, spiritually and transformatively, that parables often confront their hearers or readers.

In *That Summer in Paris*, Callaghan tells of his early conviction that good writing must "[t]ell the truth cleanly" (20) in words "transparent as glass" (21). A writer should not allow anything, not even metaphor or striking words, to come between the reader and the object of representation, which must be seen "freshly" for itself (19). Such transparency might at first seem to characterize *Such Is My Beloved*, a Depression-era novel often praised for its spare prose and simple, evocative story.[1] Drawing on the Catholic social theory of French philosopher Jacques Maritain, to whom the novel is dedicated, Callaghan tells of the sacrificial love of a young priest who attempts to help two prostitutes.[2] When his active concern for Midge and Ronnie brings him into conflict with parish leaders and ends with the girls forced to leave town, Father Dowling is at first maddened with grief and fear. In the novel's last scene, he is in a sanatorium and offers his sanity to God as a sacrifice for the girls' redemption. He thinks of his planned commentary on the biblical Song of Songs and is filled with love and peace.

Introducing the New Canadian Library edition of the novel, Malcolm Ross claims for it "the simplicity of parable" (vi), arguing that its thin, near-allegorical plot and characterization reveal Callaghan's debt to the stories of the New Testament. What Ross's astute reading of the novel's symbolic patterns also demonstrates, however, is that there is nothing really simple about parables, or about the novel's symbolic texture, in which Ross detects tensions held in ironic balance and ultimately clarified through biblical allusion. Moreover, the reception of *Such Is My Beloved* shows how deeply readers have been divided over its meaning: while most

acknowledge the goodness, or at least sincerity, of Father Dowling's love for Midge and Ronnie, they disagree about the story's wider application. Ambiguity rather than transparency has been central to the novel's effect and, as I want to suggest, to its lasting interest.

Critical disagreement has concerned such fundamental questions as whether the novel's vision is hopeful or despairing. A number of critics have emphasized Father Dowling's human and spiritual achievement, seeing him as both Christ-like and as a model of Christian service in the world. Ross is confident that in Father Dowling's giving of himself to others, "the mystical love of Christ endures in His members and the Song of Songs is heard in each generation" (xiii). Ray Ellenwood notes that the priest's love for the two prostitutes emphasizes the possibility of a world in which "the word ceases to be an abstraction and is made flesh" (45). Brandon Conron believes Callaghan's achievement to lie in his ability to picture individual love transforming society, a vision highlighting "the wonder of how people touch each others' lives and somehow, in spite of malice, broken faith, or even death, can grow in understanding, tolerance and compassion" (98). And Hugo McPherson is enthusiastic in declaring that "though Father Dowling has failed by all temporal standards in his quest, he has, in the best sense of the Christian faith, triumphed" (67).[3]

Other critics, however, are far more skeptical, noting the flaws in Father Dowling's character and the impracticability of his hope for social change. George Woodcock comments that the priest's "haunting of the prostitutes he decides to befriend" (97) hardly presents a viable program for social justice. For Daniel Aaron, Father Dowling's failure to help Ronnie and Midge "underscore[s] the futility of trying to reconstruct society according to Christian principles" (29). Father Dowling is an essentially good man, Aaron argues, whose love is real but ineffectual: he "confuse[s] appearances with realities and fails to break down the barriers between himself and the persons to whom he feels most closely drawn" (34).[4] Larry McDonald goes further to see *Such Is My Beloved* as a pessimistic novel in which the hero's effect on his society "is negligible," a fact demonstrating that "such attempts to change the social environment are predestined to fail" and that "Callaghan does not believe in the possibility of organizing and planning change according to the dogma, as he would have it, of some religion or political philosophy" (89). Glenn Willmott, too, charges that Father Dowling "fails adequately to recreate the ideals in reality which motivate and justify him psychologically" (37).

Perhaps the stark difference in opinion divides mainly along religious lines: those who are sympathetic to Callaghan's Catholicism will tend to

see his work as both more hopeful and more coherent than will those who assess his writing according to strictly secular criteria. Secularists have often regarded traditional Christian answers to suffering as inadequate. Certainly Larry McDonald is impatient with readings of Callaghan's work that presume on his Catholic beliefs. Finding no evidence in Callaghan's fiction of a world view positing original sin or life after death, McDonald prefers to value the novels for their Freudian and Marxian analyses and their interest in the influence of environment on human consciousness; such an approach leaves him only partially satisfied with Callaghan's achievement but nonetheless convinced that he is "a much more challenging, interesting and 'modern' writer when we clear away all the beguiling abstractions of Christian personalism and situate him in the concerns of his place and time in history" (94). The Christian reader, in contrast, may well be interested in precisely those areas that McDonald wishes to disregard, preferring to view his "beguiling abstractions" as profound theological mysteries.

Yet even amongst readers sympathetic to Callaghan's worldview, some have noted a failure to resolve the tensions between the secular and spiritual planes. Barbara Pell, in particular, is uneasy with the manner in which *Such Is My Beloved* provides a resolution "valid only in the spiritual, symbolic realm," while apparently leaving "the secular tragedy unresolved" (84). Given that the whole novel is about Father Dowling's "struggle to redeem the secular world with the love of Christ," his practical defeat at the novel's end "cannot totally convince the reader, especially the non-Christian, of [that love's] existential and dramatic relevance" (84). I am not so certain that Father Dowling's love has been shown to have had no effect, a point to be touched upon later, but I want to suggest that unresolved tension is evident even—or perhaps especially—at the "spiritual" level of the narrative, highlighting the novel's preference for open-ended challenge over clear resolution. In the pages that follow, then, I will discuss ambiguity as a rhetorical strategy that may provoke the reader's spiritual as well as intellectual and emotional engagement.

A consideration of parables is useful as a guide to Callaghan's method, for an affinity between parables and his fiction has long been recognized.[5] Barry Cameron describes all of Callaghan's fiction, but especially the earlier work, as "neither 'realistic' nor 'allegorical'" but rather "parabolic" (69). In such work, Cameron explains, "our immediate interest is in narrative events and the behavior of characters, yet our ultimate interest is in the application of the moral truths generated by the fiction" (69).[6] As recorded in the Gospel texts of the Bible, parables are stories of ordinary life told to

provoke a response and to initiate listeners into an experience of God.[7] Their force is often derived from a quality of surprise or even shock in their telling: in the immediate forgiveness of a father for his reprobate son, for example, or the identification of a Samaritan as more godly than two devout Jews. These features give parables a biting force or narrative twist that can illuminate a new way of seeing, bringing listeners to a point of decision and action. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understands them as part of Jesus' call to costly commitment and transformation (70-78).

The interpretative challenge of a parable is that it invites readers to apply its moral to their lives while leaving the precise application to be discovered. C.H. Dodd defines a parable by its quality of "arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (5). According to John Dominic Crossan, parables communicate not "good precepts" and "sensible programs," which is what we tend to want, but an "experience of the Kingdom" (80), often deliberately disorienting precisely because the Kingdom of God is beyond ordinary thought patterns. Interpretation is thus fraught with the likelihood of error and incomprehension. Sallie McFague writes of Jesus' parables that they are "paradigms that can serve as spurs to the imagination for personal application but never as examples to be slavishly imitated or as principles from which rules for concrete action can be deduced" (155). Even sincere truth-seekers such as the disciples required the assistance of Jesus to "read" them correctly, and Jesus suggests that many hearers will be unable to penetrate to his parables' core truth.[8]

One may say that the parable interprets the listener/reader as much as it is interpreted. Those who possess faith and imaginative vision can see the parable's application while others will prove themselves morally blind. In Cameron's words, "It is the listener, then, who places himself in one category or the other by his response to the parable" (71). This is not to suggest that readers who do not appreciate Callaghan's fiction are spiritually blind, but it may account for the fact that readers engaged by the challenges of the Christian life may be particularly compelled by the novels' parabolic aspects.[9] At their best, such fictions reveal their meaning through the reader's exercise of "intuitive vision" (Cameron 71) and moral discernment; they require attention, reflection, and some willingness to dwell in uncertainty. At worst, they may be propagandistic rather than parabolic, neither requiring nor allowing the reader's discernment; or they may be simply impenetrable.

Cameron addresses the interpretative difficulties of Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* (he does not discuss *Such Is My Beloved*), finding that the novel is at least manipulative, and perhaps even propagandistic, in its parabolic strategies. According to Cameron, the novel conditions readers to identify with the main character, who wrongly doubts the woman he loves. At the novel's end, the woman's innocence is revealed, and the narrative thus rebukes the man who doubted her—and readers—for a response the novel has made almost unavoidable. In other words, the reader is "forced to doubt Peggy's innocence" (75) in preparation for the condemning revelation that she *is* innocent. This is the provocative twist by which some parables are distinguished. Something equally ambiguous, though perhaps not so manipulative, occurs in *Such Is My Beloved*, in which the narrative first makes it possible to doubt Father Dowling before challenging, though not resolving, the doubt.

Such doubt is generated by narrative details that complicate our response to the passionate young priest. His belief that his feeling for Midge and Ronnie "must surely partake of the nature of divine love" (21) is almost immediately undercut, or at least troubled, by his practice of giving money and gifts to the girls. They need the money (though they don't spend it on food or other necessities), but it is troubling to see Dowling casting himself in the role not of helper or comforter but of client, paying for his time just as every other customer pays. In addition, the relationship leads him to neglect others who are legitimately under his care, including his mother, to whom he stops his regular gifts of money. As his love for Midge and Ronnie becomes more intimate and intense, a corresponding bitterness towards, and sense of alienation from, his community also increases, causing him to distance himself from fellow priests, lose interest in his parishioners, and condemn the wife of a wealthy lawyer from whom he requests assistance.

Perhaps most seriously, he makes increasingly more extreme assumptions about his mission, believing that loving Ronnie and Midge brings him closer "to understanding and loving God" (47), that only he can understand or love them, and "that through them he could love [...] every one else who touched them" (94). None of these prove his love false, and we need not go so far as D.J. Dooley in suspecting that "personal attraction to [the girls] is...warping his judgement" (63), but the details do qualify his claim to love the girls "as God must love everybody in the world" (47). The problem is precisely that Father Dowling *cannot* love all as God does, and that his love for the girls seems at times actually to inhibit his ability to act with love towards others.

This problem of interpretation is heightened by Callaghan's narrative style, in which, as Milton Wilson remarks, we are struck by "the terrifying ambiguity of the main characters, the final impenetrability of their motives and identity" (81), and unsure how and whether to distinguish between Father Dowling's perceptions and those of the novel's third-person narrator.[10] When Father Dowling exclaims over Christian platitudes about the poor that "You can't be a Christian when you're hungry and have no place to sleep, for then you're hardly responsible for what you do" (51), we are unsure whether to regard this as a Thomist truth or a misguided rationalization of the girls' lives. When he imagines, after hearing the confession of a young man who has visited a local prostitute, that the prostitute's body bears the sexual sins of the community not unlike Jesus bore the sins of humankind, we are not sure whether to regard the comparison as a sharp moral insight or sentimental delusion (or blasphemy).[11] The fact that scriptural allusion and religious symbolism associate both Father Dowling and Midge with the suffering Christ on the way to Calvary[12] may be just the kind of disorienting detail that jolts us into a fresh understanding of God's grace. Or not. And if we must conclude that such moments in the narrative are finally ambiguous—capable of at least two interpretations—is the ambiguity a useful and productive one or an example of novelistic incoherence? At the very least, as I hope to show, these troubling details tend to intensify the reader's response to the novel's central moral subject.

Many scenes might be chosen to explore such interpretative ambiguity. An example occurs near the beginning of the novel, just after Father Dowling has first encountered Midge and Ronnie. He is hearing confession on a wintry Thursday night, at first "listening tirelessly to girls and old men, and giving himself sympathetically to their sorrow for the slightest sin" (22). But he becomes weary by the time of the last confession when he encounters "a young hysterical girl who seemed to him to be making up a chain of small sins so that she could imagine herself full of remorse" (22). He tells her rather dismissively that "Every time you have an opinion about your neighbour you're not committing a mortal sin. Don't you understand that?" He gives her absolution "very quickly" and smiles in relief when she leaves the confession box. He thinks of the two prostitutes and decides to visit them, suddenly feeling that all of his work as a priest "seemed groping and incomplete" outside of his attempt to rehabilitate these young women. Leaving the church, he experiences "a peculiar exhilaration and joy" (23) in thinking of them. The hysterical girl is forgotten.

There are at least three ways to interpret this passage, in which the priest is mildly scornful of one young penitent and full of compassion for the two

prostitutes. One is to accept with the priest that the young woman with her "fictitious sin and her fancied penitence" (23) does not require his sustained sympathetic attention. Even keeping in mind that it is not for him to judge the state of another's soul or to decide whether a sin is real or fictitious, and that Catholic teaching enjoins self-examination for even relatively minor sins, he may be correct in his estimation of the frivolity of the girl's confession. Perhaps she enjoys the attention of the handsome young confessor and is, for self-serving reasons—or due to narcissism or false piety—taking pleasure in cataloguing her faults and not genuinely seeking spiritual guidance and absolution. Probably she has friends and a loving family to whom she can turn for support. Midge and Ronnie, in contrast, are friendless and exploited; their state is far more desperate and pitiable than that of the (presumably) pampered girl, and it is reasonable that Father Dowling should be struck by the difference between the girl's anxieties and the shame and "simple friendliness" of the two prostitutes. As he leaves the church in the hope of visiting with Ronnie and Midge, he has a strong rush of conviction that his attention to them is a way of glorifying God. He is experiencing his ministry to the outcast with fresh immediacy.

The second reading resists Father Dowling's perspective, judging his response to the girl as uncharitable and inappropriately influenced by idealization of Midge and Ronnie. The priest's indifference to this member of his parish manifests his failure to stand in the place of Christ offering God's forgiveness to repentant sinners. It is shocking to find him wondering "whether he should explain [to the girl] that a priest ought not to be worried by such trifles" in the future. Consciously or unconsciously, he is establishing a hierarchy of spiritual need based on social position and appearance. Rather than making him more sympathetic to erring humanity—capable of "loving the whole world" (159), as he imagines—Father Dowling's encounter with Midge and Ronnie seems to have made him less able to feel compassion for at least some of his parishioners, particularly those he believes to be cushioned from reality by their social status.

Nothing in the girl's actions indicates that she is insincere in examining her thoughts and words; on the contrary, she is right to care about her relations with family and neighbours, seeking to love them rather than merely behave well. She is presented as timid and unsure of herself rather than self-serving or "hysterical," "startled" by the priest's abruptness and quick to accept his censure. Far from asserting herself or betraying selfish annoyance, she drops her head and whispers her assent when the priest corrects her. The fact that she seems "unable to lift her head" after he expresses impatience indicates that she is embarrassed, chastened, perhaps even

fighting back tears. His inability to feel anything but relief when she leaves, or even to accept her confession as sincere, may suggest an element of idolatry in his developing attitude towards Ronnie and Midge. In a short time, his relationship with them has become the measure of all human interactions, their responses his standard of genuine humanity. In contrast to the seemingly false contrition of the girl, he wonders at the "something very beautiful and real about their [the prostitutes'] regret" (23).

This is a legitimate if potentially wrong-headed reading that is appropriate to the parabolic dimensions of the scene. Some of the most well-known parables of Jesus are troubling in just the way this scene is troubling, seeming to betray a kind of favouritism on the part of God. The parable of the Lost Sheep asks which shepherd would not abandon ninety-nine sheep to search for the one lost, and states that the rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner is more jubilant than that for many righteous men, seeming to indicate that the salvation of some souls is more fervently desired by God than that of others. In the related parable of the Prodigal Son, the father's treatment of the older son who has worked for him indicates at least a failure of sensitivity towards him, if not outright preference for the younger son who rejected and shamed him. If parables read their listeners/readers as much as we read them, it may be that Father Dowling's certainty about those most deserving of compassion works to prick at some readers' sense of righteousness or grievance, our tendency to identify with the dutiful rather than the ungrateful—thus pointing up our ingratitude. In responding to the scene, we are invited to question our sense of entitlement or grudging envy. Annoyance with the priest may be brought up short by the recognition that he does, after all, give absolution to the girl, which is perhaps all she required. But Father Dowling is not God and not infallible, thus leaving his judgements open to question.

The third reading gives weight to another detail in the passage: the fact that Father Dowling has been hearing confession for an hour and a half, and is "very weary" when the young girl enters the confessional. He has been sympathetic and patient with all who have made confession up until this point, and now he fails. The emotional satisfaction and sense of urgency associated with Midge and Ronnie, which make him ardent and compassionate, are missing from his encounter with a girl whose life, in contrast to theirs, is safe and conventional. Father Dowling's failing in this moment may be real, but it is not grievous and does not prove anything about his other feeling for Ronnie and Midge. Human love may, indeed, partake of divine love, but it is also human: distracted and imperfect. Perhaps Callaghan's concern is to show how in the midst of failures, divine

love lights up human encounters, even if only in brief flashes. Father Dowling is a fallen human being who, in his love for Ronnie and Midge only, reveals a Christ-like love.

This may seem merely a long-winded way of concluding what Daniel Aaron sums up neatly in saying that Dowling is "an imperfect servant of Christ and all too human" (33). Though all three readings might be, to some extent, resolved into this generalization, the case is complex and deliberately ambiguous. It matters to Callaghan's story whether and in what ways Father Dowling fails in love or mistakenly abrogates to himself the powers of God, and the novel's scenes are set up to complicate our response in the way I have suggested above. It is not enough to say that he is "all too human," though he is, because the novel is so concerned with the question of precisely how and under what circumstances human love can approach the condition of the divine.

Aaron diagnoses Father Dowling's failure as stemming from a mixture of arrogance and naïveté, "an unwarranted confidence in [his] power to uplift the fallen" and a "faith…that simplifies or sentimentalizes human nature" (33). In other words, he believes too strongly in himself and in human innocence. Victor Hoar also criticizes Dowling's confidence, which "does not yet really understand people" (94). Yet this line of argument seems inadequate, for one of the remarkable aspects of Father Dowling's sympathy with Ronnie and Midge is his ability to recognize and accept their obduracy: he is neither bothered by their lies nor sentimentally convinced of their moral improvement. In fact the novel suggests that the priest's presence *does* have a moral effect on them, as in the passage when Midge tries to pray in prison, thinking with hope and gratitude of "the gentleness in his smile" (135). If Father Dowling does err, which is not certain, it is not in "unwarranted confidence" in the power of love. Careful discriminations are invited by the story, for readers are encouraged to assess at every stage of Father Dowling's experience how close or far he is from his ideal and to consider what it means, practically, to love unselfishly. Ambiguity engages us in moral considerations: how we choose among the needy and when love becomes idolatry or obsession.

There is perhaps a fourth response to the scene in the confessional that to some extent unravels the complicated discriminations and rationale given above. This response recognizes that, not unlike the parable of the Good Samaritan, the confessional scene takes its affective charge from its reversal of a social hierarchy. What matters, according to this recognition, are not the details of the priest's thoughts and actions, whether or not he is right in his assessment of the young woman with her string of fancied

transgressions, whether or not he belittles her in assuming her struggles less meaningful than those of the prostitutes. What matters is his joyful choice to minister to two outcasts rather than to a more acceptable person. Parables often affect us through their element of reversal, their overturning of expectations, not in their offering of a precise program of right actions and doctrine. This is why, according to some biblical scholars, it is important not to over-read a parable's details. The fact that a Samaritan—a reviled person in 1st century Jewish communities—is shown to be good, not the moral lesson in his actions, is what overturns the world of Jesus' listeners, according to Crossan.[13] Similarly, we recognize that Father Dowling is most Christ-like in loving those who are most unloved.

In setting readers to ponder this scene, Callaghan achieves a number of effects. As already stated, the reader is encouraged to compare the priest's situation to real-life situations in which similar questions arise about the translation of divine imperatives, or human moral principles, into specific relationships and actions. Such situations are often fraught with moral ambiguities that are worth pondering, so long as the pondering does not prevent action. Perhaps more importantly, the scene encourages in the reader both an interest in truth—in how Father Dowling is correctly to be judged—and an orientation towards an absolute standard of judgement. In other words, we may be uncertain about the final word on Father Dowling, but we accept that there is a final word. In the earlier quotation by Milton Wilson about Callaghan's "terrifying ambiguity" (81), Wilson explains himself by emphasizing how little the reader can ultimately know Callaghan's characters: "The gods may know where Kip Caley finally stands between the extremes of relapsed thief and crucified Messiah or what lies behind the shifting features of Father Dowling—lover, madman, redeemer, egotist— […] but we are not gods' spies or gods' sergeants" (81). Just as in life, we doubt our ability to judge Father Dowling, but our doubt has meaning in relation to an absolute standard of goodness by which the priest's actions can be understood. Narrative ambiguity thus does not negate, and perhaps even confirms and points towards, an ultimate truth.

Such truth is again at issue in a later scene involving Mrs. Robison, the elegant wife of a wealthy lawyer. Father Dowling has hoped that she will take an interest in Ronnie and Midge, but instead she is offended when he brings them to her home. In contrast to Jesus with the woman found in adultery, Mrs. Robison does not see the humanity of the girls, instead objectifying them as feeble-minded degenerates, and does not hesitate to cast stones of condemnation. Smug and vicious, she is the least sympathetic character in the novel, more hateful even than Ronnie's violent lover

and pimp Lou, who is at least capable of genuine feeling. The presentation of the scene makes it difficult to resist sharing Father Dowling's outraged reaction. Stung by her contempt, Dowling rebukes her for lack of charity, "star[ing] at her rudely with his face full of indignation" (112). Should he have tempered his anger to spare her feelings? The reader will likely doubt it: she deserves the rebuke. The scene offers no evidence that Mrs. Robison possesses any feelings beside offended pride; and her uncomplicated nastiness is arguably a weakness of Callaghan's novel, giving the lie to his self-proclaimed fascination with the "potentiality of good and evil in every human being" (Callaghan qtd. in Ellenwood 39).

Most readers have approved the scene's clear judgement, in which Mrs. Robison represents the hypocrisy of the institutional church and its preference for respectability over the gospel. No understanding or sympathy is warranted. As Father Dowling walks away from the Robison home, however, his subsiding anger allows for narrative comment and his self-reflection. In a novel interested in the failures of Christians to live the hard teachings of the gospel, one might look for some reference to that most difficult commandment to love one's enemies. Mrs. Robison is a parishioner with whom Father Dowling has had a long and cordial relationship; if he does not (yet) feel concern for her spiritual state, he might nonetheless wonder what has so hardened her heart. Certainly we expect him to be concerned about the reactions of Ronnie and Midge: will this incident confirm their suspicion of the Church? Might it drive a wedge between them and Father Dowling? But he thinks of none of this, full of self-pity and aggrievedly aware that he has been put out of the Robison house "just as though he were the neighbourhood nuisance" (113). Arriving back at the cathedral, he regards its steeple cross with "no sudden affection but just a cool disgust, as if the church no longer belonged to him" (113). It doesn't belong to him, of course, but to Christ, who calls his followers to die to self, and in this scene Dowling's offended and outraged self-consciousness is foregrounded.[14] What had seemed one of the cruder moments of the novel, with Mrs. Robison's hypocrisy an object lesson for readers, becomes potentially an occasion to consider how compromised may be our purest moments of righteous outrage.

Throughout the novel, Father Dowling frequently understands—and readers are implicitly invited to doubt—that he acts according to a divine imperative. On the first night after meeting Ronnie and Midge, he prays "that he might have the full care of their souls so he could safeguard them" (21). As the narrative develops, he frequently reflects on matters such as the nature of sin and atonement, becoming convinced that he knows the

mind of God in a way that his fellow priests and Bishop do not. Intuitions become certainties and vague wishes become statements of theology, as when he reflects that Midge's tendency to burst out laughing reveals an attitude "really Christian in the best sense of the word" (58) because it manifests an ability to find the eternal in the fleeting moment (she is at the same time thinking that he's not bad looking and might become a client).[15] Out of his anger at the failure of the Robisons to assist Midge and Ronnie comes his conviction of the prostitutes' innocence in the eyes of God. "Wherever they are, whatever they're doing," he assures himself, "God would forgive them now" (124).

Whether these are arrogant presumptions or intimations of love's knowledge remain open questions. We may feel that the priest's sense of lostness when he discovers the girls gone (142) indicates the extent to which he has come to rely on them for his sense of purpose; here are the beginnings of the anguish and despair that threaten to claim him near the story's end. Still, rather like Mr. Robison, compelled by Father Dowling's love and sincerity even against his own judgement, we also are likely "curious to understand this love, this eagerness which did not seem like any emotion [we] had ever felt" (102). The narrative is ambiguous concerning the point at which Father Dowling's certainties become signs of the delusion that eventually clouds his mind. If we do not dismiss out of hand that some individuals *do* hear God, we are yet uncertain about many of Father Dowling's particular judgements.

Evidence that such ambiguities are deliberately evoked can be found in the encounter between Father Dowling and Bishop Foley near the novel's end. Speaking about the potential scandal of the priest's relationship with the prostitutes, the Bishop articulates many of the reservations that I have rehearsed above, telling the young priest that what began as a spark of "divine love" for Midge and Ronnie gradually became "a purely human love," in which "they [the girls] themselves were more important than the sinfulness they represented" (157). He cautions the young priest against a dangerous naiveté, warning him about "carnal satisfaction" in being close to the girls (156) and "arrogance" (157) in thinking himself able to help them with his mere presence. Throughout the conversation, Bishop Foley is anxious to address the "nature of this love" "as a philosophical problem" (157) in an analytical exercise not unlike what I have attempted. Underneath his admonitions are his worldly concern to protect his diocese from scandal just prior to a fundraising campaign. The Bishop is a venial but not thoroughly corrupt man, and he too is moved, despite himself, by Father

Dowling's declaration that he loved the girls—and helped them—in the only way he could: "for themselves" (157).

In a later scene, we witness the Bishop dissatisfied with the encounter, feeling himself in danger of hardness of heart, "trying to grip and hold his own conscience," and still wrestling with the problem of the young priest's "too concrete" love. Into his examination of conscience intrudes the thought of "the word made flesh" (162), a reference, of course, to the incarnation, in which God took on human flesh to demonstrate His love for humanity. The phrase also refers to the imperative of Christ's followers to embody love for others. In defending his actions to the Bishop, Father Dowling had provided a compelling picture of what such love is like, incidentally proving his lack of naiveté: "I know the girls often deceived me, Your Grace, but does it matter that they did? I don't think so. Supposing they deceived me again and again. Was I to become impatient or weary, or abandon them, out of disappointment?" (156).

In having the Bishop raise, and Father Dowling answer, the very questions that readers have been led to raise—about naiveté, extremism, lack of prudence—the novel seems to clarify that the human particularity and partiality of Father Dowling's love for Ronnie and Midge is exactly what love must be. To suggest that reflection, doubt, caution, and judgment should take the place of spontaneous obedience to Christ's command—to see the question of love as a philosophical problem, as the Bishop does, rather than a matter of immediate action—is radically to mistake the meaning of Jesus' ministry, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues in *The Cost of Discipleship*.[16] And yet still the Bishop's self-condemnation and the attractiveness of Father Dowling's self-defence may not entirely quell our doubts. The Bishop has only partial knowledge of Father Dowling's heart and has not seen, as we have, the extent to which his passion for the girls has absorbed him and incapacitated him for other acts of love and compassion. Moreover, we may well feel uneasy with Father Dowling's answer that he loved the girls "for themselves." For if Christianity is about loving people for themselves, it is also about loving people who are not in any obvious sense loveable (like the Robisons? Lou?). Our questions about how Father Dowling has loved are likely, then, to continue.

At the end of the narrative, ambiguity is at last replaced by certainty as Father Dowling is flooded with the love of God, "as wide as the water, and still flowing within him like the cold smooth waves still rolling on the shore" (173). Bereft of his reason and betrayed by his church, he is confident in God's acceptance of his sacrifice and hopeful that "periods of clarity" will enable him to work on his Song of Songs commentary. Here the

ambiguities of the story find their uneasy resolution in the paradoxes of the Christian faith, so offensive to skeptical reason, in which suffering and defeat are the ground of glory and the true measure of victory in Christ. The "three stars" in the night sky would seem to confirm the presence of God's steadfast love, and Father Dowling's own. He has truly loved. But his holy suffering does not fully resolve questions about his prior actions and decisions, which remain incalculable and troubling. Some of these actions were perhaps mistaken, diminishing the good he might have done and exacerbating his own suffering. On the other hand, a reader's uneasiness in the face of Father Dowling's scandalous certainty may reflect a preference for rules—for doubt and reflection—as a way of dodging commitment. It may be that Dowling's commitment forces readers to consider how analysis can become a means of avoiding costly love. That both readings seem legitimate suggests the extent to which *Such Is My Beloved* employs the parabolic mode, in which a simple story at once mundane and disorienting invites a personal response and opens onto the absolute.

Notes

1 Victor Hoar commends Callaghan's "controlled, sustained narratives of disarming simplicity" (98). Brandon Conron notes approvingly that "Although the narrative element is thin and the characters are few, the book is rich in symbol and irony" (79).

2 For a helpful discussion of the influence on the novel of Maritain's incarnational humanism, and of neo-Thomism generally, see William Closson James.

3 See also John W. Burbidge, who argues that Dowling's "divine love, powerless and apparently ineffective, is the kind of love to which the church and the committed Christian should always aspire" (112).

4 It is perhaps worth noting that Aaron has high praise for the novel overall. Comparing *Such Is My Beloved* to two other Depression novels, he concludes that "Only in Callaghan's novel does the author successfully depersonalize himself and enter calmly and disinterestedly into his characters, the pleasant and the unpleasant alike. Without being in any way tendentious, he strings his novel with invisible but unbending guidelines, and his world, if out of joint, is repairable" (35).

5 See, for example, Patricia Morley (12, 27), Victor Hoar (105), and Hugo McPherson (67).

6 It is worth noting here that one member of the Callaghan symposium, Brandon Conron, at which Cameron presented his paper on parabolic fiction, dissented from the view that Callaghan's work is about moral truth, stressing the novels' aesthetic rather than moral qualities.

7 Parables and allegories are often discussed together as if the terms were interchangeable. Most scholars, however, distinguish parables from allegories, seeing allegories as stories that illuminate a moral truth or scenario that can be separated from its telling. They are stories "whose several points refer individually and collectively to some other event which is both concealed and revealed in the narration" requiring "careful point by

point decoding" (Crossan 7). The parable, in contrast, "is a metaphor of normalcy which intends to create participation in its referent" (Crossan 15). Its meaning cannot be extracted from the story itself, which creates the experience it is teaching about. It is admittedly a difficult distinction to maintain.

8 See, for example, Matt. 13: 13, in which Jesus states that "The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'"

9 According to John Dominic Crossan, "Parables and analogies are notoriously weak in converting or convincing those who are not open to their vision or are clearly opposed to their purpose, but they are just as notoriously persuasive for those who are at least open to their challenge" (73).

10 Patricia Morley comments that the narrator's "irony alerts us to things the priest ignores" and finds "a great deal of humour" (29) throughout the narrative. But while Morley does name a number of comic scenes (including the "debunking of the Robisons," a scene I do not find comic), she does not explicitly show how we are to recognize and read the novel's irony.

11 Morley takes an unusual stance in assuming that "The girls' work is not valueless. The confession of a young man makes the priest realize how close his parishioners are, and how good, in many ways, this vitality is" (28). To suggest that Father Dowling realizes that prostitution is in some ways good, though a plausible modern reading of prostitution, seems to make nonsense of the priest's concern for Midge and Ronnie.

12 In the scene of the meal shared between the priest and the girls, special emphasis is placed on Father Dowling's "graciousness" in pouring wine for them "as if he were a host at a banquet" (131). On that same night, Midge and Ronnie are arrested, and as they leave the hotel, Midge "slipped and fell, hurting her knee," eliciting laughter from the watching crowd. The parallels to biblical and Catholic teaching are striking: at the Last Supper between Christ and his followers, Jesus pours wine for the disciples and tells them to remember His love for them; during His painful journey to Calvary the next day, He falls while carrying his cross and is subject to the taunts of the watching crowd.

13 Crossan explains his argument as follows: "The whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction in terms: Good + Samaritan.... When good (clerics) and bad (Samaritan) become, respectively, bad and good, a world is being challenged and we are faced with polar reversal" (62-63).

14 This is, admittedly, an unorthodox reading, as most critics read Father Dowling's disgust as an example of his proper sorrow and "withdrawal from an ungodly culture" (James 41).

15 Morley sees no distance between narrator and character here, accepting Father Dowling's assessment as narrative truth in order to proclaim that "Midge is even capable of a Christian perception of 'the eternal in the immediate' that escapes the bishop" (28).

16 In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer has stern words for those who prefer philosophical hair-splitting to obedience to Christ's call: "Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience. We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbour or not. We must get into action and obey ..." (78).

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