

“A Late Encounter with the Enemy”: The “Hyperreality” of the Civil War in Southern Mentality*

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Abstract

In the United States, Southerners have created a simulated reality of the Civil War and of the Old South. They focus on the bravery and resilience of the soldiers and disregard the actual horrors of the war.

The genuine perspective on the war can no longer be retrieved – “never again will the real have the chance to produce itself.” It is irreversibly lost on account of forgetfulness and overproduction of copies (motion pictures, books, celebrations, etc.) that distort the reality of war by “filtering” the past through Southern mentality. Southerners’ need to create a hyper-reality of the Civil War (and of the past in general) is perfectly illustrated in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” by Flannery O’Connor.

Keywords: *Civil War, Hyper-reality, Old South, Southern, Mentality.*

“The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true – Ecclesiastes.” “Simulation [...] is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”¹ In the United States, Southerners have created a simulated reality of the Civil War and of the Old South. This fabricated image of the past hides the death, the losses, the suffering and the lack of glory involved in the war itself. The image that Southerners have created offers them a false sense of identity and is made to fit their ideals. In reality, Southerners fought for glory, but, in order to hide this shameful truth, they claim they fought courageously to protect their way of life which – they believed – was dignified and aristocratic. They focus on the bravery

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¹ J. Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

and resilience of the soldiers and disregard the actual horrors of the war. Moreover, they identify themselves with defeated heroes and glamorize the whole war experience by transforming it into a product that is promoted and presented as a consumer good (in the form of different items connected to the Civil War – uniforms sold on the market, films, etc.)²

This fabricated reality is superior to and more appealing than reality itself because it is consistent with the Southern code of honor and Southerners' entire system of beliefs. The idealized version of the past is often preferred to the original one and it has even come to replace the authentic war experiences which are no longer of any interest to the young generations.³ The genuine perspective on the war can no longer be retrieved – “never again will the real have the chance to produce itself”. It is irreversibly lost on account of forgetfulness and overproduction of copies (“reproduced an indefinite number of times”) that distort the reality of war.⁴ The “copies” (motion pictures, books, celebrations, etc.) are means of recreating and altering history by “filtering” the past through Southern mentality.

Southerners' need to create a simulated reality of the Civil War (and of the past in general) is perfectly illustrated in *A Late Encounter with the Enemy* by Flannery O'Connor. The most noticeable issue in the short story is that of the discrepancy between the age of the main characters and the way they behave and see themselves – a way that suggests their refusal of growing old and accepting mortality.⁵ This attitude indicates the dissimulation of the inevitability of death because George Poker Sash pretends that he is still young and handsome and will never die: “living had got to be such a habit with him that he couldn't conceive of any other condition.” As proof of that, the old General acts accordingly: “he considered that he was still a very handsome man. When he had been able to stand up, he had measured five feet four inches of pure game cock [and] had his picture taken with beautiful girls.”⁶ In Jean Baudrillard's terms, “to dissimulate is to

² Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan and Todd W. Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (LSU Press, 2002) 155-60; O'Connor's *Short Stories: Summary and Analysis* “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” accessed January 10, 2013, http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/oconnor-short-stories/summary-analysis/a-late-encounter-with-enemy.html; Z. Vernon, *The Role of Witness: Ron Rash's Peculiarly Historical Consciousness*, accessed January 14, 2013, http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/scr/articles/scr_42-2_vernon.pdf, 1-24.

³ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁴ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” 2.

⁵ Cf. O'Connor's *Short Stories: Summary and Analysis* “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.”

⁶ F. O'Connor, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” in *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 399, 403.

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pretend not to have what one has”, whereas “to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. [...] Pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the «true» and the «false», the «real» and the «imaginary».”⁷ By further analyzing the character’s attitude towards death and old age, the reader might conclude that it is, in fact, a simulation (and not a dissimulation) that distorts the General’s view on life. He simulates a state of forgetfulness that is consistent with old age but self-induced in his case. He pretends that he has forgotten most past events, but he, actually, chooses to block out the traumatic experiences of his youth. Despite the fact that he willingly rejects an important part of his past, the character’s symptoms are as “real” as those of a person that truly does suffer from dementia.⁸

George Poker Sash disregards all present moments associated with death as well as all the memories connected to the Civil War in which he fought. He chooses to focus on (and even idealize) the positive experiences of his past. Similarly, Southerners replace the unpleasant reality of the Civil War with a glorified image of the soldiers’ bravery in battles. The fabricated image of the past is more luring and more credible than the authentic events and it, therefore, becomes a “hyper-reality”. According to Baudrillard, “hyper-reality” is a simulated reality that is more plausible and seems more “real” than reality itself. It is offered to people through different channels made available in a culture of signifiers and irrelevance of images which no longer refer to the “original”.⁹

This false / artificial reality becomes the focal point of the General’s life as well as of those present at the procession and film premiere (which took place twelve years before the graduation described in the short-story). As a result, the people present at these events are not aware of the horrors that their ancestors endured during the actual war. Instead, they romanticize and glamorize this particular moment in American history by: celebrating the war, treasuring its heroes (George Poker Sash) and creating a fictional version of the past in movies. The premiere described in the story is that of *Gone with the Wind* which is well-known for its depiction of a mythicized vision of the Civil War.

The movie and the book (*Gone with the Wind*) present a distorted image of the war. The foregrounded love story diminishes the importance of the battles and the focus is placed on glamour, family life and the regret for the disappearance of

⁷ J. Baudrillard, “The Divine Irrelevance of Images,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

⁸ Cf. *O’Connor’s Short Stories: Summary and Analysis “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”*.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem* and Baudrillard, “The Procession of Simulacra,” 3-4.

the Old South. Therefore, the war itself is not dealt with as a major topic. Moreover, instead of being a critique of the South (as it was initially meant to be), *Gone with the Wind* has become the prototype of writing about the courage and dignity of the Southerners who protected a certain way of life and their connection to land. It includes realistic as well as unrealistic accounts of the Civil War and it reflects the fact that Southerners acknowledge their history but fail to have an objective/impartial perspective on their past.¹⁰

General William J. Bush (who inspired Flannery O'Connor to create the George Pooker Sash character) appeared at a graduation ceremony at Georgia College declaring that he was getting younger every day. The authoress used his appearance to establish the basic irony of the situation of the two main characters in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy": the old General and Sally Pooker Sash. The most memorable event in both their lives is a film premiere which they attend twelve years prior to Sally's graduation. At the "preemy" – as the General calls it – Hollywood publicity agents create General Tennessee Sash of the Confederacy by partially hiding the real identity of the invented "war hero" who was only a humble soldier during the Civil War. This Hollywood type of transformation alludes to the fact that many aspects of "hyper-reality" are subordinated to *consumerism* which dominates American society. In order to advertise the film, the publicists decide to "introduce" a real participant (in the Civil War) that would provide the unrealistic image (promoted through the motion picture) with credibility. As a result, the fictionalized version of the war is associated with an original "item" in order to: blur the boundaries between the two, integrate the romanticized image into reality and even have the authentic war experience replaced by a glorified memory of it.¹¹

This "technique" is similar to the one described by Umberto Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality* in which he explains that, in some of the museums in the United States, the original objects are displayed separately and the visitor can clearly distinguish between reproductions and originals, whereas, in many others (the Museum of the City of New York for instance), the distinction between genuine pieces and replicas is indicated on explanatory panels beside, having the original items and the reconstructed ones mingled in a continuum that the visitor is not invited to decipher.¹² "This occurs partly because [...] the designers want the visitor to feel an atmosphere and to plunge into the past without becoming a

¹⁰ *Gone with the Wind: Theme Analysis*, accessed January 24, 2013, <http://www.novelguide.com/GonewiththeWind/themeanalysis.html>.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Cf. U. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego, NY, London: Harvest Book, 1990), 9.

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philologist or archeologist, and also because the reconstructed datum was already tainted by this original sin of «the leveling of pasts», the fusion of copy and original.”¹³ The same fusion of copy and original is created at the premiere in Atlanta, thus, signaling a typically American “technique” of erasing the boundaries between authenticity and imitation. As a result, the difference between “the real” and simulation simply disappears.¹⁴ “Present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation. [...] Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between one and the other that constituted the charm of abstraction.”¹⁵

Towards the end of the story, there is a scene which clearly reveals that George Poker Sash has lived most of his life holding on to an idealized image of his past in order to be able to block out the disturbing memories that he refuses to accept and which he (consciously or not) chooses to disregard and replace with pleasant ones. During this scene, the General experiences an epiphany.¹⁶ The character has forgotten his “real” past – his family and wartime experiences: “he had forgotten history and he didn’t intend to remember it again. He had forgotten the name and face of his wife and the names and faces of his children or even if he had a wife and children, and he had forgotten the names of places and the place themselves and what had happened at them.” He tries to remember a moment of glory in his past (“he tried to see himself and the horse mounted in the middle of a float full of beautiful girls, being driven slowly through downtown Atlanta”), but he is unable to do so because he is distracted by the speakers that he cannot ignore (“letting the words he heard into the dark places of his brain”, “the old words began to stir in his head as if they were trying to wrench themselves out of place and come to life”). One of the speakers’ words – “If we forget our past [...] we won’t remember our future and it will be as well for we won’t have one”¹⁷ seem to echo Jean Baudrillard’s statement: “we require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end.”¹⁸

In the end, it is suggested that George Poker Sash can no longer reject unhappy memories or have them replaced with a fabricated image of the past. The character’s futile attempt to choose only the memories that fit his interest (and his

¹³ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*.

¹⁴ Cf. O’Connor’s *Short Stories: Summary and Analysis* “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.”, 405.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” 2.

¹⁶ Cf. *op. cit.*

¹⁷ O’Connor, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” 405.

¹⁸ J. Baudrillard, “Ramses, or the Rosy-colored Resurrection,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10.

avoidance of dealing with the rest of them) is symbolic to Southerners' habit of transforming history according to their own ideals and mentality. They are known to distort the image of the Old South and that of the Civil War in order to make the two reflect the Southern code of honor and the "greatness" of those who fought for their land and families.¹⁹

As the "war hero" tries to conjure up the visions (of the past) that he selected according to his own liking, he starts remembering all the others (which he has been denying for years):²⁰

He heard the words, Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee, and he knew he was inspiring all these words that meant nothing to him. He wondered if he had been a general at Chickamauga or at Lee. [...] There was a long finger of music in the General's head, probing various spots that were words, letting in a little light on the words and helping them to live. He couldn't protect himself from the words and attend to the procession too and the words were coming at him fast. He felt that he was running backwards and the words were coming at him like musket fire, just escaping him but getting nearer and nearer. He turned around and began to run as fast as he could but he found himself running toward the words. [...] As the music swelled toward him, the entire past opened up on him out of nowhere and he felt his body riddled in a hundred places with sharp stabs of pain and he fell down, returning a curse for every hit. He saw his wife's narrow face looking at him critically through her round gold-rimmed glasses; he saw one of his squinting bald-headed sons; and his mother ran toward him with an anxious look; then a succession of places — Chickamauga, Shiloh, Marthasville — rushed at him as if the past were the only future now and he had to endure it.

The General's relative memory is pointed out even before his epiphany. He divides parades and "black" processions (which are suggestive of death) according to his own taste and wants to be forever young among the "pretty guls". His behavior highlights the fact that he only acknowledges what is consistent with his own desires:²¹

She said there would be a long procession of teachers and students in their robes but that there wouldn't be anything to equal him in his uniform. He knew this well enough without her telling him, and as for the damn procession, it could march to hell and back and not cause him a quiver. He liked parades with floats full of Miss Americas and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products. 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. However, he was willing to sit on the stage in his uniform so that they could see him. [...] To his mind, history was connected with processions and life with parades and he liked parades. [...] He didn't know what procession this was

¹⁹ Cf. O'Connor's *Short Stories: Summary and Analysis* "A Late Encounter with the Enemy".

²⁰ O'Connor, "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," 406.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 1-2, 4.

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but there was something familiar about it. It must be familiar to him since it had come to meet him, but he didn't like a black procession. Any procession that came to meet him, he thought irritably, ought to have floats with beautiful guls on them like the floats before the preemy. [...] “How I keep so young,” he screeched, “I kiss all the pretty guls!” [...]

General George Piker Sash stands for all Southerners who glamorize the Civil War (in order to diminish their sense of defeat) and become concerned with preserving its vividness only to the extent to which their distorted image of history can fulfill their psychological needs and fit their political ideology. Writer Ron Rash and David Goldfield – the author of *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* – analyze the effect that the Civil War still has on the lives of contemporary Southerners.²² According to Goldfield, the Civil War is “like a ghost that has not yet made its peace and roams the land seeking solace, retribution, or vindication. It continues to exist, an event without temporal boundaries, an interminable struggle.”²³ Similarly, Rash asserts that Southerners “have a deep interest in and even obsession with the past”. He argues that “part of what art does is it keeps things from being forgotten,”²⁴ but the danger of obsessing about the past lies in the fact that it often leads to romanticizing and elegizing “certain lost aspects of a culture while at the same time forgetting the potentially traumatic maladies of a culture.”²⁵

Culture is produced by a certain group and it reflects their identity. As a result, history is not objective. It is a “product” made by the human mind and used according to personal and collective beliefs.²⁶ Rash concludes that historical interest can distort the image of past events, but it can also “prevent those living in the region from forgetting the way of life that once existed.” Therefore, Southerners should focus on “examining both the good and bad of that culture [and] determining how they should then live in the present.”²⁷

Umberto Eco comments on the historical interest manifested by Americans, explaining that they enjoy making history more accessible and tangible.²⁸ In their museums, “the «multiple» is perfected” and reconstructions seem identical to the original. “Once the fetishistic desire for the original is forgotten, these copies are

²² Vernon, *The role of witness*, 23.

²³ D. Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Louisiana State UP, 2002), 1 *apud* Vernon, *The role of witness*, 23.

²⁴ R. Rash, *Among the Believers* (Iris P, 2000) *apud* Vernon, *The role of witness*, 24.

²⁵ Vernon, *The role of witness*, 24.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 24

²⁷ Vernon, *The role of witness*.

²⁸ U. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 39.

perfect.”²⁹ This affirmation also applies to the society portrayed in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy”. The fetishistic desire for the original (Southerners’ obsession with the past and with the ones who participated in the Civil War) is forgotten because the copies are perfect: the celebrations and the movies concerned with the Civil War become the new object of interest (replacing the fascination with the war itself) and a foot soldier (George Poker Sash) is transformed into General George Tennessee and presented as an authentic “war hero”, even though, in reality, he has no respect for history.³⁰

The creation of a romanticized image of war (in Southern mentality) reflects all the successive phases theoreticized by Baudrillard. Initially, the image is a “reflection of a profound reality” – the reality of war. Then, “it masks and denatures the profound reality”: the horrors and hardships of war are glorified. In the following stage, the image “masks the absence of a profound reality” – the absence of authentic glory associated with the Southern soldiers and the lack of any justification for the celebration of their having participated in the Civil War. The image gets to a phase in which “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever”.³¹ In “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” the old man enjoys being admired for having participated in the Civil War, but refuses to remember his war experience. He dissociates the two and despises any genuine reference to history:³²

It must be something connected with history like they were always having. He had no use for any of it. What happened then wasn't anything to a man living now and he was living now. [...] The figure was telling something about history and the General made up his mind he wouldn't listen, but the words kept seeping in through the little hole in his head. He heard his own name mentioned [...] Another black robe had taken the place of the first one and was talking now and he heard his name mentioned again but they were not talking about him, they were still talking about history.

In the last phase, the image becomes “its own pure simulacrum.”³³ The already idealized image of war is endlessly reproduced and becomes the model – the “original” – for other copies. *Gone with the Wind*, for instance, has been many times imitated by means of different items/products (that are based on the book and the motion picture): television series, theatrical plays, etc.

In *A Late Encounter with the Enemy*, history is embellished to the point of being transformed into a product to be sold and advertised through films, campaigns and celebrations that involve: “items” which imitate the “originals”

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ Cf. O'Connor's *Short Stories: Summary and Analysis* “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.”

³¹ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” 6.

³² O'Connor, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” 405.

³³ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” 6.

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(war uniforms and other such clothing) and a real-life General who is actually only a foot soldier.

This glamorized image of the Civil War is part and parcel of Southern culture and the ending of “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” suggests that it will be reproduced by future generations as well. The past has lost its meaning. It has become a consumer good and the new generations will inevitably fail to retrieve the “original” meaning.³⁴ The final tableau (of the “dead” past juxtaposed with a representative of the young – John Wesley who rushes towards the Coca-Cola machine which is a symbol of modern culture) indicates O’Connor’s denunciation of both old and new American Southern culture: “That crafty scout had bumped him out the back way and rolled him at high speed down a flagstone path and was waiting now, with the corpse, in the long line at the Coca-Cola machine.”³⁵

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³⁴ O’Connor’s *Short Stories: Summary and Analysis “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.”*

³⁵ O’Connor, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” 407.