

PURIFY THE SOURCE

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THE PROBLEM of the Catholic writer that has been causing the tempest in the literary teacups is really no problem at all. It is a prejudice; and, like most prejudices, it is born of spleen. It is worthy of consideration though, since it has been advanced by such artists as George Bernard Shaw, Conrad Aiken, and more recently, Harry Sylvester.

The Catholic writer, they say, is chained to the Procrustean bed of orthodoxy; he must chop himself down to its size. He has no freedom of thought and dares not be original. In a word, he is stifled intellectually and artistically by his doctrinal convictions.

Now the first and most obvious answer to this is that the Catholic writer has the truth and there is nothing stifling, cramping, or Procrustean about the truth. It embraces all that one may legitimately write of, and a writer cannot expect to be more catholic than that. It is as if someone were to wish that Shakespeare had rid himself of the confining bonds of English and found full freedom in the babbling tongue of the baboon. But, of course, this line of argument will not convince the unbeliever.

If, for the moment, we were to admit that an orthodox point of view limits the vision of the writer, it still would not imply that the non-orthodox writer has the advantage. All writers (and, for that matter, all men), adhere to some creed or philosophy, whether it be that of the religions or systems, or that of the individual's own making. The world of Zola, Shaw, or Maugham, is certainly not wider than that of Shakespeare, Claudel, or Mauriac. The fact is that the non-Christian writer, with all his boasted freedom of expression, is more restricted than his Christian colleague. The Christian sees man as a whole, composed of matter and spirit and having a true and necessary relationship to nature, to his neighbor, and to God. His vision is infinite since it encompasses in its sweep all heaven and earth. Contrast this with the myopic vision of the non-Christian writer whose view of man and the universe is cut off on all sides by the blank wall of matter.

EVEN THE PAGANS

Probably the most convincing answer to the charge that Catholic writers are handicapped by their orthodoxy is found in the pages of world literature. The great classics, pagan as well as Christian, were written by men who were certainly orthodox in their outlook. Newman has this to say of the fountain-head of Western literature: ". . . putting out of consideration the actors in Old Testament history, [Homer] may be called the first Apostle of Civilization."¹ The three great Tragedians were even more esteemed by Newman. Of them he writes: "The majestic lessons concerning duty and religion, justice and providence, which occur in Aeschylus and Sophocles, belong to a higher school than that of Homer."² And of Euripides he says that his verses were so well known and so beloved even by foreigners that ". . . the captives of Syracuse gained their freedom at the price of reciting them to their conquerors."³

A like orthodoxy is to be found in the greatest of the Latin authors. Newman shows this succinctly: ". . . the poems of Virgil and Horace . . . were in schoolboys' satchels not much more than a hundred years after they were written."⁴ If we add to these Cicero, who was studied throughout the Middle Ages, we have the three greatest names in Latin literature.

AND THE CHRISTIANS

Coming down to Christian times, are we to say that Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton (in his poetry), Racine, Corneille, Cervantes, Dostoevski, Dickens, Scott, Goethe, were handicapped or in any way narrowed by their Christian ethos? The objection of Shaw, Sylvester, et al. ad., vanishes in the light of history.

On the other hand, it seems that writers of talent rather than genius find a special advantage in their heterodoxy. As Jacques Maritain observes, "Christianity does not make art easy. It deprives it of many facile means. . . ."⁵ Being free from all restraint and discipline in thought or expression the non-orthodox writer has a flash, an originality, a sensationalism about him that dazzles many readers, and not a few of the less penetrating among the critics. But, since there is nothing so unsensational as yesterday's sensation, this sort of writer does not fare well in the crucible of time. Strip

¹ Newman, *Idea of a University*, America Press, New York, 1941, p. 273.

² *op. cit.* p. 275.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *op. cit.* p. 276.

⁵ *Art and Scholasticism*. New York, 1947. p. 56.

Eugene O'Neill of his stagecraft, his Freudian psychology, and his Greek mechanics, and what is left? A hollow voice shouting into oblivion. O'Neill, like so many of our modern greats, has everything but that which made the truly great great, that is, thought, insight, a power to bring the universal truths to the purblind masses, to sing in harmony with the saints even if the key must be infinitely lower. The soul of the great must ever see that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

THE REAL PROBLEM

In the modern world, the printed page has an almost magical power over the minds of the people. Not religion, but the printed word, has become the opium of the people. They refuse to think; the writer, usually a novelist, thinks for them. He answers all questions, whether they be of theology or philosophy, ethics or aesthetics, history or politics. No other person perhaps receives such adulation as the literary man. This is one of the reasons why the responsibility of the writer has become so great.

This unreasoning adulation has come about because of the inability of the reading public to distinguish between the intellect and the imagination. It is certainly essential to the creative writer that he possess a superior imagination; it is not essential that he possess a superior intellect. In our topsy-turvy age, the imagination, an internal sense, has assumed priority over the intellect which is a faculty of the soul. Thus it happens that the imaginative writer, moron though he may be, is called upon to solve the riddles of the ages.

But the tremendous responsibility of the writer, and especially the Catholic writer, comes principally from the moral effect which his book may have upon the reader. It is here that the real problem of the Catholic writer lies. For "literature," according to Newman, "is . . . the untutored movements of the reason, imagination, passions, and affections of the natural man; the leapings and the friskings, the plungings and the snortings, the sportings and the buffoonings, the clumsy play and the aimless toil, of the noble, lawless savage of God's intellectual creation."⁶ The Catholic writer worthy of the name has a sincere desire to depict these "movements of the reason, imagination, passions, and affections of the natural man" truthfully, shunning all falsification of life. Since his books may profoundly and permanently influence the reader, he is faced with an apparent dilemma. If he portrays life as it is with all its vice and corruption,

⁶ *op. cit.* p. 329.

there is always the risk of endangering the soul of the reader which, as he knows, is infinitely more valuable in the sight of God than all material creation; but if he falsifies life, so as not to shock the sensibilities of the reader, he is writing a lie.

Christian writers in all ages have been aware of the moral danger arising from the ability of literature to arouse the passions. St. Augustine, moved by remorse, tells us that as a youth he "developed a passion for stage plays, with the mirror they held up to my own miseries and the fuel they poured on my flame . . . I was glad with lovers when they sinfully enjoyed each other . . . and when they lost each other I was sad for them."⁷ Racine, true Jansenist that he was, at the early age of thirty-eight, at the peak of his powers, found a simple but drastic solution to the whole problem of the Christian writer, abandoning literature and devoting himself to spiritual things. Newman, although a lover and student of literature, warns us: "One literature may be better than another, but bad will be the best, when weighed in the balance of truth and morality."⁸ The seductive siren-call of literature is not something thought up by Christian moralists but flows from its very nature. For as Newman adds: "Man's work will savour of man: in his elements and powers excellent and admirable, but prone to disorder and excess, to error and to sin."⁹

Coming down to our own times we find an admirable treatment of the question of the moral effect of literature on the reader, and of the responsibility of the Catholic writer, in Francois Mauriac's *God and Mammon*. It appears that the responsibility of the writer, and especially the novelist, has been greatly increased in modern times. This is due to his more vivid and unrestrained depiction of vice, and his desire to create characters of "flesh and blood." In ancient times writers dealt with universals, they were more objective, less introspective than modern writers. The heroes of Homer, as also of Virgil, are types rather than individuals. The same may be said of the literature of the Middle Ages. With the Reformation and its doctrine of self-interpretation and its emphasis on the individual, we find writers becoming more and more subjective until finally we have the stream-of-consciousness school which holds with Freud that the sub-conscious is the most important level of man's existence. The conscious level (which is likened to the small part of an iceberg visible above the water), does not reflect the true man. When we

⁷ *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, translated by F. J. Sheed, New York, 1947, pp. 41-42.

⁸ *op. cit.* p. 329.

⁹ *ibid.*

consider that to the conscious part of our being belong reason, will, thought, and to the subconscious that vast abyssal world of dreams, nightmares, inhibitions and desires, we shall readily see the great danger of the new school of literature.

André Gide, that modern of the moderns, expresses the belief that the more evil the characters are the better the book; that there is a part of the devil in every masterpiece; and that morality in literature consists in presenting an idea well. And Mauriac says: "All his [the novelist's] art is concentrated on reaching the secret source of the greatest sins."¹⁰ Thus, with his preoccupation with sin and his facility for playing on the passions and emotions of the reader, the modern writer is capable of causing incalculable spiritual damage. But, it may be objected, the Catholic writer is no glorifier of vice; he surely does not pander to the passions. To be sure, but it must be remembered that the object of the Catholic writer's art is also the passions and emotions of sinful man. Although he will not condone vice, nevertheless he will depict it. Besides the author cannot determine what effect his book will have on the reader. Mauriac tells us that a young man was on the point of murdering his grandmother after reading his novel *Genetrix*.

If, as St. Charles said, one soul is diocese enough for a bishop, surely the soul of one reader is more than responsibility enough for any writer and should cause him to write his books in the holy fear of God. "Merely to speak of a soul in danger has always been enough to shatter me," Mauriac tells us,¹¹ and this should be the sentiment of every Catholic author.

What, if any, is the solution to the problem of the Catholic writer? Should he follow the solution of Racine and give up writing? No! We serve God better by using and perfecting the gifts He has given us. It is a scholastic axiom that grace perfects nature; it does not destroy it. The solution given by Mauriac and borrowed from Maritain is a simple but radical one. It is the only one for a Catholic writer or artist. It is the one used to such advantage by Fra Angelico, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and in our own day, Georges Rouault.

"Be pure, become pure, and your work too will have a reflection in heaven. Begin by purifying the source and those who drink of the water cannot be sick. . . ."¹²

As a man is, so shall he act. So too the morality of a book will

¹⁰ Francois Mauriac, *God and Mammon*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1936, p. 72.

¹¹ *op. cit.* p. 30.

¹² *God and Mammon*, p. 84.

follow the morality of the author. If it sometimes happens that an immoral or untruthful work is instrumental in bringing a reader to the Truth it is purely accidental. Alfred Noyes tells us in *Unknown God* of the great part the nineteenth century agnostics had in his conversion. This cannot of course be credited to Spencer or Huxley. They were merely signposts warning Noyes that the way of truth was not to be found in the *cul de sac* of agnostic materialism.

On the other hand a reader may find something in the writing of an author that causes him uneasiness, something which to him is in the nature of an occasion of sin. Some have found objectionable passages in such modern Catholic masterpieces as *Kristin Lavransdatter*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *Brideshead Revisited*. The sincere Catholic writer who is striving to perfect himself, "to purify the source," need feel no responsibility toward such readers. There are some who are shocked by the Bible.

Father Garrigou-Lagrange, the famous Dominican theologian, tells us on the first page of his *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* "that the precept of the love of God has no limit and that the perfection of charity falls under the precept, not, of course, as something to be realized immediately, but as the end towards which every Christian must tend according to his condition."

The Catholic writer who is carrying out "the precept of the love of God" to the best of his ability should find the whole problem of his relation and responsibility to the reader solved.

"Begin by purifying the source and those who drink of the water cannot be sick."