

modern novelists should depend both on their parent's consent and on what they have already read and understood.

The high school English teacher will be fulfilling his responsibility if he furnishes the student a guided opportunity, through the best writing of the past, to come, in time, to an understanding of the best writing of the present. He will teach literature, not social studies or little lessons in democracy or the customs of many lands.

And if the student finds that this is not to his taste? Well, that is regrettable. Most regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed.

The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South

IT'S A GREAT pleasure to speak here at Georgetown tonight. But for someone like myself who is not a teacher, and not even a literary person in the accepted sense of the phrase, it's always difficult to throw off the habits of the story-teller and to come up with some abstract statement instead. I'd much prefer to be reading you one of my stories tonight, but these are times when stories are considered not quite as satisfying as statements and statements are considered not quite as satisfying as statistics. Most novelists these days are English teachers. Their talk about fiction is designed to fill the heads of students, and their approach is consequently microscopic. I'm frequently appalled at the questions students ask me about my stories and at the very learned and literary interpretations they come up with.

I was recently at a college where a student asked me, in a voice loaded with cunning: "Miss O'Connor, what is the significance of the Misfit's hat?" Of course, I had no idea the Misfit's hat was significant, but finally I managed to say, "Its significance is to cover his head." Those students went away thinking that here was real innocence, a writer who didn't know what she was doing!

My own approach to fiction, at least when I have to talk about it, is very like the one Dr. Johnson's blind housekeeper used when she poured tea. She put her finger inside the cup. I think that if there is any value in hearing writers talk, it would be in hearing what they can witness to, and not what they can theorize about. I think it would be in hearing what some of their larger concerns are—the really important things that make details fall into place without too much sinister calculation on the writer's part. And so I'm talking tonight about "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South."

I have experienced his situation, and I think his situation has particular lessons both for Catholics anywhere who write or read fiction and for those Southerners who feel that the quality of future Southern literature will not hold up unless the best traditions of the South have reinforcement from some stable source of truth. I find frequently among Catholics

a certain impatience with Southern literature—sometimes a fascinated impatience—but usually a definite feeling that with all the violence and grotesquery and religious enthusiasm reflected in its fiction, the South is a little beyond the pale of Catholic respect and that certainly it would be ridiculous to expect the emergence in such soil of anything like a literature inspired by Catholic belief. But for my part I don't think that this is at all unlikely. There are certain conditions necessary for the emergence of Catholic literature which are found nowhere else in this country in such abundance as in the South, and I look forward with considerable relish to the day when we are going to have to enlarge our notions about the Catholic novel to include some pretty odd Southern specimens.

The American Catholic trusts the fictional imagination about as little as he trusts anything. Before it's well on its feet, he's busy looking for heresy in it. The Catholic press is constantly broken out in a rash of articles on the failure of the Catholic novelist. The Catholic novelist is failing to reflect the virtue of hope, failing to show the Church's interest in social justice, failing to show life as a positive good, failing to portray our beliefs in a light that will make them desirable to others. He occasionally writes well, but he always writes wrong. Now if in the next twenty years we find ourselves with a batch of wild Southern Catholic novelists who fail in all these things and, in addition, have certain positive obnoxious qualities—such as a penchant for violence and grotesquery and religious enthusiasm—we are doubtless going to wonder how these strange birds got hatched in our nest. Catholic discussions of the Catholic novel are frequently ridiculous because every given circumstance of the writer is ignored except his faith. No one taking part in these discussions seems to remember that the eye sees what it has been given to see by concrete circumstances, and that the imagination reproduces what by some related gift it is able to make live.

I collect articles from the Catholic press on the failure of the Catholic novelist. And in one of them I find this typical sentence: "Why not a positive novel based on the Church's fight for social justice, or the liturgical revival, or life in the seminary?" I take it that if seminarians began to write novels about life in the seminary, there would soon be several less

seminarians. But we are to assume that anybody who can write at all and who has the energy to do some research can give us a novel on this or any needed topic and can make it *positive*. A lot of novels do get written in this way, but they are not the ones that concern us as literature usually. In this same article the writer asks this: "Would it not seem in order now for some of our younger men to explore the possibilities inherent in certain positive factors which make Catholic life and the Catholic position in this country increasingly challenging?" This whole attitude, which proceeds from the standpoint of what it would be good to do or have to supply a general need, is totally opposite from the novelist's own approach. No serious novelist "explores possibilities inherent in factors." Some schoolteacher wrote that. Conrad wrote that the artist descends within himself and in that region of stress and strife—if he be deserving and fortunate—he finds the terms of his appeal. Where you find the terms of your appeal may have little or nothing to do with what is challenging in the life of the Church at the moment. And this is particularly apparent to the Southern Catholic writer whose imagination has been cast by life in a region which is traditionally Protestant.

The things we see, hear, smell and touch affect us long before we believe anything at all. The South impresses its image on the Southern writer from the moment he is able to distinguish one sound from another. He takes it in through his ears and hears it again in his own voice, and, by the time he is able to use his imagination for fiction, he finds that his senses respond irrevocably to a certain reality, and particularly to the sound of a certain reality. The Southern writer's greatest tie with the South is through his ear, which is usually sharp but not too versatile outside his own idiom. With a few exceptions, such as Miss Katherine Anne Porter, he is not too often successfully cosmopolitan in fiction, but the fact is that he doesn't need to be. A distinctive idiom is a powerful instrument for keeping fiction social. When one Southern character speaks, regardless of his station in life, an echo of all Southern life is heard. This helps to keep Southern fiction from being a fiction of purely private experience.

Unless the novelist has gone entirely out of his mind, his

aim is still communication, and communication suggests, at least to some of us, talking inside a community of which one is a part. One of the reasons Southern fiction thrives is that today a significant number of our best writers are able to do this. They are not alienated from their society. They are not lonely, suffering artists gasping for purer air. Although there are a few always who run from the South as from the plague, in general the Southern writer feels the need of expatriation less than other writers in this country. Moreover, when he does leave and stay gone out of choice and continues to write about the South, he does so at great peril to that violence between principle and fact, between judgment and observation which is so necessary to maintain if fiction is to be true. The isolated imagination is easily corrupted by theory. Alienation was once a diagnosis, but in much of the fiction of our time it has become an ideal. The modern hero is the outsider. His experience is rootless. He can go anywhere. He belongs nowhere. Being alien to nothing, he ends up being alienated from any kind of community based on common tastes and interests. The borders of his country are the sides of his skull.

The South is traditionally hostile to outsiders, except on her own terms. She is traditionally against intruders, foreigners from Chicago or New Jersey, all those who come from afar with moral energy that increases in direct proportion to their distance from home. It is difficult to separate the virtues of this quality from the narrowness which accompanies and colors it for the outside world. It is more difficult still to reconcile the South's instinct to preserve her identity with her equal instinct to fall eager victim to every poisonous breath from Hollywood or Madison Avenue. But good and evil appear to be joined in every culture at the spine, and, as far as the creation of a body of fiction is concerned, the social is superior to the purely personal. Somewhere is better than anywhere. And traditional manners, however unbalanced, are better than no manners at all. The discovery of having his senses respond to a particular society and a particular history, to particular sounds and a particular idiom, is for the Southern writer the beginning of a recognition that first puts his work in real human perspective for him. He discovers that the imagination is *not* free, but bound. The energy of the

South is so strong in him that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged, and it is when this is a true engagement that its meaning will lead outward to universal human interest.

The Catholic novel that fails is usually one in which this kind of engagement is absent. It is a novel which doesn't grapple with any particular culture. It may try to make a culture out of the Church, but this is always a mistake because the Church is not a culture. The Catholic novel that fails is one in which there is no genuine sense of place and in which feeling is by that much diminished. Its action occurs in an abstracted setting. It could be anywhere or nowhere. This reduces its dimensions drastically and cuts down on those tensions that keep it from being facile and slick. Where the Catholic writer does have a place, such as the Midwestern parishes which serve as J. F. Powers' region or South Boston which belongs to Edwin O'Connor, he fares considerably better. But these places have very definite limitations that have to be compensated for by a considerable talent on the part of the writer. Whereas in the South some fairly modest talents can come up with some fairly respectable fiction simply because society and history come more than half-way to meet them. What I am suggesting is that Catholic fiction can come easy from the sturdiest natural stock, and that in this country now that is to be found in the South. But there are reasons other than merely literary ones why the South is good ground for Catholic fiction. The writer whose themes are religious particularly needs a region where these themes find a response in the life of the people, and this condition is met in the South as nowhere else. A secular society understands the religious mind less and less. It becomes more and more difficult in America to make belief believable, which is what the novelist has to do. It takes less and less belief acted upon to make one appear a fanatic. When you create a character who believes vigorously in Christ, you have to explain his aberration. Here the Southern writer has the greatest possible advantage; he lives in the Bible Belt, where such people, though not as numerous as they used to be, are taken for granted. It was about 1919 that Mencken called the South the "Bible Belt" and said that it was "the Sahara of the *beaux arts*." That was

only a few years before the emergence in the South of a literature to reckon with. Today Southern literature is known around the world, and the South is still the Bible Belt. Sam Jones' grandma read the Bible thirty-seven times on her knees. And the rural and small town, and even a certain level of the city South, is made up of the descendants of old ladies like her. You don't shake off their influence in even several generations.

It has been suggested, apparently with a straight face, that the Biblical flavor of the South is a hindrance to the Catholic writer because Catholic readers are not accustomed to seeing religion Biblically. It is true that if your readers are not well acquainted with the Bible, you don't have the instrument to plumb meaning—and specifically Christian meaning—that you would have if the Biblical background conditioned everyone's response to life. Some of the writer's instruments have, unfortunately, to be shared with his reader. But the fact that Catholics are not accustomed to seeing religion Biblically is a deficiency on the part of Catholics, and, if the Catholic writer tries to accommodate himself to such deficiency, our literature will always be going downhill and ourselves behind it. This is, after all, a correctable deficiency, not invincible ignorance. Nothing, I think, will insure the future of Catholic literature in this country so much as the Biblical revival. Unfortunately, that revival is still the pursuit of the educated, and it is the good which the poor and the ignorant hold in common that is most valuable to the fiction writer. When the poor hold sacred history in common, they have concrete ties to the universal and the holy which allow the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity. To be great story-tellers, we need something to measure ourselves against, and this is what we conspicuously lack in this age. Men judge themselves now by what they find themselves doing. The Catholic has the teachings of the Church to serve him in this regard. But for the writing of fiction something more is necessary. For the purposes of fiction, these guides have to exist in the form of stories which affect our image and our judgment of ourselves. Abstractions, formulas, laws will not do here. We have to have stories. It takes a story to make a story. It takes a story of mythic dimensions; one

which belongs to everybody; one in which everybody is able to recognize the hand of God and imagine its descent upon himself. In the Protestant South the Scriptures fill this role. The ancient Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete has conditioned the Southerner's way of looking at things. That is one of the big reasons why the South is a story-telling section at all. Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than it is if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac. Both of these kinds of knowledge are necessary, but in the last four or five centuries we in the Church have over-emphasized the abstract and consequently impoverished our imagination and our capacity for prophetic insight. The circumstance of being a Southerner, of living in a non-Catholic but religiously inclined society, furnishes the Catholic novelist with some very fine antidotes to his own worst tendencies.

I once read a review of two books by a Catholic on the subject of the Catholic novel. One writer said that in order for a novel to be a Catholic one, it would have to be about a saint. The other one said it would have to be *by* a saint. We enjoy indulging ourselves in the logic that kills, in making categories smaller and smaller, in prescribing subjects and proscribing attitudes. The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. His interests and sympathies may very well go, as I find my own do, directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic and most revealing of a need that only the Church can fill. The Catholic novelist in the South will see many distorted images of Christ, but he will certainly feel that a distorted image of Christ is better than no image at all. I think he will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development.

A few years ago a preacher in Tennessee attracted considerable attention when he sacrificed a live lamb chained to a cross at his Lenten revival service. It is possible that this was

simple showmanship, but I doubt it. I presume that this was as close to the Mass as that man could come. The Catholic writer may at first feel that the kind of religious enthusiasm that has influenced Southern life has run hand in hand with extreme individualism for so long that there is nothing left of it that he can recognize. But when he penetrates to the human aspiration beneath it, he sees not only what has been lost to the life he observes, but more the terrible loss to us in the Church of human faith and passion. The result of these underground religious affinities will be a strange and, to many, perverse fiction—one which serves no felt need, which gives us no picture of Catholic life or the religious experiences that are usual with us. But I believe it will be Catholic fiction. There is only one Holy Spirit, and He is no respecter of persons. These people in the invisible Church make discoveries that have meaning for us who are better protected from the vicissitudes of our own natures and who are often too dead to the world to make any discoveries at all. These people in the invisible Church may be grotesque, but their grotesqueness has a significance and a value which the Catholic should be in a better position than the others to assess.

I find that any fiction that comes out of the South is going to be called "grotesque" by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called "photographic realism." The word "grotesque" should not necessarily be used as a pejorative term. There is the grotesque of the animated cartoon. But there is also that grotesque which is a constant in literature when any considerable depth of reality has been penetrated. In Southern fiction there is a growing tradition of the grotesque. In nineteenth century American writing there was a good deal of grotesque literature which came from the frontier and was supposed to be funny—such as *Sut Lovingood*. But our present grotesque heroes are not comic, or at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden and to fix us with eyes that remind us that we all bear some heavy responsibility whose nature we have forgotten. They are prophetic figures. In the novelist's case prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, distances in the qualitative

sense, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the modern instances of the grotesque. But to the eye of the general reader, these prophet-heroes are freaks. The public invariably approaches them from the standpoint of abnormal psychology.

Whenever I am asked why Southern writers particularly have this penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man. And in the South, the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. Of course, the South is changing so rapidly that almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety. But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. It is interesting that as belief in the divinity of Christ decreases, there seems to be a preoccupation with Christ-figures in our fiction. What is pushed to the back of the mind makes its way forward somehow. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature, for it is the business of the artist to reveal what haunts us. We in the South may be in the process of exorcising this ghost which has given us our vision of perfection. Robert Penn Warren has said that in twenty years there may be no such thing as Southern literature. By that time the writer from the South may be writing about men in grey flannel suits and may have lost his ability to see that these gentlemen are even greater freaks than what we are writing about now.

The South is struggling mightily to retain her identity against great odds and without knowing always, I believe, quite in what her identity lies. An identity is not made from what passes, from slavery or from segregation, but from those qualities that endure because they are related to truth. It is not made from the mean average or the typical but often from the hidden and most extreme. I think that Catholic novelists in the future will be able to reinforce the vital strength of Southern literature, for they will know that what has given the South her identity are those beliefs and qualities which she has absorbed from the Scriptures and from her own

history of defeat and violation: a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured. It is to be hoped that Catholics will look deeper into Southern literature and the subject of the grotesque and learn to see there more than what appears on the surface. Thomas Mann has said that the grotesque is a true anti-bourgeois style. Certainly Catholicism is opposed to the bourgeois mind. But in the dealings of Catholics with fiction you usually find a good deal of what is basically un-Catholic.

Or perhaps what you find is a misunderstanding of what the operation of grace *can* look like in fiction. The reader wants his grace warm and binding, not dark and disruptive. He is very busy always looking for some new Doctor Pangloss who will assure him that this is the best of all possible worlds. The word that occurs again and again in his demands of the novel is the word "positive." He seems to assume that what the writer writes about will follow a broad general attitude he has about the goodness of creation and our redemption and resurrection in Christ. There may be writers whose genuine vocation it is to do this. But it is not a vocation that can be demanded of every Catholic writer. These truths may serve for others simply as a light in which evil is seen more closely. We cannot demand centrality of the writer. We cannot even advise him, as so many do, to let evil be balanced by good. Dante divided up his territory pretty evenly between hell, purgatory and paradise. But then Dante lived in the thirteenth century when that balance was achieved in the faith of his age. We live now in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is moved this way and that by momentary convictions, which regards religion as a purely private matter. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to *achieve* one by being a counterweight to the prevailing heresy. People will differ as to what this heresy is, but the particular writer's view of it will have to come from looking at what he sees from where he is. Most of the people who want this positive literature are not able to recognize it when they get it.

Not long ago I received a letter from an old lady in Cali-

fornia who informed me that when the tired reader comes home at night, he wishes to read something that will "lift up his heart." And it seems that her heart had not been lifted up by anything of mine she had read. I wrote her back that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up. You may say that the serious writer doesn't have to bother about the tired reader, but he does, because they are all tired. One old lady who wants her heart lifted up wouldn't be so bad, but you multiply her 250,000 times and what you get is a book club.

The writer, without softening his vision, is obliged to capture or conjure readers. And this means any kind of reader. It means whatever is there. I used to think that it should be possible to write for some supposed elite, for the people who attend the universities and sometimes know how to read, but I have since found that, though you may publish your stories in the *Yale Review*, if they are any good at all you are eventually going to get a letter from some old lady in California, or some inmate of the Federal penitentiary, or the state insane asylum, or the local poorhouse, telling you where you have failed to meet his needs. And his need of course is to be lifted up. There is something in us as story-tellers, and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance of restoration. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but he has forgotten the cost of it. His sense of evil is deluded or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the *price* of restoration. He has forgotten the cost of truth, even in fiction.

I don't believe that you can impose orthodoxy on fiction. I do believe that you can deepen your own orthodoxy by reading if you are not afraid of strange visions. Our sense of what is contained in our faith is deepened less by abstractions than by an encounter with mystery in what is human and often perverse. We Catholics are much given to the instant answer. Fiction doesn't have any. Saint Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. And this is what the fiction writer, on his lower level, attempts to do also.

The danger for the writer who is spurred by the religious

view of the world is that he will consider this two operations instead of one. He will lift up the old lady's heart without cost to himself or to her. He will forget that the devil is still at his task of winning souls and that grace cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring. 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 the imagination. These are separations which are very apparent today in American life and in American writing. I believe they are less true of the South, in spite of her well-publicized sins, than of any other section of the country, and in this I believe that the South is the place where a Catholic literature can thrive. The Catholic novelist in the South will bolster the South's best traditions, for they are the same as his own. And the South will perhaps lead him to be less timid as a novelist, more respectful of the concrete, more trustful of the blind imagination.

The poet is traditionally a blind man. But the Christian poet, and the story-teller as well, is like the blind man Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees—but walking. Christ touched him again, and he saw clearly. We will not see clearly until Christ touches us in death, but this first touch is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to accept if we want to realize a Catholic literature.

LETTERS