Turning South Around:

Disability and the Crisis of the South in Flannery O'Connor's "A Late Encounter with the Enemy"

Hiro Terasawa

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) has long been considered one of the most successful southern writers in the United States. She was born to Roman Catholic parents in Savanna, Georgia—the place in which O'Connor spent most of her lifetime. The South's landscape profoundly influenced her perspective, as O'Connor notes in an essay: "The things we see, hear, smell, and touch affect us long before we believe anything at all, and the South impresses its image on us from the moment we are able to distinguish one sound from another" (*MM* 197). For O'Connor, to create fiction is to become intertwined with the South through the senses.

None of O'Connor's stories are as concerned with southern imagery as "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" (1953). In this story, O'Connor gives us General Sash, a Confederate veteran in a wheelchair, as a living reminder of the Old South's identity. Sally Poker Sash, his granddaughter, plans to have the General attend her college graduation ceremony. She seeks to gain personal veneration by means of the General's attendance, impetuously thinking that her grandfather in his Confederate uniform embodies an apotheosis of the South's history. According to Suzanne Morrow Paulson, in this fiction, "[t]he Civil War itself … becomes a symbol for the philo-

sophical and psychological issue of how the individual preserves his or her identity given a particular place in the family and in society" (56). Like O'Connor herself, both Sash and Sally are characters preoccupied with the sense of place, seeking to ratify their own identities.

Recent scholarship, however, problematizes this traditional reading of "the South" represented in O'Connor's fiction. In a postsouthern literary criticism context[1], Michael Kreyling contends that this story "parodies the public's fondness for replicas or representations ('sheer images … and pseudo-events') of southern history …" (161). In other words, it is not the sociohistorical reality but the familiar "images" of the South that we find in this text. As we will see, "A Late Encounter" is crowded with parodic "replicas"—from General Sash's fraud uniform to artifacts in the museum—and "pseudo-events"—the Atlanta premier of David O. Selznick's 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*—of the South. Drawing upon Kreyling's idea, Martyne Bone regards "A Late Encounter" as the text in which "the South's collective memory has become cinematically and commercially mediated" (149). This short fiction, therefore, discloses the fact that the southern identity is not genuine, but is socially constructed one.

Certainly, this post-southern perspective helps us to examine the cultural logic embedded in "A Late Encounter," such that the notion of an authentic "South" becomes untenable. However, in focusing almost exclusively on representations of the South's history, these studies have overlooked an aspect of how O'Connor's text operates on the surface level: namely, portrayals of disability. Indeed, until recently, the question of the representation of disability in O'Connor's fiction has largely been ignored. In "Turning South Around," I will attempt to make available a mode of analysis that allows us to examine this less studied aspect of O'Connor's writing, by tracing the path of literary (and cultural) disability studies. Disability, as we will see, is not only a character's physical or cognitive trait, but can also be seen as a textual problem that intervenes in the southern literary terrain. How, then, does disability become a textual problem in "A Late Encounter"? Before answering this question, I want to note a brief reading of this fiction.

Feet on the South: The Disabled Man Who Is Killed for the Story

"A Late Encounter" opens with an old man, General Sash, in a condition of vulnerability and despondency—he is a Confederate veteran in the wheelchair. When O'Connor describes his physical presence, she associates it with his memory of the South's history: "… he didn't remember what he had been; in fact, he didn't remember that war at all. It was like his feet, which hung down now shriveled at the very end of him, without feeling …" (*CS* 135). Here Sash's feet serve to signify the slippage of historical consciousness, which tells us that the history certainly exists but cannot be immediately perceived. His physical topography creates a map designed to paradoxically preserve the South's tradition in a way that the memorial landscape becomes invisible. Thus Sally, his granddaughter, seeks to prolong the death of Sash: he is the embodiment of "the old traditions" (*CS* 135). She is concerned about his physical condition only because she wants to flaunt "'what all was behind her'" (*CS* 135) at the graduation ceremony.

What is laid behind Sally, however, is not an unfeigned history. Indeed, the reader discovers that Sash has not been a "real" General in the war: "This was not the same uniform he had worn in the War between the States. He had not actually been a general in that war" (*CS* 135). The uniform Sash wears does not signify any historical depth; it is merely a facade without substance. Thus, contrary to Sally's insistence, Sash's presence as the General should be regarded as less original and more invented. How, then, does Sash's southern identity remain constituted and maintained?

Before General Sash becomes wheelchair-bound, he and Sally attend the Atlanta premier of David O. Selznick's 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*. While this film conveys nostalgic images of the Old South[(2)], the premier itself becomes a theatrical space in which the participants mutually interact with each other to reinvigorate the old traditions, which are tied together loosely by the figurative knot of General Sash:

The old man walked up the aisle slowly with his fierce white head high and his

> hat held over his heart. The orchestra began to play the Confederate Battle Hymn very softly and the UDC members rose as a group and did not sit down again until the General was on the stage … and the old man, with real stage presence, gave a vigorous trembling salute and stood at attention until the last blast had died away. Two of the usherettes in Confederate caps and short skirts held a Confederate and a Union flag crossed behind them. (*CS* 137–138)

With such an evocative spectacle, O'Connor orchestrates a replicated southern masquerade, mingling items recalling the South (the Confederate Battle Hymn, caps and flags) and the General's performance of "vigorous trembling salute."

Something uncanny, however, marks a critical turning point in this fiction. When Sash becomes disabled, it is highlighted that he lives in a reduced and forlorn condition, in stark contrast to the glorious day at the premiere: "Since then, his life had not been very interesting. His feet were completely dead now, his knees worked like old hinges …" (*CS* 139). Consequently, O'Connor comes to regulate Sash's movement by aligning him with "things" that recall the Old South. Despite—or perhaps because of—his fakeness, Sash is "lent to the Capitol City Museum" in which "he was displayed from one to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery, and historic documents" (*CS* 139). As a nostalgic persona, General Sash functions like a fetishized commodity, allowing readers of—and characters in—this story to flirt with the images of the South. The disabled General becomes a "figure" whose mobility is restrained with the artifacts. Moreover, the story also ends with the immobile image of Sash. In the last scene where he attends Sally's graduation, we witness, again, that he is made an object for exhibition: "That crafty scout [Sally's nephew John Wesley] … was waiting now, with the corpse [of Sash], in the long line at the Coca-Cola machine" (*CS* 144). Sash's disabled body finally becomes a corpse juxtaposed with the machine that symbolically represents the new economy arising from the South (Coca-Cola).

In *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine emphasizes that "A Late Encounter" is a specific narrative that captures the

South in which certain images become culturally reproductive. Romine refers to General Sash as "the consummate fraud, all the more threatening because his deception is consumed as authentic" (43). It is at this point, according to Romine, that O'Connor becomes imperative:

> It's all a sham, of course, since the General's authority derives not from real history, nor even from a film that's already a copy of a historical fiction, but from the spectacle surrounding the film …. For O'Connor [as a Catholic writer], such secular gnosticism can only be understood as a perverse form of incarnation culminating in the logic of the brand, here signaled by the Coca-Cola machine near which she carefully places the General at story's end. Because he embodies the idolatry of history as mediated by the simulacrum, O'Connor has, of course, first killed him off. (44)

Romine cogently argues that Sash is a forgery of history, thereby O'Connor punishes him at the end of the story. On this reading, we could say that "A Late Encounter" is structured around the deception of General Sash, a disabled veteran who dies for O'Connor's narrative resolution.

Yet, a close reading of "A Late Encounter" suggests a more complex narrativity. My primary objection to Romine's interpretation is that he disregards the story's multiple potencies related to Sash's disability by positioning him as merely a fragile character to be killed. Actually, Romine's comment is compatible with traditional narratives that stigmatize and marginalize disability. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues, "[b]ecause these characters [who have disabilities] operate as embodiments of an unnamed, profound peril, the narrative resolution is almost always to contain that threat by killing or disempowering the disabled character" (36)[3]. However, my purpose in raising this question about Romine's reading is not merely to condemn his disability-stigmatizing manner. Rather, I wish to present the moment as a landslide in which the South's images become "turned around" in relation to Sash's disabled experiences. In other words, I want to address the problem of "crisis" of the

representation of the South in terms of disability. Is General Sash merely a character whose feet are bound to the South's ground? If not, how is it that his disability intervenes in the southern literary terrain?

Turning South Around: The Aesthetics of the Wheelchair

How is the South turned around? To understand the potency of such a critical moment in "A Late Encounter," we should first reconfigure Sash's disability from a new perspective. Before this, it is important to note that I am not interested in claiming his fragile body as either the evidence of his deception or the sign of forgery of history. Instead, I want to focus on the textures of the story and ask questions about *what his disability is itself doing to the narrative*. This is a matter of close and attentive reading, but also of thinking about disability within a new category: *aesthetics*. I suggest that the turn of the South in this fiction is enacted by what may be termed the "aesthetics of the wheelchair"—the apparatus which aesthetically affects the textual matter.

So, what does General Sash do with the wheelchair? At the most basic level, the wheelchair is a machine that spotlights the immobility of the disabled figure. As we have already seen, O'Connor endows General Sash with that machine, aligning him with cultural artifacts (in the museum) and consumer products (Coca-Cola). And yet, the wheelchair is also presented as a dazzling high-speed machine that incessantly turns around Sash's body. This turning moment comes when the Boy Scout, John Wesley, pushes Sash throughout the graduation ceremony. As soon as Sash comes to feel anxious in his bodily state ("a little hole beginning to widen in the top of his head" [*CS* 141]), John Wesley "*wheeled him rapidly* down a walk and up a ramp and into a building and bumped him over the stage entrance …" (*CS* 141; emphasis added). In the uproar projected to the stage, the audience starts to call the General's name, and then "his chair was *shuttled forward roughly* and the Boy Scout took a big bow" (*CS* 142; emphasis added). And finally, we find that the granddaughter comes out of the auditorium, and is told that "[t]hat crafty scout had bumped him out the

back way and *rolled him at high speed* down a flagstone path …" (*CS* 144; emphasis added). After all, Sash's disabled body is also presented as a restive figure that appears to be dynamically turned around in the wheelchair.

What fascinates me most, however, is not how the wheelchair realizes the motion of Sash; but how it is reintroduced as an aesthetic apparatus to perturb the flow of the storyline. During the graduation ceremony, Sash is confronted with a few commencement speakers who deliver a speech with the "words" concerned with the South's history ("Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee" [*CS* 142]). However, we find that the stream of narrative centered on him comes to be disturbed, which we are obliged to quote at some length:

> 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. He was running into a regular volley of them and meeting them with quick curses. 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. (*CS* 143)

This passage is thrilling in many ways. An avalanche of the southern words and names continue to suffuse into the scene, such that the story can neither hold its spatial consciousness ("he found himself running toward the words") nor chronological continuity ("the entire past opened up on him out of nowhere …"). The reference to memorial places—the names of the Civil-War battlegrounds ("Chickamauga,"

"Shiloh" and "Marthasville")—entices us to the historical interpretation, while at the same time, the scene itself is filled with figurative language ("musket fire" and "a regular volley") so that we can no longer distinguish what is or is not reliable. Indeed, the South's history still exists here; but it is plunging into the continuous turning—that is, the narrative fails to present a consolidated image of the South.

Here is the aesthetics of the wheelchair with which the South is turned around. The southern narrative landscape comes to the crisis in representation, as if to synchronize with Sash's physical sense in the wheelchair that is running, a machine whose movements cannot become easily halted. In other words, I am suggesting that the very narrative "form" of this story has a lot of things to do with his disabled experience in the wheelchair. The aesthetics of the wheelchair, therefore, is not only about Sash's physical condition; it registers the disability as the formal problem of the text that intervenes in the reader's encounter with the southern imagery.

In the end, I use the word "aesthetics" to emphasize "the emotional impact of one body on another," to borrow the phrases of the disability theorist Tobin Siebers: "Aesthetics is the domain in which the sensation of otherness is felt at its most powerful, strange, and frightening. Whether the effect is beauty and pleasure, ugliness and pain, or sublimity and terror, the emotional impact of one body on another is experienced as an assault on autonomy …" (25). Siebers notes that aesthetics offers us the occasion to imagine an unusual bodily experience, by which we can feel sensation of others interchangeably. By thinking about disability aesthetically, I propose that the realm of Sash's physical state activates a textual complexity, which provokes powerful, yet frightening, sensations in the reader. If we go back to the graduation scene, we find that he witnesses "his wife's narrow face," "one of his squinting bald-headed sons" and "his mother … with an anxious look" (*CS* 143). If family was the symbolic unit recurring within the South's literary history (King 7), then Sash's family members appear and immediately disappear from the scene, leaving us nervous in shattered memory. So dynamic is Sash's physical experience in the wheelchair that the reader can no longer hold the rigid image of the South.

Silhouettes That Trouble: Cognitive Collapse and the Problem of Identification

Reconfiguring the disabled experience in terms of aesthetics allows us to open up new space for rethinking both Sash's figure and the southern representation in "A Late Encounter." It is not so important to seek the meaning of his physicality as to ask what it is doing to the reader's contact with the text as well as the southern narrative landscape.

Now I propose a somewhat different reading of Sash's disability, focusing more on his cognitive experience than physical state in the wheelchair. (The two elements, however, are not mutually exclusive.) Undoubtedly, O'Connor portrays Sash's cognition as the more damaged one from the outset: "… he didn't remember what he had been; in fact, he didn't remember that war at all" (*CS* 135). Although Sally thinks his grandfather's mind is "still clear as a bell" (*CS* 139), we find that his cognitive malfunction is more insidious than his granddaughter imagines. By focusing on this aspect, however, I do not merely want to diagnose Sash's cognitive breakdown; rather I want to address the narrative complication observed in this text, especially with regard to the problem of "identification." How does Sash's cognitive difference problematize the narrative formula of identification?

In fact, the process of identification in this text is much more complicated than one might assume. Recent scholarship insists that O'Connor's text comfortably recruits the historical constellation of the South in the 1950s. Martyn Bone, for example, contends that "A Late Encounter" questions "whether contemporary (1950s) capitalism pay *any* deference to Old South tradition …" (149; original emphasis). "In the closing lines," Bone argues, "the story suggests that Confederate iconography [General Sash] has given way to commodity fetishism … [as embodied by] Atlanta's most famous commodity: Coca-Cola" (149–150). Bone is accurate to specify the historical background in which the logic of consumerism became dominant in the late capitalist South[(4)], but he misses the point that this story also veers away from such an economy. Indeed, as the plot develops, the narrative is overcome

by a macabre visual effect, such that we cannot discern any clear iconographies: "Then suddenly he saw that the black procession was almost on him" (*CS* 143). Here, Sash is surprised to encounter the black procession in a sudden motion, the figures comprising the color of black that we cannot confidently identify. I suggest that this visual un-identifiability operates in relation to Sash's cognitive condition.

His cognitive deterioration is, first and foremost, bound up with the problem of visuality—that is, the visuality of narrative. "To his mind, history was connected with processions … People were always asking him if he remembered this or that—a dreary black procession of questions about the past" (*CS* 136). When asked about the past which he has forgotten, Sash conjures up the "black procession" associated with his lost sense of memory. Ultimately, this black procession comes to spread throughout the narrative landscape as he reaches a delirium during Sally's graduation ceremony. Wheeled rapidly to the stage entrance, Sash first confronts with "[s]everal figures in black robes" (*CS* 141) who shake hands with him. And, the black figures soon morph into the floating mass, losing the demarcated boundaries: "A black procession was flowing up each aisle and forming to stately music in a pool in front of him. The music seemed to be entering his head through the little hole and he thought for a second that the procession would try to enter it too" (*CS* 141). As Sash becomes cognitively confused, the graduates in black robes start "flowing up" as dark silhouettes, which Sash imagines are entering his head. In this way, it becomes more difficult for us to identify a figure with a particular character.

My contention is that the narrative process of identification is stumbled by Sash's cognitive state. In other words, I read his cognitive collapse as a symptomatic provocation regarding identification, one that is entwined with questions of character's figure. In fact, one cannot help but notice that the figure delineation between the characters gradually wanes if compared with the first half of the story. Consider, for example, the scene of the premiere:

> A real limousine came at ten minutes to eight and took them [Sash and Sally] to the theater. It drew up under the marquee at exactly the right time, after the

> big stars and the director and the author and the governor and the mayor and some less important stars. The police kept traffic from jamming and there were ropes to keep the people off who couldn't go. (*CS* 137)

Here, everything is arranged so that we can identify each character. As if to synchronize with the police, the narrator aligns each figure in a punctuating manner, keeping them from being contaminated with one another.

At the climactic scene, however, we find the black procession vacillating in front of General Sash. He himself has "forgotten the name and face of his wife and … his children or even if he had a wife and children" (*CS* 142). In this devastated state, he witnesses "all the procession had flowed into the black pool, [and] a black figure began orating in front of it" (*CS* 142). The commencement speaker Sash confronts is presented just as "a black figure," who is "telling something about history …" (*CS* 142). Sash's cognitive collapse disturbs the story to such an extent that the reader can find only the movement of a series of silhouettes. In this southern landscape that is painted black, it becomes impossible for us to distinguish who is doing what to whom.

Consequently, this highly visual disruption undoes the lexicon of the southern "identity": "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" (*CS* 142). The black figure tells about the history entwined with the Civil War, the war in which the South fought to preserve the color line; but here, color no longer presupposes any identities ("Another black robe had taken the place of the first one …"). To borrow phrases from Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, it is troubling for us to determine which "doer" is laid behind the "deed" (34) in this ceremonial speech-act[5]. What we hear is a commemorative speech wrought by a compositional interplay of color and line, not by an identifiable character with a solid bodily figure. In this respect, Sash's cognitive disintegration troubles the process of identification within this text[6].

Conclusion

At the heart of this study has been the insistence that Flannery O'Connor's fiction "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" constructs a textual interplay with General Sash's disability. Significantly, he is not merely a character to be killed nor the orthodox embodiment of the Old South's tradition. Sash's figure is most intriguing when his disability actively engages with the southern narrative terrain. The South is turned around when he is rapidly carried out in the wheelchair—the moment in which his bodily experience aesthetically becomes transferable to the reader. In addition, Sash's cognitive collapse summons the silhouettes to the landscape in the way that the reader can no longer identify a specific character. In the end, his experience in the wheelchair and cognitive collapse are two sides of the same operation: we have failed to find specific images connected to the South in relation to Sash's disability. Disability thus becomes a textual problem. This has not been the dominant methodology of O'Connor's scholarship. Instead, when scholars make reference to disability in O'Connor's works, characters are reduced to the grotesque existence who are morally degraded[7]. Our central task, I believe, is to take up alternative means of understanding disability in O'Connor's fiction.

Notes

(1) The term "postsouthern" was first coined by Lewis P. Simpson in his essay "The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America" (1980). However, it is Michael Kreyling who has magnified the potentiality of "postsouthern," with which we can "reassess the meaning and legitimacy of such foundational terms as 'South' and 'southern'" (Bone 43). From this perspective, postsouthern literary criticism seeks to denaturalize the authenticity of the South, acknowledging that "southernness" is retrospectively invented through the literary and cultural representations. The prefix "post-," therefore, does not mean that southernness is lost for good—rather, the prefix sits there to

resist the usual assumption that has regarded the South as the self-evident place.

(2) As Susan Stewart puts it, "Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack" (23).

(3) Literary disability critics, such as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, share Thomson's assumption that disability has been considered as a "problem" to be resolved in our culture. According to Mitchell and Snyder, the ways of resolution include "an obliteration of the difference through a 'cure,' the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being" (53–54).

(4) For a detailed discussion on the description of consumer items within O'Connor's works, see Bacon, pp. 115–138.

(5) Butler refers to gender as a "doing," the performative expression which does not presuppose any preexisting identities (30).

(6) Once again, I want it to be noted that I do not merely intend to "diagnose" General Sash. As Michael Berube argues, "the diagnostic mode leads us to conclude that *character X has Y disability* and can thereby preclude us from asking broader interpretive questions about plot and motive …" (130).

(7) Suzanne Morrow Paulson, for instance, contends that Sash's disability bespeaks "the impotence of old age and also to moral impotence," concluding that "[t]he General is in fact physically and morally weak …" (58–59). Likewise, Timothy J. Basselin refers to the physical grotesques in O'Connor's works as "metaphorical mirrors for the characters' (and readers') moral grotesques" (4–5).

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(寺沢　恕／博士前期課程)