

**SALLY FITZGERALD, ED. 2004. *EL HÁBITO DE SER*, BY FLANNERY O'CONNOR. INTROD. GUSTAVO MARTÍN GARZO. TRANS. FRANCISCO JAVIER MOLINA DE LA TORRE. SALAMANCA: EDICIONES SÍGUEME. 463 PP.**

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*U.N.E.D.*

An overview of the availability of Flannery O'Connor's work translated into Spanish will confirm that, amongst Spanish readers, she has been far from successful. During the 1970s and 1980s, Esther Tusquets of Lumen publishers undertook the challenge of introducing this writer's brilliant narrative to the Spanish public, making a conscientious effort to share her enthusiasm for O'Connor's prose. However by the end of the 80s, most of the translations of O'Connor's work had been relegated to dusty, back shelves in bookshops. In fact, in the over twenty years that Lumen published O'Connor's work, second editions were only printed for *Wise Blood* and *Everything that Rises Must Converge*.

It suffices to say then, that Flannery O'Connor's fiction has not fared well in Spain. This becomes painfully evident if we compare it to that of Carson McCullers, her Southern contemporary, all of whose work has been translated into Spanish, and whose unfinished autobiography entitled, *Illumination and Nightglare* was translated by Ana María Moix and published by Seix Barral in 2001. Recent appearances of O'Connor's work have been made in Catalanian (*Sang Sàvia*), and in the format of Anthology (*El negro artificial y otros escritos*). However, while all of O'Connor's work –both fiction and non-fiction– has been translated into French and Italian (thus, seemingly ruling out the hypotheses that her literature is difficult

for Catholic readers to come to terms with, or that her work loses its “essence” through translation), Spanish readers have yet to become acquainted with her wonderful essays, compiled in *Mystery and Manners* or an updated, conscientious translation of many of her short stories.<sup>1</sup>

It is surprising, then, that when her work is in such need of revision and *Mystery and Manners* has yet to be translated, Sally Fitzgerald’s 1979 edition of the majority of O’Connor’s written correspondence should now appear in Spanish. While any newly translated work of O’Connor’s is indeed welcome, one wonders why Ediciones Sígueme chose to take on the challenge –and the risk– of presenting Spanish readers with this writer’s letters when they have yet to be exposed to her essays. I consider this project to have been an enormous challenge for Francisco Javier Molina de la Torre: Sally Fitzgerald’s edition of *Letters of Flannery O’Connor: The Habit of Being* is 617 pages long and, for reasons which I will discuss, an arduous translating task. Likewise, Ediciones Sígueme is to be commended for its decision to tackle O’Connor’s correspondence when over the past decade it has been difficult for even those readers in search of her narrative to find her books. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, for example, has not been revised since the printing of its second edition in 1986. One might be lucky enough to come across a copy, but this is unlikely as it has been out of print for years. Yet there is hope for the work of Flannery O’Connor in Spanish. I have been told by José Lino Blanco of Ediciones Sígueme that *Mystery and Manners* is in the process of being translated, although that it is still too early to set a publication date. The appearance of *El hábito de ser* is indeed good news for Spanish readers as it seems to indicate a renewed interest in this unique and compelling author.

When *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor* was first published, it received rave reviews. Scholars and Flannery O’Connor enthusiasts were suddenly awarded the possibility of becoming familiar with diverse aspects of the writer: her illness, her relationships with her mother and friends, her daily routine, her feelings about racial conflicts and politics, and the evolution of her art and her doctrine are some of the topics she discussed with her correspondents. For there are hundreds of letters in this volume, which covers a sixteen-year span from 1948 to the writer’s death from *lupus erythematosus*, in 1964. This degenerative and

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1. Manuel Broncano and Julio César Santoyo did a thorough job of re-translating and re-editing O’Connor’s novel, *Wise Blood* which was published by Cátedra in 1990 (*Sangre sabia*), and thus, in a sense, brought it back to life. Likewise, Guadalupe Arbona, at Ediciones Encuentro, included three of the author’s essays from *Mystery and Manners* in *El negro artificial y otros escritos* along with eight of her thirty-one short stories (2001), but has, to date, been unable to revise O’Connor’s short-story collections, due to copyright restrictions.

extremely debilitating disease was to be greatly responsible for the large amount of correspondence she wrote, and although O'Connor had always been a fervent letter writer, even before her illness was diagnosed, she came to depend on this means of communicating with nearly everyone she knew who lived beyond the confines of rural Milledgeville, Georgia. Friends attest to her uncompromising work schedule: mornings were devoted to her fiction, during which she sat in front of her typewriter from nine to twelve, and afternoons were spent on reading and answering letters or receiving visitors (Sessions 1966: 209).

In *El hábito de ser*, we will find letters addressed to editors, publishers, fellow writers (Robert Lowell and Katherine Anne Porter, for example), critics, fans and friends. 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 significant number of letters from these two women, the majority of which are included in this volume, merits a close look. Through this correspondence, we see how these relationships were crucial in helping her to come to terms with her illness and with her need to establish bonds with people outside of her mother's rural home town. The two sets of letters complement each other: we gain insight to O'Connor's art by reading her comments to Hester, hence this correspondence serves a valuable 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. Readers not familiar with this author are encouraged to focus on the written exchanges between O'Connor, Hester and Lee as many of the author's fictional themes and much of her artistic motivation can be observed.

Fitzgerald did a remarkable job of tying the groups of letters together with her own observations; providing the reader with the necessary information to allow for a more meaningful, cohesive reading. They present us with an autobiography of sorts, if read in chronological order: "She becomes 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 writer's pain or sadness or merriment as one's own" (Coles 1979: 6). Sally Fitzgerald suggests that in order to better understand O'Connor's fiction, one should first read her correspondence. Ralph Wood proposes the reading of her letters and stories simultaneously. Clara Claiborne Park even advises readers to set aside her narrative and to focus on her letters (qtd. Gordon 2000: 226). Yet although not all critics agree on the relevance of this compendium, *The Habit of Being*, which is now on its sixth edition in English, has come to occupy an indisputable place in the study of Flannery O'Connor's fiction.

*El hábito de ser*, the volume that Ediciones Sígueme has made available to Spanish readers is impeccable on all accounts. Externally, it is appealing both to the touch and to the sight—one might venture to say even more so than the present Noonday edition in English. Yet more significantly, this Salamanca-based publishing house made two important decisions when putting this edition together: the inclusion of a foreword by Gustavo Martín Garzo entitled, “Teoría de la desgracia” in which he expresses his enthusiasm for O’Connor, and the appointment of Francisco Javier Molina de la Torre as its translator.

Martín Garzo, as a well-known and successful Spanish novelist and writer of short stories, will hopefully help to bring Spanish readers closer to the fiction of Flannery O’Connor. In his foreword, he highlights the remarkable short story, “The Artificial Nigger,” encouraging readers to discover for themselves through the letters of *El hábito de ser* the essence of her fiction. For O’Connor’s art was shaped by her extraordinary circumstances, and these letters give us the chance to come closer to understanding her narrative by merging Flannery O’Connor, the writer, with Flannery O’Connor, the woman.

Mention must be made of the commendable job of translating *The Habit of Being* carried out by Molina de la Torre. Transcribing O’Connor’s vernacular speech—which becomes more vernacular the closer the friendship—is no easy task, and at times can simply not be resolved. The tongue-in-cheek humor she uses, intentionally misspelling words at times as a rhetorical device must have presented a serious translating challenge. The following examples give evidence of this: “She says I ought to be able to teach them English [...] and I say well I ain’t able to” (1979: 31) which is translated as: “Dice que yo debería ser capaz de enseñarles inglés [...] y yo le digo: ‘Bueno, yo no puedo’” (2003: 45), and “The name of my Dread Disease is Lupus Erythematosus, or as we literary [sic] people prefer to call it, Red Wolf” (1979: 266) which appears in Spanish without the intentional spelling mistake or capital letters: “El nombre de mi horrorosa enfermedad es *Lupus erithematosus*, o como nosotros, la gente de letras, preferimos llamarlo, El Lobo Rojo” (2003: 214). In general, in this Spanish edition, Flannery O’Connor’s run-on vernacular speech has been cleaned up with punctuation and “proper” grammar and spelling. Her not uncommon use of the word “nigger” simply goes unnoticed and is translated by the word “negro” in Spanish. In this specific case, a footnote might have been useful. In fact, Molina de la Torre seems to have been a bit too conservative in his use of notes, given the difficulty of the text and the presumable lack of background of future Spanish readers. He has wisely chosen to leave O’Connor’s particular way of addressing and signing her letters to Maryat Lee in

their original form, but once again, might have included some type of explanation regarding the way the two friends played with each other's names.

Future translations of Flannery O'Connor's work will no doubt hinge on the success that *El hábito de ser* among Spanish readers. With the imminent publication of her essays, *Mystery and Manners*, one hopes that this author will finally receive the attention that she deserves –and has up to now been unexplainably denied– here, in Spain. Is it too optimistic to anticipate a future revision of her short stories? Ediciones Sígueme should be applauded for this attempt to afford Flannery O'Connor's work its due relevance, and encouraged to continue along the same line as their efforts will surely prove to be worthwhile in a not too distant future.

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