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## Launching Flannery O'Connor: The Rockefeller Foundation and a Literary Reputation

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## Launching Flannery O'Connor: The Rockefeller Foundation and a Literary Reputation

FOR SOME TIME NOW, FLANNERY O'CONNOR HAS BEEN ONE OF AMERICA'S iconic literary masters. Certainly, her cultural cachet has never been higher. There is the recent issuance of an O'Connor postage stamp and even endorsements by cultural superstars such as Bruce Springsteen and Stephen King.<sup>1</sup> Take, for example, her centrality in three recent and widely discussed scholarly cultural histories of the modern twentieth-century literary era: O'Connor is foregrounded as the first significant writer of the Writing Workshop intrusion into postwar fiction in Mark McGurl's provocative commentary about the influence of university writing programs on contemporary American fiction, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009). Mark Greif's erudite and widely cited *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (2015) includes O'Connor (along with Ellison, Bellow, and Pynchon) as one of the novelists central to his analysis. Lastly, she holds a principal position in the expansive *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945* (2012), in which she receives her own chapter alongside Ellison, Pynchon, Morrison, and DeLillo and receives further attention in the chapters on the short story and Southern fiction.

As I consider her centrality and prominence in these and many other recent studies in line with Brad Gooch's hagiographical biography *Flannery* (2009), I also contemplate the ubiquitous claim that O'Connor's writing career began with "immediate success." This commonplace is well reflected, for example, by Jay Watson in his *Cambridge Companion* chapter on O'Connor. Watson writes that under the tutelage of Paul Engle, the Iowa Writing Workshop director, and guided by several New

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<sup>1</sup>See Lawrence Downes, "A Good Stamp Is Hard to Find"; King would invite Zola, Hardy, and O'Connor to his literary dinner party ("Stephen King: By the Book"); Springsteen, when asked to name one book that shaped him, replied: "One would be difficult, but the short stories of Flannery O'Connor landed hard on me" ("Bruce Springsteen: By the Book").

Critic “mentors” (John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, and Austin Warren), O’Connor “enjoyed almost instant success” in mass circulation through *Mademoiselle* and among the elite readership of *Sewanee Review* (207). He sees her Catholic response to the postwar South as the basis, in large part, for her early acclaim and continued high valuation at present. For Watson, she welds religiosity to the quotidian: “That human beings characteristically disavow their vulnerability and limitations, preferring to see themselves as self-actuating, coherent, and in control, was merely another symptom of their brokenness and imperfection.” In short, Watson argues that she identifies the problems of modernity as a disavowal of the necessity of “God’s grace” (208).

I would like to offer a corrective to the origin story of immediate success. What I am suggesting instead is a discernible institutional pressure coming from the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), which perhaps encouraged her supporters to campaign on her behalf by lauding early apprentice work and nominating her for grants, awards, and fellowships. A careful reading of the Foundation’s archives makes plausible an argument that O’Connor (at the start of her career) was a primary beneficiary of a concentrated program to protect an elite literary culture during the early Cold War and, most importantly, to find and anoint in the younger group of writers replacements for Faulkner and Hemingway, the “geniuses” of the previous generation.

O’Connor was indeed fortunate to begin her writing career at crucial sites of literary and cultural revolution: at Iowa as the “Program Era” of writing in the university started; in the little magazines as RF was promoting elite literary values with editors claiming they could best identify important new writers given the mass circulation paperback revolution that changed forever what and how America read. The serendipity of her emergence at the time of the concerted RF effort to protect high literary culture may have been more central to her early success than pure writing talent. The same group of critics, editors, and academics who worked to rehabilitate Faulkner and to push a Southern literary renaissance on the strength of Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Caroline Gordon were also searching for new Southern voices as well—writers “serious enough” to counterbalance the commercialized

mass media culture of Hollywood, TV, and pulp fiction but who were not Truman Capote.<sup>2</sup>

In 1945 at Iowa, when O'Connor dropped the journalism program and shifted to the Writing Workshop, she stepped into the domain of Paul Engle and the array of New Critics with a decidedly Southern orientation he drew to Iowa. However, she also moved into the territory of writers and critics who were all closely allied with the RF programs to cultivate and protect high literature, including the New York group associated with *Partisan Review* (Trilling, Rahv, and Hardwick) and the supposedly independent critics such as Malcolm Cowley. It was the period when the RF was engaged in a conscious and concerted effort to support creative writing by modest grants to small literary journals, including *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Accent*, and *Poetry*, as their editors worked to cultivate the next generation of serious writers and to expand the audience for "honorific" literature. This effort has been thoroughly documented for the rehabilitation of Faulkner, but O'Connor was a simultaneous beneficiary.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the approach was to distribute grants directly to journals to facilitate raising payment rates to authors (beginning in 1947 with \$22,500 to *Kenyon Review* and \$27,600 to *Sewanee Review*). A Humanities Division report to RF trustees written in the 1950s notes that "In recommending these actions, the Division pointed out that the grants were in effect subsidies to younger writers who established their claim to such assistance by securing the publication of their material in these magazines of high literary standards" (RF Archives, "The Encouragement"). The officers of the Humanities Division understood the complexity of cultural development, given the intricate interplay between writer, publisher, reviewer, booksellers, and the reading public, but pondered how best to encourage literature at a high level.

In 1950, after a brief experiment in helping *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* raise payments to contributors, the RF decided a better approach was to fund fellowships in writing through the little magazines and the Iowa writing program to allow the editors and director to select the best and most promising writers for awards. Fellowships were awarded to fifty-eight individuals totaling \$385,300. Interestingly, the decision to include Iowa was based on Engle's personal success in

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<sup>2</sup>For a general overview, see Fodor.

<sup>3</sup>See Schwartz 113-41; Kindley.

building up the program and methodology and his active lobbying of the Foundation.<sup>4</sup> This effort culminated in 1952 with the inclusion of \$40,000 for Iowa fellowships along with additional grants to *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review*. It was under the first round of fellowships (1952-1955) that O'Connor, the only fellow granted a renewal, received her two awards. As Eric Bennett argues in his history of the Iowa program, the efforts in support of the literary publications and the Iowa Writer's Workshop were indeed a campaign to influence literary culture. Bennett documents how David H. Stevens and Charles B. Fahs, the RF Humanities Division directors, and John Marshall, associate director, pushed an agenda that "outsourced the evaluation of talent, trusting figures such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Paul Engle to decide who deserved funding" ("Creative" 380).<sup>5</sup> The best and most promising of these supported writers according to Ransom, Warren, Engle and Lytle was O'Connor, whose early stories were seen as quirky though not especially brilliant, despite arguments for her significance made early on by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, as we shall see.

In June and November of 1955, Marshall prepared two reports on the status of RF backing for creative writing. After a ten-year effort, the RF was still trying to offer continuing support for serious literature in the United States through grants to little magazines and fellowships for individual writers through those journals. According to Marshall, however, these experiments in "enlightened patronage" had not really resulted in much success either in expanding support for journals or in identifying younger literary stars despite the arguments by the editors that journals were the best way to discover new voices. But the support had helped to sustain an elite culture through the immediate Cold War years. Certainly, the reputations of Hemingway and Faulkner were secured, but a key goal of the Foundation, the journals, and writing programs was to discover the next generation of "serious" writers who would represent a new postwar American culture. How to balance traditional links to twentieth-century modernism with new directions (the Beats, the experimentalists, and the stylists in the work of Kerouac,

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<sup>4</sup>For an overview of programs for creative writers, see RF Archives, "The Encouragement of Creative Writers."

<sup>5</sup>See Bennett, *Creative Writing and the Cold War*; "How Iowa Flattened Literature"; and "Pyramid Scheme."

Henry Miller, and Salinger, for example) was a central dilemma along with more general concerns over protecting literary values in an era of rapidly expanding mass media in popular/pulp fiction, Hollywood, and television.

The June report was a wide-ranging speculative document about how best to encourage serious literary production in the emerging era of mass communication and paperback publishing. It found that more writing, more publishing, more profits with higher rates of pay for writers seemed to leave less opportunity for the serious writer. Marshall's concern was over how truly small the audience was for "literature" and how large for "pulp fiction." Aside from James Laughlin's New Directions Press, there was, he believed, no publisher who identified literary concerns as the chief criteria for selection and publication. Much of his report was devoted to a review of the history of small magazines as the centers for high literary values and their publication of new writers and a defense of the Foundation's recent program to guarantee the continued publications of such journals as *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *Hudson Review*. He explained that these journals required subsidies and patronage, though the RF eschewed patronage, always making clear that fellowships were made by the journals or Iowa rather than as Rockefeller grants (not wanting to imitate the Guggenheim program of individual grants). He was not optimistic that literary journals could find a large enough audience to guarantee self-sufficiency even in the following five years. Usually the RF avoided providing money for "continuing" costs and certainly refused requests to support ventures on the edge of collapse ("life or death money" [RF Archives, "RF Aid" 5]). However, in the case of the fellowships and the associated support for the journals, Marshall advocated enlightened patronage:

There seems to be plenty of money for what will not prove to be literature; none for what will be, that is, unless the RF, the one foundation with a stated concern in literature as an enterprise (apart from aid to individual writers like that of the Guggenheim Foundation) comes in. That the RF could well afford to must be known to everyone concerned. If its so doing seems to be patronage, I say, make the most of it: most people would regard it as distinctly *enlightened*. (RF Archives, "RF Aid" 6)

Marshall wanted to make grants to key journals to support editorial expenses and literary excellence. His plan once again was to raise payments to contributors and to continue fellowships even while

knowing that the journals all struggled to break even. He saw a large commitment by the RF for this array of journals as the best way to guarantee at least a five-year grace period for the journals in the hope they would survive through expanding readership and perhaps gain other funding. He argued, "It is not magniloquent to suppose that if an institution like the RF recognized in this way their service to contemporary literature, others might come to do so by force of its example, with the conceivable consequence that their base of support might thereby be widened" (RF Archives, "RF Aid" 7). Not yet knowing about the philanthropic upheaval the re-birth of the Ford Foundation would make and how the expansion of college and university populations would spur the already booming paperback revolution, Marshall argued for the significance of the literary elite as represented in the small journals. Marshall was concerned about the dilution of literary quality given the success of such wildly popular novels as *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *Peyton Place*.<sup>6</sup> However, the RF was completely committed to the centrality of an elite corps of critics, scholars, and editors in the university and journals to protect high culture from the potential dilution of literary quality in the mass market.

Marshall's November 1955 report was an overview of the relationship between the RF and the little magazines in preparation for a series of grant resolutions for December presentation to the Trustees for the new round of fellowship grants to journals but not to Iowa. The report, "Literature and the Little Magazines," opened by referencing Lionel Trilling's warning about the gap between the vast volume of printed words and the paucity of interest for "literature." Marshall reviewed the significance of the little magazine in support of American literary culture and specifically the initial grants in the 1940s to *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* and then the shift to fellowships in 1952 to the two journals and Iowa. He summarized the three-year effort which had helped thirty-five young writers, pointing directly to O'Connor as the best example of the value of such grants. He noted that her publishing success started in the journals and then cited a novel and a recent collection of stories, including paperback reprinting, as evidence of continued success. Marshall called her first novel "something awful, but impressive," explaining,

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<sup>6</sup>For a historical account of the novel *Peyton Place*, see Cameron.

Despite its flaws there are signs of originality and hints of sure touch in characterization, and these qualities have been increasingly manifest in her short stories. This last spring Harcourt Brace published her second book, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. It has been well received (selling some 4,000 copies according to Flannery O'Connor), and indeed had a hurrah or two from the critics. (RF Archives, "University of Iowa" 15)

In quoting O'Connor on the significance of the Kenyon fellowship, he said it was the luxury of "writing what you want to write," and Marshall identified O'Connor as an "authentic talent" who converted that luxury into serious literature which was indeed what the RF intended (RF Archives, "University of Iowa" 16-17).

Interestingly, the quotes from O'Connor in Marshall's report emerged from an exchange of letters between the two, initiated by Marshall and written in August and September 1955. Whether to recommend continuance of the fellowship program was Marshall's central question. He wrote to O'Connor for both information and guidance because she was a younger writer who had been the beneficiary of the direct aid (her early publications were in the journals kept alive by RF subventions). Marshall introduced himself as an admirer and explained that he had to present a summary and judgment about the value of the fellowship program to trustees who would decide, based primarily on his recommendations, whether and in what form it should continue. He said he first read *Wise Blood* in a NAL reprint and thought it "an awful but impressive novel" (the phrase which he was to cite anonymously in the formal report) and then read her in the magazines. He was enthusiastic about the recent collection of stories (*A Good Man*). He furthered his personal introduction to her by noting his Harvard literary provenance, having graduated in the year of her birth, 1925, with college ties to Cummings, Dos Passos, Cowley, and Hillyer (RF Archives, Letters [26 August 1955]).

O'Connor explained in her prompt reply that she was quite removed from any literary scene because she lived on a dairy farm in Georgia and spent all of her time writing. She was unsure of what to say except that the fellowships were certainly a financial boost but also important "in the way of encouragement." She wrote that her work was shaped by her life as a Southerner and as a Catholic:

Being the first provides me with a set of conventions . . . the other provides me with a moral outlook. If the devil supplies my material, the Church at least supplies my

attitude toward it. . . . Being a Catholic has perhaps saved me from being a regional writer; being a Southerner may have saved me from being a Catholic writer in the narrow sense. My pre-occupations are moral and theological and I am conscious of writing for those who do not share my orthodox views. (RF Archives, Letters [28 August 1955])

Marshall's response was appreciative of her self-assessment, but he wanted a bit more from her about the value of the fellowship. "In our more serious debates about fellowships, there is always a haunting doubt that they are palliative rather than remedial. The writer's real need is, after all, more readers and purchasers of books." Marshall wanted O'Connor's report of her own development as a writer and how she gained recognition. He wanted to understand whether the fellowships were valuable, especially since he saw her work as the premier achievement of all the awards:

I seek this from you, because, as I review all these appointments of the last three years, you of all the fellows, seem further along toward real recognition. Thus, in terms of what one hopes from the fellowships, your history may be the most complete . . . I happen to believe that such fellowships are more than palliative, that the need for them may be lasting, at least until such time as education and other factors, produce a larger readership for serious work. (RF Archives, Letters [10 September 1955])

She responded with a concise summary of her early publishing history and noted the first *Kenyon Review* fellowship came at time when she was in the middle of writing *Wise Blood* and dealing with the reality of lupus, which made teaching or other work impossible, though she was fortunate to be able to live comfortably on her family's dairy farm. She explained:

Writing the way you ought to write is not a necessity, it is a luxury and requires both money and time. I have never thought money-making by writing a possibility for me. My present collection of stories has sold about 4,000 . . . this will not add up to much in my pocket and I now face the same problem again—where to find a fellowship. (RF Archives, Letters [12 September 1955])

She planned to apply for a Guggenheim grant but was not optimistic about it or future subventions and concluded by noting that she was at work on a new novel, the same book for which she received the second *Kenyon Review* fellowship. It was a measure of Ransom's commitment to her but perhaps also reflective of the weakness of other applicants. She

reported its first chapter would be published in the fall in *New World Writing*. She continued, "I want it to be a better novel than the last and I see nothing for this but time, and another fellowship." Two days later she sent a short, additional note about the value of the fellowship, explaining that it permitted her the freedom to produce a book of stories rather than a novel since a novel might return one or two thousand dollars but a story collection nothing and payment from the quarterlies not much: "If you don't have much money, you can't well afford to write stories." O'Connor wrote. "Writing what you want is a luxury. You will probably agree that my stories are better than my novel—anyway, at the time that I wanted to write stories and had stories to write, I felt free to write them, thanks to the fellowship" (RF Archives, Letters [14 Sept 1955]). Of course, she was not required to sustain herself by her writing income; she was financially supported by the family's farm income.

In the middle of this exchange Marshall received a letter from Ransom. Ransom wanted Marshall to see his response to O'Connor's request for support of her Guggenheim application. The novelist was seeking Ransom's advice because she was not sure how to frame her application, given that the novel was initially proposed as a *Kenyon Review* Fellowship project that was set aside in favor of the stories which, in part, had resulted in the recent collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. Ransom was pleased with the switch to the story collection, which he viewed as a creditable volume. However, he urged to her to check with Engle and the editors of *Sewanee Review* to see if they thought the Guggenheim officers might be less supportive of short stories. Personally, he saw no prejudice in applying to Guggenheim as a fiction writer and suggested that she not be so concerned to define the project as a novel. Ransom made clear that all at *Kenyon Review* were admiring of her work (RF Archives, Letters [17 September 1955]).

A few days later Ransom wrote again to Marshall to say O'Connor had decided to name both a novel and a group of stories as the basis for the Guggenheim request. (This application, her second, was denied.) Rather than claiming that O'Connor was highly accomplished, Ransom stressed his belief in her potential. He viewed her as a writer in progress:

My understanding, based on what I have been told by people who know her personally, is that her health does not permit her to take regular employment, for instance as a teacher. But she is such a fine artist, and developing so fast, that I should

think she rates repeated helps from foundations or publishers as much as almost anybody. (RF Archives, Letters [22 September 1955])

Ransom devoted most of this long letter to a summary of his personal situation as he neared mandatory retirement age. He wanted Marshall to know that should the RF not renew the fellowships and the allied financial support it provided for *Kenyon Review*, in all likelihood the journal would have to close, though he was working closely with Kenyon College president John Chalmers to find a way to keep the *Review* publishing. Ransom reminded Marshall as he had over the many years of RF support about the relevance and importance of *Kenyon Review* in American high culture.<sup>7</sup>

As Marshall noted in his November report, he was fully committed to the elite journals and argued strenuously within the Foundation for continued subventions. In fact, a review of the 1955 resolution in awarding a new round of funding (\$52,200) reflected his thorough commitment to the fellowship program and highlighted its significance, citing O'Connor as exemplary of the value of *Kenyon Review's* dedication to new writers of high promise and seriousness. He summarized the value of such awards:

In literature the comparable need is for the writer to have an opportunity to practice his art, not in accordance with any given pattern but in the way which best suits individual needs and aspirations. Thus, the proposed fellowships would involve no requirement of residence or formal study or even of supervision. . . . Furthermore, in the award of literary fellowships there should be no single pattern of selections: hence, the proposal for a series of grants with appointments through the leading literary reviews which, while they each represent high standards of literary judgment, show a healthy difference of literary interest and approach. (RF Archives, "Kenyon College Literary Fellowships" 3-4)

The award to Iowa was not renewed because the RF preferred to make awards through literary journals, adding *Partisan Review* and *Hudson Review* to this next round of grants.

While Ransom's letter of invitation to O'Connor to apply for the first *Kenyon Review* grant is not extant, it was written in October 1952, as O'Connor mentioned in a letter to Sally Fitzgerald at the beginning of November. O'Connor wrote that she replied immediately in the

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<sup>7</sup>The letters between Marshall and O'Connor and Ransom are available in RF Archives, Letters. See also Janssen 172-74.

affirmative even before Ransom's letter was "opened good" (O'Connor 902). But it is clear in the RF Archives that Ransom specifically invited O'Connor and that there really was no open competition. Jansen reported that Ransom received enthusiastic endorsements of O'Connor's appointment as fellow from Tate, Robert Fitzgerald, and Peter Taylor.<sup>8</sup> He was committed to O'Connor as the best of the younger Southern writers. Then, in October 1953, Ransom wanted to renew her application so that she could receive the 1954 award in fiction, describing O'Connor to Edward F. D'Arms, the other associate director of Humanities, as a Southern writer of the "very highest promise." Ransom wanted to redistribute award money to squeeze out an extra fellowship for O'Connor:

She has no particular means of livelihood; she has told us that she suffers so badly from arthritis that she cannot take a teaching position. . . . Recently she sent us a short story and the opening section or sections of a novel. The work has the power that was evident in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own". . . . But it is imperfect; it would seem the kind of condensation and stylization which she is after do not come easily; and what she *should* do is take more time and perfect these compositions. She is at her best on a plane or so above the applicants we considered for 1954. (RF Archives, "JCR to EFD" [19 October 1953])

D'Arms was supportive and the extra award was approved. A year later Ransom summarized the fellows for Marshall and noted O'Connor in particular, saying her work was now in wider demand and he believed "she will rank as one of the best southern fictionists of her generation" (RF Archives, Letters [29 November 1954]).

In Ransom's correspondence for the early 1950s, there were frequent mentions of the pressure to find "strong" fiction for publication in *Kenyon Review* and the other journals. For example, in March 1954, he wrote to Andrew Lytle about encouraging young writers to send material to *Kenyon Review*:

We have a hard time finding fiction of any distinction. Some stories we publish aim at distinction, and that's the most you can say for them. Take a look at our Spring number . . . and see our four stories there. The one by Flannery O'Connor is first rate, I think, and the one we published this time last year from her is the best story I've seen in years, if I'm not mistaken. Most of the other stories are just good tries. (Ransom 374)

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<sup>8</sup>See Janssen 240-44 for an overview of Ransom's decisions to publish O'Connor in *Kenyon Review*.

Ransom was referencing “Circle of Fire” in 1954 and “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” in 1953, with “Circle” receiving the 1955 second place O. Henry Award. Both *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* were actively publishing O’Connor in the period of the RF fellowships, with the latter featuring “The River” in 1953 and “Displaced Person” in 1954 (after a rejection by *The Atlantic*). With some reluctance, *Kenyon Review* published “The Artificial Nigger” in 1955 and “Greenleaf” in 1956, the latter winning first place in the O. Henry Awards. These prizes are usually considered a sign of distinction, but the reality is somewhat less impressive given that in 1954 Paul Engle took over the supervision of the competition after the death of Herschel Brickell, who had edited the yearly prize and anthology of best stories since 1942. There were no awards for 1952 and 1953, but commencing in 1954 Engle chose the award recipients and edited the anthology published by Doubleday. The editor had full control to make selections and award prizes; there were no stipulated criteria, nor was there a review panel. Given O’Connor’s connections to Iowa and Engle, one is not surprised to find her receiving honors along with other Iowa alumnae. Between 1954 and 1959, she appeared four times in the anthology. In short, Engle’s control over the prizes and the use of the O. Henry anthology of best stories to publicize and push forward the Iowa workshop was in line with his rather indefatigable lobbying of the RF for support.<sup>9</sup>

Engle’s advocacy proved very helpful to Flannery O’Connor from the very beginning of her career when she received the Rinehart fellowship in support of her first novel, *Wise Blood*. The discovery and cultivation of a writer such as O’Connor was central to Engle’s appeals to the RF for inclusion in the funding for the first series of fellowships. The Archives show Engle was cautioned several times to make sure he publicized these as Iowa fellowships not Rockefeller awards so that the emphasis was on Iowa, not the Foundation, though clearly Engle saw an advantage to the opposite strategy.

After Iowa, Flannery O’Connor moved east to Yaddo and New York City, working hard on *Wise Blood* and trying to place stories and chapters in elite journals. As Gooch notes, O’Connor’s appearance at Yaddo coincided with a clear Southern renaissance there—McCullers, Welty, Gordon, Porter, Capote, etc. (149-50). Robert Lowell, Elizabeth

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<sup>9</sup>See Bennett, “How Iowa.”

Hardwick, and Malcolm Cowley introduced O'Connor to both Philip Rahv of *Partisan Review* and Allen Tate of *Sewanee Review*. Her first application for a Guggenheim in 1948 was endorsed by Lowell, Rahv, and Robert Penn Warren. In 1948, she found outlets for three chapters of *Wise Blood*: "The Train" published in *Sewanee Review* in the April/June issue; "The Heart of the Park" and "The Peeler" accepted by *Partisan Review* for publication the following year. This coincided with *Partisan Review's* publication of essays by Tate as part of a campaign to show the RF that the journal was an eclectic, "non-politicized" venue for serious literature and literary analysis. O'Connor's work was not to appear again in *Partisan Review*, but Rahv and William Phillips included "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" in their 1953 anthology, *Modern Writing*. While it is not possible to document the editorial decisions at *Partisan Review* in favor of O'Connor, it is not unreasonable to suggest that her inclusion was consistent with the many conversations among Marshall, Rahv, and Phillips about turning the journal away from left-wing politics while requesting equal treatment relative to *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review*, which is a well-documented move.<sup>10</sup>

In 1954, for example, Malcolm Cowley analyzed the current literary scene, discussing the legitimacy and significance of the paperback revolution and considering the general direction of contemporary fiction. He respected the high quality of the literary journals and, of course, the judgments of critics like Ransom, Tate, and Warren, but Cowley worried that the university was becoming too central to fiction writing and too narrow in its scholarly criticism. He also cautioned that literary journals such as *Sewanee Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Partisan Review* were still too devoted to literary and cultural criticism rather than to literature. He examined *Sewanee Review* for 1952, noting that the 741 pages of text included only ninety pages of short fiction and fifty-three pages of poetry: "Everything else was criticism, including 198 pages of commentaries and book reviews. There were five critical essays in each issue, as against one story, and the essays occupied exactly 400 pages during the year, or more than half the text" (9-10). One crucial aspect of Cowley's critique was the fact that the elite journals published so few stories that the scarcity itself gave special prominence to the writers whose work was selected. O'Connor fit this template exactly in

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<sup>10</sup>See Schwartz 113-41.

that her relevance was measured, in part, by the appearance of her stories in elite journals.

In the early period, Flannery O'Connor's strongest defender was Caroline Gordon (Tate) who, in 1951, began a lifelong relationship as editor, mentor, and advocate, as demonstrated by her careful reading and line editing of a late draft of *Wise Blood*. This was revealed in Sally Fitzgerald's "A Master Class: From the Correspondence of Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor." In promoting O'Connor, Gordon wanted to establish her significance as a serious Catholic moralist, a technically astute writer who had "real dramatic sense" (828) and whose "freaks," unlike Truman Capote's, "started out real folks but turned into freaks as the result of original sin" (829). The now accepted analysis of O'Connor as an important Southern writer in the Jamesian modernist tradition began with Gordon's early endorsement. Gordon made clear she believed the book to be one of the best she had read in recent years because O'Connor, like Kafka, provided "a firm Naturalistic groundwork" for her symbolism (831). Gordon's commentary elevated O'Connor and derided, in a decidedly homophobic way, Capote as he began to find wide acclaim for his own "bizarre" Southern stories.

In providing detailed criticisms and suggestions for *Wise Blood*, Gordon saw an opportunity to push O'Connor much further to produce elegantly crafted stories in which symbol, technique, and moral center are the measures of literary value as represented by James, Flaubert, and Joyce.<sup>11</sup> In the exchange of letters, Gordon called her a writer of the "first order" in the complexity of her characters and "superb" dialogue (843, 844). Given her extensive editorial support for *Wise Blood*, Gordon was not comfortable reviewing the novel. Four years later, however, she would publish a rave review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. In the end, *Wise Blood* received weak reviews and achieved tepid sales.

In line with Gordon's judgments about the Catholic moral center in O'Connor's work, the most positive review of *Wise Blood* came from Brainard Cheney, a fellow Catholic, in *Shenandoah*. He contrasted her work with that of Erskine Caldwell and Faulkner, saying she had represented a South where the despair is rooted in the absence of religious grace and salvation. Beyond Caldwell's "reportorial naturalism"

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<sup>11</sup>See Gordon and Tate, *The House of Fiction*, especially Preface and Appendices A, "The Arts of Fiction," and B, "Faults of the Amateur."

and Faulkner's "poetic expressionism," she presented in her realistic style "a theologically weighted symbolism" and "persistent craving of the soul." Cheney claimed for O'Connor a special insight into the nihilism of the present time and the "inescapable need of his fearful, if blind, search for salvation" (Stephens 197).<sup>12</sup>

For more than a decade Gordon and Tate had been calling for literature informed by Christianity and O'Connor seemed like an answer to that call. Tate and Gordon made a case for O'Connor, who in many ways was a more tradition-bound Southerner than Faulkner. As Gooch notes, for example, Tate thought "Good Country People" was a brilliant story and pushed hard to have it included in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, published in 1955; he encouraged Monroe Spears to publish "The Displaced Person" in *Sewanee Review* after a rejection by *The Atlantic* (245-55). Gordon glowingly reviewed *A Good Man* and identified O'Connor as an important contemporary writer: "Miss O'Connor, for all her apparent preoccupation with the visible scene, is also fiercely concerned with moral, even theological, problems. In these stories the rural South is for the first time, viewed by a writer whose orthodoxy matches her talent. The results are revolutionary" ("With a Glitter").<sup>13</sup> This praise for O'Connor fit well into the campaign at *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review* under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation effort to expand the audience for serious writing and new authors.

However, the RF project was not without critics. The sharpest attack came from John W. Aldridge in 1956's *In Search of Heresy: American Literature in an Age of Conformity*. Aldridge suggested one reason for the rather anemic state of postwar fiction was the shift of fiction writing to the university—programs such as Iowa's—and the waning of an avant garde—though he seemed to not have noticed the Beats. He saw the literary quarterlies as having become rather stodgy, pushing mundane writers such as Randall Harrell, Mary McCarthy, Walter Van Tilberg Clark, Eudora Welty, Saul Bellow, Elizabeth Hardwick, Flannery O'Connor, Jean Stafford, Shirley Jackson, Katherine Anne Porter, and

<sup>12</sup>For more on O'Connor's links to Tate and Gordon and her relationship with Brainard and Frances Cheney, including the literary salon they cultivated, see Gooch 235-39. See Stephens, Appendix A: 195-99 for a reprint of the review of *Wise Blood*.

<sup>13</sup>Still, not all the reviews were positive. The anonymous one paragraph review in *The New Yorker* said her stories had no depth.

Robie Macauley. He was more sympathetic to writers outside the university orbits such as Norman Mailer, James Jones, Gore Vidal, and Irwin Shaw.

Aldridge's critique of the institutionalization of culture is not unlike McGurl's present-day judgment of creative writing programs. The shift of writing to the university supports a blind acceptance of mainstream values, Aldridge argues, draining away the energy of the bohemian counter-culture which he believed was central to the modernist impulse of the 1920s. And he asserts that there is no literary center comparable to Paris and no replacements yet for Joyce, Lawrence, Pound, Eliot, and Hemingway. With writing and the teaching of writing now focused in the university, fiction is no longer grounded in lived experience. And he is especially critical of the RF fellowships for *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review*, where the fellows were primarily tied to the university and the journals themselves. Aldridge points out that six of the ten Kenyon fellows since 1953 were university teachers and that all nine of the *Sewanee Review* fellows were academics and contributors to the journal. He adds: "A little of it, but only a very little, might be called distinguished. Miss O'Connor and Mr. Nemerov are decidedly minor younger novelists, even among younger novelists" (57-58). His view of Flannery O'Connor is particularly negative given that she alone was the recipient of two *Kenyon Review* awards. For the academics, "she provides them with tone or chic, a little sprinkling of fake old magnolia blossoms" (59). He judges William Styron a much better and more provocative choice for Southern literary successor to Faulkner.

For the RF, the questions surrounding university influence in contemporary writing was hardly a problem. The links established through funding the quarterlies, the Kenyon School of Criticism, and the Princeton Gauss seminars broadened to include placement of key critics and scholars at the major centers of graduate study throughout the country—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Minnesota, Stanford, and the University of California. They already dominated the widening influence of literary studies in a period of expanding undergraduate enrollments and, more significantly, headed graduate English programs preparing the next generation of the professoriate.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Aldridge was better known for his literary overview *After the Lost Generation* (1951).

In her 1958 response, Gordon rejects Aldridge's diminution of O'Connor. She argues again for the novelist's importance and distinction, marking the boundaries for what would become the field of O'Connor studies, especially after her death in 1964. Gordon acknowledges the similarities between O'Connor and contemporary Southern writers such as Capote, McCullers, and Williams but notes that O'Connor is singularly different: "one of the most important writers of our age" ("Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" 3). For Gordon, the author challenges the reader to engage in the contemplation of the human relation to the divine—even though her characters are marginally literate and of lowly origin. But there is moral judgment in her fiction, a theological frame to the action which elevates her work. For Gordon and like-minded critics, O'Connor's place in recent literature was now well established. It was, they claimed, a reflection of her publishing history and her technical virtuosity. It was also evidence to them of the growing centrality of New Critical pedagogy and scholarship which was available to judge that writing. In 1959, for example, O'Connor was included, though not highlighted, in the revised edition of the ur-anthology edited by Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Fiction*.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, in the crucible period from 1950-1955—before it was clear that university enrollments would be a central driver of the paperback revolution and provide a substantial base for low cost, serious literature—the tension between mass audience and literary values shaped O'Connor's status as well. Cowley, in *The Literary Situation*, reports that the "pocket-book" publishing industry in 1952 showed that a dozen publishers printed 252 million copies of 882 new titles, with Pocket Books alone publishing 46 million copies of 109 titles, NAL 42 million of 80 titles, and Bantam 35 million of 94 titles, distributed in over 100,000 retail outlets (103-04). How to find readers for Flannery O'Connor when the garish, titillating South of Erskine Caldwell was readily at hand? But paperback publishers, like Victor Weybright at New American Library, were willing to distribute "highbrow" work as well—though in lurid, "lowbrow" packaging.

O'Connor's reputation was aided by the decision at NAL to acquire reprint rights to *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. She was certainly not unique, since Weybright made a campaign

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<sup>15</sup>See Rubin for a repudiation of Aldridge's suggestion that O'Connor was evidence of the collusion by the journals and the university professors.

of signing the “best” younger writers for paperback publication. O’Connor joined a long list of younger writers at NAL: Mailer, Jones, Capote, Vidal, Styron, Salinger, Ellison, Baldwin, Wright, and Petry. The NAL Archive documents this strategy. It is worth noting that Weybright, in 1952, also created the first mass market literary magazine, *New World Writing*, to help strengthen the audience appeal of the publisher’s more “highbrow” authors and to convince the authors themselves of NAL’s commitment to serious literature.<sup>16</sup> O’Connor’s “Enoch and the Gorilla” was selected for the first number. Thus, her appearance was not simply a measure of her talent, since the journal was also a publicity arm of the NAL.

In 1950, before the direction of mass distribution paperback publishing was clear, the RF studied the possibility of subsidizing a small group of university presses to guarantee publication of high-quality literature. It was a plan to have a panel of “astute” judges review manuscripts and to identify valuable books which would then be distributed among a small group of university presses such as University of North Carolina, Cornell University, Louisiana State University, University of Minnesota, and Stanford University. The RF would provide a subvention to each press to publish the selected manuscripts. The proposal was not supported because it seemed to infringe too closely on commercial publishing, but it did reflect the depth of concern by the RF over the status of “highbrow” literature. The RF wanted to encourage expansion of a reading public for advanced literature and later, as we have seen, John Marshall was very much chagrined to see how limited the audience was for the elite journals and the authors they chose to publish (RF Archives, “The Encouragement”). In his 1955 report, Marshall cited O’Connor’s published work as evidence of success and then cited her success in defense of the fellowship program.

In sum, O’Connor was good enough for publication, but then publication itself was cited as evidence of quality. A very small circle of like-minded editors and critics provided outlets for her work, but early on only Gordon made the claim for distinction. Under the umbrella of the RF, there was an orchestration of O’Connor’s career. These several, powerful constituencies claimed she was the exemplar of a new

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<sup>16</sup>On NAL publishing strategies, see Schwartz 38-72. Sales of *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man is Hard to Find* were not insubstantial but far from robust in paperback terms. Also, Weybright thought publishing a Catholic novelist might deflect some of the Church criticism of NAL books (NAL Archive, “Flannery O’Connor”).

generation of serious writers, but one rooted in clearly demarcated traditions. For the New Critics like Warren and Brooks, here was an acolyte who merged local focus with larger universal themes, while also staying committed to Jamesian notions of fictional technique. For the Catholic intellectuals—Tate, Gordon, Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, Brainard Cheney, and Robert Lowell—she was immediately praised for her religiosity and moral center. For the New York Intellectuals in and around *Partisan Review*, support for her was also support for a united front with the New Critics in defense of culture as further evidence of their eclectic embrace of literary distinction.

Finally, O'Connor was both insider and outsider. She was inside the Jamesian modernist tradition as a Southern regionalist with universal but conservative aspirations. However, she was outside the American mainstream as a Catholic and a cloistered "agrarian" not heavily influenced by American consumerism and Cold War conformity.<sup>17</sup> Today one might say the group of scholars and critics were "linked in" and that certainly seemed to be the situation in the early 1950s when the RF helped to guarantee the continued publication of the elite journals. This coalition of literary elites understood the need for solidarity. That O'Connor was a talented and interesting storyteller was agreed from the outset, but generally she was in these early years very far from a prodigy. The cadre of supporters tied to the RF argued for her because she fulfilled the agreed upon guidelines for literary significance. In this view, the publicity and interest in O'Connor had institutional as well as aesthetic value.

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<sup>17</sup>For a defense of O'Connor in response to McGurl's reading, see Pollack.

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