The Church and the Fiction Writer

Flannery O'Connor

The question of what effect the Church has on the fiction writer who is a Catholic cannot always be answered by pointing to the presence of Graham Greene among us. One has to think not only of gifts that have ended in art or near it, but of gifts gone astray and of those never developed. In 1955, the editors of Four Quarters, a quarterly magazine published by the faculty of LaSalle College in Philadelphia, printed a symposium on the subject of the dearth of Catholic writers among the graduates of Catholic colleges, and in subsequent issues published letters from writers and critics, Catholic and non-Catholic, in response to the symposium. These ranged from the statement of Mr. Philip Wylie that "A Catholic, if he is devout, i.e., sold on the authority of his Church, is also brain-washed, whether he realizes it or not" (and consequently does not have the freedom necessary to be a first-rate creative writer) to the often-repeated explanation that the Catholic in this country suffers from a parochial aesthetic and a cultural insularity. A few held the situation no worse among Catholics than among other groups, creative minds always being hard to find; a few held the times responsible.

The faculty of a college must consider this as an educational problem; the writer who is a Catholic will consider it a personal one. Whether he is a graduate of a Catholic college or not, if he takes the Church for what she takes herself to be, he must decide what she demands of him and if and how his freedom is restricted by her. The material and method of fiction being what they are, the problem may seem greater for the fiction writer than for any other.

For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, an organ which eventually involves the whole personality and as much of the world as can be got into it. Msgr. Romano Guardini has written that the roots of the eye are in the heart. In any case, for the Catholic they stretch far and away into those depths of mystery which the modern world is divided about -- part of it trying to eliminate mystery while another part tries to rediscover it in disciplines less personally demanding than religion. What Mr. Wylie contends is that the Catholic writer, because he believes in certain defined mysteries, cannot, by the nature of things, see straight; and this contention, in effect, is not very different from that made by

Catholics who declare that whatever the Catholic writer can see, there are certain things that he should not see, straight or otherwise. These are the Catholics who are victims of the parochial aesthetic and the cultural insularity, and it is interesting to find them sharing, even for a split second, the intellectual bed of Mr. Wylie.

It is generally supposed, and not least by Catholics, that the Catholic who writes fiction is out to use fiction to prove the truth of the Faith, or at the least, to prove the existence of the supernatural. He may be. No one certainly can be sure of his low motives except as they suggest themselves in his finished work, but when the finished work suggests that pertinent actions have been fraudulently manipulated or overlooked or smothered, whatever purposes the writer started out with have already been defeated. What the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all, is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer leans, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them.

Henry James said that the morality of a piece of fiction depended on the amount of "felt life" that was in it. The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its honor, been found by God to be worth dying for. But this should enlarge, not narrow, his field of vision. To the modern mind, as represented by Mr. Wylie, this is warped vision which "bears little or no relation to the truth as it is known today." The Catholic who does not write for a limited circle of fellow Catholics will in all probability consider that, since this is his vision, he is writing for a hostile audience, and he will be more concerned to have his work stand on its own feet and be complete and self-sufficient and impregnable in its own right. When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist.

The limitations that any writer imposes on his work will grow out of the necessities that lie in the material itself, and these will generally be more rigorous than any that religion could impose. Part of the complexity of the problem for the Catholic fiction writer will be the presence of grace as it appears in nature, and what matters for him is that his faith not become detached from his dramatic sense and from his vision of what-is. No one in these days, however, would seem more anxious to have it become detached than those Catholics who demand that the writer limit, on the natural level, what he allows himself to see.

If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letters-to-the-editor and other places

where he momentarily reveals himself, he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene. He would seem to prefer the former, while being more of an authority on the latter, but the similarity between the two generally escapes him. He forgets that sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence, and that innocence, whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite. We lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite. Pornography, on the other hand, is essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its hard purpose, and so far disconnects it from its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake.

Many well-grounded complaints have been made about religious literature on the score that it tends to minimize the importance and dignity of life here and now in favor of life in the next world or in favor of the miraculous manifestations of grace. When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality. If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God; but what is one thing for the writer may be another for the reader. What leads the writer to his salvation may lead the reader into sin, and the Catholic writer who looks at this possibility directly looks the Medusa in the face and is turned to stone.

By now, anyone who has had the problem is equipped with Mauriac's advice: "Purify the source." And, along with it, he has become aware that while he is attempting to do that, he has to keep on writing. He becomes aware too of sources that, relatively speaking, seem amply pure, but from which come works that scandalize. He may feel that it is as sinful to scandalize the learned as the ignorant. In the end, he will either have to stop writing or limit himself to the concerns proper to what he is creating. It is the person who can follow neither of these courses who becomes the victim, not of the Church, but of a false conception of her demands.

The business of protecting souls from dangerous literature belongs properly to the Church. All fiction, even when it

satisfies the requirements of art, will not turn out to be suitable for everyone's consumption, and if in some instance the Church sees fit to forbid the faithful to read a work without permission, the author, if he is a Catholic, will be thankful that the Church is willing to perform this service for him. It means that he can limit himself to the demands of art.

The fact would seem to be that for many writers it is easier to assume universal responsibility for souls than it is to produce a work of art, and it is considered better to save the world than to save the work. This view probably owes as much to romanticism as to piety, but the writer will not be liable to entertain it unless it has been foisted on him by a sorry education or unless writing is not his vocation in the first place. That it is foisted on him by the general atmosphere of Catholic piety in this country is hard to deny, and even if this atmosphere cannot be held responsible for every talent killed along the way, it is at least general enough to give an air of credibility to Mr. Wylie's conception of what belief in Christian dogma does to the creative mind.

A belief in fixed dogma cannot fix what goes on in life or blind the believer to it. It will, of course, add a dimension to the writer's observation which many cannot, in conscience, acknowledge exists, but as long as what they can acknowledge is present in the work, they cannot claim that any freedom has been denied the artist. A dimension taken away is one thing, a dimension added is another; and what the Catholic writer will have to remember is that the reality of the added dimension will be judged in a work of fiction by the truthfulness and wholeness of the natural events presented. If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is. An affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God.

If we intend to encourage Catholic fiction writers, we must convince those coming along that the Church does not restrict their freedom to be artists but insures it (the restrictions of art are another matter), and to convince them of this requires, perhaps more than anything else, a body of Catholic readers who are equipped to recognize something in fiction besides passages they consider obscene. It is popular to suppose that anyone who can read the telephone book can read a short story or a novel, and it is more than usual to find the attitude among Catholics that since we possess the truth in the Church, we can use this truth directly as an instrument of judgment on any discipline at any time without regard for the nature of that discipline itself. Catholic readers are constantly being offended and scandalized by novels that they don't have the fundamental equipment to read in the first place, and often these are

works that are permeated with a Christian spirit.

It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life; and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost. Fiction, made according to its own laws, is an antidote to such a tendency, for it renews our knowledge that we live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions. The Catholic fiction writer, as fiction writer, will look for the will of God first in the laws and limitations of his art and will hope that if he obeys these, other blessings will be added to his work. The happiest of these, and the one he may at present least expect, will be the satisfied Catholic reader.