Cheers!

From the President’s Desk

Dear O’Connor Society Membership: I greet you in the midst of a stellar year in O’Connor Studies. As many of you no doubt already know, Bruce Gentry and Bob Donahoo applied successfully to the National Endowment for the Humanities, asking them to underwrite a Summer Institute titled, like the acclaimed 2007 NEH Summer Institute that Gentry co-directed with John Cox, “Reconsidering Flannery O’Connor.” Their bid was accepted, and the institute was held this past July. It was a smashing success for both participants and faculty. Let me share some of the highlights with you here.


The intensity of excellence in O’Connor scholarship evidenced by this stellar roster of faculty aligns impressively with the participants chosen for this think-tank. For example, distinguished O’Connor monographer, Carol Schloss, whose Flannery O’Connor’s Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference (1980) proved to be in such demand that it was brought back into print by LSU in 2011, is a member of the group of twenty-five impressive scholars who worked—that is, studied and learned and visited together—during the month-long institute. Three of the group are distinguished doctoral and post-doctoral researchers who have just completed dissertations and publications on O’Connor. These newly minted PhD’s are sure to make seriously ground-breaking contributions to O’Connor scholarship, as are the twenty-three who are already more established in the academy.

The month included field trips to Savannah to O’Connor’s childhood home and to Atlanta to examine the O’Connor and Elizabeth “A” Hester holdings at Emory University’s MARBL. William Sessions, O’Connor’s authorized biographer and the editor of her recently published Prayer Journal, guided the group in their exploration of the holdings since he also serves as literary executor of the Hester estate. In addition to Sessions’ lecture at Emory, the Institute hosted four other speakers. Sarah Gordon, author of Flannery O’Connor: The Obdient Imagination (2000) and editor of the Flannery O’Connor Bulletin / Review from its inception in 1972 until Bruce Gentry began his tenure in 2003, talked about the resources that Milledgeville offers those engaged in O’Connor studies. Robert Wilson, who serves Georgia College as its University Historian, spoke on the school’s history, with special emphasis on its circumstances in the early 1940s, when O’Connor was a student there. Wilson is a celebrated tour leader who has guided multitudes of national and international visitors through the plethora of riches in Milledgeville and Baldwin County.
Nagueyalti Warren, author of Temba Tupu (Walking Naked): Africana Women’s Poetic Self-Portrait (2008), lectured on O’Connor and race. Finally, I, Avis, had the lucky chance, based on my dubious credentials as a bibliothèque bon vivante, to speak on archival work and the O’Connor collection at Georgia College.

To serve in part as a venue for initial stages of the good work that came out of this event, Bruce Gentry has already announced a 2015 conference at Georgia College, 17-19 September: “Flannery O’Connor and Other Southern Women Writers.” Among the creative writing presenters for this celebration will be Sarah Gordon, Sandra Meek, Laura Newbern, Maia Arnold, and Alice Friman. Registration costs $150, with discounts for early registrants and for graduate students. Proposals for twenty-minute academic papers or twenty-minute creative presentations are due to bruce.gentry@gcsu.edu by 31 March 2015.

As we gear up to submit proposals to Bruce, we must keep in mind that Bob Donahoo and John Sykes are organizing two O’Connor sessions for the 26-28 February 2015 American Literature Association Symposium on Fiction to be held in San Antonio, Texas. Sykes is in charge of the invited panel. Donahoo has posted this CFP on our web site: “There will be one open O’Connor panel with the general topic: O’Connor’s Burned Virtues. At the end of ‘Revelation,’ Ruby Turpin describes the faces of those she sees as having ‘even their virtues were burned away.’” This idea of “burned virtues” will be explored in this panel that seeks papers discussing such topics as the nature of virtue in O’Connor’s fiction; the value of virtue in her fiction; the depiction of virtue in her fiction; and the connections between virtue and artistic technique in her fiction.

We will have word in our next issue of Cheers! regarding the panels for the 2015 American Literature Association, which will be held in Boston in late May. Meanwhile, if you are organizing a panel for one of the regional MLA conferences, please be in touch to let us know your panelists and topics or provide your CFP. That issue will also feature coverage of the recently held “Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Place” international conference at All Hallows College in Dublin, Ireland, which was organized by Mark Bosco, S.J., Hank Edmondson, Susan Srigley, Farrel O’Gorman, Guadalupe Arbona Abascal, Rosemary Magee, and Victoria Kennefick.

Avis Hewitt Reviews “Between the House and the Chicken Yard”: The Masks of Flannery O’Connor

Categorizing this monograph requires considering that the author seeks both to interpret the work by means of the life and to interpret the life by means of the work. Not every reader or critic sees both of these as equally legitimate or useful. For example, Margaret Whitt notes in the 2013 Flannery O’Connor Review that “Sharp reduces the O’Connor oeuvre to a trajectory to identify more substantively the author herself. It is important to remember that O’Connor’s work is so very much more than its writer” (137). Bruce Gentry, on the other hand, seems to welcome, according to his dust-jacket praise of the work, an innovative portrait of the writer herself: “Sharp entertainingly reveals Flannery O’Connor to be more religious, more Southern, more intellectual and individualistic than O’Connor wanted us, at least at first, to realize.” I, for one reader, could add to Gentry’s list the notion of “sainted” and categorize “Between the House and the Chicken Yard” as a biography of O’Connor’s personhood that delves into her many selves, rather than into the sequence of events—that is, the plot—of her life. In that regard, Sharp’s work resembles Lorraine Murray’s 2009 The Abbess of Andalusia: Flannery O’Connor’s Spiritual Journey.

Like Murray, Sharp shapes an image of O’Connor that is not dependent upon chronology but upon the roles she most prominently played. The two works differ in that Murray traces the various sides of O’Connor’s personality/character/personhood to her deep faith in Christ and speculates that O’Connor will “one day become not only a saint, but a doctor of the Church, largely based on her defense of the Faith in her letters” (205). Sharp is more intent upon reading O’Connor’s several selves in terms of Jungian psychology. First, she defines her approach: “Jung’s assessment that the persona is merely a mask for the ‘collective psyche,’ the combination of the conscious and unconscious, enables readers to understand...
the person secreted behind the masks” (3). Then she asserts, “The multiplicity of Flannery O’Connor’s created masks throughout her thirty-nine years shows not only her complexity but also her chosen self-defining characteristics” (4). Sharp then makes a seemingly modest contract with the reader: “This study of her self-identifying masks uncovers previously unexamined nuances of O’Connor’s disposition, vision, and voice” (4).

But much of what the ensuing commentary reveals is either that which students of O’Connor know quite well already—“masks reveal her independent, rebellious spirit; her ingenious imagination; her religious inclinations; and her understanding of the South” (4)—or that which cannot be substantiated, the notion that a character speaks for and reveals the author herself. With Enoch Emory she “rejects the status quo”; with Nelson Head she “experience[s] the influence of historical, Southern racist attitudes and the sentimental attachment to their ancestral land”; with Hulga Hopewell she renounces “carefree innocence” because of physical affliction and suffers “misunderstanding, irritation, and upheaval” because of maternal “distancing” (4-5). Readers will remember Mark Bosco’s exclusive interviews with Eric Langkjaer that stirred a great deal of Joy Hulga kiss-and-tell hubbub. We who wondered at the injustice of one participant’s narrative of a “romantic” interlude from six decades ago not getting balanced by the other’s “take” could rely only on O’Connor’s statement to Betty Hester, who had, like Sharp, assumed that O’Connor and Joy Hulga were interchangeable in the textbook / Bible salesman intrigue: you cannot “read the author by the story. You may but you shouldn’t” (HB 170).

Because reading the author by the story is a central element of this monograph, those who engage with the book, but heed O’Connor’s stricture, are left to find other strengths of the book. They are bountiful. Sharp certainly demonstrates assiduity as a researcher. Her wealth of work in the archival materials at Georgia College and at Emory’s MARBL—as well as some instances of information from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas—Austin, the Atlanta History Center, and McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa—makes her monograph a trove of riches indeed. The 165 pages of actual text overflow with footnotes attributing the insights Sharp is sharing to her archival work. A full 60 of the pages have such footnotes, and some pages have as many as seven. She provides astute summaries of the evolving plot and characterizations in many of O’Connor’s key works. Of course, the work with the fullest “back story,” in terms of manuscript pages, is Wise Blood, with over two thousand. The extent to which Haz Motes represents O’Connor—and she confesses affinities with Motes, Nelson Head, Enoch, and Joy Hulga at various points in The Habit of Being—seems to me not as crucial as the good instruction that Sharp’s astute mastery of many of the manuscript files offers her readers.

In short, much recent scholarship shows use of the O’Connor archives: Bruce and Ruth Reiniche have used them to great good effect in looking at the Motes women and at Ruby Hill. Bob Donahoo recently presented at the Washington, D.C., American Literature Association conference on his findings with regard to O’Connor as essayist without the Sally Fitzgerald filter controlling our perceptions of that particular “mask” of the author. By monograph’s end, when we are considering O’Connor’s mentor mask, especially as it pertained to her connection with Cecil Dawkins, the thesis of Sharp’s book becomes blurred. A straightforward biography could pause at such points and speculate widely as to why O’Connor gave energies relationally in the diverse directions that she did: intentional charitable works, assuaging loneliness and a sense of isolation, the re-enacting to the power Caroline Gordon held in her own nascent years as an author. But Sharp is locked into her Jungian paradigm, and readers may not find it needful to make all of the complexities that were Flannery O’Connor fit it. But around and beyond that issue and in the resplendent footnotes of this monograph much that is powerfully good is in play.

The Violent Bear it Away . . . the generous give it away.

Andalusia Farm relies on individual donations to support ongoing preservation efforts. Will you help ensure future generations can experience the setting that inspired one of our greatest writers? Ten percent of all donations will go towards establishing an endowment. Please give what you can at online at www.andalusiafarm.org.
What drew you to the executive director position at Andalusia?

Well, I was a Flannery O'Connor fan in high school and college. I'm just crazy about her and all her stories. And then I put the books on the book shelf and moved on to other authors. You know, I'm not a Flannery O'Connor scholar; I'm an art historian. My field is really 20th-century American art. And I've been a museum curator and director for over 20 years. I also write about museums and environmental sustainability. My first career was museum curator, and my second career, I worked for a preservation architect, doing business development and writing about museums and historic preservation and sustainability. So when I came out to Andalusia, I got the rental car at the airport in Atlanta, drove out I-20 and turned up 441 and I was just charmed. First of all, it's beautiful countryside. And then I arrived at Andalusia and just got completely seduced. The fact that it's an historic site with a historic building, the fact that it's 544 acres of contiguous open space, in an increasingly dense area, and, of course, the international brand of Flannery O'Connor—all those things conspired to seduce me to embark on an adventure. My son is off to college, and I was ready for something different. So there you have it.

But you were somewhat familiar with O'Connor from reading her in high school and college?

Right. I knew she was a great writer, but to be honest, I wasn't that knowledgeable about her biography. I just thought she was an unbelievably talented and original literary voice. But I didn't know much about the details of her biography until I started researching the job. And then it was even more fascinating.

My sense is that environmental issues make up one of the important directions of O'Connor criticism and scholarship. I'm wondering if, in your few months in the position, you've gotten that sense as well? Are you talking to people in the academic community and in the public more generally who are interested in the intersection of O'Connor's work and environmental concerns?

Oh, absolutely. I took Bruce Gentry's class last semester and had an opportunity to dig into the criticism. Of course it was wonderful being in the classroom. He's a fabulous teacher. It was very energizing to hear the discussions of the undergraduates and graduates. I am aware that there are a few scholars who have been writing about O'Connor as an ecologist or an environmentalist and of course, it makes sense. I've been asking around, “Does anyone know if she read Rachel Carson?” Silent Spring just came onto the scene at the end of Flannery's life, and I was curious to know if anyone knows if she read Carson. I haven't done any research myself. I've read a few essays on the topic. But of course, the stories have some indication that she was concerned about nature and conservation issues. Certainly, that's very topical today. Here at Andalusia, at this beautiful, natural habitat, on one side you have Wal-Mart and on the other you have a car dealership. Route 441 used to be all farm land from the railroad tracks all the way out to Andalusia and beyond. Now, it's strip malls. So, I think it's interesting and certainly follows in line with how many other historic sites have continued to make themselves relevant by touching on contemporary issues. And certainly, the environment is one of the most important contemporary issues. For example, climate change. I'm not sure that Georgia is the most receptive to this conversation—certainly there are pockets—but I think it's an interesting story for us to tell here at the farm.

The previous director, Craig Amason, held the position for more than a dozen years. As the new director, what do you see as his major accomplishments?

Oh, my gosh! Craig is my hero. Well, of course, he put in place all the infrastructure to receive visitors to the farm. He was here for twelve years, and for eight of those years he worked by himself. It was only in the last four years that he had a part-time visitor's services manager, who really ran the tours and received the visitors. I'm just constantly amazed at not only his skill set, but his perseverance to keep going in the face of a lot of
difficulties. Andalusia is not the recipient of all the profits from sales and copyrights from Flannery's work. That goes into a separate charitable trust. Andalusia is one of many beneficiaries of the trust and funding for Andalusia is by no means assured. So, he did a fantastic job of getting the place up and going, and all the infrastructure, like security, dealing with termites—all the unglamorous part of it. Getting the phone system set up, the computers, the website. He taught himself HTML and a number of other programs. He's just an amazing renaissance man in my mind. So, I can't thank him enough, and at every turn I call him my hero, because he did all the hard work. Now I get to have fun and program the buildings that he saved. For example the Hill House is just a marvelous artifact in itself. So that's a wonderful save, so to speak. And then, of course, there is the Cow Barn, which is an equally fantastic structure that just oozes inspiration for Flannery's stories. Among them, of course, is “Good Country People,” where Manley Pointer takes off with Hulga’s leg from that hayloft. I'm a museum person, and my job is to raise money, but also to engage visitors in programs so they can continue to come back to the farm. We can’t possibly survive on visitation that brings people in once, then they check it off the bucket list, and that’s it. We really need to engage people for repeat visitations. That's the saving grace of every, single successful museum around the world.

I think you’ve touched on this a little bit already, but in what ways do you hope to continue Craig’s work, and what changes and new goals comprise your vision of Andalusia going forward?

Well, continuing Craig’s work is just to continue with responsible stewardship of the historic structures and the entire property. That means paying attention not only to the natural landscape, but the kind of vernacular design of the landscape around the house and the barnyard. Mrs. O’Connor cared about her garden. There are vestigial shrubs and plants here that were part of the fabric of the farm when Flannery was here. So, Uncle Louis's fig trees, for example, that she writes about, we want to make sure those are healthy and even producing figs. And guess what, maybe we’ll even make Andalusia Fig Jam and sell it in our shop! I think there’s a lot of opportunity here, and that’s one of the things that seduced me to pitch my hat in the ring. Oh my gosh, there are just so many opportunities, from programming—meaning engaging people on-site with activities that help provide a portal into Flannery's writing and the themes that she covered—to just socializing at the farm. Providing a place for regional folks just to come and take a walk, listen to some music, enjoy a talk—more casual programming—is incredibly important. And then, of course, there’s taking care of the structures.

Craig, as I said, really did the heroic job on the Hill House and Cow Barn, but there are some other structures. The equipment shed right in the barnyard was compromised when I got here. I saw that it was an emergency, and I wrote a grant, and the week after I submitted the grant, a tree fell on the structure that housed a hundred years of farm tools and implements, including a vintage tractor. Is that the inspiration for the murder weapon in “The Displaced Person”? I'm a curator, I am attuned to using collections to tell a story. All those items have a lot of value in terms of setting the scene at Andalusia, for people to imagine what life was like when Flannery lived here, and can help visitors imagine all the functional aspects of the farm. The labor issues, the machinery—all those things are themes in her writing and we should be bringing those forward to help visitors engage. I’m glad to say, the grant was successful and we now have a little bit of seed money, and we can keep going and rebuild that structure and then use it for some kind of educational programming about writing, about nature, about farm tools and implements. There are a lot of different things that we could do once we have the shed.

Congratulations on getting the grant! Is there anything that has been particularly surprising to you about the work since taking over?
Well, I don’t know about surprising, but what has been really thrilling and so much fun for me is talking to the visitors. They come from all over the world and all manner of occupation and socio-economic strata. Some who come are fans of Flannery and they weep at the threshold to her bedroom. They’ve come a long way and they are excited and it is a lifelong dream of theirs to be at Andalusia. Other people have never heard of her. They are on their way somewhere, you know, like the family driving to Florida on their vacation in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and they just happen upon Andalusia. They see the historic sign, the brown sign that says, “Historic Site: Andalusia Farm.” And they don’t know what it is, but they turn in, like my mother, who stopped at every, single historic marker when we were on our road trips. So it ranges, it’s the full spectrum, from pilgrims to people who happen by. But for me, it’s very interesting in chatting with them what they bring to the table. It makes me think about how we can engage them on their terms. You know, not everyone has read everything Flannery has written, and we need to respect that and help them find a way into her work. And that happens in all kinds of ways. There are all ages of people, too. We have kids who come, and the parents let them run around in the grass and take in the nature. They’ve never read Flannery! But we want them to become readers, and we want them to see that creativity is important and valued, so they’ll grow up to be Flannery fans, we hope. So, for me, it hasn’t been so much surprising, but really gratifying.

What has been surprising is the degree to which local people—some folks just within the five-county area—have never heard of Andalusia. They haven’t the least idea of what it is. Even though they drive past it every day and they see the sign, they don’t know what it is, or they haven’t been spurred to be curious about it. So on that front, we’re trying to employ a number of strategies to engage local people, because that’s where a lot of the repeat visitations come from, and, to be really blunt, that’s what funders look for. When you’re looking for money, they’re going to ask you an important question: “What is your community benefit?” So we need to be able to quantify that and demonstrate some impacts about how people in the community are engaging with Andalusia and how we’re doing something that contributes positively to the community. We want to wake them up and engage them, so that they can also contribute positively to Andalusia. You know, preservation and conservation, those are the activities we’re engaged in, and those all cost money, to be honest. We want to make sure Andalusia is here 20 years hence, 50 years hence. We want it here for future generations. We’ll need to provide for that and ask others to help us.

You mentioned that you are working on some strategies to engage the local community. What kinds of things are you doing to get Andalusia on the local radar?

Well, there are two rooms that constituted an addition to the farmhouse in the late Fifties. Flannery was living there at the time. They are more or less modern rooms. One was occupied by her uncle when he came to visit on the weekends—Uncle Louis. And the other room was used as a kind of back parlor. It was really distinguished by the very large, oversized bookcase which is now at Georgia College in the O’Connor Room. So I did an assessment and said, “I think these spaces are more valuable used as changing exhibition spaces and program spaces.” When things change and there is something new to see, that’s how you engage local and regional people. Then there’s a reason for them to come back and visit you. Quite often I would hear, “Oh, yeah, I’ve been to Andalusia.” And I ask, “When is the last time you were there?” “I was there about five or six years ago.” Well, we can’t sustain ourselves on that kind of visitation. We need to create reasons for people to keep coming back, to tell their friends, and to come again and bring more friends. We now have media capability where we can show movies and we can have Power Point presentations as part of lectures. It is not an uncommon thing; look at your own visits to your favorite museums. Chances are there were different programs each time, just as they probably had a gift shop and they probably had some kind of café or refreshments. The whole idea is to keep people there as long as possible, so that they fall in love and they want to come back. So, it’s not a speed-dating situation, I guess you could say. (Laughs.)

It’s a long-term relationship you’re trying to build.

Yes. You asked about strategies. There’s, of course, the property itself, on which Craig did an amazing job. He got the great trail loop established. It’s a groomed trail, it’s about a mile long, and it’s absolutely beautiful. You walk through a woodland, along the creek, and people come just to walk the trail. And that’s fine—we like that. Looking at the property as another way to extend the visitor’s experience is right up our alley. That’s what we’re doing. Some of the functional areas of the farm, like now that the barn is stabilized, you look behind it, it’s all grown over. One of my ideas is to get goats. That’s a very green and low-impact way to recapture that space from nature. If we could have goats back there, we could begin to see how the farm functioned. Twice daily milking of cows—it was a big deal. You have to have a lot of labor to help you get the cows out faster, bring them back, milk them. That was all part and parcel of the farm life that Flannery certainly observed and that her mother was a part of, and that I think served as inspiration for some of her stories. The more people can see, the more engaged they are, the longer they stay, the more they bring their friends back, the more likely they are to support you.

I just have one last question. It goes back to thinking of O’Connor as a writer, as a figure in American literary history. How would you say your understanding of O’Connor and her legacy has deepened or expanded since becoming executive director?

As I said, I didn’t know that much about her biography until I started researching the job, but I certainly felt deeply her raw talent as a writer. It’s amazing, the story structure, the way she uses words, the description of place—all of those things just hit me over the head like a hammer when I first encountered her, and I still have that feeling when I read her. Her stories are just so tightly put together, her sentence structure is perfect, the
words she uses are perfect. That hasn’t changed—I’m still crazy about her as a writer. I wasn’t aware of her work as a visual artist, and I’ve seen a number of reproductions of her paintings. There is one painting at Georgia College that I have seen “in the flesh,” and although it’s unfinished it’s very good and shows a fair degree of skill and talent. And I’m an art historian, this is my field, and I can see how she fits into the context in which she was situated, the influence of modernism on her work, on her visual art. That, to me, has been a revelation, and I would love, love, love to see more. Of course I am certainly aware of the reproductions of her cartoons and her linocuts, they tend to reproduce well, so you get it. The paintings are a bit of a mystery, so I would really like to see those and I think they would make a fabulous monographic exhibition. I told someone the other day, it would be exciting to have a show of her artwork and I am sure museums all over the country would vie for a travelling show of her work as a visual artist. It would sort of flesh her out more for her fan base, if they saw her that way.

But what’s been, I think, really very moving to me as a fan of her writing is being in the house where she lived, walking around in the kitchen where she and her mother had their meals. I mean, imagine the table talk! From some of the things Flannery writes about in her letters, you really get the sense of what it must have been like, living there, and that’s something we want to convey to visitors. I think, for me, the most absolutely touching thing is imagining her with the diagnosis that she had of the disease that killed her father after four years, and she lived twelve years with it. Sometimes I think about that, and how she must have felt when she passed that four-year mark with her disease. It went into remission and then flared up . . . you know, just trying to imagine her as an artist and the sense of urgency to create her art before her energies were diminished. She kept a very rigid schedule, and rightly so. I think she was driven: she had something to contribute, and she wanted to do it, create her art while she still could. That to me is very deep and poignant. I really pay attention to that when I’m at the farm. I want to make sure that I’m honoring that when we’re here, and that visitors also have a sense of that.

I have to say that when I was in Bruce Gentry’s class, we were talking about the stairway [in “A Stroke of Good Fortune”]. I raised my hand in class and said, “The stairs in Andalusia are right outside her bedroom.” And they’re extraordinarily steep. The way she writes about them in that story: the stairs “reared up.” To me, that just feels so present—the idea of the stairs as somehow threatening, somehow upsetting, for an entire story. I thought it was a brilliant strategy. So we were discussing it, and I thought, “Oh my gosh, those stairs are right outside her door!” Every time she’d leave her room she was reminded that she couldn’t walk up those stairs. I find that connects me to her as a person. Certainly she was a wonderful artist, a great writer, but she was a person with foibles and challenges. She had to go home at age 25 and live with her mother. And I think she made the most of it—and how!
Selected Recent Publications

**Books**


**Book Chapters**


**Articles (excluding those published in The Flannery O'Connor Review)**


