

FLANNERY

A Life of Flannery O'Connor

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For Paul Raushenbush

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As for biographies, there won't be any biographies
of me for only one reason, lives spent between the
house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy.

--Flannery O'Connor

PROLOGUE: WALKING BACKWARDS

When Flannery O'Connor was five years old, the Pathe newsreel company dispatched a cameraman from their main offices in New York City to the backyard of the O'Connor family home in Savannah, Georgia. The event, as O'Connor wryly confessed in an essay in *Holiday* magazine in September 1961, almost exactly three decades later, "marked me for life." Yet the purpose of the visit from "the New Yorker," as she labeled him, wasn't entirely to film her, outfitted in her best double-breasted dark coat and light-wool knit beret, but rather to record her buff Cochin Bantam, the chicken she reputedly taught to walk backwards.

How a Yankee photographer wound up for a memorable half-day at the bottom of the O'Connors' steep back stairs isn't entirely clear. One rumor credits the connections of Katie Semmes, a well-to-do dowager cousin who lived in the grander house next door, and whose tall windows looked down on the yard where the filming took place.

According to a girlhood playmate of O'Connor's, "Miss Katie brought them down here to do it." O'Connor simply credits an item on her celebrity chicken in the local papers: "Her fame had spread through the press and by the time she reached the attention of Pathé News, I suppose there was nowhere left for her to go--forward or backward. Shortly after that she died, as now seems fitting."

The shoot did not go smoothly. O'Connor was certainly prepared. Whenever the cumbersome camera on its tripod began to grind, she adopted a fierce, dignified expression--the one she used if she felt she was being watched. The problem was her uncooperative tan "frizzled" chicken, with its backward-growing feathers, spending hours scratching obliviously in the yard while the cameraman fidgeted. Finally, as the afternoon

wore on, the bird began to back up. O'Connor, a natural mimic, jumped next to her and began to walk backward as well. The operator stuck his head under his tent. A few seconds later, the hen hit a bush and abruptly sat down. Exasperated, "the Pathé man" gathered his equipment and made a quick exit, refusing even to enjoy a dish of ice cream.

O'Connor's screen debut exists in all its fragility in a Pathe film archive. The brief stretch of scratchy footage opens with a title card announcing in italic script: "Odd fowl walks backward to go forward so she can look back to see where she went." For all of four seconds, O'Connor, a self-possessed little girl, is glimpsed, in glaring afternoon light, a wisp of curls peeking from beneath her cap, calmly coping with three chickens fluttering in her face. In close-up, the biggest of her Bantams then jerks backwards a half-dozen times on a short stretch of pavement, supporting the skeptical theory of one relative that it was merely suffering from a cognitive skip. Some obvious gimmickry makes up for the brief stunt--with the help of reverse-feed technique, the chicken as well as lines of barnyard cows, mares, and ducks comically parade backwards. The End.

O'Connor never had the pleasure of seeing the tandem performance on screen. The short never came to a Savannah movie theatre, though "Unique Chicken Goes in Reverse," was released as a 1:27 minute vignette, in March 1932, a week shy of her seventh birthday. Its cute subject matter was the sort that appealed to Depression-era audiences in other light-hearted spoofs that played on seven-to-eight minute reels, along with current events and sports news, before the main feature. Among other whimsical topics treated by Pathe that year in their animal "gag reels"--Florida sportsmen feeding crackers to turtles; Boston kids showing off their pet tabby cats; a girl at the Westminster Kennel Club Exhibition in New York City producing a tiny dog out of her satchel.

While O'Connor's star turn is brief, its after-image flickered in her mind long afterwards. Not a woman, or author, overly given to delving into childhood memories to unlock her identity, something about that afternoon's performance stayed with her for years. Certainly the obdurate refusal of her bird to be easily seduced by the ambassador from klieg-lit culture kept her giggling. But so did its pratfall, and, by association, hers. O'Connor loved to make fun of her own diminutive stature in popular culture. When a friend accused her of "celebrity" after the publication of her first book of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, she gleefully wrote back that her fame was "a comic distinction shared with Roy Rogers's horse and Miss Watermelon of 1955."

She also enjoyed the attention. O'Connor dates her lifelong passion for raising exotic birds to the rush she at least pretended to have received from the noisy movie camera. "From that day with the Pathé man I began to collect chickens," she writes in "The King of the Birds," her title for her *Holiday* magazine article. As a Catholic schoolgirl trying to recreate her winning formula, she began to collect other birds with freakish traits: one green eye and one orange, an overly long neck, an askew comb. She searched in vain for a one-of-a-kind with three legs or three wings, and pondered a picture in Robert Ripley's *Believe It or Not* of a rooster that survived thirty days without its head. "Apparently Pathe News never heard of any of these other chickens of mine;" O'Connor writes, with a stage sigh, "it never sent another photographer."

Yet the memory did not stop there. In the fall of 1948, O'Connor was a guest at the Yaddo artists' colony in upstate New York. Now a young woman of twenty-three, a budding writer, she had settled on fiction as her vocation after several years preparing for a career as a cartoonist by designing linoleum-cut cartoons for her women's college in

Milledgeville, Georgia. Her artistic signature: the initials of her name arranged to resemble a bird with beak, though she eventually dropped the “M” for Mary, simply becoming “Flannery.” From the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she went for an M.F.A., her professors helped her win a residency in the prestigious colony for a few months. Another guest that fall was Robert Lowell, a thirty-one-year-old poet who had won a Pulitzer Prize the year before for his first book, *Lord Weary’s Castle*.

Lowell needed no introduction, because she already knew his work. The two quickly developed a friendship based on mutual admiration; he would remain one of the rare souls for whom she felt a lifelong affection. But in her first walk-on appearance in his consciousness, in a letter Lowell writes to the poet Elizabeth Bishop on October 1, 1948, cataloging the crew he’d met at dinner, O’Connor can be caught using the backwards chicken as her comic calling card: “Now there are an introverted and an extroverted colored man; a boy of 23 who experiments with dope; a student of a former Kenyon class-mate of mine, who at the age of six was in a Pathe News Reel for having a chicken that walked backwards; and Malcolm Cowley, nice but a little slow.”

That fall and winter at Yaddo O’Connor was mostly holed up from breakfast until dinner in her tiny room in West House, a smaller version of the unheated main Mansion, closed to guests at the end of summer. There she worked on drafts of her first novel, *Wise Blood*. Lowell read and commented on the work-in-progress, begun in Iowa City two years earlier. The challenge of the novel was its main character, Haze Motes. Once she hit on his tone and stature, the novel began to cohere. In earlier drafts, he was a homesick Southern boy. By the time she finished, he was a more extreme character, a high-contrast and highly contrary prophet. The phrase O’Connor used to nail his character is put in his

landlady's head in the novel's last few pages: "She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh."

It's tempting to read Haze Motes as O'Connor's backwards-walking hen--baptized in fire. "Backwards" is surely the word for him. "Time goes forward, it don't go backward," his landlady warns him. He's the template for a number of memorable O'Connor creations who decide to operate their souls in reverse--The Misfit, snarling about a world thrown off-balance, or O.E. Parker, who gets God tattooed on his back. Maybe this first instinct to draw a line connecting Motes back to her stubborn Cochin Bantam that fittingly died struck O'Connor as right. This time around the performance would be humorous, entertaining, weird, but religious as well. Maybe she snickered as she realized what she'd done; or, maybe not. Perhaps their kinship was accidental rather than planned.

Where O'Connor literally went with the backwards-walking chicken is spelled out in "The King of the Birds," first published under the title, "Living With a Peacock": "My quest, whatever it was actually for, ended with peacocks." As a woman living with her mother on a farm in central Georgia for the rest of her adult writing life, after being diagnosed with lupus when she was twenty-six, O'Connor reverted to her childhood passion for collecting unusual birds--a one-eyed swan, a tribe of mallard ducks, three Japanese Silkie Bantams, two Polish Crested Bantams, a pen of pheasants, and a pen of quail. Yet the high-profile birds she first ordered from an ad in the *Market Bulletin*, at \$65 a pair, were peacocks, or as she usually called them, "peafowl."

These fantastic creatures, with maps of the solar system for tails, are the birds most often associated with O'Connor. After she became a well-known author, many

photographers visited, or wished to visit, her farm, Andalusia. As much as she cast her younger self as pixilated by the attention of the Pathe cameraman, as a woman she dreaded his kind. When she did allow *Time* magazine or one of the Atlanta papers to send a photographer, the results invariably featured her exotic birds. She wanted them to upstage her. In the most famous of these photographs, taken by Joe McTyre for the *Atlanta Journal* in 1962 and later used on the back cover of the collection of her letters, *Habit of Being*, O'Connor is posed on aluminum crutches before a screen door, seemingly in dialogue with a peacock preening on the brick steps beside her.

O'Connor loved to play with patterns in her stories. The jalopy Tom T. Shiftlet drives in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" looks a lot like that of Haze Motes, last seen pushed over a cliff in *Wise Blood*. The big black valise the Bible salesman lugs in "Good Country People" might be the same the three little arsonists arrive carrying in "A Circle in the Fire." Most poignantly, "Judgment Day," a story O'Connor was working on during the last weeks of her life, was a retelling of her first published story, "The Geranium," remarkably closing her fictional circle. The separation between her life and her art was porous: a peacock comes walking off Andalusia onto the farm of "The Displaced Person." In "The King of the Birds," she reveals an eye for such patterns in her life as well. The emphasis is hers when she notes a line of pedigree from the unique chicken of her childhood to its artistic descendant, her unfurled peacock that will "dance forward *and backward* with it spread."

The girl with the expression she recalled as exhibiting "dignified ferocity," recorded in the archival footage in "Unique Chicken Goes in Reverse," is instantly recognizable to us. Her features are clearly those discerned in anecdotes about her

childhood in Savannah--contrary, a prankster, determined, funny, creative, and focused. And just as her Cochin Bantam morphed into a peacock--a bird observed by the old priest in "The Displaced Person," "taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail"--so this clever child performer grew into the one-of-a-kind woman writer, "going backwards to Bethlehem," who freighted her acidly comic tales with moral and religious messages, running counter to so much trendy literary culture.