

WILLARD MOTLEY AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL NOVEL

When the Negro author Willard Motley published his first novel in 1947, the *New York Times* heralded him as «an extraordinary and powerful new naturalistic talent¹», and the *New Republic* found his *Knock on Any Door* even finer than anything by Dreiser². Literary reviews and journals began at once to discuss his book and his ideas; the movie industry saw its chance and turned the novel into a powerful motion picture; the daily press focussed public attention and interest on him, thus making the young Chicago Negro all of a sudden to one of the great modern American literati.

Willard Motley was born in Chicago, on July 14, 1912. He attended grammar and high school in the same town and established something of a reputation as a football player. Half-back was his position, and «The Little Iron Man» his sports-page nickname. Willard's greatest wish was to go to college, but «his 135 pounds and his funds were not enough»³, and so he had to give up his scholarly intentions. But Motley was not dejected. He made the best of his situation and set out to study the world instead of books. He left his native Chicago and began to tour the American continent, taking whatever job came to hand. So far Willard Motley has made four continental trips — by bicycle, by «jalopy», by thumb, and by brake rods. Touring the United States, he has earned his living as a football player, ranch hand, migratory laborer, cook, dishwasher, salesman, waiter, janitor, chauffeur, laboratory technician, handy man, and radio-script

¹ *New York Times*, May 4, 1947.

² *The New Republic*; quoted as found in KUNITZ & COLBY, *Twentieth Century Authors*, 1st Supplement (The H. W. Wilson Co., N. Y., 1955) p. 694.

³ *Ibidem*.

writer. He has also worked as a housing authority interviewer and as a writer for the Office of Civilian Defense. He has known the juke joints, the Negro sections, the hobo camps, and the flop of several dozen States. He has even served a jail sentence in Cheyenne, Wyoming — thirty days for vagrancy.

During his days of wandering Willard Motley began to think of a career as a writer. He had always been interested in literature, but now he wanted an active role in it, and so he began to write short stories. Success was sparse. His stories did not sell. Motley tried different genres of literature, but only his radio scripts found approval. About his early creative period the now well-known author says himself:

As far as writing is concerned I went through several periods starting with trying to write short stories for pulp sport magazines. I even tried writing «confessions». Finally I moved to the slums of Chicago after being bored in the middle-class neighborhood in which I was reared and there discovered myself and the sort of thing I wanted to put on paper⁴.

The thing which Motley discovered in the slum area of Chicago was the sordid, bleak, and cheerless existence of its poverty-stricken inhabitants:

They are all broken-down. The young and the old. They are the lost, looking for the lost. Their funeral dirge is the juke box played so loudly that they have to shout to hear each other, tombstone to tombstone⁵.

It took him six years of hard work to study the bleak details of slum life and to put all the arousing facts on paper. But when *Knock on Any Door* did appear on the market, it met with high approval and made a tremendous stir in the United States.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ WILLARD MOTLEY, *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, (Signet, N. Y., 1959) p. 202.

The protagonist of Motley's passion-packed narrative is Nick Romano, the handsome and innocent-looking son of an Italian businessman, who piously serves as an altar boy in a Denver Catholic church and has set his heart on being a priest. However, when the family loses its means and savings during the depression years and is forced to move to a poor, disreputable district, young Nick begins to associate with delinquent boys who impress him with their open contempt for adult authority and begin to spoil his character. Through their influence Nick gets involved in a petty crime for which he is sent to a reform school, the worst possible environment for a boy with an unbalanced character. There are no better words to describe Nick's hopeless situation than the « welcome speech » of a young reform school derelict for the new boys: « Whatever you have done, when you come here you are almost like an angel. They make worse crooks out of you »⁶.

And the treatment which the boys get from their wardens must, perforce, make hard-bitten, incorrigible criminals out of them: they are beaten and brutalized, starved and tormented, and thus driven to active and passive negativism which from now on will dominate their lives and make them hate Society. This is the very treatment which makes Nick swear that:

...he'd never be sorry for anything he ever did again. He'd never go crawling home asking forgiveness again. He'd never try to reform now. He was on Tommy's side. All the way. For good. For ever⁷.

When the family moves to Chicago, Mr. Romano takes Nick out of reform school and takes him along to Illinois. But his change of situation is none the better for Nick. In Chicago he begins to pal around with bums, hobos, pimps, and homosexuals, and very soon he is sent to reform school again. When he is released from the Adolescent Home after several weeks, Nick is completely lost for Society. The only

⁶ W. MOTLEY, *Knock on Any Door* (Fontana Books, London, 1956) p. 57.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

person who can influence him somewhat is Emma, his sister's girl friend, whom he has married in a rush of decency and love. But Nick has never learned to work; he cannot hold any job; he loses his wages in crap games and is forced to turn criminal again in order to provide money for his wife. He gets involved in a hold-up, is caught and sent to prison for a year. But neither the penitentiary nor his loving wife can change Nick. When he begins to run around again with his poolroom friends after his release, Emma sees no other way out of her dilemma than death: she turns on the gas and commits suicide. Her death takes the last spark of decency out of Nick. He turns full-time gangster, goes on a daring «stick-up job», is pursued by the police and, trying to escape his pursuers, shoots Riley, the tough policeman.

So far so good. The action is fast-moving, touching and arousing, and fully deserves the high commendation which it received from the *New Republic* when it said that the novel was more praiseworthy than anything by Dreiser:

... there is greater artistry here, more sensitivity to the trials of the human personality and more richness of detail and description ... Some may be repelled by the sordid lives it portrays, but none can come away from it without a feeling of sympathy for the Italian youth turned gangster⁸.

Unfortunately, Willard Motley has written a second part to his poignant novel, in which he wants to persuade the reader that the criminal was the victim of Society before becoming its foe. Nick's friend in need, Grant Holloway, asks Morton, the well-known lawyer, to defend Nick in court. The trial itself is a farce. Morton and his side present deliberately false evidence and shameful lies to whitewash the killer. The whole procedure is disgusting, and the apex of disgust is reached when Morton calls the prosecuting attorney a shyster⁹. The only excuse that can be offered for Morton's

⁸ Quoted as found in KUNITZ & COLBY, *Op. cit.*, p. 694.

⁹ W. MOTLEY, *Op. cit.*, p. 398.

scandalous behavior is his professional knowledge that « a case is not a matter of facts but of evidence »¹⁰, and his keen interest in sociology:

...my belief in the brotherhood of man forces me to do everything in my power to save the life of a boy who is — I believe — the victim of his environment¹¹.

Motley, the sociologist, uses Morton, the lawyer, as his mouthpiece to accuse Society:

Society is you and I and all of us. We — Society — are hard and weak and stupid and selfish. We are full of brutality and hate. We reproach environment and call it crime. We reproach crime — or what we choose to label crime — without taking personal responsibility. We reproach the victims of our making and whether they are innocent or not once we bring them before the court, the law, Society — once we try them, we try them without intelligence, without sympathy, without understanding...¹² Nick Romano was murdered seven years ago! I so charge! I accuse — Society! — of the murder of Nick Romano! Society... you and I... all of us... we... the good people! — murdered — Nick Romano! Why is he here before us? We ordered him here! We brutalized him and murdered him and we made this rendez-vous with him seven years ago...¹³.

The material presented so far shows quite clearly that Motley, as a sociologist, belongs to the so-called « environmental school » which holds that environment, not heredity, is the shaping factor of human character: « We are, all of us, the result of everything that has happened to us and that surrounds us »¹⁴.

Thus Motley is a true follower of Popenoe and Newman, the famous American psychologists, who were the first to examine the influence of environment on identical twins¹⁵. However, Motley is excessively one-sided. Science has pro-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹⁴ *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ H. ROHRACHER, *Kleine Charakterkunde* (Urban & Schwarzenberg, Wien 1956) p. 240.

gressed considerably since the first startling findings of Peppenoë, and today it is a well-known fact that also heredity is an important factor of man's character. Heredity, for example, is the determining factor of the extent to which a man *can* be influenced by his environment¹⁶. This is exactly what the *Yale Review* meant when it said that: «...Mr. Motley is a good sociological reporter..., but no man ever becomes a murderer through no fault of his own»¹⁷.

Nevertheless, Motley's one-sidedness is understandable and can be excused because he has an ax to grind. His severe attacks on the obsolete and brutal reform school system are necessary, and his desperate plea for the abolition of capital punishment is soul-stirring. How exceedingly well does he describe the last nerve-racking days and hours of the victim! How appallingly exactly does he set forth what the electric current will do to the victim's body! And how profoundly moving is his report on what will happen to the family of the executed culprit: they are the real victims, the innocent mothers and brothers and sisters who, despised and ostracized by their former neighbors and friends, must go on living: «Society takes its revenge on the mothers and families of the men it kills. The man dies. They live on»¹⁸.

The great success of *Knock on Any Door* induced Motley to write a sequel to his gripping novel. Again he studied and worked hard for many years, and in 1958 he was ready to publish *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*. The hero of this strongly naturalistic novel is young Nick, Nick Romano's illegitimate son, and its principal theme is drug addiction. Nelly, young Nick's mother, is led into the habit by one of her lovers, a dealer in dope known as The Wolf, and we follow her through all stages of enslavement.

At one point she goes away for a cure, but she lapses again, and we are spared no detail of her degradation. And

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 245.

¹⁷ *Yale Review*, Summer 1947.

¹⁸ W. MOTLEY, *Op. cit.*, p. 458.

then young Nick is introduced to marijuana and goes on to heroin, and we follow him with the process we have followed his mother, though in the end he is saved.

Combined with this dope fiend story is the arousing excursion into the life of Louie, old Nick's little brother and enfant terrible of the Romano family. Louie does not work, takes part in gang wars, is arrested by the police and sent to jail. When he comes out of jail, Aunt Rosa tells him about Nick's execution. This dreary fact impresses Louie much, and he tries hard to be better. He changes completely when he meets Judy, a colored girl, whom he wants to marry. But the family, friends and neighbors are shocked about the idea. Judy knows that their love is doomed; people are not ready to accept them, and Louie would only suffer. So one day she quietly disappears, leaving Louie desperate and brokenhearted in Chicago as another victim of Society.

Though Motley is still attacking and rebuking Society, his attitude towards the significance of environment has changed: he no longer considers it as the sole shaping factor of personality, but grants certain incontestable rights to heredity. Louie, for example, is reared in good surroundings — his living brothers and sisters are good people — and nevertheless he takes after Nick, his derelict brother. Young Nick, on the other hand, is reared in an impossible environment, but how effectively can he fight off the temptations of the slum world! And that he finally does succumb to them depends on certain hereditary factors which allow him a definitely given power of resistance to environmental influence, and not a jot more. It is not so much the realistic and exact description of the slum world and the dope fiend, but this deterministic concept of human behavior which makes the novel so truly naturalistic. Says G. Hicks:

Certain fashions in literature do change, but at the same time supposedly outworn styles have a way of lingering on. Naturalism, for example, has been regarded for some decades as old hat, and yet we still have our James Joneses and our Willard Motleys. Motley's last

novel .. is naturalistic not only in its massing of factual material; it is based on a deterministic concept of human behavior and thus conforms in a general way to the theories of naturalism set forth by Zola¹⁹.

Again Motley has delved in the profundities of the human soul. Again he has tried to find the connection between a man's antecedents and his present situation. Again he has endeavored to familiarize his readers with the whole background of his unfortunate protagonists. « Cause! Cause! Search for Cause! » he cries out passionately²⁰, and he goes on to assert:

God! If you knew the life of any one of them here from the cradle to this point. If you knew what brought them here. And they are not completely bad. Sick, yes. Warped, yes. How can anybody judge anyone else. Not, at least, without knowing all of his life and that of his parents and his grand-parents. It is easy to judge. It is harder to dig down into the solid rock of cause²¹.

Society, says Motley, is guilty in many respects, but its greatest malpractice is its punishing the drug addicts instead of curing them:

Society never sees itself as criminal and so, in punishing and not curing, Society daily weakens itself. Becomes as diseased as those it punishes .. There is no cure in punishment²².

The novel did not meet with the same good reception as *Knock on Any Door* did. The *Saturday Review* found that it had « too little dramatic force and therefore Motley had to rely on documentation »²³ and *Time* was even more exacting:

What the book has to offer is the authenticity of setting and speech that recalls Nelson Algren's excursion into the same territory. Unfortunately, Author Motley has not written another « Man with the Golden Arm » — but only a sort of Man with the Wire-Recorder Ear²⁴.

¹⁹ G. HICKS, « Art and Reality », *Saturday Review of Literature*, Aug. 9, 1958, p. 11.

²⁰ W. MOTLEY, *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (Signet, N. Y., 1959) p. 221.

²¹ W. MOTLEY, *Op. cit.*, p. 203.

²² W. MOTLEY, *Op. cit.*, p. 152.

²³ *Saturday Review*, Aug. 9, 1958, p. 11.

²⁴ « The Wire-Recorder Ear », *Time*, Aug. 11, 1958, p. 74.

In spite of this unfavorable critique there can be no doubt that Motley's special aptitude is his clear perception of the weaknesses, faults, sins, and crimes of Society — an aptitude that is especially manifest in *We Fished All Night*, his third novel, which relates the story of three young men before and after World War II. It would have been a sin of omission if Motley had not exploited the war for his literary purposes and had failed to accuse Society of its greatest wrongdoing. *We Fished All Night* is — as *Kirkus* puts it — « not for the thin skinned »²⁵. What Motley is interested in and writes about in this poignant novel is not the fighting at the front; he is concerned with the sociological effects of war; he wants to know what war does to Society, and what it does to the men who are sent to the battlefields. Three case histories are offered to support Motley's deeply and honestly pessimistic view of human affairs. Three men from Chicago have gone into the dark and horrible night of war from which they come back broken in health and spirit. Aaron Levin, a sensitive Hebrew, loses his mind as a result of his cataclysmic experiences in the army: he cannot stand the killing and maiming and does not see any sense in war as mankind is all one and as we are brothers. He returns to Chicago as a schizophreniac, writing nonsensical, sex-tinged poetry and rejecting the love of Rebecca who tries to follow him into the dark, confused realm of his sick mind.

Jim Norris, a respected union organizer and labor leader, returns from the war haunted by the fears of his moral decadence. He has killed an old woman and slept with a 14-year old French girl. Back in Chicago the latter experience seems wonderful to him, and so he tries to find satisfaction again by attempting to rape a young girl.

Don Lockwood, a former Polish actor who has changed his name to escape from the slums, comes back as an amputee: he has lost a leg on the battlefields of Europe. As a crippled

²⁵ *Kirkus*, Oct. 1, 1951, p. 586.

veteran be is picked up by ruthless politicians, who use Don for their purposes under the pretense of sending a veteran to the House of Representatives. After learning that politics is business, Don decides to make the most of it, and with the help of a millionaire's daughter he becomes one of the most powerful, but utterly corrupt politicians. He forgets his democratic and philanthropic ideas and betrays the workers and voters who believe in him.

Is the dark night really over? What has America fought for? Why have so many men died? These hard, captious questions are asked by Motley throughout his novel, and the reader cannot help being aroused and feeling uneasy. Small wonder that the critics the critics themselves feel perturbed.

Willard Motley is a powerful writer, a master of words, who knows that « a little word has sometimes lost or won an empire », and who knows how to say the right thing at the right moment. Says a critic: « Willard Motley has a magic with words and, to the extent that words make the result, lays you under a spell. He has ear for speech, and his dialogue, while often gross, is speech as people speak it »²⁶. What does the writer himself think about the art of writing and about his work? Here are some quotations which might help to explain his personality:

The book is man's greatest invention. Everything man has dreamed, thought, believed, everything man knows is within the covers of a book...²⁷ I think that's one of the fundamentals of writing, to know that fiction is the modification of life's true horrors on people...²⁸

I like writing late at night, and when the story is coming good generally work from 12 to 14 hours a day until I hit a cold spot. Then there are several days when I loaf and wait for the story to take hold of me again. I think that I most enjoy sitting in bars, restaurants, etc., watching people, listening in on their conversations and wondering about them who they are, what their lives are²⁹.

²⁶ Quoted as found in KUNITZ & COLBY, *Op. cit.*, p. 694.

²⁷ W. MOTLEY, *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, p. 279.

²⁸ W. MOTLEY, *Op. cit.*, p. 219.

²⁹ Quoted as found in KUNITZ & COLBY, *Op. cit.*, p. 694.

Some critics call him a « super-craftsman »³⁰ and a « crusader »³¹, others frown upon him and say that he suffers from a « Cotton Mather complex », an obsession with one's sadistic eloquence³². What dose Motley himself say about art and artists? Must a writer, an artist, conform and bow to the standards of his critics? Here is the novelist's definite answer:

An artist is a non conformist. He paints or writes what he pleases, as he pleases. He shouldn't be afraid to paint — or write — anything he wants to. He doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks or says. He has to express himself in his own way and needs humannes and sympathy...³³

And that is exactly what Willard Motley is — a non-conformist who says what he pleases and as he pleases, a man who ruthlessly exposes the imperfections and inattentions of Society, a social reformer who fervently holds that « every human being is dignified ».

ALFRED WEISSGÄRBER

³⁰ *New Republic*, May 12, 1947.

³¹ *Kirkus*, June 1, 1958, p. 390.

³² J. GRAY, « Counsel of Despair » *Saturday Review*, Dec. 8, 1951, pp. 20-21.

³³ W. MOTLEY, *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, p. 265.