

have made a significant contribution to the literature of our age.

—Reviewed by Mary Luetkemeyer

¹K. C. Joseph Kurismmootil, S. J., *Heaven and Hell on Earth: An Appreciation of Five Novels of Graham Greene* (Chicago, 1982), p. 55. ²E. M. Burke, "Grace," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed., p. 666. ³Gaston's statement is drawn, as his footnote indicates, from Boardman's perception that "Greene never loses sight of the fact that he is a writer, one whose concern is 'the correct setting of a question,' rather than its answers." G. R. Boardman, *Graham Greene: The Aesthetics of Exploration* (Gainesville, Fla., 1971), p. 142.

Flannery O'Connor and Friends

The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheney's, edited by C. Ralph Stephens, Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1986. xxvii + 220 pp. \$24.95.

IN EARLY 1953 Flannery O'Connor wrote Brainard Cheney a letter of appreciation for his complimentary review of her first novel, *Wise Blood*. The review, which appeared in the August 1952 number of *Shenandoah*, was one of the earliest perceptive and sympathetic estimations of her work. O'Connor's letter inaugurated a correspondence and close friendship with Cheney and his wife Fannie that was to span eleven years, until O'Connor's death in August 1964. From letter-writing the friendship expanded into frequent mutual visits: O'Connor to the Cheney's antebellum home, Cold Chimneys, in Smyrna, Tennessee; the Cheney's to the farm residence of O'Connor and her mother in Milledgeville, Georgia.

O'Connor and Brainard Cheney were drawn together by mutual acquaintances, by certain similarities of background, and most importantly by common literary and

religious outlooks. Born in 1900, Cheney, a native Georgian like O'Connor, was educated at Vanderbilt, where he became associated with the leading intellectual and literary figures of the Southern Renaissance: Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, and his wife, Caroline Gordon Tate. The latter became Cheney's "literary godmother"; she was also O'Connor's literary mentor.

After an early stint as a newspaper reporter Cheney turned to literature and politics. Beginning in the 1930s, he wrote and published several novels, plays, short stories, and critical essays. From 1943 to 1945 he served as an advisor to Senator Tom Stewart of Tennessee; later, in 1952, he worked as a speech writer and public relations officer for Tennessee Governor Frank Clement. More important, Cheney and his wife, Fannie, a librarian-teacher at George Peabody College, converted to Roman Catholicism in 1953, shortly before their friendship with Flannery O'Connor began. The Cheney's conversion had been influenced especially by the Tates, themselves converts to Catholicism and close friends of O'Connor.

What emerges in the O'Connor-Cheney letters is a portrait of a friendship based on mutual affection and commonality of vision regarding literature, religion, Southern culture, and American society in general. Both were conservative, traditional Catholics whose writings expressed deep religious concerns. In retrospect, we can see that their literary careers were at a peculiar crossroads when they first met in 1953. O'Connor was just beginning to receive national and international attention for her stories. Cheney, on the other hand, had achieved success with earlier novels (*Lightfoot*, 1939; *River Rogue*, 1941) but was finding it increasingly difficult to match these early successes, partly because of diverse interests and his more active involvement in the political life of the times. Their exchanges of criticism of each other's work in the letters is marked mainly by adulatory comments by Cheney for O'Connor's stories, with an occasional

shrewd word of particular advice about a scene or character. O'Connor, on the other hand, offers copious and detailed technical criticism of Cheney's manuscripts, remarks which help to reveal her own concern with the craft of fiction.

It is clear from the letters that Cheney the Catholic convert saw in O'Connor a strong, unwavering example of the faith he had recently professed. In several letters Cheney laments his own spiritual weaknesses; on his sixty-fourth birthday, and in the midst of O'Connor's last illness, he comments: "Unless the Lord has [a] hole card He's getting ready to turn over that will knock my eyeballs out—the only sense I can make of it is He knows I can't stand much!" This came two months before O'Connor's death, when she could remark with typical irony from her hospital bed: "A little boy in the hospital here flushed all his clothes down the toilet and has upset the plumbing completely on the 2nd and 3rd floor. The Lord blessed me by putting me on the 4th."

In general these letters suffer by inevitable comparison with the magnificent collection edited by Sally Fitzgerald, *The Habit of Being*. The cause of this weakness is the relative proximity of the correspondents, both geographically and intellectually. Because the Cheneys and O'Connors visited so often, most of the substantive discussions of literature, religion, and society undoubtedly took place during these visits, so that the letters tend mainly to contain exchanges of pleasantries, local news, follow-up comments from the visits, and plans for future socializing. Moreover, because O'Connor and Cheney shared similar religious and artistic beliefs, the letters do not provide the penetrating glimpses into O'Connor's mind one finds in *The Habit of Being*, in which her correspondents often took skeptical or adversarial positions, thus forcing O'Connor to clarify her thinking on paper and develop coherent and detailed responses. None of this was necessary in corresponding with the Cheneys; agreement was either assumed or, one suspects, issues had already been thoroughly aired during their many visits.

Nevertheless, the letters do provide flashes of the famous O'Connor wit, her trenchant humor and self-deprecating irony. Describing the marriage of their dairyman's daughter, she notes:

We have just survived high ceremonies here. The Stevens' (dairyman's) daughter, age 16, 9th grade, got married and my mother let them have the reception here. It was quite a wedding with bridesmaids in six flavors, children with dripping candles, and a cadaverous preacher in white pants, blue coat, and black and yellow striped tie. My mother always prepares for the wrong accident—she was expecting a hole to be burned in her tablecloth. But somebody set a wet punch cup on her Bible.

Many of her observations exhibit that unique blend of the comic and the serious that marks her fiction, as in this description of a local sit-in:

We had our first attempt at a sit-in here—at [a drugstore]. . . . They were all outside agitators from Atlanta. A neighbor came in and told us about it, said a "carful of nigger sports in bermuda shorts and yachting caps" blew in and stopped at the negro cafe. From there they sent a woman around . . . to case the joint. [The store] had been tipped off by two local negros—a school teacher and another who gives out the sheriff's bootlegging rights—so [they] sent the word out to the backwoods. This neighbor said the drugstore began to fill up with the toughest folks the county could produce and these sat all day in the drugstore with their switch blade knives honed and read newspapers and comic books—some who had never been known to read before. Anyway the colored woman sent to get the lay of the land came in and ordered three coffees to go, looked around, got her coffees and went back with the word. The sit-in folded. But that night the Klan met right across the road from us . . . Our colored man has been gone from here ever since. I hate to see it all get started.

This serio-comic trait is nowhere more in evidence than when O'Connor refers to the struggles with her own illness and career. When first obliged to use crutches because of her lupus, she remarks:

I am on crutches and will have to be on

them a year or two. Right now I feel like the Last Ape. It requires a major decision for me to swing across the room. . . . Of course this is not such an inconvenience for me as it would be for a sporty type. I can still throw the garbage to the chickens (though I am in danger of going with it) which is my favorite exercise.

On lecturing she says: "I still have another talk in front of me, this one to a Catholic women's convention in Savannah. I am doing this one because I can't fast for Lent and should do some extra penance. They are my version of the hairshirt."

In these and other brief glimpses, the letters to Cheney help complement the fuller portrait of O'Connor contained in *The Habit of Being*. At the same time, from the Cheney side the letters help convey a sense of the strong literary community sustained by the energy, talent, and generosity of figures like Brainard Cheney—a community which the critic Ashley Brown has seen as a Southern equivalent of the Irish literati who gathered in County Sligo during the Irish Renaissance. O'Connor was well served by such a friendship. It provided the sympathy and encouragement that sustained her as a writer—the love and regard of people from "home."

—Reviewed by John F. Desmond

Rethinking the Canon

La Regenta, by Leopoldo Alas (Clarín); translated by John Rutherford, *Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984. 734 pp. \$20.00.*

THIS SPANISH MASTERPIECE of the late nineteenth century is a disturbing novel. And it asks disturbing questions. But even before attempting to explain what these questions are, I want to pose some of my own: Why did it take exactly 100 years for this extraordinary novel to appear in English translation? Why did it take much of this

century before even Spaniards would recognize its worth? No one has ever been able to offer a complete and definitive answer to this dual problem of recognition (the reader's) and reputation (the author's)—and I am certainly not the first to break the pattern. But some reasons must be put forth so that we who have inherited this long and, some would say, aging culture of the West can come to grips with an even more fundamental question: Why do some books become part of the canon of a received tradition, and others—equally meritorious—do not? Why do we read Flaubert but not Clarín? What constitutes a tradition? Is there a natural process by which we arrive at a corpus of texts that we call representative—indeed, normative—of Western civilization? Or is it, rather, an artificial construct—and, implicitly, perhaps even a movable one, capable of shifts and realignments in its cultural contours? No one, I think, would dispute the legitimate claims of the Bible, Homer, Plato, Dante, and—why not—Cervantes as essential and connecting parts of a coherent system—perhaps a debatable notion in itself—of thought and values (even if our students no longer read them). But when we come to modern times (The Renaissance? The Age of Enlightenment?), we seem to be cast adrift in a sea of conflicting voices and ideologies.

The failure to recognize the great moral and aesthetic beauty of *La Regenta* in its own time can be ascribed at least in part to ideological reasons. Spain in the nineteenth century was motivated both in its collective and its individual behavior by a series of protracted and intense conflicts of a politico-religious nature. And Alas's vision of a corrupt, narrow-minded, and back-stabbing provincial Spanish city run by members of the cloth and the ruling oligarchy could not fail to provoke hostility among those presumably marked as targets for the novelist's biting tongue and harsh satire. *La Regenta* was thought of (and still is by many) as a liberal book attacking conservative vice. Certainly during the Franco years this was true. It was not until the 1960s, when the first modern