

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE:  
AN INSIDE GLIMPSE AT THE FORGING OF ART AND PERSONA

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When Flannery O'Connor was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus in 1951 her personal and professional development were presumably cut short. Forced to retire permanently to rural Georgia with her mother, she depended on written correspondence to stay in touch with friends, editors and fellow writers. This article evaluates the relevance of Flannery O'Connor's letters both to the study of her narrative and to her own well-being. Although over the years she wrote and received letters from over thirty people, I will focus on two fundamental friendships which were forged through written exchange and which complement one another, while affording O'Connor scholars and enthusiasts a broader and more balanced perspective with regards to her thoughts on numerous issues such as religion, race, the process of writing and her illness.

KEY WORDS: Flannery O'Connor, Betty Hester, Maryat Lee, Sally Fitzgerald, letter-writing, written correspondence, lupus, *The Habit of Being*.

The personal circumstances which defined Flannery O'Connor's restricted lifestyle are in large part responsible for her dependence on written correspondence to communicate with the world beyond the confines of Milledgeville, a small, uneventful town in the heart of Georgia's Bible Belt. When at the age of twenty-six she was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, the physical limitations brought about by this illness sent her home for good, interrupting a promising future—or so it seemed—which she had worked so diligently to forge for herself while living first at the writers' colony, "Yaddo," and later in New York and with friends in Connecticut.

Back in her mother's home town, and far from her editors, publishers, fellow writers and friends, O'Connor necessarily became a fervent letter writer, determined to keep up with outside events and to pursue her career by staying in touch with the literary world. Thus, written correspondence soon became an important part of her daily routine, occupying nearly as much time as her artistic production. Friends attest to her uncompromising work schedule and her military discipline: mornings were devoted to her fiction, during which she sat in front of her typewriter from nine to twelve—regardless of whether or not she was able to produce—and afternoons were spent reading and answering letters or receiving visitors.

The increasing availability of many of the written exchanges which took place between Flannery O'Connor and friends and acquaintances has given scholars new insight into her art. Thus, given the relevance of written correspondence in her life, in the following pages

I will discuss the impact that the publication of her letters has had on academia, and more specifically the implications of the correspondence that Flannery O'Connor maintained with Maryat Lee and Betty Hester.

In a less than favorable 1964 obituary, a journalist referred to the writer as “a fierce Roman Catholic who wrote like a witch” (Sessions 1966: 210). Indeed, until some of her private correspondence was made available to the public—several letters were published as early as 1966 by her friend William Sessions—the picture O'Connor had given of herself appeared to be that of an austere, afflicted recluse. However, this first group of letters surprisingly revealed to O'Connor scholars and admirers that behind this writer's serious demeanor and tight-lipped responses,<sup>1</sup> there was a witty, compassionate and sociable young woman who relied upon the postal system to first develop and then nurture her most profound relationships, and whose letter-writing was an essential part of her well-being.

Although friends like the above mentioned William Sessions contributed to the prospect of considering Flannery O'Connor and her work in a different light, the year 1979 was to be decisive, marking a turning point in the research of this author's fiction. Fifteen years after the writer's death, her friend Sally Fitzgerald selected, edited and published *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*—a collection of hundreds of letters written between 1948 and 1964. Thus, a woman who once may have seemed a “dour, religious fanatic” (Cash 2002: xvii) suddenly gained an entirely new dimension as scholars were afforded the possibility of reading correspondence addressed to a wide variety of people in this 617-page volume. Through what Robert Coles regards as an epistolary autobiography (1979: 6), Flannery O'Connor becomes for us “gradually and ironically ... a part of a long, absorbing, entertaining, edifying story – her correspondence a narrative one can't put down because one is learning, laughing, experiencing the reader's pain or sadness or merriment as one's own” (1979: 6).

Thanks to *The Habit of Being*—which has recently been translated into Spanish and published by *Sígueme*—the insight gained into diverse aspects of the writer's art and life is of indisputable and incalculable value. Her illness, her relationship with her mother, her friends, her daily routine, her feelings about racial conflicts and political issues, her doctrine and the evolution of her art are some of the topics which she discussed with her correspondents. And just as the themes she touched upon in her letters were varied, so too were the nature of her recipients and the purpose of her missives. Fitzgerald's compendium provides readers with the opportunity to further develop their understanding of the author's complex fiction through the variety of voices projected from her correspondence.

O'Connor had always preferred to communicate with others via post, even before lupus imposed its constraints upon her. While at graduate school, she wrote daily to her mother and subscribed to the local Milledgeville press.<sup>2</sup> However, when in 1950 she was unexpectedly forced to return to her mother's home town, she consolidated her customary

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1. In a 1995 interview for the National Broadcasting Company's program, *Galley Proof*, she was interviewed by Harvey Breit. When asked if she would like to tell the audience what happens in her short story, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” she replied, “No, I certainly would not. I don't think you can paraphrase a story like that. I think there's only one way to tell it and that's the way it's told in the story” (Breit 8).

2. The correspondence between O'Connor and her mother has up to now been safeguarded from inquisitive scholars, and the prospects of their letters being made available to the public are not good.

means of communication. Once settled in with Regina O'Connor at "Andalusia," a dairy farm on the outskirts of town, her letter-writing became a respite from her work after three hours of self-imposed reclusion and a means of keeping in touch with reality (Sessions 1966: 209; Cash 1990: 61). However, and perhaps more significantly, O'Connor seems to have depended on written correspondence to ensure her own well-being. For by reaching out to those who lived far from Georgia, she was freeing herself not only from the social constrictions of Milledgeville parameters but also from a very well-meaning, yet oppressive and scrutinizing maternal presence.

Of the more than thirty people that O'Connor wrote to over the years, two names stand out as the recipients of the greater part of her correspondence: Maryat Lee, and "A," who was revealed to be Elizabeth Hester in 1998 upon her death. The large number of letters available at the Ina Dillard Russell Library at O'Connor's alma mater, Georgia College and State University—268 and over 300, respectively—merits a close look as to the nature of her friendships with both of these women and the contents of their letters. Through their written exchanges, we see how these relationships were of significant importance in helping her to come to terms with her illness and with her need to establish bonds with people outside Milledgeville.

It is surely not an easy task to edit such a considerable amount of letters and therefore it is not surprising that Sally Fitzgerald's decision not to publish part of this correspondence has given rise to a great deal of speculation and became the grounds for a heated dispute with Maryat Lee. This confrontation confirms that what may seem to be an authentic and reliable source, should not be entirely trusted. Reading others' correspondence appeals to us because we assume that we are gaining a truer and certainly more intimate picture of the writer. Letters are a means to secret information. Yet those interested in O'Connor's work should overcome the pretense that her letters will provide them with an "accurate" portrayal of her self. For Fitzgerald, as a close friend of the author, applied her own criteria when deciding which letters would be viewed by the public.

Many of the letters not included in *The Habit of Being* dealt with racial issues and personal feelings. When some of this correspondence was later published, numerous scholars directed their focus towards these seemingly censored themes in an attempt to incorporate this new information into the framework of their understanding of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Years later, Fitzgerald wrote, "My editorial decision was based on the fact that those particular letters, if read out of context, would have been seriously misleading as to Flannery's deeper attitudes and convictions" (1998: 424). However, ultimately, Fitzgerald's omission caused the very issues that she had wished not to be misinterpreted to be magnified in a series of articles that were written after the Maryat Lee/O'Connor correspondence was donated to Georgia College and State University. According to Fitzgerald, since these "equivocal letters" surfaced, O'Connor has received undeserved "politically correct" criticism (1998: 425).

Yet, it would be naïve to hold Fitzgerald responsible for depriving scholars of an authentic representation of the author, and the interesting debate which has never entirely subsided over the years should not draw our attention away from the very nature of epistolarity. First and foremost, the written dialogue which takes place between addresser and addressee is an act of intimacy, initially meant for one person and not for massive reception (Todorov 1967: 37, 61). We, as onlookers, are not meant to be included in this exchange which involves the addressee calling for a response from a specific reader within

a specific context (Gurkin 1982: 89). Janet Gurkin claims that the interpretation of written correspondence is a difficult task precisely because of what she calls an “epistolary pact”: there is a confidentiality between confidants which can not be breached by outsiders (1982: 49).

If one is fortunate enough to be granted permission to read these letters—the majority of which are still unpublished—the initial feeling of discomfort, or even embarrassment at prying into a part of O’Connor’s life that was not meant for public eyes is quickly dispelled. One becomes engrossed in her reflections, her down-to-earth running commentaries on local events, and the way she uses humor to take the edge off of even the grimmest situations. Thus, to begin to understand O’Connor’s art implies carefully reading her correspondence. And this has been made possible for scholars and the general public by Sally Fitzgerald’s diligence, the Flannery O’Connor Foundation’s generosity and recipients’ donations of other unpublished letters to the university archives.

O’Connor once told her friend Maryat Lee that she was her “soap serial without the soap” (Cash 1990: 61). Indeed, the latter was to be the writer’s contact with the North, and the exciting, vital city of New York—the core of the literary world and the home of most of the important publishing companies, and O’Connor needed the stimuli that Lee’s world offered. Their letters covered a wide range of topics: life in Milledgeville, New York gossip, their art, and finally, their illnesses (Nye 1998–2000: 33). As a playwright and the author of *Dope*, Lee enjoyed relative popularity and success on the alternative theater circuit in the 1950s and 1960s. She and Flannery met when Lee was visiting her family, who also lived in Milledgeville. What seemed to be a dead-end relationship developed into a close alliance which lasted until O’Connor’s death in 1964 and which is documented by 161 letters from Flannery and 104 from Maryat (Wray 1993: 1).

Thus, the differences between the two women, which easily could have been an obstacle to the forging of so unlikely a friendship, were strangely overcome in time. Lee appeared to be O’Connor’s antithesis: while Maryat was self-centered, undisciplined and in need of taking part in multiple activities, Flannery concentrated on her spiritual life, seemingly finding inspiration through her religious faith (Cash 1990: 56–57). However, the friends had more common features than it might first appear. As members of closely bonded southern families, they shared mutual friends and acquaintances and thus a similar frame of reference. As outsiders—O’Connor a Catholic in the Bible Belt and Lee a professed lesbian—both struggled to understand and to come to terms with the oppressive “Southern way of life.” Furthermore, and despite their different *modus operandi*, the O’Connor/Lee letters attest to an equal degree of commitment to their writing, one of the topics which they most frequently discussed. Finally, towards the end of their correspondence, the women often wrote of their illnesses and the numerous treatments that they had either heard about or undergone.

As I have previously mentioned, after O’Connor’s death, Lee publicly criticized Fitzgerald’s omission, and controversy followed. In these “politically incorrect” letters, Flannery plays the devil’s advocate to Maryat when civil rights and racial issues are discussed, and the latter likewise goads her on religious matters (Cash 2002: 150). Ralph Wood observes that Lee appeared as “the pluperfect bleeding-heart Yankee liberal” while O’Connor assumed the role of “starchily unreconstructed Southern racist” (1993–94: 96). It could be inferred that Fitzgerald, by making this editorial decision, underestimated scholars’ ability to conscientiously interpret O’Connor’s work. Fortunately, by making

these contentious letters available, Lee's family put an end to an important part of the critical monopoly which had existed for over twenty-five years. O'Connor did indeed receive negative criticism regarding her frivolous comments on these topics, and playing the devil's advocate does not exonerate her from many of her derogatory references to African Americans. However, the insight that has been provided to her readers through this wider vision and new perspective of her self and her art merits acknowledging the possibility that Flannery O'Connor had contradictory feelings regarding racial and political issues.

In 1998 the antagonism between Lee and Fitzgerald was intensified when the latter wrote, "Maryat Lee was too self-centered to write about much except herself and her own thought, feelings and adventures, so Flannery's correspondence with her is nowhere nearly as interesting as that with A" (1998: 423). In this article, Fitzgerald had clearly let her feelings get the better of her. Several of O'Connor's letters testify to a warm, close relationship between two southern women who are both far from fitting into the canon of the Southern Belle, unique in their own way, yet in need of finding the means to adapt to southern convention. Sarah Gordon challenges Fitzgerald's dismissal of the O'Connor/Lee correspondence when she defines it as surely a reflection of the writer's "fondest expression of friendship on record," suggesting that these letters were also left out of *The Habit of Being* because of Maryat's homosexuality, an issue which, once again in the eyes of Fitzgerald and O'Connor's Milledgeville family members, could have compromised Flannery (1992: 25; 2000: 241).

Nowhere is O'Connor's wit more evident than in her letters to Maryat Lee. Yet, while much of the content of these letters is occupied with insignificant, funny bantering between the two—"It is not known by everybody but the peafowl is called peafowl because his favorite dish is peas" (O'Connor 1979: 212)—the most pervasive subjects are race and civil rights. Lee's highly politicized comments contrast with the conformity of O'Connor. The friends discuss current events from entirely different perspectives: Maryat lives in New York, which permits her a greater freedom in her assessment. O'Connor, on the contrary, lives in the midst of the racial conflict and argues that northerners cannot fully understand the true complexity of the southern reality (1970: 200). While reading these letters, it is not always easy to discern when she is provoking Maryat and when she is being sincere; and at times, no matter how well-intended the reader may be, it is difficult not to detect a hint of racism in her manifestations. Her ambivalence confuses scholars and critics alike. In fact, Claire Kahane and Melvin G. Williams find it impossible to dismiss her racial slurs (Wood 1993-94: 114). For despite their humorous tone, some of her witty observations are hard to laugh at.

The correspondence between the two women provides ample evidence of O'Connor's contradictory attitudes towards African Americans and the racial issues that were so much a part of her socio-political context. It also helps her readers to understand an apparent lack of definition in the portrayal of blacks in her fiction, who at times seem to be mere stereotypes. In one letter, she addresses her friend as a lover of "niggers." In another, one of her most disturbing, she tells Lee that she is an integrationist in the legal but not the aesthetic sense. "With remarkable candor," writes Wood, "she confesses her distaste for Negroes" (1993-94: 96). However, and although O'Connor should not be exonerated from these attitudes by arguing that they are merely a product of her circumstances, some allowances can be made. The only blacks that O'Connor had direct contact with were those hired by her

mother to work on their farm. Responding to criticisms of the instrumentalization of her fictional black characters she claimed that she did not understand black people: "I can only see them from the outside. I wouldn't have the courage . . . to go inside their heads" (1979: 159). Yet, even so, she proved to have a good understanding of the principles of integration and great insight into the racial reality (Cash 2002: 154–55). When in 1959 Maryat wished to arrange an interview between James Baldwin and her friend in Milledgeville, O'Connor replied, "No I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on—it's only fair. Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia" (1979: 329). O'Connor's forced retirement to Milledgeville and the necessary dependency on her mother dictated an observance of the southern code, or so she believed. Finally, one must remember that none of these letters was meant to be dissected by zealous scholars. In not one of her works can we find racial slurs or derogatory comments towards blacks on the part of the narrator. In fact, had these letters not been donated, her ambivalent stance on racial issues may never have come to light.

Thirteen years after the O'Connor/Lee letters were made available to scholars, one thing seems to be clear. By omitting many of these friends' exchanges from *The Habit of Being*, Fitzgerald achieved two things: an unbalanced representation of O'Connor, and the consequent awakening of scholars' curiosity as to why she might have made this choice. In retrospect, it appears not to have been a very appropriate decision. For, "[t]o shut the door to the possibility of such knowledge and investigation is to deny O'Connor her full humanity and to reduce her life and her work to pious platitude or to dogmatic exemplum" (Gordon 2000: 244). Nonetheless, and despite questionable editorial decisions, Fitzgerald's contribution to both the general public and academia has been undeniably valuable and the source of innumerable critical essays which came forth as a result of the aforementioned debate.

O'Connor's correspondence with Elizabeth Hester is an example of the "pious platitude" which Gordon refers to. This friendship was to be of a completely different nature, but appears to have been a friendship just the same. We have seen how Fitzgerald considered the content of these letters to be far more interesting than that of those exchanged with Lee (1998: 423). However, this argument has been contested by critics like Gordon and Cash who defend the literary value of the O'Connor/Lee correspondence as a way of gaining insight into matters such as the process of writing, her life in Milledgeville and her illness. It might be more appropriate to summarize by saying that while Lee's letters shed light on O'Connor's personality, Hester's are of vital importance in understanding the writer's doctrine and artistic objectives.

In 1955, O'Connor received a letter from a complete stranger who had first read her novel, *Wise Blood*, and then the collection of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. A reader had finally understood her work! O'Connor, who customarily answered any letter that someone had taken the time and trouble to write, answered enthusiastically (1979: xiv). Her admirer proved to be well-read and truly interested in what was behind the writer and her art. Hester, who was referred to as "A" on her own request until her death in 1998, was to become a regular correspondent, and ultimately a good friend of Flannery's over the next nine years.

The O'Connor/Hester correspondence primarily concerns the women's common interest in literature, religion, philosophy and psychology. For the first two years of their

letter-writing, the central theme was O'Connor's fiction. Judging by her comments, it seems that she and Hester wrote back and forth about what Flannery's proposals were, and where she had drawn her inspiration from. Unfortunately, to date, only the letters from O'Connor to Hester are available. However, William Sessions, Hester's literary executor, has agreed to make public a large part of her correspondence which was left in his care upon her death. Researchers will presumably benefit from the possibility of studying O'Connor's work from yet another angle when these letters are displayed for scholarly reference in May 2007 (Cash 2002: 330).

This correspondence is, without a doubt, much more transcendental than that maintained with Maryat Lee. With time, O'Connor began to reveal her dedication to the Church, making constant reference to St. Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain, whom she considered her mentor and guide to understanding the writings of the thirteenth-century theologian. "I am a Thomist three times removed and live among many distinctions (A Thomist three times removed is one who doesn't read Latin or St. Thomas but gets it by osmosis)" (1979: 439). Thus, these letters provide insight into O'Connor's application of Aquinas' philosophy to her life and to her writing (Andretta 1998–2000: 52).

During the first stage of their letter writing, O'Connor spoke and Hester listened. As their friendship developed, a more human side of Flannery began to emerge as Hester, in turn, consolidated her role as "intellectual soul mate," becoming a more active confidant. In 1957, Hester started to send some of her own stories—during this period she wrote a number of yet to be published stories and at least two novels—and both women began to submit comments and criticism on each other's work (Cash 2002: 220, 223). O'Connor consistently highlights the need for discipline and hard work, along with the importance of the role of the Church in providing guidance. From O'Connor's responses to her friend, we can infer that Hester offers advice as well, which is acknowledged and taken seriously as Flannery thanks her for her observations, and at times, agrees to change aspects of her stories. By this time, O'Connor had become aware of her friend's "up and down times of elation and depression" (1979: 464) and began to focus on more personal aspects of Hester's life. Sally Fitzgerald claims that in fact Hester suffered from what we know today as "bipolar syndrome," a manic-depressive disorder also endured by the poet Robert Lowell (1998: 422). O'Connor gradually began to encourage her to consider conversion to Catholicism. Soon after, she was Hester's sponsor at confirmation (1979: 154).

It becomes clear while reading their correspondence that O'Connor was concerned about her friend's mental stability, and this concern increased two-fold when Hester announced three years later her decision to leave the Church: "Faith is a gift but the will has a great deal to do with it. The loss of it is basically a failure of appetite, assisted by the sterile intellect" (1979: 451–52). Their final correspondence hints at a possible strain in communication, perhaps due to O'Connor's disillusionment regarding her friend's new-found life views. These letters avoid theological matters, focusing on literary issues and Hester's episodes of depression (Andretta 1998–2000: 69). O'Connor suggests that she follow a rigid routine, "a condition of survival," in order to keep the demons at bay (1979: 464–65). Her patience seems to have finally run out when she writes to another friend about Hester: "She doesn't believe any longer that Christ is God and so she has found that he is 'beautiful! beautiful!' Everything is in the eeeek eek eureka stage. The effect of all this on me is pretty sick-making but I manage to keep my mouth shut" (1979: 459). O'Connor was worried about Hester's "cosmic speculations" and was suspicious of her devotion to

the British novelist Iris Murdoch, whose influence she felt had played an important part in Hester's repudiation of the Church (Cash 2002: 224, 227). In one of the last letters to her friend, O'Connor, exasperated, writes, "Love and understanding are one and the same only in God. Who do you think you understand? If anybody, you delude yourself. I love a lot of people, understand none of them. This is not perfect love but as much as a finite creature can be capable of" (1979: 534).

We could conclude, therefore, that generally speaking, the subject of these more than three hundred letters is fundamentally that of O'Connor's faith and its relevance to her art. Throughout the women's correspondence, she stressed the repercussions of Saint Thomas Aquinas on her own vision of life and her understanding of artistic creation. She writes that there must necessarily be a moral basis to her fiction, and that this moral sense should coincide with the dramatic sense in her stories. In other letters, she highlights the importance of being able to differentiate between aesthetic beauty and transcendental beauty (Andretta 1998–2000: 57–58). Through these manuscripts, it becomes clear that it was her desire to write within a Thomist framework, as she openly and frequently confesses this intention (1979: 157, 216). The nature of the women's relationship—an educated, yet insecure aspiring novelist asking O'Connor, by now an established writer, for guidance and encouragement—made it possible for the latter to candidly discuss her fiction with all of its flaws and virtues. Had Hester's literary career been more consolidated, we would have probably never had the opportunity to take such a close look at O'Connor's work, for the former's fiction would have likely been the subject of many of their letters. The reflections, explanations and justifications manifested in these letters in response to her friend's inquiries and observations are an essential asset to those truly interested in her fiction.

Sally Fitzgerald suggests that one read O'Connor's letters before approaching her fiction. Ralph Wood proposes the reading of correspondence and stories simultaneously. Clara Claiborne Park even goes as far as to advise the reader to put aside her narrative and to focus on her letters (Gordon 2000: 226). Regardless of this obvious disparity of opinions, all three are on common ground when they highlight the relevance of O'Connor's epistolary attributes. Her letters to Maryat Lee come as a respite to many readers when they discover that although her proposals were indeed serious, she was a funny, practical woman, capable of discussing not only philosophy and theology, but trivial Milledgeville gossip, as well. The insight that we gain by reading her comments to Hester is undeniably valuable and serves a more didactic purpose, while the Maryat letters hint at a more authentic, spontaneous Flannery, and are a welcome palliative to the dark intensity of her fiction. Thus, these two sets of written correspondence undoubtedly complement each other and are equally significant if one wishes to better understand Flannery O'Connor, the woman, and Flannery O'Connor, the writer of fiction. Through them, we see how very important it was for her to establish and maintain bonds with friends and community, and we are able to infer her need to nurture friendships that only those who lived beyond the constraints of rural Georgia could offer her. Thanks to the publication of these letters and later donations, we can begin to get a feel for the intricacies of her artistic production, the nature of her faith, and finally how she comes to terms with the consequences of the debilitating illness, lupus erythematosus, and with her encroaching death.

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