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THE CATHOLIC NOVEL

Fact or fiction?

Peter Quinn

Is there such a thing as the Catholic novel? Tricky question. My qualifications for addressing it boil down to two: I'm a practicing novelist—although that's not how I make my living (I'm a political and corporate speechwriter); and I'm a practicing Catholic, though the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith might require a retraction or qualification of certain opinions before it would license me, formally, to use that label.

When examined more closely, however, those two qualifications, thin to begin with, become even less substantial. I don't spend much time thinking about being a novelist, Catholic or otherwise. I did, in the beginning, when I wanted to find out what it took to be one. I read two books on the subject. The first was by an Englishman whose name I've forgotten. It was titled, I think, *On Becoming a Novelist*. In the opening chapter, the author posited that it was unwise for aspiring novelists to be encumbered by a spouse, children, or a full-time job. Since I was happily encumbered with all three, I didn't bother reading the rest of the book.

The second book was by John Gardner, a novelist (*Grendel*, *The Sunlight Dialogues*) whose work I admire and respect. The essay was called *On Moral Fiction* (1978). Gardner left me so confused about the substance of moral fiction and how it was written that I thought maybe I should try my hand at "immoral fiction"—as a pre-Vatican II educated Irish Catholic I was sure it would mainly consist of elaborate descriptions of raunchy sex. For that same reason, I was fearful I wouldn't be any good at it.

The end result of consulting these books was that I concentrated on writing speeches, making a living, being a father and husband, and reading fiction rather than attempting to write it. Eventually, I became a novelist the same way I became a Catholic, not through study, reflection, and pondering on what it meant, but through a moment's grace, a subliminal calling, a sudden turn (a conversion?) that left me utterly convinced of something that up until that moment I'd held ever so tenuously.

I had what I think is among the most ordinary religious conversions in the history of the Catholic Church. (Some

might argue it wasn't a conversion at all, but a reversion.) I was born into a devout Irish American family. My college-educated parents were extremely loyal to the faith and attentive to its practice, while skeptical about the hierarchy to a remarkable degree (given the fact that this was during the fifties). I attended Catholic schools in the Bronx from kindergarten through college—Saint Raymond's Grammar School, Manhattan Prep, Manhattan College—to the last stages of study for a Ph.D. at Fordham.

In 1967, with conscious intent and a sense of self-liberation, I stopped going to Mass and decided that Catholicism was a rapidly disintegrating relic of a vanished stage of European civilization and, before long, would be a curiosity in a category with Zoroastrianism. I was no more attracted to any other faith than Stephen Daedalus in *Portrait of the Artist*, who upbraided a friend for supposing that his abandonment of Catholicism implied an embrace of Protestantism. "I said that I had lost my faith," Stephen said, "but not that I had lost my self-respect."

My decision to be a Catholic Christian began with a re-appreciation of religious experience. This was spurred by weekly attendance at an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Kansas City while I spent a year there as a VISTA volunteer teaching adult education. Several years later, historical studies gave me a fuller appreciation of the complexity and richness of Catholic culture and thought. I was content at this point to think of myself as a "cultural Catholic," interested in the influence and integral role of Catholicism on Western culture but uninvolved in its practice as a living faith. Then, in a New York moment—I'm not kidding, I was waiting impatiently for a long-overdue bus—something happened.

I was looking up at the windows of the apartment building across the way. I was thinking about all the different lives being lived behind them, each convinced of its own

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CHARLOT

significance, each caught up in tragedies and joys that were of no consequence to the universe, that were laughable in their sheer smallness and would be quickly obliterated by death and swallowed in the immense, amoral indifference of the cosmos.

In the time it took to turn and step onto the bus, I was convinced otherwise. No lights parting clouds or angelic voices. No sudden grasp of a logical argument I hadn't understood. No *De profundis* in the style of Gerald Manley Hopkins; "I did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod." Just this, felt for the first time "in the deep heart's core": the certainty that Jesus isn't a prophet, a moral teacher, a saint, history's greatest holy man, but the living Christ, present in every moment of time, equally, always, and as real as the cold sensation in my hand of the metal handrail, the coins and tokens clanging at that moment into the fare box, the wide, brown, handsome face of the bus driver.

My conversion into novelist was almost as abrupt and mundane. I had set out to try to write a history of the immigration of the famine Irish into New York and their effect on the city. In the course of my research, I learned about the role the Irish played in the development of the black-faced minstrel show. That resulted, in turn, in the discovery that Stephen Foster, America's first great songwriter, was living in a hotel at Broadway and the Bowery during this same period and quickly becoming one of America's first has-beens.

For reasons still unclear to me, I traveled down to the hotel in which Foster had been living and in which he died, in January, 1864, after slitting his throat. The structure had been demolished long ago and replaced by a nondescript apartment building. Standing there, I had a sensation of what might have rushed through Foster's mind on a routine day, the kinescope of memory and desire that he—like me and every human being—carried in his head: worries, lusts, melodies, heartbreaks, hopes, regrets, the ceaseless flicker of light and faces that flit through the dark.

For a minute or two, I felt as though I were watching the disorderly and momentary procession of Stephen Foster's thoughts. There were no shocking secrets or insights—that would come later—only the unstoppable flow of perceptions and recollections in their quotidian urgency and everlasting insignificance. I knew in that instant that what I wanted to reach were unspoken feelings, unrecorded moments, forgotten conversations, the randomness and density of every human life, and that it couldn't be reached through history. It lay in the territory of the imagination.

I decided at this point I wanted to be a novelist. I never made a formal renunciation of my faith as a historian. I just quietly stopped practicing, not rejoicing in my apostasy or condemning those who remained, but following my heart down the heterodox path of historical fiction. Five years later, my novel *Banished Children of Eve* was published.

There, then, is how I arrived at being a Catholic novelist. The questions that remain—that I've so far managed to avoid

addressing—are: What's the relationship between the two? Or is there any relationship between the two? And should it even matter?

Let me take those questions in reverse order. And please note: I speak for nobody but myself. I have neither sufficient ability nor sufficient arrogance to reach any universally definitive conclusions about the existence or nonexistence of the Catholic novel. First, does it matter? In general, I think, it doesn't. The practice of literature doesn't require the segregation of a separate category of fiction labeled "Catholic." It's not a genre like, say, science fiction or Gothic horror or romance. I'm unaware of any organizations or writing associations exclusive to Catholic novelists; if there are any, I haven't been invited to join.

In particular, it matters only to the writer who seeks to write in ways that expressly reflect Catholic teachings or moral sensibilities, or to readers who seek to find such themes in what they read. Some novelists have unabashedly declared or acknowledged the Catholic nature of their work: Evelyn Waugh, Walker Percy, Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, and Alice McDermott among them. Their novels have struck chords among their fellow Catholics, but the admirers and readers they've reached spread far beyond the ranks of their coreligionists.

If, then, it's possible for Catholics to write Catholic novels that appeal to non-Catholics, it's also glaringly apparent that non-Catholics can and do write intellectually impressive novels, which many Catholics find morally serious and expressive of at least some of their religious values. The list of such writers runs the gamut of great fiction from Melville to Mailer, from Dickens to Orwell, from the Wolfes (Thomas and Virginia) to the Roths (Henry and Philip) to Hawthorne, Hemingway and the rest, ad infinitum.

In addition, there's that special category of lapsed or renounced Catholic writers who—depending on which critic you believe—have or haven't continued to embody Catholic themes in their fiction. My list, obviously influenced by my ethnic background, includes F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, James Joyce, Brian Moore, and nine out of ten of Irish novelists currently practicing their trade in what is now called "post-Catholic" Ireland.

So, if it's true that Catholic writers write novels with Catholic themes, from a Catholic perspective, and that Catholic readers find fiction written by non-Catholics that resonates with their beliefs and consciences, what does it mean to speak of "Catholic themes" and "a Catholic perspective"? Let me suggest that, for me, what creates a relationship between a work of fiction and Catholicism is the presence of certain distinctive qualities, including, among other things, the communion of saints; sin, suffering, and redemption (which I count as one quality); grace; and the Incarnation.

I've never encountered any better description of the communion of saints than in the opening of William Kennedy's *Ironweed*, when Francis Phelan walks among the headstones

in Saint Agnes, an Albany cemetery filled with his Irish American ancestors. It's All Saints Day—the ancient Celtic feast of Samhain—and Francis converses with the departed and is watched by them. Michael, Francis's deceased father, "signaled to his neighbors that an act of regeneration seemed to be in process, and the eyes of the dead, witness all to their own historical omissions, their own unbridgeable chasms in life gone, silently rooted for Francis as he walked up the slope...."

The dead are gone, not obliterated. The community still includes them, still ropes even them in, and though death changes everything, consumes everybody, the commune and the communing continue. For the Catholic, it is the tomb, not the center, which cannot hold. Communion and comedy come from the same root.

When it comes to sin, suffering, and redemption, you'd be hard-pressed to find any serious work of fiction without the second person of that trinity—suffering. It comes in all flavors—emotional, mental, physical, financial, existential. It includes everything from root canals to cancer. It savages innocent children, the helpless, the old, the good, the bad, and the supermodel.

We call suffering a mystery. But it's a mystery only for the believer, for those, like Job, who subscribe to the notion of a just and merciful God. It's not a mystery to Darwinians. It's a fact like birth and decay, to be alleviated perhaps, but empty of metaphysical significance, just as all of creation is

devoid of such a dimension. For Christians, suffering is, to borrow from Graham Greene, the heart of the matter. It's embodied in the hideous embarrassment of the Cross that advertises the frightening possibilities for those who utter the words "Thy will be done."

Nobody has ever better expressed that truth than perhaps the most famous of all lapsed-Catholic writers—albeit, a playwright rather than a novelist—Eugene O'Neill. "In all my plays," O'Neill wrote, "sin is punished and redemption takes place." A reluctant apostate, who wrote several times of his wish to believe, he remained a firm believer in the permanently fallen state of human beings and their need to place their suffering in a context of redemption, if not by God, then by one another.

The shape of that redemptive scheme can vary from novel to novel. The Jesuit priest at the conclusion of Japanese Catholic writer Shusaku Endo's *Silence* has seemingly renounced his faith, but this renunciation is a redemptive sacrifice. Harry Lyme in Graham Greene's *The Third Man* flees redemption down "the labyrinthine ways," literally, hiding in the sewers. Sometimes, at least for me, it's easier to find sin and suffering than redemption in Flannery O'Connor's novels, but it's always there.

Several years ago, I did a long interview with William Kennedy—it's reprinted in his book of essays, *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car*—and asked him about the thirteen rejections he received for Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ironweed* before he

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found a publisher. All thirteen had found the story depressing. Nobody, they said, wanted to read novels about alcoholic bums. "But it's actually a very hopeful novel, isn't it?" I asked. "A novel about redemption? And forgiveness?" In part, Kennedy answered this way: "'Redemption' is the key word. That's what it's all about. It parallels the *Purgatorio*...it's a journey through planes of escalation into a moment of redemption out of sin. Francis [Phelan] cleanses himself."

Intrinsic to the redemption is grace. As a child I always loved the word "grace," a result perhaps of the fact that every female of my acquaintance with that name was either gentle and sweet or seemed to like me. Redemption in the Catholic tradition isn't predestined. It's not a one-time act. It requires the constant assistance of grace. In the words of the old *Baltimore Catechism*, actual grace is "the supernatural help of God which is given human beings to enlighten our minds and strengthen our will to do good and to avoid evil." Though grace may often be amazing, it isn't always pretty and sometimes, I think, isn't recognizable as grace, at least not at first.

Father Ernest Burner, the plump protagonist of J. F. Powers's short story "The Prince of Darkness," seeks only the modest comfort of having his own parish, a safe perch for himself and a place where he can ensconce his aging mother as housekeeper. When the archbishop dashes his hopes, reassigning him once more as a curate with the admonition that "I trust that in your new assignment you will find not peace but a sword," Father Burner is abjectly unaware of being given divine assistance for the enlightenment and sanctification necessary "to do good and to avoid evil."

Like most of us, all Ernest Burner is aware of is God's *no*. But is this *no* a beginning rather than an end? Is it filled with grace? Does grace more often than not mean saying yes to God's *no*, "Not my will but thine," and saying it with Molly Bloom's emphatic "yes and his heart was going like mud and yes and yes I said yes I will yes?"

For me, the Catholic novel involves the believers' confrontation with God's apparent refusal to treat them any differently from nonbelievers; with, in human eyes, his passive silence or active refusal; with outcomes that so often seem at best hard to understand in the context of faith and at worst destructive of our happiness. Yes, there are miracles of grace; not every instance of grace is hard to recognize or embrace. Some pray and receive—but not all; perhaps not even most.

The mystery is unsolvable. It has no satisfactory answer in our temporal space, in this vale of tears, in a post-Auschwitz world where we know that there is no floor to human suffering, no point where God intervenes and says enough. We can only search. We can only confront that dry, dusty holy water font beside the door in Roddy Doyle's magnificent novel *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. We can only wonder why it is no longer a holy well, why Paula Spencer, a woman of common innocence, has been driven into a place of such profound physical and psychological suffering, and the faith she was raised in seems incapable of offering solace.

To those novelists who don't believe God is a part of the equation—that the whole idea of some theological dimension is absurd or irrelevant—there's no need to bother with the presence or absence of grace. Where grace is or its absence noted, when it is searched for and even when, as in Brian Moore's *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, it isn't found, I believe the subject is Catholic or of interest to Catholics.

The Incarnation, the last distinctive quality of Catholic fiction on my list—and let me reemphasize that it's *my* list—is the least easy to pin down, although the most essential. Alone among the great monotheistic faiths, Catholicism is a lover rather than a breaker of icons. It assumed the art and artistic impulses of paganism in their classical and folk forms. It made goddesses into saints, pagan feasts into religious holidays, the Pantheon into the church of All Saints, pre-Christian holy sites into places of Christian pilgrimage. Certainly, there were always two forces at odds in Catholicism, immersion in the world and renunciation of it, appreciation of the flesh and aversion to it, the embrace of the immediate and the flight from it.

That tension isn't a bad thing. It's built into the Christian's constant struggle to balance herself between God's gift of this temporal moment and the promise of another moment—an eternal moment—to come. The Incarnation isn't a temporary blessing bestowed on the world, a glancing blow of goodness. It is God's infusion into creation...*et incarnatus est*... "and He became flesh." The Catholic Church's wealth of visual art gave the physical representation of Christ—of the naked child and the nearly nude figure on the cross—a prominence largely lacking in other Christian churches.

The art historian Leo Steinberg, in his book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, sees in the Catholic art of the Renaissance the expression of "full Christian orthodoxy." Renaissance art, he writes,

harnessed the theological impulse and developed the requisite stylistic means to attest to the utter carnality of God's humanization in Christ. It became the first Christian art in a thousand years to confront the Incarnation entire, the upper and the lower body together, not excluding even the body's sexual component. Whereas the generations that followed recoiled, so that by the eighteenth century, the Circumcision of Christ, once the opening act of the Redemption, had become merely bad taste.

I agree with Steinberg. Although it was the progenitor of Western art, the bridge between the classical and postclassical art, the patron of some of the greatest art and architecture in human history, the Catholic Church is now a largely irrelevant player in the field of visual creativity. Just consider the churches constructed in this century or the decorations within. At the very least, you'd be hard put to find any evidence attesting "to the utter carnality of God's humanization in Christ."

The Catholic celebration of the Incarnation—full and unqualified—grounds the church. It is the basis of Catholic insistence on the Real Presence. It is the reason, I think, why there is so little Catholic writing on the Second Coming and the last days. Many Christians don't share that reticence. The publishing sensation of the last decade has been the *Left Behind* series of eschatological novels, which have sold nearly 50 million copies detailing a right-wing Christian fantasy about the end of the world, the Rapture and the battle of Armageddon.

In contrast to this trend, when I scanned a list sent me by a friend of some eighty titles he uses in a course on the Catholic novel, I was unable to recognize any apocalyptic sagas. (I was also horrified at how many of the titles I hadn't read.) Truly Catholic novels embrace the utter carnality—the all-inclusiveness—of the Incarnation. They don't find sexuality in bad taste. They don't recoil from the squalor and sinfulness that are inseparable from the human condition. Their driving passion isn't a *deus ex machina* at the end of time that sets the world right and cleans up the mistakes of the first creation.

In my view, truly Catholic novels are immersed in the always untidy, often sordid world. They don't squint at reality. They don't separate themselves from the democracy of sinners and view existence from the high places where the aristocracy of saints are gathered to greet the next and last Big Bang. Two of my favorite New York nov-

els—which are, I think, profoundly Catholic novels—represent this immersion in the fullness of the Word made flesh.

Both are about music. Oscar Hijuelos' *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* centers on the faithfulness of an artist to his art, even where its power and glory are unrecognized or undervalued. *Mambo Kings* is a passionate, eloquent account of the workings of the communion of saints (and sinners), sin, suffering and redemption, grace and the Incarnation.

The other novel is Josef Skvorecky's *Dvorak in Love*, a lyrical account of the Bohemian composer's sojourn to New York and Iowa to write the *New World Symphony*. Running throughout the book is Dvorak's Catholicism, earthy and complex, fleshy, fractured, fully incarnate in his creative work.

Finally, then, to my last question: What's the relationship between Catholicism and the novel? In a word, it's complex. Catholics may write novels devoid of their faith, while non-Catholics may, in their novels, confront questions of faith. The first obligation of the novelist is to art, not faith (the reverse of the theologian's). To the extent that a writer succeeds in turning words into beauty, into language that is true to the human experience and acknowledges the presence—or even the possibility—of what “we see now through a glass, darkly, but one day face to face”—he or she, Catholic or not, offers a suitable prayer. It is one, I believe, that will be found worthy. □

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