SURVEY OF UNITED STATES CATHOLIC LETTERS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

By JOHN PICK

The year 1900 is merely an arbitrary date, and it is practically impossible for any outsider to evaluate American Catholic letters in the past half century without considering the historical and cultural background out of which they were born.

It would be exalting mediocrity to contend that Catholic letters – at least until very recently – flourished in America with any vigour or continuity. True, American Catholicism constitutes a minority culture in the midst of a vast society, predominantly secularized. But at the same time we are by far the largest single group in the United States. Out of a total population of 150 million, there are nearly 30 million Catholics. Yet, as one looks back over the panorama of the history of letters in America, it is woefully apparent that our contributions to literature, at least in the past, have been for the most part very slight and very undistinguished.

The Catholic Church is, of course, the oldest organization in this country. In the year 1776, when the United States gained its independence and was born as a nation, the Church was nearly 1,776 years old. Yet a Catholic culture has never flourished here if we take literature as a criterion. Although Columbus and his crew sang the *Te Deum* on the shores of the New World, and although the early Spanish and French settlements left their memories in terms of missions and place names which are reminiscent of the great Catholic saints, these early beginnings never blossomed into a culture crowned with a Catholic literature. Even such Catholic centres as New Orleans, Baltimore, and St Louis have contributed little to Catholic letters.

The truth is that the literary ascendancy was to be that of Virginia and then of Puritan New England, which flowered in a very different culture in the early nineteenth century.

Across the sea, such countries as England and France had their nineteenth century Catholic revivals which no literary or social historian, of whatever creed, would dare to overlook. Not so in America. It is, therefore, really impossible to speak of a revival, or renascence, or 'Second Spring' of Catholic letters in America. There had flourished no earlier Catholic culture. There was nothing to be reborn.

* This paper was read in the Aula Magna of the University on 19th January 1956.

The reasons for the long delay in the emergence of a Catholic culture are not far to seek when one realizes that until fifty years ago we were still a pioneering and missionary church.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we were primarily a missionary church; and it is even more important to recognize that in the nineteenth century, with the tremendous tidal waves of Catholic immigrants reaching the New World, we were even more of a missionary church. Instead of being able to play her traditional role as Mother of the Arts, the Church in America by necessity devoted her time, her energy, her slender funds (most of which until nearly half a century ago were still supplied by faithful Europeans), and all of her efforts to keeping the faith alive.

After an early period of working heroically among the Indians, she had to absorb all the Catholic newcomers to our shores. What she needed desperately were priests, priests, and more priests; sisters, whole congregations of them; schools, orphanages, hospitals, chapels and churches. She had to dedicate all of her attention to ministering as directly as possible to the immediate needs of an ever-increasing membership.

The newcomers had to battle against pressing poverty, against social inferiority, and against prejudice as their growing numbers began seriously to challenge the ascendancy already in established command.

Culture, letters, leisure, patronage, the arts – these were luxuries. This historic tragedy left its mark on the Church in the United States for many decades, and even now we are only beginning to recover. Its marks are still to be seen on our institutions and on our people.

Out of this situation, with a feeling of social and financial inferiority, grew a withdrawal – certainly understandable but at the same time unfortunate – into what some European commentators have called a 'Catholic ghetto' A provincial defensiveness grew and developed. Without a tradition of cultural leadership, Catholics devoted themselves to the rough warfare of establishing themselves.

Europeans sometimes fail to realize that during these difficult years American Catholics were building up a unique educational system which burdened them with double taxation. It has not been until recently that Catholic colleges and universities have managed to rise above mediocrity, and the absence of generations of educated Catholics has meant that until only yesterday each generation has had to start anew at the bottom of the cultural ladder.

Then, too, American Catholic cultural life was deeply affected, as were European countries, by the tragedy of the Reformation which split the unity of Western Christendom. This meant that for centuries the Church, especially in Protestant countries, was on the defensive and in a state

of siege, and its main ammunition had to be apologetic, sectarian, and didactic. The effort on Catholic art was profound and unfortunate.

In the nineteenth century in England, Wilfred Ward was tempted to think that at last in his own lifetime the siege under which the Church had been suffering for more than three hundred years was finally lifting. It was hardly to be expected, however, as his daughter, Maisie Ward Sheed, has emphasized, that:

> The majority of Catholics could rid themselves immediately of the intellectual results of the protracted siege state. When the City is relieved, Wilfred Ward reminds us, it is much if you find in the garrison a keen *esprit de corps*, a fighting spirit, a fine state of military discipline. You cannot expect to find the normal life of a city in peace time. The museums, the picture gallaries, the arts and studies that flourish in a time of peace will have few adepts when all able-bodied men have been drafted into the ranks.
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> And even after the siege has been raised the garrison will be slow to realize – especially if the siege has been prolonged – from how abnormal a state they are issuing.

What was true of England and the Continent was even more true in America. Indeed – in the words of one cultural historian – Catholics had come to look upon bad art as almost one of the characteristics of the Church.

On such dark horizons it will be surprising to find any glimmerings at all before the year 1900, and the history of Catholic letters in America up to that time may be told very briefly. A few figures emerge and should be given their due, but it would be a mistake to exaggerate their intrinsic significance and become guilty of that enthusiastic partisanship which has all too often characterized Catholic literary and cultural scholarship.

Orestes Brownson is probably the greatest of these nineteenth century figures, though most of his work belongs to polemics rather than to literature. He entered the Church in 1844, a year earlier than Newman in England, but the English Catholic revival which flowed from Newman's entrance was long postponed in America. One other significant American at this time turned to Rome, Isaac Hecker, who in 1865 founded *The Catholic World*, a magazine which since that date has reflected literary life in America.

The Civil War period gave us two poets who may be found in anthologies – Abram Ryan and John Bannister Tabb – but they are minor poets. Boston became the home of the Irishman John Boyle O'Reilly, but to-day he is no longer read. Joel Chandler Harris came into the Church almost on his death-bed.

At the turn of the century there was no Catholic literary movement, and it is significant that such people as Louise Imogen Guiney, Henry Harland, and F. Marion Crawford had withdrawn to Europe to find a more congenial Catholic literary atmosphere. We shall speak of them later.

In surveying Catholic letters since 1900, *genre* by *genre* – poetry, fiction, biography, the essay – it will be found that time winnows, decade by decade, and that of the first two decades very little of significance has survived. Year by year various writers have been hailed as important Catholic poets, novelists, or essayists, but with the perspective of another generation they have disappeared and are no longer read, and mention of them will be found only in Catholic literary history or Catholic anthologies of interest to the historian of Catholic letters rather than to the critic who demands intrinsic literary merit.

As one nears 1950, more and more names may be mentioned in each field, not because they are necessarily those that will survive in the future but because the winnowing process of time has not as yet taken place. Long ago Matthew Arnold warned that the 'personal estimate' rather than the 'real estimate' of writers is especially a danger in reference to one's contemporaries, and each generation of Catholic critics since 1900 has been prone to the pitfalls of the personal estimate. Undoubtedly as we near the Catholic writers of to-day, we ourselves are subject to the same tendency to exaggerate their importance. As authors recede into the past, greater objectivity is possible.

What poets, then, of the first two decades – or roughly through the years of the first World War – have triumphed over time and are still recognised as significant?

Certainly the sonnets of John Lancaster Spalding or the verses of Charles Warren Stoddard, hailed in their day, are no longer read. Nor are Shaemus O'Sheel, the prolific Hugh Francis Blunt, or Michael Earls. Maurice Francis Egan, the author of some two dozen volumes and the object of praise by his contemporaries as 'educator, poet, novelist, critic, and diplomat' and as 'the most distinguished Catholic layman of his time', is to-day only a memory. Agnes Tobin, greeted by Yeats as the finest poet America had produced since Whitman, is no longer known.

Padraic Colum transplanted himself to America, but his work has retained its Irish roots, and he is hardly a part of American literary history.

The work of two minor poets does survive from this period: that of Louise Imogen Guiney, who, however, after withdrawing to Oxford in 1904, turned to criticism and editing and produced very little poetry between that date and her death in 1930; and, better known, that of the convert Joyce Kilmer, killed in action in 1918. There are those who believe

that he would have become a poet of real stature had he survived. Aline Kilmer, his wife, who survived him, is in the opinion of some a poet at least as good as her better-known husband.

By the middle of the 1920's the number of minor poets had grown almost to the dimensions of a movement. During a period of a few years, such people as the following established themsleves: John Bunker, Francis Carlin, Raymond Larsson, Sister Madeleva, J. Corson Miller, Benjamin Musser, Charles L. O'Donnell, Daniel Sargent, A.M. Sullivan, and Thomas Walsh. These are still minor poets, and the list is uneven to quality, but poets they are. However, it must be admitted that almost all of them are read – in so far as they have a public – exclusively by Catholics.

In the interval since then the names of still more minor poets may be added – and some of them have produced only a single volume: Alfred Barrett, Fra Angelico Chavez, John Duffy, Leonard Feeney, Clifford Laube, John W. Lynch, John Frederick Nims; and a group of sisters: Jessica Powers (Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit), Sister Maris Stella, Sister M. Jeremy, Sister Miriam, R.S.M., Sister M. Maura, Sister M. Therese.

Undoubtedly some of the poets in these lists have not been sufficiently appreciated. On the other hand, such a review as the following of William Thomas Walsh's *Lyric Poems*, appearing in *Spirit* and written by a fellow poet whose name appears above – such a review, I say, might look exaggerated to an objective eye:

> Not in years has so large a sweep of Catholic lyric eloquence been brought between book covers. The sheer Catholic upsurge of these psalms and sighings breaks upon the mind like an impetuous and pounding surf. The plunge is that of intensity harnessed to truth. The metrical counterpoint is as fine-spun and graceful as recessive ocean spray.

And the lyrical review goes on:

> It is not too much to say that many of these poems, particularly the longer ones, rise to majesty. They shatter completely the notion that modern Catholic poetry is minor and fragmentary. Milton himself, could a Catholic vision have illuminated him, might have been proud to write such lines as these... It must suffice to say that every syllable in this book is Catholic, every line melodious and untrammeled; that here there is poetry which takes flight bravely, soars superbly and keeps its nesting-place securely upon the high ledge of Christian revelation. Hispanist, biographer, novelist and historian, William Thomas Walsh has certified by this beautiful book that Catholic poetry is as sure-winged as it ever was.

Much of the Catholic poetry outside of this select list – and even some

in it – suffers from what may be called academicism and from blind traditionalism. Experimentalism and vitality are needed if Catholics are to speak to their contemporaries. There seems much uncomfortable truth in a comment of H. Marshall McLuhan in the *Kenyon Review*: 'The Catholic reader comes... with a mechanism of sensibility which came off the line in 1850.' The same might be said of many of the writers themselves.

To write good religious poetry is, of course, an extraordinarily difficult task. T.S. Eliot – probably the one major religious poet of our time – once asked the question, 'Why is most religious verse so bad, and why does so little religious verse reach the highest levels of poetry?' His answer is:

> The capacity for writing poetry is rare; the capacity for religious emotion of the first intensity is rare; and it is to be expected that the existence of both capacities in the same individual should be rarer still. People who write devotional verse are usually writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is the confusion of didacticism, polemics, apologetics, piety, or propaganda and poetry. The result is degeneration into shallow religiosity.

There is a tendency for us to call our propaganda poetry, but to call other propagandistic verse merely propaganda. An editorial in *Spirit*, the official organ of the Catholic Poetry Society of America, well said:

> There are too many who would violently condemn the Communist's use of poetry to advance economic or atheistic propaganda, while tossing their hats into the air because Brother John of the Holy Angels has embodied a lengthy digest of St Augustine's *City of God* in a loosely constructed epic in blank verse, which could not bear any actual analysis as poetry.

Or as another writer in the same source expressed it:

> It is difficult to estimate whether the bulk of bad 'communist' poetry outweighs the bulk of bad 'religious' poetry, or bad 'scientific' poetry. The good poet who attempts to load his lines with excessive argument, however, is menacing his talent and betraying his trust, and time will punish him.

Too much that parades itself as religious poetry simply is not poetry at all. Good intentions do not necessarily result in good poetry. The nature of poetry is to be poetry. This cannot too often be repeated.

For the encouragement of our best talent and for its careful critical guidance, much credit must be given to the Catholic Poetry Society of America. Through its periodical, *Spirit*, edited by John Gilland Brunini and founded fifteen years ago, it has raised both the quality of religious poetry and its appreciation. When one reads through the three anthologies

gathered from back numbers, *From the Four Winds, Drink from the Rock,* and *From One Word,* one cannot help being impressed by the religious poetry which it has fostered. And when one studies the collection from the same magazine of editorials and critical articles gathered a few years ago under the title *Return to Poetry,* one realizes how very genuine has been the contribution of this group to the advancement of Catholic letters in this country.

To-day, the greatest hopes are particularly concentrated on three converts, Thomas Merton, Robert Lowell, and Allen Tate.

Thomas Merton, whose name in religion is Father Louis, is now a Trappist at Gethsemani in Kentucky and has four volumes of poetry to his credit: *Thirty Poems, A Man in the Divided Sea, Figures for an Apocalypse,* and *Tears of the Blind Lions.* The crucial point is whether he is a growing and developing poet or not. Robert Speaight, who recently wrote the foreward to a selection of Merton's poems for a London publisher, remarked: 'I have been interested to observe, in making a selection from his first three published volumes of verse, that the third and latest volume, all the poems of which were written at Gethsemani, is incontestably the best.' If this is true, then American Catholics may well look with greater and greater anticipation to Merton.

Robert Lowell has been widely acclaimed by the serious reviews, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and has firmly established himself. His first book, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), was followed by *Lord Weary's Castle,* which received the Pulitzer Award for Poetry in 1947 – the first time, I believe, that the prize has been given to a Catholic poet. His most recent volume, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs,* appeared in 1951.

Whether he will grow into America's greatest Catholic poet is largely dependent on whether the deep personal conflicts of his life are resolved in Catholic terms.

The recent reception (1950) of Allen Tate into the Church has meant the addition of one of the most distinguished of contemporary editors, critics, and poets. It is not difficult in going back over his poetry to see in it his gradual approach to the Church. At this date it is impossible to predict what his poetry will be like in the future, but it may well be that his name will be among the few that will survive in the future history of Catholic poetry in America.

These three men, Merton, Lowell, and Tate, are all converts, and there arises the question – often raised in England – as to why it is that our best writers are so frequently those not born within the Church. At all events, up to the present time, the condition and status of Catholic poetry seems probably our most solid contribution to American Catholic letters.

The novel, at any rate, has not fared so well, in spite of the fact that in our contemporary world it is easily the most popular and most widely read of the literary *genres*. It would seem that Catholics spill at least as much ink as others (and in America there are numerous Catholic book clubs and even an organization called 'The Gallery of Living Catholic Authors'), and yet the history of the Catholic novel in America is not one of which one can be proud.

Of course, it is a commonplace of literary history that the novel was the last *genre* to develop; it was born after the Reformation was well under way. In the words of one critic: 'It was secular; it had never been baptized.' And it is significant that in the Catholic revival – no matter what country one studies – it had been the last of the literary types to emerge.

Even on the Continent and in England it took the novel a long time to become Catholic in the very deepest sense: to treat of the fullness of all the realities which a Catholic life throws open to the novelist. In France it finally appeared in the work of such men as Bloy, Bernanos, and Mauriac. In England it took longer. The novels of Benson, Baring, or Mackenzie, or Kaye-Smith – significant contributions as they are – can hardly be called great Catholic novels in the same sense. However, very recently the work of Waugh and Greene has given at long last to England what Undset and the Frenchmen I have mentioned above gave to the Continent.

Back in 1928, Francis X. Talbot, then literary editor of *America*, wrote: 'Never before in English literary history have there been so many and such brilliant Catholic novelists. In technical excellence they are easily the equal of their contemporaries.' But this optimistic assertion can hardly be applied in America. The emergence of outstanding Catholic novelists in modern England and France has not been paralleled here.

Just a few years ago the British critic and writer George Orwell remarked: 'A fairly large proportion of the distinguished novels of the last few decades have been written by Catholics and have been describable as Catholic novels.' But again, he could hardly have been thinking of the American Catholic novel. We seem poor and barren indeed in comparison with the riches of the European Catholic novelists of the past two generations. One American Catholic critic, deeply devoted to the cause of Catholic culture in this country, has summed up the situation severely and succinctly: 'The great bulk of American Catholic fiction is unintelligent and unreadable.'

A great number of critical studies have treated the problem of the contemporary Catholic novel in the United States. All of us, I think, know

the usual criticisms levelled against Catholic fiction, even though we may not go so far as to agree with the Catholic publisher who declared that Catholic novelists have got themselves such a bad name that even the Catholics avoid them.

The difficulties, undoubtedly, are many, but the following are significant among them: first, a failure to deal with Catholic life on anything but the most superficial levels; second, the failure sufficiently to realize that the novel is an art form and that it cannot be overloaded with an obtrusive thesis; third, an emasculation, a false prudence, and a Puritanism which has even been called Jansenistic. All three defects are regrettable, though understandable in terms of the cultural history of Catholicism long on the defensive in America.

It would be a grave error to place all the burden of such criticisms on the novelists themselves. Their Catholic readers and the state of Catholic criticism – these are at least as much to blame.

Catholics are likely to be very intent upon, and enthusiastic over, writing about a religious view of life without understanding the humble, patient, and arduous discipline that the craft of writing demands and without which we are doomed to mediocrity. Every work of art expresses an attitude towards life, but the theme must become part of the whole, inextricably welded and fused with the life presented – otherwise the result is mere propaganda and not a work of art.

Jacques Maritain has urged the Christian painter to stop all work on the tabernacle and to concentrate for a long time on the creation of grapes and fish. The implication, of course, is that we be humble and intelligent enough to discipline ourselves in an art form. The danger of the ordinary enthusiast who is told the need for Catholic literature – and the need is tremendous – is that he will rush immediately into the world of explicit dogma without the humble preparation needed. He probably realizes that men's differences are ultimately theological. No world-view can stop at philosophy. The avid young writer plunges into apologetics. The result is a kind of pseudo-art in which even the theology is betrayed by the shoddiness of its medium into well-meaning but quasi-heretical sentimentalsim.

All great novels have been built around conflict, and the peculiar disease of the Catholic writer seems ro be his timidity, his reluctance to treat of sin. When the problem of sin is avoided or treated on superficial levels, then correspondingly the treatment of virtue tends to become empty and lacking in vitality.

The American Catholic novelist may learn much from the Continental Catholics, though I am fully aware that it would be stultifying if we mere-

ly produced American Mauriacs or Undsets. There is an American way of presenting the universal Church, just as there is a French or an English way. Nevertheless, the advice and counsel of these writers may be endlessly helpful, I can think of no sounder approach to the treatment of evil in the novel than the words of Mauriac:

> I am far from sharing Gide's opinion that good literature cannot be made out of fine sentiments, and that the worse the characters the better the book. Nevertheless, it certainly is not easy to make good literature with only good sentiments, and it is almost impossible to isolate the good from the bad so as to make an edifying portrayal. The ambition of the modern novelist is to apprehend the whole of human nature, including its shifting contradictions. In the world of reality you do not find beautiful souls in the pure state – these are only to be found in novels and in bad novels at that. What we call a beautiful character has become beautiful at the cost of a struggle against itself and this struggle should not stop until the bitter end. The evil which the evil character has to overcome in itself and from which it has to sever itself, is a reality which the novelist must account for. If there is a reason for the existence of the novelist on earth it is this: to show the element which holds out against God in the highest and noblest characters – the innermost evils and dissimulations; and also to light up the secret source of sanctity in creatures who seem to have failed.

Sigrid Undset, likewise, emphasizes the necessity of a truly realistic attitude in viewing life on the part of the Catholic novelist:

> Tell the truths you have to. Even if they are grim, preposterous, shocking. After all, we Catholics ought to acknowledge what a shocking business human life is. Our race has been revolting against its Creator since the beginning of time... But remember, you have to tell other and more cheerful truths, too: of the Grace of God and the endeavour of strong and loyal, or weak but trusting souls, and also of the natural virtues of man created in the Image of God, an image it is very hard to efface entirely.

We seem, for instance, to be afraid to produce an American satirist. Yet the Catholic – as several Englishmen during the past few decades have brilliantly demonstrated – in our modern world is in a peculiarly advantageous position as a satirist. Yet we in America have handed over satire to such a man as Sinclair Lewis. Ronald Knox has observed: 'No country, I suppose, has a greater need of satirists than the United States; no country has a greater output of humour, good and bad, which is wholly devoid of any satirical quality.'

Our survey of the novel takes us back to 1900. At that time, F. Marion Crawford and Henry Harland were being acclaimed. Both of them were living abroad; both wrote romantic tales, usually with Italianate backgrounds. *The Cardinal's Snuff-Box* was Harland's most popular title, and it is occasionally reprinted, while Crawford's *The White Sister*, *Marzio's Crucifix*, and *Saracinesca*, among his thirty novels, were long cherished by Catholics. Both Harland and Crawford enjoyed tremendous sales while they were living; to-day they are barely remembered.

Each decade has had its Catholic novelists who have been highly successful in sales and have often attained wide popularity among a general reading public. Such a list – down to our own day – includes such novelists as Maurice Francis Egan, Michael Earls, Frank Spearman, Elizabeth Jordan (who wrote some forty volumes), Kathleen Norris (whose *Mother* sold half a million copies and who has seventy novels to her credit), Lucille Borden, and Frances Parkinson Keyes. These frequently attained the national best seller lists. However, the critic who is interested not so much in sales statistics as in the lasting qualities of great literature will realize that it is highly improbable that any of these writers will continue to be read by future generations. The same may be said of Henry Morton Robinson's *The Cardinal*, which had a fantastically great circulation only a few years ago.

Especially interesting among the serious novelists of the younger generation to-day are Richard Sullivan and Harry Sylvester, though the latter's novels have often made Catholics uncomfortable by their outspoken criticisms of the clergy and of Catholics. Julian Green has so identified himself with France, where he has lived for many years, that he hardly belongs to the story of the American Catholic novel.

Two recent war books are notable, *The Weight of the Cross*, by Robert O. Bowen, and *The Gallery*, by John Horne Burns. Burns' second book, *Lucifer with a Book*, a novel of life in a private school, has much of the stark realism of his war novel.

Three other recent novels seem outstanding: Crawford Powers' *The Encounter*, Caroline Gordon's *Strange Children*, and Brendan Gill's *The Trouble of One House*.

Richard Sullivan, Harry Sylvester, and Brendan Gill are also among our best short story writers, and occasionally they have their stories collected into a volume such as Richard Sullivan's *Fresh and Open Sky*. But for the most part, the short story writers appear in magazines, often the better non-Catholic ones, because we as yet have no quality Catholic periodicals which devote themselves to serious fiction. Most Catholic magazines print short stories no better than the secular 'slicks'. Indeed, one Catho-

lic critic said:

> The Catholic magazines patronize the same mentality, with a subtle philosophy of life conspicuously more harmful. They seem to say: 'If you say your prayers (especially if they are repeated on nine successive days), if you are good and do the right things, then you shall have a job, succeed in your ambitions, be crowned with the good things of this world' – a kind of back-stairs entrance to materialism, particularly enticing because its easy steps are padded and comfortable with a righteous piety.

Since the better Catholic short stories may be found only in widely scattered magazines, anthologies of them are especially useful to non-Americans who want to judge for themselves the best of American Catholic fiction. Outstanding among the anthologies are three edited with short and incisive introductions by Sister Mariella Gable: *They are People* (a later title for the same book was *Great Modern Short Stories*), *Our Father's House*, and *Many Coloured Fleece*. Here may be found the work of such writers as Paul Horgan, whose novelette, *The Devil in the Desert*, has recently been reprinted and whose novel, *The Fault of Angels*, ought also to be read, Fra Angelico Chavez, Richard Coleman, John Fante, Brendan Gill, W.B. Ready, Richard Sullivan, Harry Sylvester, and J.F. Powers.

The last named is probably at the very top of the list of our Catholic short story writers. His stories have been collected in a volume entitled *The Prince of Darkness*, of which there is even an Italian edition. Until now, J.F. Powers has devoted himself to the short story, but at the moment he is completing his first novel; and if it has the quality of his shorter fiction, then he may be America's first really great Catholic novelist and a writer one would not hesitate to put alongside some of the great European Catholic fictionists.

A genuinely significant Catholic novel may, of course, come from some distinguished convert yet to join the Church. We are always proud, and rightly so, of the converts to the Faith, but perhaps we too often blind ourselves to the tragic fact that among writers in America some of the greatest – at least technically – of our age were born into the Church and left it: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, James Farrell, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill. Almost any one of these would have been capable of a great Catholic novel.

Competence rather than greatness has characterized our work in biography and lives of the saints, though there has been no lack of quantity. Agnes Repplier has gracefully written *Mère Marie of the Ursulines*, which was a national best seller. The most productive of our biographers, how-

ever, is Theodore Maynard. Not quite so prolific is Katherine Burton. Daniel Sargent has done good work, and so has the Hispanist William Thomas Walsh with his *Isabella, Philip II,* and *Teresa of Avila.* But almost all of these have aimed at a popular level.

There have been numerous autobiographies by leading Catholic writers and innumerable stories on conversion. Only a few have a lasting quality. The most recent spiritual odyssey has been *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton. It has appeared in special editions in England, France, Germany, and Italy, and non-Americans have had the opportunity of judging it for themselves. It is a difficult book to evaluate, because so little attention has been paid to it as literature. Its significance is probably seen most objectively through the eyes of a European, Evelyn Waugh, who wrote in the introduction to the British edition, which bears the title *Elected Silence:*

> It remains essentially American. Despite a cosmopolitan childhood, Thomas merton—Father Louis, as he is now named—is typical of what is newest and best in his country. Columbia not Cambridge formed his style. His spirituality, though French in discipline, is a flower of the Catholic life of the New World. Americans no longer become expatriates in their quest for full cultural development. They are learning to draw away from what is distracting in their own civilization while remaining in their own borders.
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> Here in fresh, simple, colloquial American is the record of a soul experiencing, first, disgust with the modern world, then Faith, then a clear vocation to the way in which Faith may be applied in the modern world.

Two of our most important Catholic historians are converts, Carleton J.H. Hayes—his books have had a wide influence through their use as texts in many colleges and universities—and Ross Hoffman. Peter Guilday's work as founder of *The Catholic Historical Review* and of the American Catholic Historical Society as well as his own work as an American Church historian has had a widespread effect through the influence of generations of his students at the Catholic University of America.

American Catholic drama has been for the most part undistinguished, and many of the same criticisms that have been levelled at the American Catholic novel have been applied to it. Too often the kind of mentality that would like to form a Dogma-of-the-Month Club has been dominant, and too seldom has the question been raised to artistic merits.

Recent exceptions may be found in the plays of such men as Philip Barry (made famous by his *Hotel Universe*), whose *Here Come the Clowns* and *Joyous Season* are notable; so also in Emmet Lavery's *First Legion*,

which has been widely translated and produced abroad, and in Leo Brady's and Walter Kerr's *Brother Orchid.*

There have been several attempts to found a vigorous Catholic theatre movement. In 1937, Urban Nagle, a leader of Blackfriars Catholic Theatre movement, and Walter Kerr founded the Catholic Theatre Conference, which has met annually and on which great hopes have been pinned. It is doubtful, however, whether it has had an increasing impact, although genuine efforts have been made at several Catholic universities.

Two books grew out of Richard Dana Skinner's position as dramatic critic for *Commonweal*: *Our Changing Theatre* and *Eugene O'Neill—A Poet's Quest.* The leading Catholic dramatic critics to-day are Walter Kerr of *Commonweal* and Euphemia van Reneselaer Wyatt of the *Catholic World.*

In the field of the essay, John Lancaster Spalding (with twenty-five volumes), Maurice Francis Egan, Charles Warren Stoddard, all popular in the early decades of the century, are passed over by readers of to-day. Louise Imogen Guiney, Joyce and Aline Kilmer are superior in other fields. James Daly has probably been overrated (an English prose that is, in its *genre*, so flawless and delightful that we dare any living writing in our language to match it). Leonard Feeney has been popular for his whimsy and his occasional insights.

The truth is, however, that Catholics did contribute one informal essayist who won a first-rank position early in her life and held it for fifty years until her recent death: Agnes Repplier. Though her work was in this minor *genre*, yet she must be recognised as one of the five writers of genuine quality we have had. She was given honorary degrees by Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Marquette, and the University of Pennsylvania. It is safe to predict that she will always have a place in anthologies.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of a strong critical movement among Catholic writers. Sound criticism not only means that Catholic writers will not be praised for the wrong reason—or conversely, deprecated on the wrong grounds—and thus that the creative writer will feel that his work is brought before the court of intelligent appreciation, it also means the preparation of a larger and larger body of Catholic readers, a public for the serious Catholic novelist and poet.

The best Catholic criticism in America will be found not in books but in some of the leading periodicals, in the reviews of such people as John S. Kennedy in *The Sign*, of Harold C. Gardiner in *America*, of Katherine Brégy in the *Catholic World*, and in the work of many of the laymen in *Commonweal.*

One of the best introductions to the quality of criticism by Catholics at

the present is a volume edited by Harold C. Gardiner, in which he has collected a series of critical appraisals by various American Catholics that have appeared in *America*. It is entitled *Fifty Years of the American Novel*, 1900-1950.

Chief among the younger critics is Wallace Fowlie, who devotes himself principally to French literature. His most recent book, *Pantomine: A Journal of Rehearsals*, is very deserving of high recognition. Our most distinguished art critic probably is James Johnson Sweeney. Allen Tate's recent reception has brought into the Church one of America's most discriminating literary critics, a man respected and well established.

In the fields of philosophy and theology there are several strange paradoxes. Our most distinguished philosophers, such as Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon, are Frenchmen. By an odd shift an American, Anton Pegis, is president of the Medieval Institute at the University of Toronto, while its former president, Gerald Phelan, a Canadian, now heads the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame.

In the fields of philosophy and theology there is a seeming meagreness of publication, and yet there is a vigorous intellectual life which is often envied by Europeans – when they get to know it. In comparison with that of twenty-five or fifty years ago, the situation has vastly improved.

How can one explain this situation? Probably in terms little appreciated by outsiders: almost all the Americans have teaching posts where the demands of their classes far exceed those of Europeans, and there is very little time left for the painstaking production of books. The work of even so great a man as John Courtney Murray is to be found in the form of articles.

It is in the periodicals, therefore, that one must look for signs of activity, in such periodicals as *Theological Studies*, *Franciscan Studies*, *The Thomist*, *The Schoolman*, and *The New Scholasticism* (the quarterly journal of the American Catholic Philosophical Association).

Bishop Fulton Sheen, who produces a volume every year, is the most widely known preacher and popularizer of theology and philosophy, his *Peace of Soul* having been a recent best-seller. And Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*, which has appeared in English, French, and Italian editions, his *Waters of Silence*, a history of the Trappists, and his *Ascent to Truth*, on the life of contemplation, have been widely read and discussed.

Popular also recently have been Fulton Oursler's *The Greatest Book Ever Written* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, retellings of the Old and New Testaments respectively. They have been national best sellers, though they have not been assessed from the literary standard.

Contributions from America to the liturgical revival have been particu-

larly on the popular level. Principal contributors include Paul Bussard, William Busch, Gerald Ellard, Martin B. Hellriegal, Virgil Michel, and H.A. Reinhold. The wellspring of the movement has been the Benedictine establishment, St John's Abbey at Collegeville, Minnesota, where the Liturgical Press publishes, among other things, a monthly magazine *Worship* (until recently called *Orate Frates*), devoted to the liturgical movement. One American Catholic, not usually optimistic or given to exaggeration, has gone so far to say that '*Orate Frates*, conducted by the Benedictines to foster liturgical observance, has (though the fact is not widely realized) completely revolutionized devotional literature.'

Nor should one underestimate the very impressive accomplishment, especially in the past decade or two, of the Liturgical Arts Society and its quarterly *Liturgical Arts*, edited by Maurice Lavanaoux; and the Catholic Arts Association with its periodical *Catholic Arts Quarterly*. There is perceptibly a steady evolution – certainly not a revolution – in the various Catholic Arts, including music, painting, sculpture, and architecture.

It will seem a paradox to Europeans that our really important periodicals continue to fight valiantly for a sufficient circulation to support themselves in spite of the fact that there are thirty million Catholics in the United States. The fact remains that they have lived so long without an intellectual and cultural tradition that the very best of our periodicals survive on a slim support.

For forty years the weekly *America* has given leadership on the part of the Jesuits. Our oldest magazine, the monthly *Catholic World* was founded in 1865 and therefore its bound volumes constitute a continuous picture of American Catholic literary life. Its uneven quality has been a reflection of the uneven calibre of Catholic culture activity; notable among its recent editors was James Martin Gillis, whose editorship was characterizrd by vigour and forthrightness.

The Commonweal is almost unique in that it is run by Catholic laymen and its opinion is respected by many of the non-Catholic intellectual leaders. Founded in 1924 by Michael Williams and others, it has had difficulty in surviving, though a recent subscription drive was well supported even by secular periodicals. For those who find back issues of *The Commonweal* unavailable, the calibre of the magazine may be judged by a recent anthology drawn from its bound volumes, *The Commonweal Reader*.

The Sign is aimed at a wider and less literarily discriminating Catholic public.

Thought, which is published ar Fordham University, is the most important of our general quarterlies that maintain a high level of quality.

A few more recently established journals should be mentioned because they indicate vigour and evidence of vitality. *Cross Currents*, a quarterly, performs an important service for Americans in reprinting from continental periodicals important articles which would not be available to those far removed from large libraries. *Renascence: A Critical Journal of Letters* is devoted to a critical evaluation of the Catholic revival of letters both here and abroad.

As one looks back over the panorama of fifty years of Catholic letters, one realizes that, in spite of many qualifications, conditions have vastly improved in America, and that we are just now in a better position than ever before.

Only ten years ago, George N. Shuster, possibly the leading Catholic layman in the United States to-day, wrote: 'As at present constituted, the Catholic body in America has virtually no use for intellectuals... The educated Catholic has never been so much alone in the midst of his fellowmen. One cannot help feeling that even in the last decade there has been an advance, small as it may be.

True, in fifty years we have not produced major figures – a Claudel, a Newman, a Bremond, a Hopkins, an Undset, or a Greene. In fact, a non-Catholic American, T.S. Eliot, has written greater criticism, greater religious poetry, and greater religious drama than any American Catholic writer. And *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, by Willa Cather – another non-Catholic – would seem to be a greater American Catholic novel than any of us has produced.

But the fact also remains that Catholic literature in America has never been in so vigorous a state as right now and – even more important – the air is full of promise.