Flannery O'Connor's "A Late Encounter with the Enemy:" A Commentary on Camus' The Stranger

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Flannery O'Connor, a modern southern American writer who deals mainly in religious themes, wrote most of her fiction in the 1950's when existentialism, or action-centered thought, was extremely popular. The anguish and trembling we find in Kierkegaard and Kafka, for instance, often appear in the troubled souls of her characters. Miss O'Connor also read Heidegger, and many of her major themes suggest she must have been particularly attracted to two of his existential moments—the meaning of time (that is, living in the authentic present) and facing death with resolution. Likewise, the French existentialists find their way into O'Connor. The sense of mystery and wonder espoused by Marcel is certainly part of the texture of her rural scenes; and, by contrast, she was well aware of Sartre's portrayals of nausea and despair, for some of her grotesque characters are tragicomic embodiments of these mental states.

One existentialist, however, toward whom O'Connor seems ambivalent is Albert Camus. One reason for this is that she liked Camus, and praised him as a serious searcher for meaning in what she thought was a particularly secular century. "What Christian novelist could compare his concern with Camus'?" she asks. On the other hand, as a Christian, she did not accept Camus's notion of freedom. She contends the modern age, including the Church, has "domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily."¹ This might be a criticism of Camus, for he denies the significance of the supernatural, and insists that man—Sisyphus in The Myth of Sisyphus and Meursault
in *The Stranger*—must confine himself to the present world, however absurd, and "imagine himself happy."2 O'Connor's simultaneous affection for and intellectual quarrel with Camus, of course, is not surprising. She was also a disciple of James Joyce, for her use of the "epiphany" as a literary technique is modeled on his art. This does not prevent her, however, in stories like "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," from satirizing his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where young Steven views the female body merely as an object for his art, while neglecting its relevance as a vehicle of the divine spirit. So, with Joyce as with Camus, she can be a disciple, but at the same time a critical one.

In this light I would like to examine O'Connor's story "A Late Encounter With the Enemy," where she seems to parallel Camus' famous novel *The Stranger*. Perhaps this novel more than any has served as a modern paradigm for readers seeking liberation from oppressive institutions, governments, and restrictive societies. By using it as a backdrop for her story, O'Connor is able to bring into sharp focus her own notion of freedom (or lack of it) in the 20th century. Though the themes of the two works are continents apart—one about an ordinary middle-class man in Algiers, the other about an old general in the American South—there are elements in the two stories that are very similar, so that, considered side by side, one reflects and gains power from the other. The two, for instance, are centered on the meaning of time, particularly the significance of what both authors call "the present moment."
Second, both are structured around the problem of death in modern society. Finally, the three controlling metaphors in both pieces are identical—the sun, the act of shooting, and the notion of a trial. All these elements work together to show that O'Connor, who admired Camus, at the same time, used him to write her own story about freedom. For her, Camus' idea of freedom is too narrow and may even lead to a kind of blindness; it needs to be seen in a much broader context than The Stranger allows, and to this end "A Late Encounter" is her statement on what it means to be free, or rather, "unfree"—a real "outsider" in the modern world.

My contention, then, is that the focus of both Camus and O'Connor is the same—what it means philosophically to live in "the present." Camus' novel details a few episodes in the life of Meursault (viz., sea-sun), events which in relationship to each other serve to define that "present moment." Meursault appears first at his mother's funeral, where he feels strange amidst his mother's friends. Afterwards he frolics on the beach and sleeps with his girlfriend Marie. Then a friend, Raymond, asks him to help with a personal problem, which he does, though he ends up shooting an Arab. This leads to his trial, whereupon he again feels estranged because the jury misinterprets his motives in the shooting. Finally, in prison he refuses the consolation of eternity offered by the priest for repentance: Meursault has been "too much absorbed in the present... to think back."3 In The Myth of Sisyphus Camus says the absurd man must give up all hope of
afterlife and choose to live in the present—"the "barriers between which I confine my life." For Camus, Meursault, like Sisyphus, is innocent and must "imagine himself happy;" he accepts the world as it is, irrational though it be. In effect, Meursault "revolts" against the usual life patterns by which men live in favor of his own lifestyle. This "lucid indifference" enables him to be himself, truly alive, free.4

O'Connor's setting and plot in "A Late Encounter With the Enemy" are far removed from Camus' novel, but her intention to parallel his story surfaces in her making the thematic center of her tale the present moment, or what Old General Sash of the Confederacy calls "living now."5 We know that O'Connor read Heidegger, who speaks of the "authentic present," or what it means to live meaningfully in the circumstances into which one is "thrown." He often relates the present to death, a time which conditions every moment one is alive.6 General Sash is grotesque precisely because he doesn't know how to relate death to "the now." But it is Camus that O'Connor seems to have in mind as she develops her main character. At age 104, General Sash awaits the college graduation of his 62-year-old granddaughter, Sally Poker Sash. She wants him there to show off her traditions, and he agrees to be on stage only because he was there once at a premiere where he received his uniform from a "beautiful gul" (235). Actually, he detests lights andprocessions because they remind him of his past, which he hates: "...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 than a cat" (237). Sash is in a way like Meursault, who is indifferent to the past and enjoys his present life with Marie. General Sash also forgets the past--the Spanish American War and his son who fought in it. His mind, like Meursault's, is on the sensual life of the present--for him the Miss Daytona Beaches and kissing all the "pretty guls" (237). He appears absurd, however, not because others misinterpret his actions, but because he, like so many of O'Connor's characters, is essentially a materialist.

Closely related to the concept of "the living present" in The Stranger is the meaning of death itself. In fact, Camus structures the book around three deaths. The novel opens with the death of Meursault's mother; he visits the mortuary and walks in her funeral procession. Then midway in the work Meursault kills the Arab. Camus dramatizes this second death by having Meursault, bothered by the heat, drive "four shots" (76) into the body. The final death is that to which Meursault is condemned as a result of the trial. All these deaths work together to help explain Meursault's conscious acceptance of his own death. In The Myth of Sisyphus Camus says that death is absurd because it ends life, and for Camus "the point is to live." Hence, in The Stranger there is no reason for Meursault to weep at his mother's death, and the death of the Arab belongs to the circumstances under which he was killed, however absurd. Similarly, at the point of his own death, Meursault rejects
the afterlife hinted at by the priest, for the absurd man lives in time without appeal. When Meursault, then, is emptied of all hope, he feels free, and Camus complements this feeling with a "persistent breeze" (152) that the stranger feels had been blowing toward him all his life. Like Sisyphus, Meursault is now strangely happy.

The structural points involving death in Camus' novel are also curiously present in "Late Encounter." The funeral procession (death #1 in Camus) and Meursault's final epiphany when he accepts his own death (death #3 in Camus) are realized simultaneously in the final section of O'Connor's story. Here, at the graduation ceremony, the procession of graduates becomes a kind of funeral procession in Sash's mind. As if to signal his own death, it comes upon him like Meursault's persistent breeze, his mental faculties swelling gradually with the music. Having paralleled Camus' first and third deaths, O'Connor then introduces the shooting (death #2 in Camus) as a way of undercutting the whole situation, so that her main character is not liberated, but destroyed. Here the words of the graduation speaker strike the General like repeated bullets from a gun. These "shots" also contain the reason for the old man's trauma: "If we forget our past...we won't remember our future and it will be as well for we won't have one" (210). At this point Sash's entire past opens up, and it is "as if the past were the only future now and he had to endure it" (241). What he sees is the critical look of his wife, his sons' anxious faces, and
Chickamauga, Shiloh, Marthasville--battlefields from the past he has not related to life, so that now the present becomes a battlefield on which he is psychologically shot to death.

In paralleling elements surrounding death in The Stranger, O'Connor reverses Camus' thinking in The Myth of Sisyphus. Like Meursault, Sash is emptied of all hope, but he is neither free nor happy. This kind of twist is typical of O'Connor; in "Good Country People," Joy Hopewell's Sartrian belief in "Nothingness" becomes, to her surprise, a kind of "nausea" when she loses her "Being" (her wooden leg, mark of her identity) at the hands of a phoney Bible salesman. Sash enters a similar kind of mental hell, screaming "God damn every goddamn thing to hell" (238), though all he has done is imitate Meursault, that is, forget the past and the future. In the end he is wheeled out of the auditorium by his nephew, who waits with the corpse at a Coca-Cola machine, symbol of present material world in which he has put his faith. It is interesting that O'Connor does not mention the notion of afterlife. Rather, her story seems to reflect a primitive notion of time, where the reason or "the why" of the present, says Cassirer, is in the past. This Meursault rejects, and so does Sash. For all his Confederate ties, the General is really a modern--not a primitive--man. In paralleling Camus, then, O'Connor also challenges him by portraying a vanity that is blind to any deep spiritual connections to history.

The images in Camus are also important to O'Connor. The sun, for instance, shines on Meursault throughout the novel--
when he walks in the procession, swims with Marie, and even at the moment he kills the Arab. Ironically, in its brightness it highlights his immediate involvement, while at the same time causing blindness and distress which only serve to separate him from others. This image is related to another key image in the novel--the very act of shooting (the Arab). Here it is because Meursault is affected by the sun, which blurs his vision, that he fires again and again into the inert body. This excessive shooting seems irrational, but that is Camus' notion of life itself, which takes place "on this little strip of sand between the sunlight and the sea" (72) and then is snuffed out. The final image, the trial, is in turn connected to the first two, for it is here that Meursault's acquaintances, not aware of the sun at the shooting, interpret Meursault's life negatively. One inmate says he did not weep at his mother's funeral, another that he carried on an underground liaison with Marie. It is through the trial that Meursault becomes aware that he is all alone, a stranger to other people. And as a result of the trial he is able calmly to accept his lot, remain reconciled, and live within the barriers of "the now."

In "Late Encounter" O'Connor uses almost the identical images as Camus. The sun, as well as the "light" (236) and the "spotlight" (237) focus intensely on the General, much as the sun persistently follows Meursault through The Stranger. The light, in both cases, calls attention to the importance of the moment, as well as the reality of alienation. In
Sash's case the sun at the graduation hits the black procession, just as it hits Meursault in the funeral procession or on the beach, for it "...blazed off the fenders of the automobiles and beat from the columns of the buildings and pulled the eye from one spot of glare to another" (239). The only difference now is that the sun calls attention, not to Sash's inner world which, like Meursault's, may be misunderstood, but to the past--"To his mind, history was connected with processions" (234)--that he himself misunderstands. It is a history, of course, from which he is alienated, but through his own ignorance, rather than (as in Meursault's case) the ignorance of others.

When using light to focus on her characters, however, O'Connor employs an element Camus does not--humor. It is, as Cheney points out, a metaphysical humor, for we laugh at the old man, but simultaneously stand aghast. In contrast to Camus, O'Connor does not view alienation as an ennobling experience. For her, life does not become absurd because of a choice to live intensely, but grotesque because of bad choices, as with Sash's about the past. Coleman observes that O'Connor's

...art of the grotesque is solely a revelation of one form or another of pride. If you cannot "identify" with her characters because you are superior to them "in any way that matters" you are grotesque.

General Sash, of course, is alienated, but he is also arrogant, and O'Connor uses the effects of lighting to focus, not only on his separateness as in The Stranger, but also on his
essential foolishness. At the premiere, for instance, the lights catch Sash with his "neck thrust forward, his mouth slightly open, and his voracious gray eyes drinking in the glare and the applause" (237). He may think of the moment as pleasurable, but to the audience he is pathetic.

In "Late Encounter," as in The Stranger, there is also the image of shooting. Meursault shoots the Arab under the pulsating heat of the sun. In O'Connor's story the sunlit black procession becomes, along with the words of the graduation speaker, a series of metaphoric bullets that come at the General like "musket fire" (241). As with Meursault, though he shoots instead of being shot, Sash is filled with "word-bullets" that expand his mind, whereupon a "little hole" (140) opens in his head. I have already discussed Sash's battlefield death, but it is worth noting that, though the sun and the procession are real, these bullets are a figment of Sash's mind that now serve to do him in. Meursault, of course, is able to ignore the world he finds irrational and find peace in his limited perceptions, but when Sash tries to depend on his view of reality, he becomes grotesque, and, as though to emphasize the point that one must see beyond his own narrow world, O'Connor has him actually run toward the position he has so long denied and now opens upon him like a machine gun. The excessive gunfire, then, mirrors that in The Stranger, but Sash cannot dismiss death easily as Meursault; rather, he must "encounter" it as "the enemy" on the "battlefield" because of his choice to ignore
its relation to other moments in time.

The graduation ordeal is also Sash's trial—the third image. Like the bullets, the old man's judge and jury are products of his imagination. On imagined battlefields from the past, his mother, wife, and sons, who return to look at him "critically" (241), now serve as the courtroom where the judgment on his life takes place. He sees, as does Meursault in his courtroom, how far removed he is from others, but O'Connor's verdict is different from Camus'. Carl Jung says that the Promethean sin of our age is that man is estranged from living traditions, that he converts otherworldliness into matter-of-factness and then gives empirical boundaries to what he calls "meaning." As a result, man finds himself disconnected from the past and deeply disturbed within his unconscious psyche.¹⁰ This is the judgment Sash's family and history pass on him personally. Meursault, the absurd man, cannot contact others, nor they him, so he must remain the outsider, and imagine himself happy. General Sash fails to contact others, so he must go through a mental hell before undergoing the death penalty. And the verdict? Guilty of not living in the living past.

There is little doubt, of course, that O'Connor is an existentialist interested in significant action in the present. Tarwater, in The Violent Bear It Away, having learned from the past, freely commits himself to future action, his eyes now "burned clean." In "Late Encounter" O'Connor tells a similar story in reverse—one about inaction and "unfreedom."
What gives it power is that she parallels our century's great novel about existential freedom, *The Stranger*. Both stories depend on the concept of "living now," that is, in the sensual present. And both relate that "now" to death. Meursault is free because he does not look back or forward; Sash is deeply disturbed for precisely the same reasons, so his death becomes a violent trauma. The two authors then embellish their action with images of light, bullets, and a courtroom trial--O'Connor adapting her metaphors to fit her own notion of freedom. Still, Miss O'Connor does not criticize Camus directly. Who can quarrel with a man like Meursault, who does what he thinks is right under the circumstances? But, having read Heidegger and Cassirer and Jung on the meaning of time, she adopts many of the materials in Camus' *The Stranger*--his theme, structure, and imagery--to create her own story about freedom, or better, unfreedom in the modern world. Admiring Camus as a novelist and philosopher, she wrote "Late Encounter" as her answer to him on the vexing problem of the meaning of time--a topic about which she simply chose to disagree.
Footnotes


