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***SOCIAL STANDARDS REGARDING TRUTH AND LIES
AS DEPICTED IN LITERATURE:
VERACITIES AND FALSEHOODS IN
FLANNERY O'CONNOR***

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Abstract: Human society is an intricate mechanism – one which functions based on a set of rules that are synchronically fix and flexible. Humans have forever desired to make the differentiation among themselves and other beings, and among the structures that have been taken into account as markers of superiority to the non-human presences there are the set truth-lies and art and religion.

How much truth and how much untruth is involved in art and religion represents an endless discussion just as much as where is the borderline between facts and fiction – but there can be no doubt when affirming that such a writer as Flannery O'Connor has, through her artistic outcomes, depicted majestically the complex and confusing relation among all these “man-made” constructs that give our nature specificity.

Some literary works, purloined letters, might not even try very hard to mask the truth(s) – the facts are there to be seen by those wishing to look with an insightful eye. Yet, the most obvious is rarely easy to capture, just as much as the simple is always hard to depict. It takes a great writer to artfully reveal truths and lies, by hiding them in plain sight, in such a way that the reader needs stop and reflect.

O'Connor's work represents a bewildering exploration of human existence, one which most clearly reveals the frailty of life in an environment created with the aid of religious precepts claiming to distinguish between universal veracity and absolute falsehood.

If reading Flannery one might not resolutely distinguish between truth and lies, at least one will have understood that there is more to reality than meets the eye.

Human society appears as an intricate mechanism – one which functions based on a set of rules that are synchronically fix and flexible. In their attempt and desire to differentiate themselves from other forms of life, human beings have constantly devised ways to organize their shared existence in order that they may construct what is understood to be a balanced, harmonious society – our lives, not only at an individual level, but also at the communal one, is a work in progress. What are the foundations of such laborious project and to what ends does it all lead is a question of great interest to some.

In order that individuals may accept the ‘ways’ which society imposes in order for it to function harmoniously, they need be convinced said ways are not only

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the correct ones, but the ones that bring most benefit to everyone inside the group, hence

[s]carcity (*Lebensnot*, *Ananke*) teaches people they can't freely satisfy their instinctual drives, that they can't live by the pleasure principle. Therefore, the reason for which society imposes the decisive altering of the instinctual structure is of an 'economic' nature (Marcuse 40)

– and for this to take place a strict set of truths and untruths has to be put forth, a set of laws to which the members of society must necessarily adhere to – the more ardently they stick to it, the more balanced the community appears to be and the better it performs.

The structure of truths and falsehoods is as important as the essence it contains – with one absolute truth reigning high over the rest, with universal truths – which should not vary in time and/or place, with local ones, that can be, under certain strict conditions, changed by those 'elected' to do so, and a series of common certainties to fill in everyday everywhere existence.

Human society, during its entire history, has come up with two major kinds of truths to speak of – either religious or scientific – and according to who has the power, therefore, who gets to decide what rules govern life and, why not, even eternity, either one or the other type will be considered as the truth and, even more important, the other lot will necessarily have to be dismissed and labeled as absolute falsity, in order that its opposite set might gain even more strength in front of the crowds. It is understood by default that the two are in stark opposition, as also the followers of each side, with the ones opting for religious truth labeled as 'believers', whilst the ones believing in scientific proofs labeled as 'non-believers'.

As Edward Harrison stated, the problem with this split started when “[p]ersons who reject religion because of its archaic mythical beliefs are left without moral imperatives. Disbelievers find themselves condemned as moral outlaws”, just as well as the issues the opposite situation provokes seem to be just as undeserved, when devotees are seen as either non-intellectuals or outdated intellectuals, hence “by the time of the Enlightenment the rational mind had become the model of truth, replacing the authority of revelation and tradition”. (Harrison 40-41; Lewis P. Simpson qtd. in Brinkmeyer, Jr. 3)

Therefore, one of the two sides has the upper hand and the other falls into disgrace – but this position might seem only at a first glance as a misfortune, hence, truth be told, the fallen ones have always an advantage in kindling imagination and with this, the power of sabotage, for revolutions never start with the uprising of the privileged ones.

But what happens with art, and mostly literature? Is there a truth or several that might just belong to fiction? Or is it that fiction is simply make-believe, hence holds no veracity whatsoever?

The issue is rather complex and varies in both time and place – yet it is generally understood that during the last decades, maybe also due to the idea expressed by Lyotard that with the advent of postmodern society “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility”, all being relative, with even history reduced to one

story from many others, there is more tolerance shown towards the indication that also literature can hold truth and that behind its facet of fiction the most concrete facts lie hidden. (37)

With the death of the author, as Roland Barthes amply explained it – and the empowerment of everybody else – readers, characters, narrative threads etc. – there budded the idea that maybe under veils of illusion, fictional texts contain real-life information. (*Romanul Scriiturii, Antologie*)

Some writings, purloined letters, might not even try that hard to mask the truth(s) – the facts are there to be seen by those wishing to look with an insightful eye.¹ Yet, the most obvious is rarely easy to capture, just as much as the simple is always hard to depict. It takes a great writer to artfully reveal truths and lies, by hiding them in plain sight, in such a way that the reader needs stop and reflect – as in a hall of mirrors – to search for the entity whose image appears in every looking glass, and, eventually, to estimate who this entity represents. Flannery O'Connor is such writer!

The 'hall of mirrors' effect is easily seen in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* through a series of doublets, such as the two protagonists who share the same name, Tarwater, reminding one of a form of medieval medicine used for getting the ill rid of "strong spirits." ("Tar water")² The puzzling and eerie situations related to the presence of a double appear in such scenes as related to old Tarwater's death, were the reader has to take a minute and see to whom is young Tarwater speaking – his great-uncle, old Tarwater, or his alter-ego/shadow, 'the stranger'; then there is the double young Tarwater and Bishop – even the fact that young Tarwater had been chosen by his great-uncle to become a prophet and the young mentally disabled child's name, though seemingly chosen by a father that is an intellectual and religious skeptic, is what it is; even the "couple" old Tarwater and Bishop, both incapable to adapt to normality; also, there is the fact that the schoolteacher, Rayber, has to take care of two boys that in many respects are quite similar gives an uncanny feeling of 'lost-and-found'. In the end a form of mirroring can also be seen in the way old Tarwater and Rayber react when they think they are being misunderstood and mentally represented as something else than what they wish to be: old Tarwater was furious when thinking that his image was in the schoolteacher's mind in an erroneous manner just as much as Rayber was frantic when he thought young Tarwater had him as an "imprisoned image" when entering a church. (O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* 198)

He [young Tarwater] didn't search out the stranger's face but he knew by now that it was sharp and friendly and wise, shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed panama hat that obscured the color of his eyes. He had lost his dislike for the thought of the voice. Only every now and then it sounded like a stranger's voice to him. He began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance. (O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* 144)

¹ With reference to Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Purloined Letter".

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tar_water

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“I saved you to be free, your own self!” he [old Tarwater] had shouted, “and not a piece of information inside his head [Rayber’s]! If you were living with him, you’d be information right now, you’d be inside his head, and what’s furthermore,” he said, “you’d be going to school.”

The boy grimaced. The old man had always impressed on him his good fortune in not being sent to school. The Lord had seen fit to guarantee the purity of his upbringing, to preserve him from contamination, to preserve him as His elect servant, trained by a prophet for prophesy. While other children his age were herded together in a room to cut out paper pumpkins under the direction of a woman, he was left free for the pursuit of wisdom ... The boy knew that escaping school was the surest sign of his election. (O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* 132-133)

“Where he wanted me was inside that schoolteacher magazine. He thought once he got me in there, I’d be as good as inside his head and done for and that would be that, that would be the end of it. Well, that wasn’t the end of it! Here I sit. And there you sit. In freedom. Not inside anybody’s head!” (O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* 135)

When Rayber reached the street, Tarwater was standing still in the middle of the next block. With a furtive look around him, he vanished, apparently into the building he had been facing. Rayber dashed forward. As he reached the place, singing burst flatly against his eardrums. Two blue and yellow windows glared at him in the darkness like the eyes of some Biblical beast. He stopped in front of the banner and read the mocking words, UNLESS YE BE BORN AGAIN...

That the boy’s corruption was this deep did not surprise him. What unstrung him was the thought that what Tarwater carried into the atrocious temple was his own imprisoned image. (O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* 198)

The fact that the two characters, old Tarwater and Rayber, their conflict representing the starting point of the novel, find themselves in a complementary antagonism, one as a backward religious fanatic, and the other as an arrogant academic conformist, might not come as such a surprise – though the extent to which Flannery O’Connor pushes their intolerance and aggressiveness seems somewhat farfetched. Yet, one had better remember the words of Coleridge that imagination is the “willing suspension of disbelief” when attempting to cope with such powerful personalities as her (anti-)heroes. (qtd. in O’Connor, *A Prayer Journal. Introduction*, X)

Such doubles, constantly in a state of balanced opposition and symmetric parallelism, represent a step forward in the Gothic tradition, and here one can see the evolution of the doppelganger from such characters as Edgar Allan Poe’s William Wilson and Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray.

This coupling via antithesis comes quite naturally if we look at the fact that O’Connor was persistently torn between two opposite states – and this can be seen not only from her fiction, but also from her non-fictional writings. Inside her there was a battle going on, between her “much debated anti-intellectualism” and her solid religious spirit, which finally was expressed by herself in the cry: “[i]f I could only hold God in my mind” (Peiu 57; O’Connor, *A Prayer Journal* 39). From such a clash sprang her talent and from it was born a work that challenged all conformity

and took truth and lie from one part of the epistemological framework to the other, her writings attempting to put up for debate all the types of veracity that humans arrogantly defend and follow, and all the falsity people (think they) understand and reject.

This perfect mixture she presented between Catholic devoutness, “replete with its mystery” and a high level of (anti-)intellectualism, intermingled with her rich Old South-based imagination, “ripe with its manner”, represented the fuel that produced such singular writings as hers. (Earley Whitt 5)

Her works are rare gems not only due to the fact that she bravely and skillfully tackled the existence of these two opposite systems, unveiling the shortsightedness of the representatives of both – and one might add, in times as hers, her valiance proves even greater since she stubbornly reveals the equivalence of intolerance and sectarianism that intellectuals nourish within themselves to those of the religious bigots – but also through her passionate manner in depicting her characters and their at least bizarre, if not downright absurd, actions.

It is exactly due to her “crazily distorted characters that stretch credibility” by which the author shows her earnestness towards the personages that populate her works – contrary to Bloom’s perspective that O’Connor displayed a “rather fierce stance towards some of the protagonists in her story”, one would argue that it is precisely due to this effort of hers to push things to extremes which demonstrates her greatest care and concern to give her (anti-)heroes the chance to develop complexity and experience veracity and falsehood. (Earley Whitt 5; Bloom, *Flannery O’Connor. Bloom’s Major Short Story Writers* 8)

It is by depicting such characters and their deeds that the author gives her auditorium the chance to witness a grand display of what represents the antagonism between religious and intellectual fanaticism and, even more important, their shared essence – intolerance: old Tarwater, the barbaric backwoodsman, convinces easily any reader of how fatal shortsightedness based on a personal (mis)interpretation of ‘sacred precepts’ can be, whilst Rayber, the schoolteacher, a model of progress, demonstrates how the opposite, though still extreme attitude, based on science solely with the firm rejection of any other system, can be just as damaging – and both (anti-)heroes join hand in hand in their ridiculousness.

One great problem of humanity is that so many never take sides, or otherwise stop to ponder on matters of importance – and this troublesome situation we find ourselves in can be understood, surprisingly, when looking at Flannery O’Connor’s life and her works. Her talent comes out yet again in the fact that her writings are so complex that they include on the one hand the most unbelievable protagonists, people that would leave the most insensitive of audience agape, while, paradoxically, in general the great lot of her characters is rarely composed of fanatics but of unexceptional figures. The main bulk belongs to the middle stream: neither high intellectuals, nor pure religious devotees. The ones that might belong to any of the two extremes will, in the end, find their castigation – for in a mediocre world, any form of passion, be it enlightening or not, must be outlawed.

This is majestically exemplified in O’Connor’s short story “Good Country People”, where the reader sees how Hulga/Joy is finally punished for siding with the highly educated, skeptic, and moreover, atheist lot – she is placed in opposition to

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the rest of her world, people who, ironically, do not genuinely believe in God, but nevertheless fake it quite well – and in the end she will become a victim of the master trickster Manley Pointer, as a result of the credulity her arrogance produced.

“In my economy,” she said, “I’m saved and you are damned but I told you I didn’t believe in God.”

Nothing seemed to destroy the boy’s look of admiration.

...

“We won’t need the Bible,” she observed.

“You never can tell,” he said, panting.

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The girl looked at him almost tenderly. “You poor baby,” she murmured. “It’s just as well you don’t understand,”

...

“Oh no no!” she cried. “It joins on at the knee. Only at the knee. Why do you want to see it?” The boy gave her a long penetrating look.

“Because,” he said, “it’s what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else.”

...

“Put it back on,” she said.

...

“Not yet,” he murmured, setting it on its foot out of her reach.

...

He jumped up so quickly that she barely saw him sweep the cards and the blue box into the Bible and throw the Bible into the valise. She saw him grab the leg ... When all of him had passed but his head, he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had any admiration in it. “I’ve gotten a lot of interesting things,” he said. ... And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga,” he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 294-9)

In *Wise Blood* we see a certain type of fanaticism – it is the ‘disconcerting’ kind, which seems to spring from nothing and aims to accomplish nothing, making it hard to be placed in any format. The protagonist Hazel Motes goes against all sorts of mainstreams: both scientific, as well as clear-cut institutionalized dogmatism – and amazingly in the end he reaches some form of conclusion as to what his lot is and takes matters into his own hands, by punishing himself for his immoderacy and blinding himself, an act that has an incredibly powerful symbolism, which inevitably will lead to his death.

In his confusion and ignorance, Hazel Motes intuitively grasps truths that go beyond the normal understanding of common people, he perceives realities that have brought up misfortune to humanity and have mystified philosophers for centuries, and moreover he foresees the power of man’s need for religion, for a guiding faith, even when such reality has been stripped off its most strongest symbols, the very pillars that consist the foundation of its existence.

Nothing was working the way Haze had expected it to. He had spent every evening preaching, but the membership of the Church Without Christ was still one person: himself.

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If Haze had believed in praying, he would have prayed for a disciple, but as it was all he could do was worry about it a lot. (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 75)

His tragedy is that he does not have the power of mind to conceptualize what he can only intuit and he has not the power of spirit to hypnotize the masses in following his beliefs.

In the end, all his actions, even if carried out in such a perplexing and ludicrous manner as presented by O'Connor, Hazel Motes provokes, more or less willingly, the occurrence of an epiphany in the otherwise conventional life of Mrs. Flood, his landlady:

She had never observed his face more composed and she grabbed his hand and held it to her heart. ... The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 120)

Should the readers' conclusion be then that this powerful *mélange* between religiousness and (anti-)intellectualism leads unescapably towards a taste for violence? It certainly would appear so – and it is easily explainable that by taking such mutually exclusive perspectives and putting them together in one mind, the natural impulse that comes to surface should be the destructive one, the death drive, annihilating all hope, if not all life just as well.

As the author herself expressed it so exactly and poetically, though with a touch of grotesque

[t]he general accusation passed against writers now is that they write about rot because they love it. Some do, and their works may betray them, but it is impossible not to believe that some write about rot because they see it and recognize it for what it is. (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 31)

O'Connor saw violence around her, since society is forever full of it, even if sometimes not overtly exhibited, and she revealed it through her writings. She never approved of violence and intolerance – as can be seen from the destiny awaiting the characters of her novels and short stories that performed some kind of aggression, hypocrisy being one of the more insidious types. It makes no difference for her if the violence is based on matters of a religious or an intellectual nature, she will expose it for what it is and she will let her characters bear the consequences!

And this was the big mystery, the misunderstanding, in what regards the apparent misconnection between her life and her works – a shy nature, her writings are characterized by paradox, proving to be “quietly filled with insight, shrewd about human weakness, hard and compassionate” – it is so facile to give a Freudian reading and think that the vehemence displayed was part of her repressed impulses, when in fact it was ‘merely’ the truth she saw, that violence is a part of human

nature, and wished to reveal or better depict such matter of facts. (Giroux, *Introduction* 6)

Her readers might linger in perplexity and insist in wondering upon the situation: what is the secret behind such a nature as O'Connor's and what is it that mesmerizes people to come back to her works, as shocking as they may be?

Although she has been compared to "someone like Sophocles ... for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man's fall and his dishonor", if one ever wishes to talk of O'Connor's (repressed) feelings, one had better remember how "Fitzgerald illuminates O'Connor's darkness, bringing to light the essentially positive view that Christianity makes possible ... [hence] a character in each story ... would have a moment where he or she would see or come to know the world in a way that possessed a touch of ultimate insight." (Thomas Merton qtd. by Giroux, *Introduction* 13; Earley Whitt 4)

O'Connor's work represents a bewildering exploration of human existence, one which most noticeably reveals the frailty of life and the fickleness of human beings, in an environment created with the aid of religious precepts claiming to distinguish between universal veracity and absolute falsehood and embellished by artistic outcomes, as markers of humanity's greatness and endurance.

If reading Flannery one might not resolutely distinguish between truth and lies, at least one will have understood that there is more to reality than meets the eye, that one should never tier to search under the thin layer that facts consists of at a first glance, and that as not all that glitters is gold, not all that is soiled is rotten.

Finally, when the readers shall discover how Flannery O'Connor's (anti-) heroes experience a sublime, though fugitive moment of epiphany and by being witnesses to it, they will inevitably come to divine the essence of O'Connor's most cherished and hidden secret – that, in the end, behind all that screen of skepticism, Flannery was an incurable optimist!

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