"As someone who has read and taught Flannery O'Connor's fiction continually for the past half century, I found myself riveted by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell's compact and highly readable biography of one of the twentieth century's most deeply fascinating writers. What O'Donnell has managed to do here is to get at the heart of the mystery of O'Connor's novels, short stories, essays, and letters and to reveal the by turns dark and luminous Catholic faith that sustained and transformed her work throughout her too-brief life. The truth is I could not put O'Donnell's book down until I had read straight through it from beginning to end. It's all here—the scholarship, the critical insights, a Catholic writer's trenchant understanding of another Catholic writer to remind us that the spirit of Merton, Dorothy Day, Walker Percy, and O'Connor herself is alive and well today."

—Paul Mariani
Boston College

"Angela Alaimo O'Donnell has written a graceful, compelling biography of Flannery O'Connor whose fiction, she rightfully insists, constituted 'the inestimable contribution [she] has made to American Catholic literature, thought, and culture.' A devout Catholic, O'Connor wrote with the same fervor about her faith than she did her craft. Seamlessly moving from the life events in O'Connor's pilgrimage—the places she wrote, the friends she made, the sufferings she endured—into the characters, settings, and symbols of her stories, O'Donnell brings readers into that enlightened nexus where O'Connor's Catholicism explains and extolls her art. O'Donnell's biography is a must read for anyone who wants to understand how and why O'Connor's fiction with its violence, suffering, and mystery emerges from her Roman Catholic faith and practice."

—Philip C. Kolin
University of Southern Mississippi
Editor, *The Southern Quarterly*

“With evident commitment, *Flannery O’Connor: Fiction Fired by Faith* traces continuing negotiations between a courageous life of prayer and an exacting aesthetic pursuit. A rich, insightful introduction to the life of an author whose ardent Christianity forged a breathtakingly original narrative art.”

—Richard Giannone
Author of *Flannery O’Connor, Hermit Novelist*

“How refreshing it is to read a biography of Flannery O’Connor that shows a deep understanding of her faith and treats it not as an idiosyncrasy to be dismissed as peripheral but as the primary motivator in her life and art. Professor O’Donnell has written an elegant and multi-dimensional portrayal of O’Connor as ‘a fellow Catholic-in-exile.’ This is a must-read for anyone interested in coming to a full understanding of the ways in which O’Connor’s faith was not just the background but the driving force behind her vision.”

—Jill Peláez Baumgaertner
Author of *Flannery O’Connor: A Proper Scaring*
Wheaton College

Flannery O'Connor

Fiction Fired by Faith

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

Cover design by Stefan Killen Design. Cover illustration by Philip Bannister.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014950491

ISBN 978-0-8146-3701-2 978-0-8146-3726-5 (ebook)

For Brennan

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Abbreviations

CS	*Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.
CW	*O'Connor: Collected Works*. Edited by Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Library of America, 1988.
FOC	Flannery O'Connor
GCSU	Flannery O'Connor Collection, Ina Dillard Russell Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundation
HB	*The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor.* Edited by Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
MM	*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

Acknowledgments

It is a commonplace that biographers stand on the shoulders of those who have come before them, and this is certainly true of my experience in writing this brief biography of Flannery O'Connor. I have relied on documents produced by many people, beginning with O'Connor, herself, followed by Sally Fitzgerald, who did the foundational work of editing O'Connor's letters and essays and in creating the detailed chronology of her life published in *The Collected Works*. Publication of the letters, in particular, has made it possible for O'Connor to narrate her own story, in a sense, and for us to hear it told in her own voice.

This book owes a great debt to two biographies that have provided faithful and compelling accounts of O'Connor's life—Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* and Brad Gooch's *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*. These biographers have constructed narratives that enable readers to see the external circumstances of O'Connor's life as well as the internal workings provided in her letters, consulted archives containing writings only recently available, conducted interviews with O'Connor's friends and colleagues, and offered insightful commentary on the connections between her life and her work. To the reader eager to know more about O'Connor's life, I heartily recommend both books.

In addition, I owe a great debt to the many scholars who have written critical studies of O'Connor's work. These writers are too many to name, but I'm especially grateful for the work of Jill Peleaz Baumgaertner, Sr. Kathleen Feeley, SSND, and Richard Giannone. In my years of teaching, I have availed myself of their fine scholarship and their often brilliant analyses of O'Connor's fiction, and they have shaped my own understanding of her work.

On a more personal note, there are a number of people I would like to thank for their roles in making this book possible. First, I am grateful to the staff at Liturgical Press, especially Barry Hudock, for inviting me to write a biography of Flannery O'Connor for the "People of God" series. It has been a pleasure and privilege to devote so much time and energy to careful consideration of O'Connor's life and work.

I am grateful to my colleagues at Fordham University's Curran Center for American Catholic Studies, Christine Firer Hinze and Maria G. Terzulli, for their enthusiasm about this project and for their unflagging support of my work. I am blessed to work at such a rich and vibrant center and in partnership with such generous colleagues.

I am grateful for the support I received from the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical & Cultural Research in the form of a writing residency in the Ecclesial Literature Project's "Apart, and yet a Part" workshop. Inspired by my colleagues in the program and by our writing coach, Michael McGregor, I wrote key portions of the manuscript during my time there and benefited from Michael's insightful critique and commentary.

Finally, I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to my family, especially to my husband, Brennan, for his love and long friendship and for his unfailing support and encourage-

ment of my work. His fine critical eye and his ear for the rhythms of good prose have made this a better book. The fact that we "discovered" O'Connor together as undergraduates and spent many years reading her stories, talking about them, and teaching them to our own students has led us both to a constantly deepening appreciation of and affection for her work. In a sense, Flannery has been a member of our household for three decades. For these reasons and more, this book is dedicated to him.

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor is, perhaps, the most celebrated American Catholic writer of the twentieth century—and justly so. The author of thirty-two short stories, two novels, insightful essays on the craft of fiction, and hundreds of splendid, literary letters, O'Connor devoted herself to her vocation as artist and belongs to that unusual breed of writer who gains critical acclaim during her lifetime. That recognition is hard won for O'Connor, as the literary establishment is generally suspicious of writers who claim allegiance to a particular faith. On more than one occasion, readers of her work remarked on her Catholicism, and not in a complimentary way. In 1972, when her publisher Robert Giroux was preparing himself to receive the National Book Award O'Connor was posthumously awarded for her *Collected Stories,* an author startled him by inquiring whether he genuinely valued her work: "Do you really think Flannery O'Connor was a great writer? She's such a Roman Catholic!"[1] The implication is clear: being a practicing Catholic somehow disqualifies a writer from serious consideration, as if one's art is marred by belief in God or one's mind is compromised by adherence to the teachings of the church—or both.

Despite this deep cultural prejudice against Catholics—a prejudice that has flourished in America from its early Puritan beginnings—O'Connor managed to write fiction that was so arresting and original that perceptive readers could not help but recognize her genius. During her brief lifetime—cut sadly short by lupus, the disease she suffered with for thirteen years before her death at age thirty-nine—she won many awards for her fiction, including grants from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Ford Foundation, a fellowship from the *Kenyon Review*, and several O. Henry awards. As mentioned above, her posthumous collection, *The Complete Stories,* received the National Book Award in 1972. This extraordinary event marked a break with tradition—the award, usually given to a living writer, was granted to O'Connor's work by the judges to honor her lifetime achievement. Clearly, as both an American writer and as a Catholic writer, Flannery O'Connor has achieved a rare distinction: recognition of the value of her work by the literary establishment as well as by readers in search of a voice and vision that can articulate the challenges of enacting belief in a culture of unbelief.

Finding Flannery

It seems some account of my own relationship to Flannery O'Connor's work is in order—and I'm going to begin with a spoiler.

When I first encountered O'Connor's fiction as an undergraduate English major at a secular university, I didn't know she was Catholic. We read her signature story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in a literature course, along with works by other celebrated authors, including Henry James, William Faulkner, and Vladamir Nabokov. A strange tale, depicting

a road trip that goes horribly wrong when the family encounters a serial killer along the back roads of Georgia, O'Connor's story is both humorous and terrifying. The main character, a garrulous old grandmother regarded as a nuisance and a busybody by her family, is slightly ridiculous. She is the kind of woman who sneaks her cat into the car (hidden in her hippopotamus-shaped suitcase) because she is afraid he'll accidentally turn on the gas stove in her absence and asphyxiate himself, the kind of woman who wears a nice dress, gloves, and a fancy hat when she travels in case she should get into an accident so that anyone who might see her lying dead on the side of the road will know that she is a lady. At the end of the story, this absurd woman comes face-to-face with her own doom in the form of a bespectacled outlaw called "The Misfit" who is tortured by his inability to believe in God. Much to her grief and disbelief, the man has led her entire family into the woods and summarily executed each member. All of this is remarkable, to say the least—not the kind of story one reads every day. But what is most remarkable is the grandmother's response to the Misfit's near-tears expression of his spiritual agony. Amid her urgings that he must have faith in the God he doubts, she extends her hand in attempt to comfort him, referring to him as "one of my own babies," whereupon he promptly shoots her three times in the chest. The last we see of the grandmother, she is lying dead in a ditch, her legs crossed beneath her and her face turned up towards the blue Georgia sky. She is smiling.

As a nineteen-year-old reader, relatively unschooled in the ways of literary criticism, I had no idea what to make of such a story. Was I supposed to feel sorry for the grandmother and her family? (Truth be told, they were foolish and annoying enough to stretch any reader's patience.) Was

I was supposed to despise the Misfit? (He was a terrible man, but he was also agonized by his unbelief.) Was I supposed to laugh at the comic touches that coexist side-by-side with the tragic reality of a serial killing? (The fact that the grandmother's son, Bailey, wears a ridiculous yellow shirt with large blue parakeets on it as he disappears into the woods—and that his killer emerges from the woods wearing that same shirt—seemed grimly funny and horrible at the same time.) Was I supposed to think the grandmother deranged in her response to the Misfit's spiritual crisis? (She was, in fact, traumatized by the day's events.) Or was this a calculated, last-ditch effort to save herself? (The old woman could be cagey, selfish, and manipulative.) Finally, how was I supposed to make sense of these apparently senseless deaths?

O'Connor's story shocked us all, back then, and as a longtime professor of literature, I can attest that it still shocks students today. (Yes, even now, despite their exposure to many more images of brutality represented in film and on television than college-age students of my generation had ever seen.) I wanted to understand what this writer was up to, but my English professor at the time didn't provide very much help. We examined the story as one of many stories we read that semester, each of which contained unaccountable ambiguities. There were no satisfying answers to the questions we posed. Instead, we were to accept the strangeness and move on.

A few years later, when I encountered O'Connor's work again as a graduate student studying literature, I learned that she was Catholic. In addition, she was a Catholic born and raised in the (then) largely anti-Catholic South. Interestingly, I happened to be enrolled in a Southern university at the time and had witnessed, firsthand, how rare Catholics

were in that part of the world. Having grown up in the Northeast in a region where the dominant religion was Catholicism, this sensation of not belonging was new to me. For the first time in my life, as a Catholic I was considered foreign and exotic. Suddenly, in my new environment, I was able to re-see Flannery O'Connor as a fellow Catholic-in-exile (though perhaps I was being a shade dramatic) and to re-see her stories, including "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," as the work of an unmistakably Catholic writer.

Viewed through the lens of O'Connor's faith, I came to understand the story in an entirely new light. In the simplest terms, what she had captured so powerfully and hauntingly in the conflict between the grandmother and the Misfit was the struggle between faith and doubt in the face of human suffering. The story was not an isolated tale of horror, but a universal moral drama, an externalized *psychomachia* representing the battle that goes on in every human soul. I recognized the grandmother's foolishness as garden variety human folly, the family's intolerance of her typical of intergenerational family dynamics, and the fate that befalls them all as the result of dumb, blind chance—events terrible, undeserved, yet somehow inevitable. This was a representation of the human condition, though expressed in the most vivid and local terms. It was also an expression of the human plight: Evil exists in the world, in this case in the form of the Misfit, and it is often performed by people who don't seem particularly evil. Far from being consummate devils, readily recognizable by horns and hoofs, they are ordinary, awkward, foolish human beings, often more like us than not. This shared capacity for good and for evil is precisely what the grandmother in the story recognizes, what causes an upwelling of compassion in her, and what compels her to reach out to the Misfit. Seen in the context of Catholic theology, I understood

the Grandmother's final actions not as a crazy woman's delusional gesture, but as a sign of her conversion and transformation, the action of grace in her soul. The last gesture in the life of this selfish woman is a self-forgetful expression of love. Yes, it gets her killed—because the world O'Connor depicts is, after all, the real world, and serial killers *are* killers. But by her actions, her life is redeemed. Her death, therefore, is not a tragedy—quite the contrary. (Hence the crossed legs and the smile.) The depiction of her at the end of the story indicates the peace of mind and heart she has found through her Christlike action. Here, too, is a reminder of both the real world and the ways in which it is a challenge to live one's faith in that world: Christ was crucified for his unaccountable gestures of love—why should his followers expect any different treatment? O'Connor, herself, confirms this understanding of the story. In a letter to her friend Elizabeth Hester she writes: "It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing. . . . All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal. . . ."[2] Clearly, O'Connor sees hope in the actions of her characters where others (mistakenly) see despair.

Keeping Company with O'Connor

My discovery of the grandmother's conversion—and, ultimately, her salvation—also marked a kind of conversion in me. Recognition of O'Connor's Catholicism, and the fact that her fiction was informed by her faith, encouraged me to explore her work more fully and to realize the degree to which her religious belief shaped her imagination. I would go on to read the rest of O'Connor's stories, her novels, her

essays and lectures, and her many letters, during my time in graduate school. The letters, in particular, enabled me to trace O'Connor's journey from literary apprentice, unsure of her talents, to mature writer in full possession of the knowledge of her work's worth. They also enabled me to bear witness to O'Connor's deepening understanding of her faith. O'Connor's theological reading was broad as it was voracious, ranging from the writings of the church fathers and those of the saints to works by contemporary theologians such as Romano Guardini and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As she struggled with the disease that would eventually kill her, O'Connor retained her intellectual acuity and her unfailing sense of humor. The subject of her own imminent mortality was never very far from her mind, but rather than making her morbid, this knowledge made her receptive to reality, to the plain fact of death, and to the urgent necessity of preparing for what lies beyond this life. She eventually came to see her illness as yet another form of grace: "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense, sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company; where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies."[3]

O'Connor's journey took her to places she did not wish to go, but the pilgrimage made her more fully human, more faithful, and more attentive to the life around her—the life that would be the substance of her stories.

Through this process of accompaniment, I gained a sense of intimacy with O'Connor. Her strange stories gradually opened up for me, though I confess I still found them puzzling and challenging. Her astonishing ability to present the world we think we know in unexpected guises continually

surprised me, kept me guessing, and goaded me into reading more deeply and attentively in the hope of discovering the truths that lie at the core of her vision. There is always something dark, elusive, and mysterious about an O'Connor story—just as there is inevitable mystery at the center of the faith she professed—and it was that element of mystery that compelled me to return to her work again and again.

Fortunately for me, I have been able to devote a good portion of my life, as both a reader and a teacher, to attending to that mystery at the center of O'Connor's fiction. In my thirty years as a professor, I have taught her stories innumerable times, and with each fresh encounter, I find something new to admire in O'Connor's vision and her craft. In a sense, we have undertaken a common pilgrimage as we navigate the many intersections of art and faith. In addition, I am able to do this in partnership with my students, most of whom are reading O'Connor's work for the first time. Keenly aware of my own initial response to her fiction in my sophomore classroom so many years ago, I know how troubling they may find it. Perhaps that's why I feel particularly privileged to serve as their guide through the complexities of her stories. As a teacher in a Catholic Studies program at a Jesuit university, I am able to ground O'Connor's fiction in the fact of her faith—something my professors at a secular university were unwilling or unable to do—to discuss her stories in light of the theology of Catholicism, and to enable my students to experience the kind of conversion I did, recognizing the ways in which grace and redemption work in the lives of even the most (seemingly) undeserving of characters, as well as (seemingly) undeserving human beings.

As is evident, my fascination with O'Connor extends beyond her fiction. A deep interest in a writer's work inevitably leads to a deep interest in his or her life, and in the case of

O'Connor, it is impossible to study her life without reckoning with the primacy of her faith. Conversely, as my own discovery described above suggests, knowledge of the life of a writer enhances a reader's understanding of his or her work. This knowledge is particularly necessary for a writer like O'Connor, who is very deliberate in presenting her readers with situations that shock readers out of their complacency and challenge ordinary ways of thinking. This book is an attempt to provide for the reader a brief account of the life of Flannery O'Connor demonstrating some of the ways in which her fiction, like a finely wrought piece of pottery, is both shaped and fired by her faith. My hope is that readers who are new to her work, or readers who have encountered her work and found it peculiar or puzzling, will arrive at a fuller understanding of the stories themselves, but also a fuller sense of Flannery O'Connor as a human being. As a conversationalist and correspondent, she was brilliant, witty, hilarious, charming, stubborn, and eccentric. As an artist, she was ambitious for her work and yet humble before her art. As a Catholic, she believed passionately in her faith—was free of pieties and yet respectful of the church—and cultivated the connection between her twin vocations as an artist and as a devout believer. Given all of this, it is small wonder that we continue to value, half a century after her death, the inestimable contribution O'Connor has made to American Catholic literature, thought, and culture. In addition to telling her story, this brief study will attempt to assess the nature and scope of that contribution. I hope it might prove an invitation to the reader to follow O'Connor beyond these pages, to (re)read her marvelous work, and to keep company with her as she explores the nuances of her faith by means of her art.

CHAPTER ONE

The Road from Savannah to Milledgeville (1925–45)

Memories of a Catholic Girlhood

> "As for biographies, there won't be any biographies of me because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy."[1]
>
> —Letter to Betty Hester, 1958

Flannery O'Connor knew a good story when she read—or wrote—one. Given this, it is ironic, perhaps, that she did not see the drama and grandeur of her own. While it's true that the details of O'Connor's life do not constitute tabloid fare—there are no scandals, no torrid love affairs, no bouts of madness, no amassing (or loss) of enormous wealth, no rise to stardom, and no subsequent fall to obscurity—it is the quiet ordinariness of her story that makes it remarkable. The outline of her life is spare, elegant, and easily traceable. Born and raised in the state of Georgia, Flannery lived there until her college graduation. Afterwards, the world opened

up for her when she went to graduate school at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she encountered influential writers who would admire and help promote her work. As a result of these connections, O'Connor would move to New York City, the center of the writing and publishing world, and take up residence in Connecticut with friends who wished to provide her with space wherein her writing would flourish. Just as O'Connor seemed poised on the brink of success—having drafted her first novel and found a publisher at age twenty-five—the diagnosis of lupus sent her back to Georgia, back to the family farm she knew as a child, which bore the exotic name "Andalusia," and back to a state of childlike dependency as she would live with her mother who cared for her in her debilitating sickness until she died. It was during her thirteen-year sojourn at Andalusia that she wrote the words in the epigraph to this chapter. From her vantage point, her life was "as ordinary as a loaf of bread," to quote the words of one of her characters, O. E. Parker of "Parker's Back," a man who is sorely in need of recovering a sense of his own wonder. This statement is surely an expression of O'Connor's humility and perhaps a manifestation of her disappointment—but it is also, characteristically, a criticism of readers' expectations when it comes to biography (or fiction, for that matter). Readers want to be amused, excited, titillated, shocked, and surprised. She saw little in her own life that would evoke those emotions, so she had to content herself with obscurity—or so she thought.

In truth, O'Connor's earthly pilgrimage was brief and poignant. In some ways, this poignancy is inevitable when a talented person dies before she is able to fulfill her promise. But in O'Connor's case, we are moved by her life—by her death—and by the particulars of her journey because through

her stories, essays, and, especially, her letters, we get to know her extraordinarily well. During the time when O'Connor was living in exile—walking from the house to the chicken yard and back—she was corresponding with friends and fellow writers, publishers, readers, and fans of her work. Reading these letters, we become eavesdroppers overhearing stories of every kind, ranging from her delight in the peafowl she raises to her pleasure at meeting a quirky couple at the doctor's office who reminds her of a pair of her own characters; from her steely disapproval of the suggestions made by an editor regarding a piece of her work to her enthusiastic admiration of her favorite writers; from profound theological insights she gains from her reading to the generous spiritual direction she provides for readers who write to her about matters of faith. We also bear witness to O'Connor's courage, gratitude, and irrepressible grace in the face of the disease that is gradually ravaging her body. By the time death arrives, the reader feels very much as if he or she has lost a friend and fellow-traveling companion along the pilgrimage of life. Contrary to O'Connor's assessment, hers is a story well worth reading and worth telling. As with any good story, it's best to begin at the beginning.

Arrival & Early Stirrings

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925, to Edward and Regina Cline O'Connor at St. Joseph's Hospital in the city of Savannah, Georgia. In choosing her first name, her devoutly-Catholic parents acknowledged the auspicious day of their daughter's birth, the Feast of the Annunciation. In choosing her middle name, they harkened back to the Cline family's august Southern past, preserving the memory of Civil War Captain John Flannery, who later

became a wealthy banker and cotton broker, and his wife, Mary Ellen Flannery. Thus, from the beginning, O'Connor's dual identity as Catholic and Southerner was established. (O'Connor would later drop the name *Mary*, when she began writing in earnest, judging the name *Mary O'Connor* an insufficiently interesting or memorable pen name.)

O'Connor's family was thoroughly Irish Catholic on both sides, though their backgrounds and history were markedly different. Her maternal great-grandfather, Hugh Donnelly Treanor, had immigrated to America from County Tipperary in 1824 and settled in Milledgeville in central Georgia where he made his name and his fortune operating a water-powered gristmill on the Oconee River. O'Connor reports in one of her letters that the first Mass in Milledgeville was said in his hotel room, and future Masses would take place in his home where the priest would use the piano as an altar.[2] Regina Lucille Cline was born into a family that was large (she was one of sixteen children), prosperous (they lived in an antebellum mansion), and influential (her father was elected town mayor in 1889). In contrast, Flannery's father came from a more humble background. His grandfather, Patrick O'Connor, immigrated to Savannah in 1851 where he established a livery stable, and his father worked as a wholesale distributor. Though his father was successful enough as a businessman, Edward O'Connor was not a child of wealth or privilege. When he and Regina met at a family wedding, he was twenty-six-years old, living with his parents, and working as a salesman in his father's business. Regina, too, was twenty-six, and recently recovered from a love affair gone wrong. O'Connor was strikingly handsome, charming, and a decorated soldier, having been awarded a World War I Victory Medal. Within three months of their meeting, they were engaged and married soon afterwards

at the Sacred Heart Church in Milledgeville. The couple then established themselves in the fashionable Irish Catholic enclave of Lafayette Square (with the financial assistance of Regina's relatives) in Savannah. The tensions inherent in such a "mixed" marriage would manifest themselves from time to time, but O'Connor's parents were affectionate towards one another and were equally smitten with their only child, though as she grew they would show their love in different ways—her father in undisguised and unconditional delight at his daughter's talents, and her mother in her devotion to the task of raising her daughter to be a proper Southern lady.

In "Memories of a Catholic Boyhood," the preface to his book about Catholicism in America, writer Garry Wills describes life for Catholic children during the pre-Vatican II era: "We grew up different." In his essay, Wills captures the experience of the Catholic raised in a largely Protestant culture—for Catholics, being different was a point of pride. In the Savannah of O'Connor's childhood, Irish Catholics were a considerable presence. Many Irish had arrived during the potato famines of the 1840s, many had demonstrated their loyalty to their home state and region by fighting in the Civil War (as did Captain Flannery), and some had gone on to hold leadership positions in local government. However, Catholics were still regarded with suspicion and treated with prejudice. Anti-Catholic laws were still on the books, and though Catholics did not have to endure the Jim Crow laws that strictly divided the city by race, there was an invisible, *de facto* line of separation that kept the Irish Catholics segregated. Lafayette Square, the "better" section of the Catholic ghetto where the O'Connors lived, was situated at the center of the Catholic life in Savannah. Within sight of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (and in audible range

of the *Angelus* bells), forty yards from the Catholic grammar school she would attend, surrounded by like-minded observant Catholic neighbors, Flannery grew up "different," indeed, from the non-Catholic children of the city. Their daily lives governed by the liturgical calendar, Saints' Days and Feasts, First Communions, and May Crownings—their spiritual lives governed by Catholic school, Mass attendance, and reception of the sacraments—the O'Connors occupied a "meticulously organized world within a world," in the words of biographer Brad Gooch.[3] Savannah Irish Catholics were secure in their role and, in fact, celebrated their religious and ethnic identity each year with a St. Patrick's Day parade that rivaled the annual Confederate Day parade in size and scope. Young Flannery was a part of this rich subculture. As Garry Wills acknowledges regarding the world of his own Catholic boyhood, "It was a ghetto, undeniably. But not a bad ghetto to grow up in."[4]

Mary Flannery, however, was not comfortable with the conformity demanded of children in the world of Catholic school. As the only child of attentive parents—including a particularly doting father—both of whom she addressed by their first names, she was accustomed to spending time in the presence of adults and did not care for the company of children. Edward and Regina enjoyed the stories their daughter told and wrote along with the charming drawings she presented them with. They also encouraged her in her childhood obsession with birds, allowing her to raise them as pets.

One of the imprinting experiences of Mary Flannery's childhood occurred when she was five years old. Pathè News somehow learned of a Georgia child who had achieved the remarkable feat of teaching her pet chicken to walk backwards. The Pathè newsman showed up at the O'Connor

home and filmed Flannery and her trick chicken for several hours in the back yard. The fact that they were never able to capture the feat on film—the editor settled for running four seconds of footage film backwards—did nothing to dampen Mary Flannery's enthusiasm for her new-found fame. In O'Connor's words, the event "marked me for life."[5] From that day forward, she began to collect chickens. She had a particular fondness for birds with freakish characteristics, those with mismatched eyes and disproportionate limbs, and searched in vain for those with extra legs and wings. This early focus on so-called "freaks" is portentous. In the stories she would write as an adult, O'Connor would frequently write about people who were "different," who did not fit in, often on account of some sort of physical deformity or limitation. Her fiction presents the reader with a parade of afflicted characters, including one-armed men, one-legged women, club-footed children, women scarred by acne, mentally challenged children, insane adults, and intersex people—all of whose difference place them outside of the norm (for better or for worse). Flannery, in fact, regarded herself as a kind of "freak," a person who did not comfortably fit into any conventional culture she was expected to belong to—and among those cultures she chafed against was that of the institutional church. (This would remain true for all of O'Connor's life, yet her attitude towards the church as a flawed and human institution was generous—she loved it but could not pretend it was perfect.)

It is easy to see why Catholic school might be a trial for an unconventional child. She found the nuns who taught her at St. Vincent's Grammar School for girls to be rigid and unimaginative in their teaching. They faulted her for imperfect spelling and for dwelling on her seeming obsession with ducks and chickens when writing her school themes. Many

of the Mercy nuns who taught her were, according to O'Connor, young and exceedingly innocent, just off the boat from Ireland and products of an even more intensely hot-house Catholic culture than the one she knew in Savannah. She took their teachings with more than a grain of salt. One particular story O'Connor relates in her letters in later life illustrates one form her rebellion took: "From 8 to 12 years it was my habit to seclude myself in a locked room every so often and with a fierce (and evil) face, whirl around in a circle with my fists knotted, socking the . . . guardian angel with which the Sisters assured us we were all equipped . . . You couldn't hurt an angel but I would have been happy to know I had dirtied his feathers—I conceived him in feathers."[6]

O'Connor presents the story in comic fashion, but the conflict she felt was serious. Here was a child prepared to do battle with supposed angels who were clearly representations of her own incipient doubts about the teachings being offered her. Even as a child, the theology O'Connor required was far beyond what the relatively unschooled, good sisters could offer.

When Mary Flannery entered the sixth grade, Mrs. O'Connor enrolled her daughter in Sacred Heart School staffed by the sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, a more formally educated order of nuns who had, in fact, taught Regina in high school. Moving one's child to a school outside the parish was unusual, and the gesture was regarded as an attempt on Regina's part to distance her child from the mixed population of shanty and lace-curtain Irish at St. Vincent's and integrate her into the more genteel world of Sacred Heart. Whatever her mother's reasons, Mary Flannery was set apart, yet again, from the neighborhood children. She did seem less troubled in her new school (though she never properly fit in), and the exceedingly bright child

of the O'Connors maintained her reputation as a poor speller and an unexceptional, slothful student. (Interestingly, Flannery would remain a self-described "very innocent speller" all her life.)[7]

Exorcising the Self through Fiction

Later in life, O'Connor would write stories that feature children, some of whom share her peculiarities and precociousness. Though they are not strictly autobiographical, some of these characters are surely versions of Mary Flannery's own childhood self. This is certainly true of the unnamed child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," an irreverent young girl with a distaste for nuns but a deep-seated spiritual hunger. When her two fourteen-year-old cousins come to visit for the weekend, the twelve-year-old protagonist (an only child) watches them with suspicion. Students at the local convent school, Mount St. Scholastica, they arrive in their brown uniforms calling one another Temple One and Temple Two, a joking reference to advice Sr. Perpetua, an elderly Sister of Mercy, had given her young charges. When importunate boys attempt to make sexual advances, good Catholic girls ought to respond, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" The girls, who "were practically morons," in the protagonist's estimation, laugh hysterically at this, but the child does not find it funny at all: "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present."[8] Clearly, the child is oriented toward goodness, hungry for words that convey a vision of the holiness of ordinary, everyday people—yet she is also perverse. Though steeped in religion (she says her prayers and recognizes the *Tantum Ergo* when the girls sing it, jokingly, to scandalize

some local Church-of-God boys), she recognizes her sinful nature and her seeming inability to curb it: "She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody. She was eaten up also with the sin of Pride, the worst one." Like many Catholic children, she longs to be a saint, but pondering this one night before falling asleep, she feels her unworthiness: "She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick." She then imagines herself being shot, boiled in oil, torn to pieces by lions, and set on fire in cages, trying to decide which fate she could stand. It is difficult for her to know how much she'd be willing to endure for her faith.[9]

The humor in this portrayal is evident—O'Connor knows this child from the inside. Smarter than most people around her, and impatient with the limitations of both her contemporaries and authority figures, Mary Flannery, too, suffered from the sin of pride and was wise enough to know it. (In fact, O'Connor creates a number of characters, adults as well as children, who are afflicted with intellectual pride. She is masterful at getting inside their heads.) As the story continues, we also learn that the child also shares O'Connor's fascination with freaks. When her cousins return from the local fair, she asks them to tell her about what they saw—in fact, she lies to them in order to get them to tell a particularly shocking story of an intersex person who was put on display: "it was a man and woman both. It pulled up its dress and showed us." The young girl wonders at this, but she wonders even more at the message the so-called freak delivers to the spellbound audience: "'God made me thisaway . . . This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way.'"[10] In an intuitive theological leap, the child comes face-to-face with the mystery of the incarnation,

the most visible sign of God's unconditional love for his creatures, even in our radical imperfection. She recognizes in the intersex person's public testament of faith an echo of the idea of being a Temple of the Holy Ghost and falls asleep dreaming of the supposed freak as a preacher instructing people in the ways of God.

The story depicts the child's conversion, a new orientation towards holiness, precipitated by this virtual encounter. In the final movement of the story, she accompanies her cousins, along with her mother, when they return to the convent. Kneeling down in the chapel with the students and the nuns, bowing before the monstrance containing the host, hearing the *Tantum Ergo* being sung, "her ugly thoughts stopped and she began to realize that she was in the presence of God. Hep me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do."[11] The child recognizes the Real Presence of Christ—in the Eucharist, in the community, and in herself—and responds with a humility and gratitude we have not seen before. She is also granted a new vision: as they drive away from the convent towards home, she sees the sun, "a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood, and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees."[12] Playing on the trope of the sun as Son, O'Connor depicts the child's new understanding of the seemingly ordinary world as visionary, as "charged with the grandeur of God" (in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of O'Connor's favorite poets), as immanent with divine presence. Thus, the silly cousins, the hapless nuns, and the supposed freak's words all lead the child to her salvation. No one and no thing is beyond redemption. As in all of O'Connor's stories, God works through the corporeal world offering glimpses of the holiness inherent within.

The Way of Sorrow

The great sorrow of Mary Flannery's young life was the death of her father from lupus on February 1, 1941, when she was just shy of sixteen. She made no secret of the fact that he was her favorite parent, and Edward O'Connor did not hide his unconditional love for his daughter. (Regina's love, on the other hand, was deep and sincere, but also tempered with the desire for her child to perform well academically and socially.) What's more, Mary Flannery shared her father's temperament—dreamy (as opposed to practical), artistic (they both loved to draw and to tell stories), and playful (they would create alternate identities for themselves, he "King of Siam" and she "Lord Flannery O'Connor").[13] Later in life, O'Connor would acknowledge, "My father wanted to write but had not the time or money or training or any of the opportunities I have had." In further recognition of their similarities, she notes, "I am never likely to romanticize him because I carry around most of his faults as well as his tastes."[14] Both mother and daughter loved him deeply and were stricken by this loss. In a journal she kept as a young girl, O'Connor wrote these words: "The reality of death has come upon us and a consciousness of the power of God has broken our complacency like a bullet in the side. A sense of the dramatic, of the tragic of the infinite, has descended upon us, filling us with grief, but even above grief, wonder. Our plans were so beautifully laid out, ready to be carried to action, but with magnificent certainty God laid them aside and said, 'You have forgotten—mine?' "[15]

A sense of the fragility of life and the vanity of human wishes becomes a reality for O'Connor, and the young girl's bright future is suddenly shadowed by the inevitability of mortality. This reckoning with reality would inform her

personality for the remainder of her days and would become a key aspect of her vision as a writer. For the immediate moment, she realized the direction of their lives would change.

That change, however, had been prepared for in some ways. Beginning in 1932, as the Depression worsened, her father began to experience a series of financial setbacks. When it became increasingly difficult to make a living in the real estate trade as an independent man of business, he sought other opportunities. In 1938, Edward O'Connor was offered a position as senior real estate appraiser for the Federal Housing Administration; however, this good news was accompanied by the unwelcome condition that the family move from the protective environment of their Catholic neighborhood in Savannah to the city of Atlanta. Mary Flannery left Sacred Heart School in March of her seventh-grade year and was enrolled in the parochial school of St. Joseph's Church in Atlanta.

Predictably, perhaps, adjustment to life in the new city proved difficult for mother and daughter, and by the beginning of the fall school term, O'Connor and her mother moved once again, this time to Milledgeville, Regina's hometown, taking up residence in the Cline family mansion. Milledgeville was familiar to Mary Flannery, as she had made many visits there during her childhood to see relatives, but it also presented new challenges and opportunities. Like most small towns in Georgia, it was largely Protestant and had no Catholic schools. O'Connor was enrolled in the Peabody Normal School, an experimental lab school run by the Education Department of the Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College). For the first time, Mary Flannery found herself outside the bounded world of Catholic school and cultivating friendships with Protestant children. As part of the large Cline clan, there were plenty of family members

in her life (all of them adults) and she was still very much a part of a Catholic "ghetto." But she also developed a new sense of herself as being different from her peers on account of her Catholicism—a difference she would gradually own as the meaning and value of her tradition became more evident to her in her new environment.

While Regina and Mary Flannery were living in Milledgeville, Edward O'Connor continued to live and work in Atlanta, coming home on weekends to visit his family. For years he had been suffering from illness, characterized by exhaustion and pain in his joints. Initially misidentified as arthritis, his physicians treated him and he carried on with his work as best he could. Eventually, however, he would be diagnosed with lupus—a disease that mimics arthritis as it attacks the joints, but it causes much greater devastation as the body's immune system attacks its own organs and tissues as well. The O'Connors did not share this diagnosis with their daughter, trying to protect her from the inevitable fear and worry associated with such dire news, but Mary Flannery could not help but notice her father's gradual decline. Even so, when death arrived just one month after his forty-fifth birthday, the family was surprised and stricken. The O'Connors' only consolation was that he was no longer suffering the effects of the dreadful disease that had slowly taken his life. Fortunately, they had no way of knowing that eventually Flannery—who favored her father in so many ways—would suffer the same disease, and that she, too, would die prematurely.

The Road to Recovery

Milledgeville may have been a small town compared with the more cosmopolitan port city of her birth, but, happily,

it proved to be a place where Mary Flannery could thrive. A sleepy community of barely six thousand people located at the center of the state, the town had the feel of the Deep South, complete with the provincialism and local color associated with that world.[16] Later on in her life, when O'Connor returned to Milledgeville after her northern sojourn in New York, she would make jokes at the town's expense: "We have a girls' college here," she once wrote to a friend, "but the lacy atmosphere is fortunately destroyed by a reformatory, an insane asylum, and a military school."[17] Once renowned as the largest insane asylum in the world, the Central State Hospital put Milledgeville on the map for Southerners: the expression, "going to Milledgeville," had become code for a person who has lost one's sanity.[18] It was precisely this blend of the genteel and the grotesque that appealed to O'Connor's sensibility. In reality, the countryside surrounding the town was full of grotesques—fake preachers and faith healers, phony Bible salesmen, busybody farmers' wives, Ku Klux clansmen, drifters, and serial killers. These, in fact, are the "freaks and folks" (to borrow a phrase from O'Connor) who would eventually populate her fiction.[19] Thus, Milledgeville was destined to become something more than just a physical home for O'Connor—it would serve as inspiration, ground her imagination, and provide a suitable theater within which her characters could play out the drama of their salvation.

For the time being, though, Milledgeville provided young Mary Flannery with stability, comfortable routine, and an educational system she could rebel against (as was her wont) even as she benefited from it. The Peabody High School O'Connor attended was the antithesis of the rigid Catholic school curriculum she was familiar with. The school offered no classes but featured "activities" in which the course of

study seems to have been entirely determined by teachers' whims and students' interests. Instead of studying the periodic table in chemistry, the teacher would ask the students what they wished to learn about and then turn their attention to cosmetics or photography; instead of learning to diagram sentences in English class, they would engage in exercises in literature appreciation; instead of learning about the past in history class, they would report on the headlines in the local paper.[20] None of this took up much of O'Connor's time or attention. Years later she would joke about this exercise in experimental teaching: "I went to a progressive high school where one did not read if one did not wish to. I did not wish to . . ." [21] This is an overstatement, of course—Mary Flannery did read quite a lot. Her particular fascination was the ten-volume commemorative edition of Edgar Allen Poe's work she found on the bookshelf at home. She confesses in the same letter her favorite volume was the *Humorous Tales,* which included absurd stories that appealed to her own offbeat sense of humor. O'Connor recalls, "These were mighty humerous [*sic*]—one about a young man who was too vain to wear his glasses and consequently married his grandmother by accident . . . another about the inmates of a lunatic asylum who take over the establishment and run it to suit themselves."[22] O'Connor shared Poe's penchant for the absurd, and his stories would prove a formative influence on her own vision and voice when she turned her attention to writing.

O'Connor's neglect of her schoolwork also enabled her to dedicate herself to another project she cared deeply about, her role as art editor of the school newspaper, *Peabody Palladium*. In addition to her childhood talents for raising chickens and teaching them to do tricks, Mary Flannery had a gift for comic drawings. Typically, her cartoons were gently

satiric commentaries on the culture of high school, allowing her the freedom to be social critic of an institution she also felt at least some small measure of belonging to. (Once again, as in her earlier criticism of nuns and Catholic school, we see O'Connor's seemingly innate distaste for institutions.) Among the most humorous drawings is the one that appeared in the *Palladium* on the day of her graduation, titled "At Long Last . . ." The illustration depicts a girl in a cap and gown rushing with arms extended toward a door marked "EXIT" in large block letters.[23] When Mary Flannery left high school, she was ready.

Preparing for Flight

It may seem surprising that O'Connor chose to remain in Milledgeville and attend Georgia State College for Women (GSCW), but in that time and place (1942 in the rural South), staying close to home was the norm. Nearly all of the girls who graduated from her high school and planned to attend college chose the same route. In addition, Mary Flannery, for all of her mental exuberance and spirit of rebellion, was shy and did not make new friends easily. Finally, she and Regina were still grieving over her father's death the previous year, albeit quietly. Leaving her mother behind to start a new life in a new place did not appeal to her at age seventeen, so instead of moving away, she moved over from the local high school to the local college in the summer just after graduation.

College would supply Mary Flannery some of the intellectual stimulation that high school lacked. She took courses from teachers who recognized and praised her talent as a thinker and a writer—something her previous teachers were reluctant to do, given the seeming oddness of O'Connor's

imagination and her unwillingness to conform to boundaries and rules. She formed a number of close friendships with other artistically oriented young women. And in joining the Newman Club, she found a small community of Catholic students (ten altogether, the total number of Roman Catholic students at the college) that met weekly in the Sacred Heart Rectory and attended monthly First Friday Masses together.[24]

O'Connor's college years were heady as well as lively. In December of 1942, the students bore witness to Pearl Harbor, and in January of 1943, the faraway war being waged in Europe came close to home when large groups of WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) arrived in their dorms and classrooms. She also made the acquaintance of a young soldier, Marine Sergeant John Sullivan, stationed at the college naval base. A fellow Irish Catholic, Sullivan became a close friend and visited O'Connor at the Cline family home. She would correspond with him after he was demobilized, but their letters would gradually peter out after Sullivan confided to her his intentions to leave the marines and enter the seminary to study for the priesthood. This is the first of the few romantic relationships O'Connor entered into during her lifetime. Though she was surely disappointed that none of them ended happily, unlike many young women of her place and time, getting married did not rank first on the list of things she hoped to accomplish.

The subject of international politics, as well as local campus events, proved equally welcome fodder for O'Connor's lively imagination, and these show up in her extracurricular work. In her three years at GSCW, O'Connor submitted stories and poems to the college literary magazine, *The Corinthian,* and served as art editor of the college yearbook, *The Spectrum,* to which she contributed linoleum-block cartoons satirizing undergraduate life and the waves of

formidable WAVES who dominated the campus scene. She also sent some of her cartoons to *The New Yorker* in the hopes of receiving wider recognition for her work and earning extra income; however, none were accepted. Notably, it is during this period that she begins to sign her academic and creative work as Flannery O'Connor (though family and friends continued to address her as Mary Flannery). The name change, along with the quality of the work O'Connor is producing, suggests a young woman who, if not reinventing herself, was finally coming into her own.

All of this impressed faculty member Dr. George Beiswanger, O'Connor's philosophy professor—so much so that he encouraged Flannery to apply to his alma mater, the University of Iowa. O'Connor leaped at the opportunity, applying to the journalism program in hopes of preparing for a career in newspaper political cartooning. Upon acceptance of her application, she was awarded a journalism scholarship, including full tuition and a stipend of sixty-five dollars per term.

In September of 1945, O'Connor would finally leave Milledgeville, her seven-year sojourn there having come to an end. In his book, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage,* a joint biography of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor, Paul Elie identifies this period of O'Connor's life in Milledgeville as crucial. With the death of her father, a man she admired deeply and emulated in any number of ways, O'Connor gradually learned to channel the spirit they shared and assumed the role that he had played—that of the fierce independent. "Independence," Elie argues, "will be the main theme of O'Connor's pilgrimage, in her life and in her fiction."[25] Her creative work gave her confidence in her ability to make her mark in the big world beyond the small town's borders—as well as beyond her region—while her faith

equipped her with the necessary courage. As she left for Iowa City to begin her new life, it is likely she believed she was leaving home for good. Little did she know, in just five years' time, she would be returning, and in circumstances no one would have the hardness of heart to intuit or the darkness of mind to imagine.