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THE THEATRICAL WORLD OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "A LATE ENCOUNTER WITH THE ENEMY"

A b s t r a c t. Attempting a scrutiny of Flannery O'Connor's short story entitled "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," the reader is by no means left in a quandary as to the experience of death, pain, and suffering percolating through the very foundations of southern culture since antebellum times. Also, the phenomenon in question appears to be deeply embedded in the aesthetics of historical baroque, which allows one to notice a striking resemblance between the nature of southern experience of the 1950's and the essence of baroque sensibility. Such an observation assumes extraordinary importance if considered in the context of modern theatricality.

Grounded upon a comparison between the seventeenth-century France of Louis XIV and the contemporary South of O'Connor's protagonist, George Poker Sash, the article explores the transplantation of a multitude of cultural traits characterizing the baroque onto the realm of modern experience(impelled to confront southern history by the author) through the prism of such notions as the play of appearances, *miseen abime*, and the spaces of theatricality. These concepts, predominantly associated with the theater, are delineated in the course of William Egginton's *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity* and *The Theater of Truth: Ideology of Neo-Baroque Aesthetics*, which two works comprise the theoretical background of the discussion concerning the relationship between the contemporary South and its historical experience.

The argument is supported by Guy Debord's conceptualization of the spectacle adumbrated in *The Society of the Spectacle,* which presents the culture of the commodity as endowed with theatrical attributes. Bearing in mind that fact that, as Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues in her *Baroque Reason*, the representation of a historical subject in necessarily connected with theatricality, O'Connor reader is enabled, with the assistance of the works mentioned above, to locate the tragedy ensconced in the core of southern culture enveloped in an intricately woven web of modern appearances.

Key words: baroque, *vanitas*, theatricality, spectacle, *miseen abime*, spaces of theatricality.

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Omar Calabrese's engrossing study bearing the title *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* acquaints the reader with the essence of the neo-baroque world by outlining the cornerstone of its aesthetics, which "encourages us not to produce exaggeratedly unified or simplified models. Neither the physical nor the human universe can be reduced to unity. The universe isa fragmentary multiplicity in which many models confront and compete with each other" (171). Apart from the apparent presence of multiplicity in its epistemology, as Calabrese clearly suggests, the neo-baroque is to be perceived as a factor generating tension and fluctuation within a given system, which inevitably leads to the system's instability in its cultural cognition (26).

Indubitably, these remarks are of critical importance with reference to Flannery O'Connor's oeuvre, whose formidable diversity of interpretative possibilities is generated by her application of the doctrine of the analogy of being (Desmond 20). As a consequence, as the central axis of her works the reader is bound to discover a vivid depiction of the confluence of two realities (the human and the divine), which phenomenon gains prevalence over other, non-theological approaches to O'Connor's fiction (Driskell and Britain 9). As a matter of fact, O'Connor's outstanding literary legacy is suffused with the spirit of ardent Catholicism, which makes its presence the overriding principle directing the course of critical attention paid to her work (Giannone 9, Feeley 12, Wood 11).

Upon attempting a punctilious examination of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," a story published in the collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* in 1955 and inspired by factual circumstances (Gooch 171)[1], the reader may be under a misapprehension that it is the only work by O'Connor avoiding a portrayal of the divine element in operation within its structure. Nevertheless, Giannone's *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love,* a compelling work adumbrating the considerable extent to which O'Connor's writing was influenced by Catholic theology, proves that such a claim would be nothing but a travesty of truth even in the case of the only story by O'Connor that deals with the Civil War and the experience of its time-honored presence in the cultural world of contemporary South (98).

In the course of Giannone's informative book, one is confronted with the author's claims that the presence of the sun symbolizes the numinous dimen-

[1] Gooch points to the fact that the story was inspired by the appearance of one-hundred-and-six-year-old Confederate general William J. Bush during his granddaughter's graduation ceremony at Georgia State College for Women, O'Connor's *alma mater*.

sion in that O'Connor's protagonist's exposure to its rays causes the burning of a hole in the old man's head, which is tantamount to sending divine retribution on the historically ignorant character and leading to his ultimate realization of the value to be perceived in southern historical experience (Giannone 99).

Notwithstanding the conventional perception of sun imagery as the indication of divine grace in O'Connor's stories and novels (Srigley 138), one must not overlook the irresistible temptation of drawing a parallel between the scene of the general's connection with the sun and the famous French absolutist monarch living at the turn of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries: Louis XIV, also known as the Sun King. The formulation of such a striking observation is made possible by paying meticulous attention to Allen S. Weiss' assiduous endeavor to delineate the philosophical as well as aesthetic assumptions concealed in the structure of baroque gardens that come into focus in *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Formal Garden and 17-th-Century Metaphysics*.

In fact, the lavish texture and the extreme size of the royal garden erected in Versailles as an expression of the King's hubristic personality[2] accentuates his pursuit of *vanitas* and "the ubiquitous symbolic apotheosis of the king as sun, and the symbolic effect of the vanishing point at infinity" (50). *Vanitas,* a typical motif conditioning the cultural production of the baroque period in addition to being inextricably connected with its sensibility (Calabrese 46), clearly leads to perceptual instability accompanied by a lode of divergences in that "the fascination with representations of *vanitas* hovers between melancholy and exaltation, between the finality of death as ultimate absence and luxury as the tempting presence of the world" (Weiss 49).

As has already been outlined, the rationale standing behind the stupendous achievement of creating an unnaturally extensive garden(not to be fully contemplated by human vision from the chateau)serves the purpose of gratifying the King's desire embedded in his own vanity, which is directed at establishing his stature as that of the infinite and equal to the divine; hence the connection with solar imagery and the vanishing point of the garden situated in infinity owing to the garden's proportions far exceeding the ability of human vision and aimed at the sun (Weiss 47).

[2] Weiss claims that the erection of Versailles was dictated by the King's will to forget the garden at Vaux-le-Vicomte. (51)

In a similar vein, O'Connor's presentation of the protagonist of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," George Poker Sash, is replete with incontrovertible evidence suggesting the persistent pursuit of *vanitas* in the one-hundred-and-four-year-old-man. The constant oscillation between "the finality of death" and "luxury as the tempting presence of the world" becomes an integral part of the way the man in his dotage approaches the meaning of his existence in the era of modernity. As a matter of fact, the man in the fall of his life may be said to constitute an ideal instantiation of baroque *vanitas*: the malaise caused by the awareness of death as a phenomenon ensconced in the quiddity of human existence is to be deceptively alleviated by the presence of luxury and excess (Lambert 33).

Such a conclusion may be arrived at upon reading the opening sentences of O'Connor's story: "the General didn't give two slaps for her [his granddaughter's] graduation but he never doubted he would live for it. Living had got to be such a habit with him that he couldn't conceive of any other condition" (252). In the description of her protagonist's dismissive attitude displayed towards the significance of historical experience in America, O'Connor further underlines the old man's marginalization of the reality of death hanging over human existence since time immemorial, "the past and the future were the same thing to him, one forgotten and the other not remembered; he had no more notion of dying that a cat" (257). The old man's inadvertent engagement in the phenomenon described above is engendered by his infatuation with a smorgasbord of temptations lurking in the nature of the modern world: luxury, the artificial effulgence of Hollywood film industry world and excessive interest in female corporeality.

As can be discerned, both figures discussed appear to be enamored with worldly vanity and this particular penchant indubitably cruises the perimeter of their existence in that they endeavor to create their own hubristic image of social elevation apart from wishing to occupy the unattainable position of infinity. As far as the French absolutist monarch is concerned, it is the royal garden at Versailles with its vanishing point in infinity combined with sun imagery equating the king with the divine that must be designated to perform the task in question. In the case of O'Connor's character, however, the yearning for infinite grandeur has been portrayed in the old man's attachment to *vanitas* as well as in his reluctance to restoring southern historical experience to the status of reverence it so richly deserves.

Having drawn a line of similarity between the two figures, it is advisable to take into cognizance Walter Benjamin's idea regarding a significant as-

pect of the monarch in German baroque drama: his stature as the representative of history who is capable of holding the course of history in his hand with his scepter *(The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 65). The idea adduced in the previous sentence holds certain relevance to grandiose enterprises embarked upon by both figures bent upon contemplating their glamorous lives. Louis XIV, as an absolutist monarch, engages in the activity literally; George Poker Sash, however, is compelled to carry out his assignment with the saber received with the rest of the general's regalia at the film premiere in Atlanta, an event in the story that holds substantial importance to comprehending O'Connor's final message.

Unfortunately, both men presented are impelled to taste the bitterness of ultimate defeat bylosing the acrimonious battle for the triumph of their hubristic desires over the tedium of human existence. As Weiss claims, "vanity is not merely a moral flaw, but rather a central figure of self-representation – culminating, in extreme instances, in a false relation to infinity, or a relation to a false infinity" (70). The fact that the Sun King and the false Civil War general have delusions of grandeur (a fact corroborated by their urge to represent themselves as infinite) is stressed by the presence of implacably serious flaws in their systems of self-representation.

Namely, the contradiction in the symbolism of Versailles includes the presence of the labyrinth (limited space)and the Enceladus (a statue symbolizing the futility of inflated human attempts in comparison with the divine), which inexorably leads to the conclusion that the garden is a visual exploration of tension between closure and finitude (73). O'Connor's proud and ignorant Confederate veteran is ultimately made to experience the same phenomenon by virtue of the constant entanglement in friction created by the culture of consumerism and the unexpected return of southern history (putting an end to the old man's attachment to modern temporality).

What unites both cases is the play of appearances stemming from the shared predilection for *vanitas*, which phenomenon gives rise to illusions of their inflated stature approximating the infinite, as has already been argued. Nevertheless, the idea that eludes their attention is that the occurrence of irreducible disparities (delineated above) in the manner of their self-representation pushes them to "that very point where the vanity of the human lot can only be described as the fall from the infinite to the finite" (Weiss 77), which revelation lies behind the screen of sumptuosity separating their convictions of earthly existence from its true nature.

The vocabulary appearing in the last sentence is imbued with theatrical resonance, which, upon heeding the circumstances in which both men demonstrate their social positions with their supercilious articulations of high taste, appears perfectly vindicated. It is imperative that the baroque cultural phenomenon of the spectacle be shed light upon through the prism of the realities of the seventeenth-century France and the twentieth-century American South.

Weiss points to the fact that Louis XIV established his solar mythology in public during *Carrousel*, a public performance that took place in 1662 in the presence of fifteen thousand people (53). The erection of the resplendent garden at Versailles, already shown to depict the King's notion of his elevated social position, may be construed as another factor substantiating the theatrical dimension of baroque cultural production. In fact, Weiss refers to the King's garden(as well as The Hall of Mirrors constructed between 1678 and 1694) as a "baroque spectacle" (72) on the grounds that it draws the observer into a richly-woven web of appearances, a phenomenon typical of baroque theatrical reality (Egginton, *The Theater of Truth* 98).

Furthermore, in his introduction to Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, Bryan S. Turner comments that the baroque was concerned with "artificial, socially constructed nature of reality (its hyperreality) and the precarious, catastrophic, uncertain and hazardous nature of all human existence" (8) and the spectacle bears great responsibility for such a *status quo* as Turner goes on to explain that "the fantastic world of baroque theatre beautifully expressed this precarious fragility" (8). The fact that the predicament inherent in the nature of human life, which is marked with the immanence of death, finds its means of expression in the context of the baroque stage holds great aesthetic significance and deserves further attention.

As a matter of fact, the culture of the baroque was inextricably connected with theatricality on the grounds that the spectacle was targeted at the arousal of sense with the aim of engendering commitment of the masses to absolute monarchies (Maravall 90), as is the case in the example of *Carousel* taking place in honor of the Sun King. Following Lambert's train of thought regarding the transplantation of a multitude of cultural traits of the historical baroque onto the realm of modernity under the label of neo-baroque (23), one is allowed to cogitate upon O'Connor's story in a groundbreaking way: the baroque infatuation with theatricality appears to be ensconced in the reality of the American South presented in the course of her Civil War story.

The reader is encouraged to propose such an audacious solution to the dilemma posed by O'Connor by virtue of Turner's argument drawing a line of resemblance between baroque spectacle and modern culture. Similarly to the creation of the former in order to bring masses to conformity to absolute monarchy through the artificial pleasure of the spectacle, the latter relies on the same aesthetic mechanism produced by the presence of consumerism in cultural experience (24).

The juxtaposition of the twentieth-century cultural realm with the phenomenon of the spectacle is further shed light upon in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, a work theorizing the role of the spectacle in contemporary society. The author points to the fact that "the development of the forces of production is the real unconscious history that has built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups […] [and] the spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (12–13). Such a claim appears to function as the rationale standing behind the creation of O'Connor's story as the Georgia writer intends to fathom the intricacies describing the experience of the South placed at the cultural crossroads of its falsified history and the emergence of the commodity as the dominating element of human existence enticed by the spectacle of modernity.

As the world of absolutist western European monarchy employed the spectacle in order to make the masses render support in favor of the oppressive social system, so the capitalist world of the American South uses a range of media available in the twentieth century with a view to creating an aura of cultural subjugation to envelop its inhabitants, which is expressly stated in Turner's words:

> Mass pleasure, mass consumption and the endless reproduction of lifestyle functioned as a modern form of religious illusion and the fetishism of commodities was precisely the modern religion of the masses in which a new sacred aura surrounded everyday commodities. The culture industry of modern society is thus a new version of the culture industry of the baroque in which absolutism in government and the superficialities of everyday consumption are perfectly combined to produce a passive mass audience. (25)

In spite of a period of almost three hundred years differentiating the coordinates of their earthly life, the proud owner of the garden in Versailles and the American Civil War veteran are both content to see the vicissitudes of their existence emerge in a theatrical context during public spectacles:

upon traversing the royal garden, or on stage at a film premiere. With the baroque world of Louis XIV and the contemporary realm of George Poker Sash presented to be characterized by theatricality, it is imperative at this point that attention be turned to the theorization of the phenomenon in question so as to produce a vivid portrayal of O'Connor's character's tragedy amalgamated with the failure of his self-representation.

The southern author presents her character's *tedium vitae* coupled with his decrepitude and paralleled by his abandonment of the past(including the experience of the Civil War) to oblivion. However, there is a single event in the old man's life that he perceives as worthy of retention in his mind: his appearance at the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* (Balee 34–35) in Atlanta twelve years before as well as the reception of the general's uniform, which incident paves the way for his successive descent into the abyss of cultural emptiness and sterility painstakingly concealed by a web of intricately woven appearances.

The reader is requested to bear in mind the significance of O'Connor's inclusion of the "cinema extravaganza" (Kilcourse 176) released in 1939 in her story. The reference to the extremely popular Hollywood film portraying the antebellum southern reality requires one to take into congizance the observation that the cultural atmosphere of Hollywood in the 1920s as well as the 1930s is inextricably connected with the resurgence of the baroque aesthetics (Ndalianis 10). This remark, coupled with the fact that O'Connor places her protagonist in a theatrical location during the premiere of the above mentioned film, opens up a new possibility of conducting a thorough analysis of the story.

As a matter of fact, from the moment of ascending the stairs leading onto the stage, George Poker Sash, attired in the general's uniform and carrying the sword obtained the day before, does not lead an ordinary existence any more. In lieu of that, he is bestowed upon the honor of being the leading actor in the spectacle to be performed on the scene of modernity. Bathing in the meticulous attention of the viewers and emotionally feasting off the glamour of the spotlights, the supercilious old man bears witness to his public re-christening upon being introduced by the announcer as "General Tennessee Flintrock Sash of the Confederacy" (235). The new name is anything but an expression of the baroque trait of excess (Hendin 25), which is tantamount to its perception as appearance in the baroque sense.

Hardly daunted by such unexpected eradication of his real identity, the newly appointed ninety-two-year-old general formulates his *credo*: "How I

keep so young? I kiss all beautiful guls" (234).Such objectionable interest in the female body exposes his indomitable will to participate in the modern spectacle aimed at sensual manipulation of the masses. There is more unassailable evidence confirming Sash's intended participation in a variety of modern spectacles: "He liked parades with floats full of Miss Americas and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products" (252). One may venture a statement that the old man's acquiescence to be used so as to lend an air of authenticity to the film and manipulate the viewing public is simultaneous with his entrance into the world of appearances at play in the story. This domain includes the general's regalia (the hat, the uniform, the saber) as well as his new name.

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, a book exposing a substantial degree of similarity between human life and the realm of the theater, argues that, upon entering the presence of other people, a human being assiduously endeavors to extrapolate from given circumstances the society's expectations regarding the role he/she is to play on the stage of the social milieu. In Goffman's estimation, these roles

> take the form of demand [and] the cultural values of an establishment will determine in detail how the participants are to feel about many matters and at the same time establish a framework of appearances that must be maintained, whether or not there is feeling behind the appearances. (6)

The quotation justifies the fact that the tension central to the culture of the baroque, the dichotomization of reality caused by the dissonance between social proprieties and the imposition of appearances to be maintained on their behalf at all costs, is invariably present in the American South gathered at the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*.

When subjecting a substantial body of southern literature to scrutiny, the reader is overwhelmed by the ubiquity of the phenomenon known as the cult of the Lost Cause resulting from the South's truculent insistence upon its glorious past and its concomitant denial of its fall off the pedestal after the defeat in the Civil War (Hobson 245). However, the advent of Southern Renaissance, in whose dying moments O'Connor creates her fiction, is to be construed as the appearance of attempts aimed at the ultimate debunking of the old myth as the culture of the region is more and more consumed by the pernicious experience of modernity (Sykes 2).

Henceforth, prior to his appearance on the stage, Sash is under the impression that, by virtue of his presence at the first projection of the film, he

will be required to act in adherence to social expectations adumbrated by the veneration of the Lost Cause and the antebellum southern reality. However, the same society expecting its senior citizen to perform his patriotic duties with due zealotry and dignity imposes upon him an intricate network of appearances (already enumerated above) irrespective of "whether or not there is feeling behind [them]," as Goffman claims. The old man, taking into consideration the significance of his existence being included within the realm of modern appearances, comes to the realization that his position of elevation, conferred upon him by modern southern society, obliges him to participate in an ongoing spectacle engendering a glamorous panoply of illusions where the play of illusions, against the backdrop of southern history, takes precedence over the real nature of the reality Sash is supposed to represent.

As a consequence, the subsequent events forming the course of his existence situate the old man in a plenitude of public places devoted to historical remembrance: every so often he takes a position of honor on Confederate Memorial Day, in the museum, or in old people's homes, bringing the lavish world of appearances along with him. Goffman's accentuation of the requisite maintenance of artificiality in demeanor leads the reader, engaged in the analysis of the general's reprehensible social conduct on the stage as well as beyond it, to arrive at the realization that the illusions his performance is pervaded by are "merely appearances, and that there exists beyond the screen of appearances an essence that is somehow more real, but that is currently concealed or absent" (Egginton, *How the World Became a Stage*110-111). The range of possibilities O'Connor provides as far as the discovery of that essence is concerned will be shed light upon in the course of the paragraphs to come.

Egginton's engrossing study *How the World Became a Stage* attempts to outline the quiddity of theatricality and presents its basic argument that "theatrical mimesis reproduces [reality] in an alternate realm" (86). Indubitably, this idea is inextricably connected with the initiation of "the permanent potential of infinite mise an abime" (87), which seems to exist in accordance with the baroque spectacle "practices that assume and help construct viewers capable of navigating an often bewildering edifice of imaginary spaces that open onto further interior spaces in […] a permanently potential miseen abime" (121).

As has already been established, the general's appearance in the theatrical environment and his reception of excessively artificial identity(visible in the new name)are coupled by his acquiescence to promote the modern culture of

the spectacle based on its baroque counterpart. It appears that a wide range of possibilities to be found in *miseen abime*- in its mechanism of opening a multiplicity of frames within each other (Lambert 4)- comes to the assistance of the old man in his pursuit of *vanitas* and in his attempts to make his earthly existence approximate the infinite by the denial of what was situated at the basis of baroque state of human precariousness – death.

In fact, the general's presence at the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* deserves further attention on the reader's part in that the proliferation of representative frames does take place in O'Connor's story irrespective of the author's intention. In order to provide a clearer insight into this matter, the reader is advised to take into cognizance Egginton's presentation of the spaces of theatricality. In the course of his theorization, there is a distinction between four spaces associated with theatricality: that of the audience, of the stage, of a play within a play, and of the crypt.

The general appears on the stage immediately before the projection of the film and he is expected to represent the values of the Old South (the announcer informs the audience that he fought and bled in the battles they are going to see reenacted) that subsequently appear in *Gone with the Wind*. At the same time he is impelled to experience his rechristening, almost simultaneously being presented with the uniform and the saber (objects to be used in the incessant multiplication of appearances). Undoubtedly, he is aware of the nature of his new calling as well as of the dimensions of responsibility resting upon his shoulders, and, as a consequence, he instantaneously commences to perform in the first spectacle of his life, however brief it proves to be (the general only manages to establish his imaginary connections with the allure of the female body). Subsequent spectacles taking place beyond the stage are concerned with the same thematic content: incessant boasting about fictitious encounters with attractive women in the hotel room or having pictures taken with elegant ladies at the premiere.

What must be borne in mind with reference to the essence of theatricality, Egginton argues, is the separation of a content from its representation and the coexisting relativization of the former (*How the World Became a Stage* 138). Contemplating "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" from such a viewpoint, the reader is under the impression that the irreconcilable dissonance between the representation (the general) and the relativized content (southern history) is what Egginton presents as inextricably connected with the context of theatricality. Buci Glucksmann's claim that "if […]history becomes a representation; representation is itself subject to dramatization or

theatricization of the sensible world in a backward movement towards a missing centre, towards that decadent centre" (134) presents the general's glamorous life of spectacle as directed at finding its missing core, the equivalent of"the promise of a truth just beyond the veil of appearances" (Egginton, *The Theater of Truth* 7).

Returning to Egginton's delineation of the spaces of theatricality with reference to O'Connor's protagonist's occupation of the space of the stage and his engagement in his first spectacle within the confines of this space, the reader may make instantaneous inferences that, by placing the second representation of American history behind him in the form of the film, O'Connor appears to suggest the operation of *mise-en-abime* through the opening of another frame within the already existing one: general Sash. The content of the latter representation is also southern historical experience, but special attention needs to be paid the film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's depiction of the Civil War reality.

With the Confederate anthem "To Arms in Dixie" melancholically sounding in the background, the audience sees brief expressions of worship directed at the antebellum South before the first scene:

> There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered […] A Civilization gone with the wind."

Seeing that the spectacle called the Old South is replete with appearances that are deceptive at first sight, similarly to the proud general, it is impossible not to be in a quandary in connection with the content of both representations of southern history: the excessively mythologized and the dismissive one.

Egginton's assurance of the presence of truth behind a veil of appearances encourages one to delve into his description of the space of the crypt:

> defined as that space within which no new spaces may be opened. In other words, the mise en abime of nesting spaces that characterizes theatrical spatiality is potentially, but only potentially infinite. In practice, there is always some ultimate interior space that cannot be opened further. This space [. . .] I call the crypt. (*How the World Became a Stage* 105)

The crypt, presented as the final space of theatricality that is unable to open within its bounds another one due to the fact that there must be some

diminutive, indivisible frame, as Egginton explains, may be located within the structure of O'Connor's story, no matter how inconspicuous its function appears it be.

It has already been demonstrated that in the theatrical world of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" there are two representations of American history of the Civil War era: the general and the film. Since both depictions have been presented as riddled with deceptive appearances separating the representation from its real content, the reader is impelled to fall back upon the function of the crypt, which is supposed to "to stand in for the real, the unrepresentable, and hence the foundation of all representations" (Egginton, *How the World Became a Stage*152) to discover the concealed meaning of O'Connor's work. Henceforth, the crypt may be construed as responsible for the signification of the antebellum American experience: the basis of all representations emerging in the course of the story.

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that O'Connor intentionally uses theatrical context in order to bewilder her reader by emphasizing his/her inability to untangle the mystery lying at the heart of her work. With a view to finding a solution to the problem posed by both representations and what Egginton refers to as the real standing behind them, one needs to take into cognizance Lewis Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature*. This work produces a barrage of illuminating insights into the cultural reality of the antebellum South and will provide invaluable assistance in the process of elucidating the enigmatic origin of the representations coming into existence in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy."

Simpson argues that the pastoral vision of the Old South, discursively baptized by him as "garden of the chattel" and supposed to be the equivalent of the northern "garden of the covenant" (2), did not experience long duration and was quickly dwarfed by materialistic impulses accompanying the enforcement of slavery (13). As a consequence, as the author later professes in the course of his work, the deleterious effects of slavery came into view forthwith and "at the margins of [southern] imagination there was an awareness of irreconcilability of the Southern slavery system to the pastoral mode" (61).The incommensurability of both aspects of old southern culture mentioned in the citation indubitably points to the apparent unrepresentability of the antebellum reality on the grounds that any representation focusing exclusively on the latter element would be a misrepresentation, which is how one is to perceive Egginton's explanation of the crypt seen in the light of southern tradition emerging in O'Connor's story.

Bearing in mind Egginton's remark concerning the crypt's state of being internally indivisible (the ultimate frame, expressing the unrepresentable) and being "alone among properly theatrical spaces [. . .] solid, full, impenetrable" (105), one may conduct an incisive analysis of general Sash's participation in his last spectacle during his granddaughter's graduation ceremony at college. The eponymous late encounter with the enemy will eventually prove to be the ultimate confrontation with the deception of his theatrical appearances and with the divine intervention through the medium of the crypt.

In fact, the general's presence at the event when the graduates are to receive their scrolls is dictated by Sally's unquenchable yearning for social elevation. Her grandfather, a mendacious representation of the Old South artificially produced by modern consumerist culture, is expected to appear on the stage behind her:

> She wanted the General at her graduation because she wanted to show what she stood for, or, as she said, "what was all behind her," and was not behind them. This *them* was not anybody in particular. It was just all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living. (252–253)

The "upstarts" she refers to are certainly those responsible for the deracination of the values of the Old South that she, in her mendacity, wishes to see restored to their full splendor. In this way, she makes of herself another representation of southern history, which is justified by her standing next to her grandfather on the stage during the premiere. With reference to Sally's demeanor during the event, one is to be sensitized to the meaning of her fashion *faux pas* committed in preparation for her public appearance as she accompanies the general onstage wearing an elegant dress and scout shoes. It appears that O'Connor is bent upon emphasizing the fact that the core of modern southern experience lies in the falsity created by the play of appearances connected with the phenomenon of theatricality.

During the final spectacle, the general is requested to be present behind Sally when she receives her diploma. The reception of scrolls is to be preceded by a procession of schoolteachers marching into the auditorium. Egginton's second study of theatricality, *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics,* proposes the idea that the division of the world into the audience and the stage corresponds to the relation between truth and illusion (39). Taking into account this distinction, it is an effortless task to

explain the general's lack of enthusiasm: people endowed with considerable intellectual agility and in possession of knowledge in the field of education constitute the truth cryptically concealed behind a screen of illusions produced around him.

In fact, O'Connor foreshadows his imminent death in the presentation of his attitude to the events scheduled to take place at the graduation ceremony: "He didn't have any use for processions and a procession full of schoolteachers was about as deadly as the River Styx to his way of thinking" (252). This thought, that could be understood as his fear of being unmasked, is to be juxtaposed with Egginton's comment on the role of ideology which is to "cover […] inconsistencies and failures at all costs, and it does so via the interplay of concealment and revelation that has its material, conventional counterpart in the space […] called *the crypt*" (*How the World Became a Stage* 152).

The mode of demeanor the general consents to adopt at the premiere and to enrich with his artificial additions embedded in carnality combined with consumerism, endeavors to conceal what has already been demonstrated by Simpson as the "South that never was" (15), an expression formulated owing to the incompossibility of slavery and the glorified pastoral vision of the South (61), which has been understood to signify the inability to represent the antebellum experience fully. Since contemporary southern experience performs its task through the interplay of revelation and concealment taking place within the space of the crypt, it is worthwhile to consider the paradox of the unfolding of theatricality, which, as Egginton claims, raises the awareness of the fact that death is the final escape from the play of appearances (*How the World Became a Stage* 111).

The crypt, expected to contain the truth standing behind all appearances and made to signify southern history described to be unrepresentable by virtue of Simpson's reference to the "South that never was," is definitely the fulcrum in the machinery of destruction putting the general to his miserable death. The nature of historical experience, in fact, may be construed as the end of the possibilities inscribed in the mechanism of *miseen abime*, the smallest point that can be imagined by virtue of the status of unrepresentability ascribed to the region's past. As a matter of fact, the story's presentation of the crypt is visualized by the appearance of a small hole in the general's head made by the Sun just prior to his being taken onto the stage. Armed with his usual set of appearances(the hat, the uniform, and the saber), the general gets a warning from the divine against attempting to produce an-

other false representation of southern history within the existing ones, relying on the "potentially infinite miseen abime" (Egginton, *How the World Became a Stage* 87) in the process of bringing his existence near the infinite, that is near God.

Apart from that, the content of the crypt is supposed to make the general aware of the fact that what lies behind all representations percolating through the story is the nothingness resulting from the unrepresentability of the South "that never was," to repeat Simpson's phrase. It would be highly inappropriate to aggravate the cultural crisis outlined above by continuing his march in the world of appearances and in his engagement in another spectacle.

Nevertheless, when the orator making a speech at the ceremony mentions his name and accentuates the importance of history to the American nation, the general has a vision in which a succession of names (historical names) "rushed at him as if the past were the only future now and he had to endure it" (261). The past, already presented to be devoid of content, tantamount to nothingness placed in its foundation, is to be his future owing to his entanglement in the deceptive world of appearances.

Following Egginton's reference to Calderon's metaphor *El gran teatro del mundo*, which compares human existence to dramatic production written and directed by God and requiring individuals to play the role assigned (*How the World Became a Stage* 113), the reader is under the impression that the general has been summoned on the stage for judgment. Cautioned against the repetition of his mendacious behavior, the general imagines his presence during another spectacle with himself mounted on a horse on a float full of attractive young women. Since he cannot accept the fact that the experience of nothingness is to inhabit his existence, he intends to fall back upon the power of appearances, his faithful ally up to this brutal confrontation. Unfortunately, he clenches the saber so hard that he bleeds to death and O'Connor successfully points to the fact that the "baroque derangement of appearances" (Buci-Glucksmann 131) invariably wreaks perceptual havoc both in the seventeenth-century and on the stage of modernity in the modern age.

It is of paramount importance to return to Debord's conceptualization of the role ascribed to the spectacle on the grounds that his insightful comment adduced before is bound to come to the assistance of O'Connor reader in the endeavor to explore the essence of contemporary southern experience seen through the prism of theatricality. As the process of commodity production, the main fulcrum in the intricate social mechanism constructed by the intro-

duction of capitalism in Western tradition, points to the "real unconscious history" concealed behind the spectacle corresponding to "the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life," one is encouraged to move one step further in their intellectual indagation in connection with O'Connor's ultimate message.

It has already been established that "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" is constructed upon a theatrical representation of the antebellum South in that both the general and the film are supposed to appear in the story as symbols of the Old South created by modern capitalist culture grounded upon the exchange as well as the consumerist enjoyment of its products. Referring to Debord's claim, one is painfully aware of the fact that the encroachment of the commodity upon the realm of human existence necessarily entails the phenomenon of the spectacle, which, in turn, points to the fact the ongoing theatrical performance of modernity is meant to weave an intricate web of appearances enveloping humanity in order to conceal the painfully regrettable truth concerning the real *locus hominis* in the contemporary world: the complete servility to the commodity.

As the "development of the forces of production is the real unconscious history that has built and modified the conditions of existence of human groups," the evocation of a feeling of subordination to the process of capitalist creation of goods, staged in the theater of the twentieth-century southern culture, impels the O'Connor reader to turn his/her attention to the antebellum southern reality, which is supposedly represented by the modern spectacle created by general Sash as the representative of mendacious consumerist modernity.

As a matter of fact, the *modus faciendi* of the culture of the Old South, heavily influenced by the impulse to worship the commodity as an integral part of the extremely brutal variety of capitalism erected upon the enormous social edifice of slavery, may also be reduced to the conception of a spectacle. With profound subservience to the commodity operating at the depth of human experience in the region prior to the Civil War, one may arrive at the realization that the aristocratic life of opulence and sumptuosity is tantamount to the creation of theatrical appearances whose role is directed at the concealment of the legacy of death, pain, and suffering inflicted by the hateful system of slavery.

Simpson's argument, delineating the incommensurability between the pastoral vision of the Old South and the detrimental effects of slavery upon the whole of surrounding reality, indirectly suggests the necessity of perceiving social interaction in the region prior to the years between 1861-1865

as an ongoing spectacle that presents antebellum experience as replete with artificial refinement and glamor. Such a cultural mechanism is employed, similarly to the baroque phenomenon of the spectacle, with the sole purpose of concealing the painful truth expressed in the dictum hovering above human earthly existence since time immemorial: *mors ultima linea rerum*.

Futhermore, as the Sun King frequently relied upon the function of theatrical experience with the aim of enlisting the support of the French people, southern aristocrats, having the same objective in their mind, were in the habit of inviting their slaves to dances in their mansions. Indeed, one discovers such a truth upon consulting Solomon Northup's slave narrative entitled *Twelve Years a Slave* (181–182), which contributes to affix a seal of theatrical characterization to the antebellum culture of the spectacle operating upon two planes: the appeasement of slaves through brief enjoyment as well as the suppression of the dark echoes of death lurking at the unavoidable conclusion of human existence (in the case of southern aristocrats).

Perceiving both the antebellum as well as the contemporary South as societies of the spectacle in accordance with Debord's argument, one is compelled to turn their critical attention to the juxtaposition of the two dimensions of southern experience represented in the story, simultaneously paying heed to Egginton's presentation of the spaces of theatricality. What emerges in the course of such cogitation is the paradoxical conclusion that, as the modern society of the spectacle (nominating Sash as its representative) is supposed to represent the antebellum populace characterized by the same cultural phenomenon,the reader is sensitized to what Egginton discursively baptizes as "the permanent potential of infinite mise an abime," which manifests itself in opening numerous planes of representation.

This is expressed in the insight into Sash's thoughts provided by O'Connor at the denouement of the story as the protagonist is placed on the stage during the graduation ceremony: an orator commences to eulogize the value of historical experience (making reference to such important names as Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, and Lee), whilst the old man's imagination produces another plane of mendacious representation of the past by portraying the general as mounted on his horse in the company of attractive women.

The significance of the little hole in Sash's head (already referred to in the course of this article) deserves further attention in the light of Egginton's delineation of the crypt as the last, indivisible space of theatricality that cannot open onto more planes of representation through the exhaustion of the possibilities ascribed to the baroque mechanism of *miseen abime*. Appar-

ently, O'Connor's reliance upon the cultural implications of the crypt in theatrical spatiality is predominantly dictated by the urgency to put an end to the enormity of distortion wreaking havoc as the modern culture of the spectacle mendaciously represents the wholeness of southern past experience. The diminutive space of the crypt, summoned into the realm of modernity through divine intervention in O'Connor's story, points to the paradox ensconced deep in the core of southern experience, notorious for its groundless glorification of the reality associated with the Old South.

The impossibility of producing a unified representation of the antebellum culture (so strongly emphasized by Simpson's reference the idealized "South that never was" as opposed to slavery as a serious flaw in the whole image) makes the Georgia writer produce an express response to multifarious attempts undertaken by the modern society of the spectacle with the aim of resuscitating the essence of southern past. By making the cultural enterprise in question ultimately encounter the space of the crypt, which, according to Egginton, is supposed "to stand in for the real, the unrepresentable, and hence the foundation of all representations," O'Connor endeavors to point out the impossibility of decoding the multiplicity concealed in the heart of southern experience as the spectacle of modernity goes on.

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TEATRALNY ŚWIAT OPOWIADANIA FLANERY O'CONNOR "A LATE ENCOUNTER WITH THE ENEMY"

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Próbując przeprowadzić analizę opowiadania Flannery O'Connor pt. "A Late Encounter with the Enemy", czytelnik nie podaje w wątpliwość doświadczenia śmierci, bólu i cierpienia, które to aspekty przesiąkają przez fundamenty kultury amerykańskiego Południa jeszcze od czasów poprzedzających Wojnę Secesyjną. Zjawisko, o którym mowa, wydaje się głęboko zakorzenione w estetyce baroku, co pozwala na dostrzeżenie uderzającego podobieństwa między kulturą Południa amerykańskiego kontynentu z lat 50. XX wieku i esencją barokowej wrażliwości. Powyższa obserwacja nabiera szczególnego znaczenia, jeśli rozważyć ją w kontekście współczesnej teatralności.

Oparty na porównaniu między XVII-wieczną Francją Ludwika XIV oraz współczesnym Południem, artykuł bada przeszczepienie szerokiego wachlarza cech charakteryzujących barok na

grunt współczesnego doświadczenia kulturowego (ukierunkowanego na konfrontację historii Południa przez autora) przez pryzmat takich pojęć, jak: gra pozorów, *mise en abime* oraz przestrzenie teatralności. Te pojęcia, w głównej mierze kojarzone z teatrem, są nakreślone w publikacji Williama Eggintona *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity* oraz *The Theater of Truth: Ideology of Neo-Baroque Aesthetics*, które stanowią teoretyczne tło dyskusji dotyczącej związku między współczesnym Południem i jego doświadczeniem historycznym.

Argumentacja wsparta jest konceptualizacją zjawiska spektaklu zaprezentowaną w książce Guya Deborde'a *The Society of the Spectacle*, która przedstawia kulturę wymiany towarowej jako zjawisko obdarzone cechami teatralnymi. Mając na uwadze fakt, że – jak twierdzi Christine Buci-Glucksmann w *Baroque Reason* – reprezentacja podmiotu historycznego jest koniecznie związana z teatralnością, czytelnik, za pomocą dzieł wyszczególnionych powyżej, ma możliwość umiejscowienia tragedii usytuowanej w jądrze południowego doświadczenia spowitego zawikłaną siecią pozorów kultury nowoczesnej.

Słowa kluczowe: barok, *vanitas,* teatralność, spektakl, *mise en abime*, przestrzenie teatralności.