

Catholic Novelists and Their Readers

By Flannery O'Connor

Whenever I think of the Catholic novelist and his problems, I always remember the legend of St. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio. This legend has it that St. Francis converted a wolf. I don't know whether he actually converted this wolf or whether the wolf's character didn't just greatly improve after he met St. Francis. Anyway, he calmed down a good deal. But the moral of this story, for me at least, is that the wolf, in spite of his improved character, always remained a wolf. So it is—or ought to be—with the Catholic, or let us just say with the thoroughly Christianized novelist. No matter how much his character may be improved by the Church, if he is a novelist, he has to remain true to his nature as one. The Church should make the novelist a better novelist.

I say *should*, because unfortunately this doesn't always happen. The Catholic novelist frequently becomes so entranced with his Christian state that he forgets his nature as a fiction writer. This is all right, this is fine, if he stops writing fiction, but most of the time he doesn't stop writing it, and he makes the same kind of spectacle of himself that the wolf would have made if, after his meeting with St. Francis, he had started walking on his hind legs.

A novelist is, first of all, a person who has been given a talent to do a particular thing. Every serious novelist is trying to portray reality as it manifests itself in our concrete, sensual life, and he can't do this unless he has been given the initial instrument, the talent, and unless he respects the talent, as such. It is well to remember what is obvious but usually ignored: that every writer has to cope with the possibility in his given talent. Possibility and limitation mean about the same thing. It is the business of every writer to push his talent to its outermost limit, but this means the outermost limit of the kind of talent he has.

Perhaps I'd better say at this point what kind of fiction writer I am talking about. I mean the fiction writer who looks on fiction as an art and who has resigned himself to its demands and inconveniences. I mean the fiction writer who writes neither for everybody, nor for the special few, but for the good of what he is writing. No matter how minor his gift, he will not be willing to destroy it by trying to use it outside its proper limits. This kind of fiction writer is always hotly in pursuit of the real, no matter what he calls it, or what instrument he uses to get at it.

St. Thomas Aquinas says that art does not require rectitude of the appetite, that it is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made. He says that a work of art is a good in itself, and this is a truth that the modern world has largely forgotten. We are not content to stay within our limitations and make something that is simply a good in and by itself. Now we want to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God. The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists. He must first of all be aware of his limitations as an artist—for art transcends its limitations only by staying within them.

For many readers the writing of fiction cannot possibly be a serious occupation in its own right. It is only serious for them as it affects their personal taste or spirits or morals. But the writer whose vocation is fiction sees his obligation as being to the truth of what can happen in life, and not to the reader—not to the reader's taste, not to the reader's happiness, not even to the reader's morals. The

Catholic novelist doesn't have to be a saint; he doesn't even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist. This doesn't mean that the writer should lack moral vision, but I think that to understand what it does mean, we have to consider for a while what fiction—novel or story—is, and what would give a piece of fiction the right to have the adjective "Catholic" applied to it.

The very term "Catholic novel" is, of course, suspect, and people who are conscious of its complications don't use it except in quotation marks. If I had to say what a "Catholic novel" is, I could only say that it is one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships. Only in and by these sense experiences does the fiction writer approach a contemplative knowledge of the mystery they embody.

To be concerned with these things means not only to be concerned with the good in them, but with the evil, and not only with the evil, but also with that aspect which appears neither good nor evil, which is not yet Christianized. The Church we see, even the universal Church, is a small segment of the whole of creation. If many are called and few are chosen, fewer still perhaps choose, even unconsciously, to be Christian, and yet all of reality is the potential kingdom of Christ, and the face of the earth is waiting to be recreated by his spirit. This all means that what we roughly call the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply that it is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by. This may or may not be a Catholic world, and it may or may not have been seen by a Catholic.

Catholic life as seen by a Catholic doesn't always make comfortable reading for Catholics, for that matter. In this country we have J. F. Powers, for example, a very fine writer and a born Catholic who writes about Catholics. The Catholics that Mr. Powers writes about are seen by him with a terrible accuracy. They are vulgar, ignorant, greedy, and fearfully drab, and all these qualities have an unmistakable Catholic social flavor. Mr. Powers doesn't write about such Catholics because he wants to embarrass the Church; he writes about them because, by the grace of God, he can't write about any other kind. A writer writes about what he is able to make believable.

Every day we see people who are busy distorting their talents in order to enhance their popularity or to make money that they could do without. We can safely say that this, if done consciously, is reprehensible. But even oftener, I think, we see people distorting their talents in the name of God for reasons that they think are good—to reform or to teach or to lead people to the Church. And it is much less easy to say that this is reprehensible. None of us is able to judge such people themselves, but we must, for the sake of truth, judge the products they make. We must say whether this or that novel truthfully portrays the aspect of reality that it sets out to portray. The novelist who deliberately misuses his talent for some good purpose may be committing no sin, but he is certainly committing a grave inconsistency, for he is trying to reflect God with what amounts to a practical untruth.

Poorly written novels—no matter how pious and edifying the behavior of the characters—are not good in themselves and are therefore not really edifying. Now a statement like this creates problems. An individual may be highly edified by a sorry novel because he doesn't know any better. We have plenty of examples in this world of poor things being used for good purposes. God can make any indifferent thing, as well as evil itself, an instrument for good; but I submit that to do this is the business of God and not of any human being.

A good example of a very indifferent novel being used for some good purpose is *The Foundling*, by Cardinal Spellman. It's nobody's business to judge Cardinal Spellman except as a novelist, and as a novelist he's a bit short. You do have the satisfaction of knowing that if you buy a copy of *The Foundling*, you are helping the orphans to whom the proceeds go; and afterwards you can always use the book as a doorstop. But what you owe yourself here is to know that what you are helping are the orphans and not the standards of Catholic letters in this country. Which you prefer to do, if it must be a matter of choice, is up to you.

There are books, however, that purport to have a strong Catholic flavor that are not as innocuous as *The Foundling*, and these are novels that, by the author's efforts to be edifying, leave out half or three-fourths of the facts of human existence and are therefore not true either to the mysteries we know by faith or those we perceive simply by observation. The novelist is required to create the illusion of a whole world with believable people in it, and the chief difference between the novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural. And this doesn't mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater.

Whatever the novelist sees in the way of truth must first take on the form of his art and must become embodied in the concrete and human. If you shy away from sense experience, you will not be able to read fiction; but you will not be able to apprehend anything else in this world either, because every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses. Christ didn't redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form, and he speaks to us now through the mediation of a visible Church. All this may seem a long way from the subject of fiction, but it is not, for the main concern of the fiction writer is with mystery as it is incarnated in human life.

Baron von Hugel, one of the great modern Catholic scholars, wrote that "the Supernatural experience always appears as the transfiguration of Natural conditions, acts, states . . .," that "the Spiritual generally is always preceded, or occasioned, accompanied or followed, by the Sensible. . . . The highest realities and deepest responses are experienced by us within, or in contact with, the lower and lowliest." This means for the novelist that if he is going to show the supernatural taking place, he has nowhere to do it except on the literal level of natural events, and that if he doesn't make these natural things believable in themselves, he can't make them believable in any of their spiritual extensions.

The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look. If what he sees is not highly edifying, he is still required to look. Then he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees. Now this is the first point at which the novelist who is a Catholic may feel some friction between what he is supposed to do as a novelist and what he is supposed to do as a Catholic, for what he sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies. Is he to reproduce this? Or is he to change what he sees and make it, instead of what it is, what in the light of faith he thinks it ought to be? Is he, as Baron von Hugel has said, supposed to "tidy up reality?"

Just how can the novelist be true to time and eternity both, to what he sees and what he believes, to the relative and the absolute? And how can he do all this and be true at the same time to the art of the novel, which demands the illusion of life?

I have found that people outside the Church like to suppose that the Church acts as a restraint on the creativity of the Catholic writer and that she keeps him from reaching his full development. These people point to the fact that there are not many Catholic artists and writers, at least in this country, and that those who do achieve anything in a creative way are usually converts. This is a criticism that we can't shy away from. I feel that it is a valid criticism of the way Catholicism is often applied by our Catholic educational system, or from the pulpit, or ignorantly practiced by ourselves; but that it is, of course, no valid criticism of the religion itself.

There is no reason why fixed dogma should fix anything that the writer sees in the world. On the contrary, dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality. Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery. The fiction writer is an observer, first, last, and always, but he cannot be an adequate observer unless he is free from uncertainty about what he sees. Those who have no absolute values cannot let the relative remain merely relative; they are always raising it to the level of the absolute. The Catholic fiction writer is entirely free to observe. He feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe. He feels perfectly free to look at the one we already have and to show exactly what he sees. He feels no need to apologize for the ways of God to man or to avoid looking at the ways of man to God. For him, to "tidy up reality" is certainly to succumb to the sin of pride. Open and free observation is founded on our ultimate faith that the universe is meaningful, as the Church teaches.

And when we look at the serious fiction written by Catholics in these times, we do find a striking preoccupation with what is seedy and evil and violent. The pious argument against such novels goes something like this: if you believe in the Redemption, your ultimate vision is one of hope, so in what you see you must be true to this ultimate vision; you must pass over the evil you see and look for the good because the good is there; the good is the ultimate reality.

The beginning of an answer to this is that though the good is the ultimate reality, the ultimate reality has been weakened in human beings as a result of the Fall, and it is this weakened life that we see. And it is wrong, moreover, to assume that the writer chooses what he will see and what he will not. What one sees is given by circumstances and by the nature of one's particular kind of perception.

The fiction writer should be characterized by his kind of vision. His kind of vision is prophetic vision. Prophecy, which is dependent on the imaginative and not the moral faculty, need not be a matter of predicting the future. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth.

For the Catholic novelist, the prophetic vision is not simply a matter of his personal imaginative gift; it is, also a matter of the Church's gift, which, unlike his own, is safeguarded and deals with greater matters. It is one of the functions of the Church to transmit the prophetic vision that is good for all time, and when the novelist has this as a part of his own vision, he has a powerful extension of sight.

It is, unfortunately, a means of extension which we constantly abuse by thinking that we can close our own eyes and that the eyes of the Church will do the seeing. They will not. We forget that what is to us an extension of sight is to the rest of the world a peculiar and arrogant blindness, and that no one today is prepared to recognize the truth of what we show unless our purely individual vision is in full

operation. When the Catholic novelist closes his own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, the result is another addition to that large body of pious trash for which we have so long been famous.

It would be foolish to say there is no conflict between these two sets of eyes. There is a conflict, and it is a conflict which we escape at our peril, one which cannot be settled beforehand by theory or fiat or faith. We think that faith entitles us to avoid it, when in fact, faith prompts us to begin it, and to continue it until, like Jacob, we are marked.

For some Catholic writers the combat will seem to be with their own eyes, and for others it will seem to be with the eyes of the Church. The writer may feel that in order to use his own eyes freely, he must disconnect them from the eyes of the Church and see as nearly as possible in the fashion of a camera. Unfortunately, to try to disconnect faith from vision is to do violence to the whole personality, and the whole personality participates in the act of writing. The tensions of being a Catholic novelist are probably never balanced for the writer until the Church becomes so much a part of his personality that he can forget about her—in the same sense that when he writes, he forgets about himself.

This is the condition we aim for, but one which is seldom achieved in this life, particularly by novelists. The Lord doesn't speak to the novelist as he did to his servant, Moses, mouth to mouth. He speaks to him as he did to those two complainers, Aaron and Aaron's sister, Mary: through dreams and visions, in fits and starts, and by all the lesser and limited ways of the imagination.

I would like to think that in the future there will be Catholic writers who will be able to use these two sets of eyes with consummate skill and daring; but I wouldn't be so reckless as to predict it. It takes readers as well as writers to make literature. One of the most disheartening circumstances that the Catholic novelist has to contend with is that he has no large audience he can count on to understand his work. The general intelligent reader today is not a believer. He likes to read novels about priests and nuns because these persons are a curiosity to him, but he does not really understand the character motivated by faith. The Catholic reader, on the other hand, is so busy looking for something that fits his needs, and shows him in the best possible light, that he will find suspect anything that doesn't serve such purposes.

The word that occurs again and again in his demands for the Catholic novel is the word *positive*. Frequently, in reading articles about the failure of the Catholic novelist, you will get the idea that he is to raise himself from the stuff of his own imagination by beginning with Christian principles and finding the life that will illustrate them. This is the procedure, I gather, that is going to guarantee that all his work will be positive. The critic seems to assume that what the Catholic writer writes about will follow a broad general attitude he has toward all reality and that this attitude will be brought about by a belief in the general resurrection. He forgets that the novelist does not write about general beliefs but about men with free will, and that there is nothing in our faith that implies a foregone optimism for man so free that with his last breath he can say *No*. All Catholic literature will be positive in the sense that we hold this freedom to exist, but the Church has never encouraged us to believe that hell is not a going concern. The writer uses his eyes on what he happens to be facing. In a recent book by a Catholic scholar, Mauriac and Greene are taken to task because in their novels they do not give us a true picture of Christian marriage. It is implied that if they exerted themselves a few degrees more, they could do this and, in the process, improve their art. This is a very doubtful

proposition. Vocation is a limiting factor, and the conscientious novelist works at the limits, of his power and within what his imagination can apprehend. He does not decide what would be good for the Christian body and proceed to deliver it. Like a very doubtful Jacob, he confronts what stands in his path and wonders if he will come out of the struggle at all.

It is usually assumed that the novelist has chosen a perverse subject or attitude with an eye to fashion. It is fashionable to be gloomy, and so he has ignored the virtue of Christian hope; it is fashionable to show the dying marriage, and so he ignores the Christian one.

Surely, if a novelist is worth reading in the first place, his integrity in these matters is worth trusting. It has been my experience that in the process of making a novel, the serious novelist faces, in the most extreme way, his own limitations and those of his medium. He knows that the survival of his work depends upon an integrity that eliminates fashion from his considerations. Our final standard for him will have to be the demands of art, which are a good deal more exacting than the demands of the Church. There are novels a writer might write, and remain a good Catholic, which his conscience as an artist would not allow him to perpetrate.

We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery. St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do. The danger for the writer who is spurred by the religious view of the world is that he will consider this to be two operations instead of one. He will try to enshrine the mystery without the fact, and there will follow a further set of separations which are inimical to art. Judgment will be separated from vision, nature from grace, and reason from imagination.

These are separations which we see in our society and which exist in our writing. They are separations which faith tends to heal if we realize that faith is a "walking in darkness" and not a theological solution to mystery. The poet is traditionally a blind man, but the Christian poet, and storyteller as well, is like the blind man whom Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to learn to accept if we want to realize a truly Christian literature.

The universe of the Catholic fiction writer is one that is founded on the theological truths of the Faith, but particularly on three of them which are basic—the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. These are doctrines that the modern secular world does not believe in. It does not believe in sin, or in the value that suffering can have, or in eternal responsibility, and since we live in a world that since the sixteenth century has been increasingly dominated by secular thought, the Catholic writer often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it. This means frequently that he may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience, and the images and actions he creates may seem distorted and exaggerated to the Catholic mind.

The great mistake that the unthinking Catholic reader usually makes is to suppose that the Catholic writer is writing for him. Occasionally this may happen, but generally it is not happening today. Catholics brought up in sheltered Catholic communities with little or no intellectual contact with the modern world are apt to suppose that truth as Catholics know it is the order of the day except among

the naturally perverse. It may be true that these are good times for the Church in one sense or another. There are signs of a returning interest in supernatural realities, but there's just enough of this to provide renewed hope, not yet to provide a working reality strong enough to support fiction for many writers.

A few writers can, by virtue of special talent, in all honesty write works of art that satisfy Catholics and that non-believers can respect. One of these in this country is a man named Paul Horgan. Mr. Horgan is an artist, and he writes the kind of books that Catholics say they want to read. Whether there is a great sale of his books to Catholics, I severely doubt, but anyway, he is a case in point of the writer who is able to remain true to what he sees and the demands of his art and, at the same time, write books that don't offend the ordinary Catholic. But to demand that every Catholic write like Mr. Horgan is to limit the nature and possibilities of art. There is a great tendency today to want everybody to write just the way everybody else does, to see and to show the same things in the same way to the same middling audience. But the writer, in order best to use the talents he has been given, has to write at his own intellectual level. For him to do anything else is to bury his talents. This doesn't mean that, within his limitations, he shouldn't try to reach as many people as possible, but it does mean that he must not lower his standards to do so.

Arthur Koestler has said that he would swap a hundred readers now for ten readers in ten years and that he would swap those ten for one in a hundred years. This is the way every serious writer feels about it. Of course, when, the writer tries to write what he sees and according to the standards of art, he is bound to be read by all sorts of people who don't understand what he is doing and are therefore scandalized by it, and this brings me to the second pious argument against writing the way the artist, as artist, feels he should. This is the danger he runs of corrupting those who are not able to understand what he is doing. It is very possible that what is vision and truth to the writer is temptation and sin to the reader. There is every danger that in writing what he sees, the novelist will be corrupting some "little one," and better a millstone were tied around his neck.

This is no superficial problem for the conscientious novelist, and those who have felt it have felt it with agony. But I think that to force this kind of total responsibility on the novelist is to burden him with the business that belongs only to God. I think the solution to this particular problem leads us straight back where we started from—the subject of the standards of art and the nature of fiction itself. The fact is that if the writer's attention is on producing a work of art, a work that is good in itself, he is going to take great pains to control every excess, everything that does not contribute to this central meaning and design. He cannot indulge in sentimentality, in propagandizing, or in pornography and create a work of art, for all these things are excesses. They call attention to themselves and distract from the work as a whole.

The fiction writer has to make a whole world believable by making every part and aspect of it believable. There are many Catholic readers who open a novel and, discovering the presence of an arm or a leg, piously close the book. We are always demanding that the writer be less explicit in regard to natural matters or the concrete particulars of sin. The writer has an obligation here, but I believe it can be met by adhering to the demands of his art, and if we criticize on this score, we must criticize by the standards of art. Many Catholic readers are overconscious of what they consider to be obscenity in modern fiction for the very simple reason that in reading a book, they have nothing else to look for. They are not equipped to find anything else. They are totally unconscious of the design,

the tone, the intention, the meaning, or even the truth of what they have in hand. They don't see the book in a perspective that would reduce every part of it to its proper place in the whole.

The demand for positive literature, which we hear so frequently from Catholics, comes about possibly from weak faith and possibly also from this general inability to read; but I think it also comes about from the assumption that the devil plays the major role in the production of fiction. Probably the devil plays the greatest role in the production of that fiction from which he himself is absent as an actor. In any case, I think we should teach our prospective writers that their best defense against his taking over their work will lie in their strict attention to the order, proportion, and radiance of what they are making.

There are those who maintain that you can't demand anything of the reader. They say the reader knows nothing about art, and that if you are going to reach him, you have to be humble enough to descend to his level. This supposes either that the aim of art is to teach, which it is not, or that to create anything which is simply a good-in-itself is a waste of time. Art never responds to the wish to make it democratic; it is not for everybody; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it. We hear a great deal about humility being required to lower oneself, but it requires an equal humility and a real love of the truth to raise oneself and by hard labor to acquire higher standards. And this is certainly the obligation of the Catholic. It is his obligation in all the disciplines of life but most particularly in those on which he presumes to pass judgment. Ignorance is excusable when it is borne like a cross, but when it is wielded like an ax, and with moral indignation, then it becomes something else indeed. We reflect the Church in everything we do, and those who can see clearly that our judgment is false in matters of art cannot be blamed for suspecting our judgment in matters of religion.