

Vladimir Vujošević*
University Donja Gorica
Montenegro

“A HORROR AND A PHANTASM”: HEIDEGGER QUOTATION AS A GOTHIC DEVICE IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S “GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE”

Abstract

This paper explores the parodic rendition of the prominent Gothic convention of “found manuscript” in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People”. In Gothic narratives, parents are often confronted with some compromising textual evidence of their children’s disturbing secrets. In O’Connor’s story, Mrs. Hopewell stumbles upon a book her daughter is reading. A passage from this tome functions as a parodic “found manuscript” of the Gothic: its incomprehensible and bizarre content appears to the benighted Mrs. Hopewell as “an evil incantation in gibberish”. However, the fragment in question is an excerpt from Martin Heidegger’s *What Is Metaphysics?* The reference to the proverbially esoteric author ironically highlights the textual uncommunicativeness of the Gothic. However, the quotation in question is not just a part of mere Gothic parody for it can also be read as a meta-commentary on the nature of Gothic textuality itself.

Key words: Flannery O’Connor, Gothic, Martin Heidegger, uncanny, Nothingness

1. Gothic epistemology

Frederic Jameson has somewhat mockingly defined Gothic fiction¹ as “that boring and exhausted paradigm [...] where on the individualized level – a sheltered woman of some kind is terrorized and victimized by an ‘evil’ male” (Jameson 2003: 289). Flannery O’Connor’s 1955 story “Good Country People” can be read as an elaboration of this ironical account of the genre: an “innocent” girl is seduced and maltreated by an evil and cunning male disguised as a harmless Bible salesman. Presenting himself as a naive and pious rustic, one of those “good country people”, nineteen-year-old Manly Pointer is, in reality, a sociopathic nihilist who targets vulnerable females. He seduces his victims only to expose them subsequently to cruel rituals of humiliation.

Hulga Hopewell, one of his victims, has a prosthetic leg (a result of a childhood accident) and a doctorate in philosophy. In her early thirties, she is still living with

* Faculty of Philology, University Donja Gorica, Oktoih 1, 81000 Podgorica, Montenegro; e-mail: Vladimir.Vujosevic@udg.edu.me

¹ This paper is a largely-modified version of chapter 4.4.1. of my unpublished doctoral dissertation *Gothic Motifs in Flannery O’Connor’s Prose* (University of Belgrade, 2018).

her benign mother, as a sullen spinster and atheist “too educated for (her) own good” (Woessner 2011: 94). Her philosophical education would prove to be yet another kind of caricatural innocence. A country girl who has legally changed her baptismal name “Joy” to the German-sounding “Hulga” for purely “nihilistic” reasons, is a parodic version of the “innocent heroine” type of the Gothic. Her “innocence” is made farcically literal: she is a thirty-three-year-old virgin who has never been kissed.

As a parodic Gothic protagonist, Hulga has a certain mock “cryptic self”. “Encrypting rather than decrypting seems” to be a “major move of the Gothic” (Berthin 2010: 6). Gothic fiction, being the “poetics of concealment”, often portrays the dark underside of the ordinary family life: a haunted cellar, a body in the closet, tormenting traumas behind the image of the family idyll. In various works of the genre, haunting secrets are constantly looming beneath the surface of the ordinary life trying to make their way to the fore. Hence, the frequent motif of *Doppelgänger*s in the Gothic.

The cryptic presence of buried secrets weighs heavily on Gothic characters, their very personae being thus permanently marked by the dismal presence of some unspeakable mysteries. The haunting presence of their secrets endows their gestures with double meanings, distorts their words into cryptic “texts”. The entire genre is marked by the struggle of “the occult” to make itself manifest.

What defines the Gothic world is the presence of some evasive “haunted center”. One can easily see the similarity, famously noticed by Emily Dickinson, between haunted houses and haunted selves² of the Gothic. In the works of the genre, there is almost always a deep, dark cellar (be it architectural or psychological one), a place of concealment behind many locked doors, Wittgensteinian secret “box” with a “beetle” in it (a protean and mysterious object constantly shifting forms in the darkness), a haunted subterranean crypt in which the familiarity of the world collapses. The Gothic evokes the constant threat of the world going uncanny. It is the poetics of the familiarity of the world lost.

In the famous thought experiment, Wittgenstein encourages us to imagine each one of us as having a box with a secret content called “beetle”. A box is here a metaphor for the mind, and “beetle” is a byword for some private mental content. “No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box” (Wittgenstein 1986: 100). I can be familiar only with the “beetle” I own (i.e. with my own thoughts and sensations). What other people have in their boxes remains the unsolvable puzzle.

This image depicts our minds as being “haunted” in a way, not unlike a secluded and enchanted castle, permanently inaccessible to others. We can only say that there

² “One need not be a chamber to be haunted, / One need not be the house” (Dickinson 1960: 670).

is "something"... in the box. This oblique way of speaking is typical of the genre, for Gothic terrors are often described by vague, ostensive terms, like in the case of Stephen King's novel *It*. The Gothic "center" cannot be adequately fixed by a definition and brought to light: it always remains that "something", lurking in the darkness.

The Cartesian idea of mental privacy could be described by evoking the Gothic scenery of imprisonment and concealment. Our external, physical life (our gesticulations, facial expressions) can be known by others, but our mental life always remains an enigma of sorts, being permanently immured within the "unapproachableness" of a private mind. We can see the ruined castle from the outside, but what remains inside, its "haunted center", cannot be fully comprehended.

For Descartes, the mind and body were two utterly different substances (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*). The content of our minds remains somehow essentially private, detached from the outside world and our bodies. Hence, Wittgenstein's use of the "non-transparent box" metaphor, whose inner content only I can see. If the Cartesian conception is true, then I cannot coherently talk about my own mental life (sensations) to other people, since everything that I may feel remains hopelessly "private". The core of our mental experiences remains "untranslatable". This is why the Gothic has a penchant for specters, those utterly mental, cerebral subjects eternally obsessed with their own indecipherable secrets. In a way, there is no Gothic without phantoms and their unfathomable puzzles. Epistemological problems are easily "translated" into Gothic narratives.

The Gothic is the Cartesian genre. Aren't all Gothic protagonists specters of sorts, disembodied spirits like Quentin Compson in Faulkner's gothic *The Sound and the Fury*? He is, indeed, a faceless Cartesian "mind agonizing in the void" (Di Renzo 1993: 147). We can never come to know or understand Quentin completely. The insurmountable gap between us and the Cartesian subject is what generates the Gothic effect. What we are left with are heaps of words, the debris of private thoughts, soliloquies of a private mind that can never be completely understood. The words become cryptic, almost oracular. The language in the Gothic is an unstable and unsafe structure. The genre portrays the world of linguistic erosion. It's no surprise that various scholars have insisted on the radical "unrepresentativeness" of the Gothic:

Rather than the "horror" film's challenge to the audience to open their eyes and see, the feared object of Gothic cinema is both held and withheld through its codes of visual representation. (...) It is thus not just that we do not see, but precisely what we cannot see. (...) In its aim to withhold from our gaze precisely what it appears to offer, the Gothic film is always threatening to collapse the frame, befuddle the boundaries, question the stable norms of subjectivity, hence the elasticity of form. (Kavka 2002: 227)

It is not by chance that Hulga's favorite philosopher is Nicolas Malebranche "who believed that mind is the only reality" (Di Renzo 1993: 74). In O'Connor's story, there is, indeed, a "beetle in the box"³, some unrepresentative mental content that stands between Hulga and her mother. The "unrepresentativeness" of this secret content is the crucial feature of Gothic textuality. In many Gothic texts, the kinship between children and their parents is disrupted and thwarted by the mute presence of some inner mental kernel. Hulga Joy Hopewell and her mother fail to establish coherent communication. In some fundamental sense, they do not share the same common language. The language becomes utterly cryptic, on the verge of meaningless as if there is some inherent software "bug", a fatal error in the linguistic system that distorts the words into a meaningless jumble. The presence of the hidden mental content possesses the normal language agency like a virus, rewriting the standard grammar into cryptic codes. The Gothic operates as linguistic malware. The speech acts now fail to reveal anything.

The Cartesian metaphor of a "secret mental compartment" is explicitly evoked in "Good Country People". Just as in Wittgenstein's example, Hulga invites her mother to "look inside":

And she said such strange things! To her own mother she had said — without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full — "Woman do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" she had cried sinking down again and staring at her plate, "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light". (O'Connor 1971: 276)

2. Gothic textuality

Hulga is an enigma to her own mother, with whom she speaks in an almost oracular fashion using obscure philosophical jargon that puzzles Mrs. Hopewell, a simple countrywoman. One day, in Hulga's absence, Mrs. Hopewell seizes the opportunity to pick up a strange book her daughter is avidly reading. This is Mrs. Hopewell's attempt to understand the mystery of her own daughter. What follows is the parody of the Gothic "intrusive reading" motif. Often, a Gothic character has an opportunity to skim through old, locked up, dusty manuscripts and secret letters

³ The very word "beetle/bug" has a certain Gothic aura. Insects crawl in dark and damp places, and their morphology often triggers visceral reactions. The Biblical text prohibits their consumption by terming them "abomination" (Leviticus 11: 20). The notion of bugs as a form of life antithetical to the human one (see e.g. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*) was exploited in horror cinema and various Gothic texts. In Lewis's *The Monk*, bugs are feeding on father Ambrosius's blood. They are black, unclean, and carnivorous, and they are prominently featured, as a fetish and forensic evidence, in Jonathan Demme's gothic *The Silence of the Lambs*.

in a quest for the answers to dark and haunting mysteries. This textual paraphernalia "also take on an almost uncanny power to fix and 'materialize' the speaking subject" (Williams 1995: 66). When Mrs. Hopewell opens "the book at random", she is confronted with the following text:

Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing – how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing (O'Connor 1971: 277).

Eerie words like *horror* and *phantasm* are highlighted in an otherwise incomprehensible text recalling thus the famous scene from Poe's only novel in which Arthur Gordon Pym reads from a fragmented letter written in blood, rubbing it by phosphorus in the utter darkness of the ship's vaporous hold, only to see a barely readable part of a sentence containing the ominous word *blood*. This word, mysteriously underlined, deprived of any meaningful context, imbues Pym's mind with utter panic. The very fragmentation is the strong source of the "indefinable horror" (Poe 1994: 30) of the Gothic: Mrs. Hopewell is somewhat similarly left in the horror of fragmentation: "These words had been underlined with a blue pencil and they worked on Mrs. Hopewell like some evil incantation in gibberish. She shut the book quickly and went out of the room as if she were having a chill" (O'Connor 1971: 277).

In the Gothic, the reading of a "secret file" resembles a séance wherein an opportunity is given to the ghosts of the dead to speak out the unspeakable horrors that continue to haunt them even in the liminality of death. This scenario is famously played in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* where a manuscript, written "in old, faded ink", long-hidden "in a locked drawer" is suddenly exhumed from oblivion. However, the "emergence" of the text hardly solves anything. The text always remains intrinsically unreliable. Old manuscripts, written confessions, and arcane texts are introduced in Gothic narratives to give meaning to traumas, to provide the present hauntings with meaningful histories. However, these textual clues remain substantially uncommunicative: they are fragmented, heavily coded, essentially unreadable, "rotting, blotted, and incomplete" (Elliott 2013: 196). The Gothic can be described as a genre of thwarted textual forensics.

The enigmatic quotation in O'Connor's story functions as a parodic "secret file" (an eerie, hidden mysterious text of the Gothic). In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, a protagonist finds a hidden manuscript in a secret compartment, only to discover that

the ominous Gothic text is nothing more than a trivial washing-bill. The reader is to be aware of the somewhat similar discrepancy in O'Connor's story also: what is for Mrs. Hopewell a menacing text, an extraction from some dark *grimoire* (compared to "evil incantations") is, in reality, a fragment from Martin Heidegger's *Was ist Metaphysik?* There is a comical twist in misidentifying the text from a distinguished German philosopher for a version of a witchcraft textbook. What happens here is a parody of Gothic textuality.

3. Heideggerian gothic

Heidegger's philosophical persona (the self-imposed image of "the hidden king of philosophy", "the-old-wise-man" living in a secluded hut in the Black Forest, his notoriously difficult and arcane philosophical idiom) was often subjected to a comical treatment⁴. The same parodic attitude seems to be present in O'Connor's story: a passage from an author whose language is considered notoriously difficult and obscure is ironically used to *clarify* something about Hulga's personality.

However, O'Connor's reclaiming of Heidegger quotation in "Good Country People" is not just an instance of the cheap mockery of the outlandish language of metaphysics⁵. The irony is directed not so much toward Heidegger, as toward Hulga who is presented as some utterly complicated, completely cerebral person, immersed in Heidegger's *oeuvre* as someone else would be in a romance novel. It could be argued that the meaning of Heidegger quotation is not important here, for its purpose is to point to Hulga's comical over-intellectualism by simultaneously parodying the Gothic convention of "found manuscript". However, the Heidegger quotation in O'Connor's story could also be read as a meta-commentary on the nature of Gothic fiction itself.

It has been argued that the Gothic, an 18th-century genre, emerged as an expression of Romantic resistance to "the disenchantment" (fostered by growing secularism, scientism, and rationalism of the period). Hence the prevalence of motifs of supernatural intrusions, and inexplicable phenomena⁶. However, it seems more appropriate to understand the genre as a specific expression not so much of

⁴ Theodor Adorno, e.g. in his 1962 lectures on philosophical terminology quoted sonorous segments from Heidegger's *Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?* in an almost jeering manner of stand-up comedy. O'Connor herself has made similar passing remarks on Heidegger's "rural persona" in her private correspondence (see O'Connor 1979: 243).

⁵ It appears that O'Connor's procedure in this story somehow mimics Carnap's famous criticism of Heidegger's use of language. In *Overcoming Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language*, Carnap has quoted "snippets" from the same Heidegger's text that figures in "Good Country People". Similarly, Carnap takes decontextualized fragments from *Was ist Metaphysik?*, offering them to the baffled readers as "a specimen of metaphysical nonsense" (Sorensen 2017).

⁶ See, e.g. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's take on this subject, as quoted in Davison 2014: 487.

Romanticism but of Enlightenment rationality itself, for the Gothic does not project desirable alternatives to modern, dry scientism. On the contrary, it offers a dystopian scenario of the collapse of rationality. The supernatural in the Gothic is never a valid, preferable "romantic" alternative to the rational, "disenchanted" *cosmos* of the Enlightenment. The emergence of the supernatural is always terrifying, chaotic, and maddening. The only alternative to modern, scientific rationality is chaos. This is the ideological core of the Gothic for, as Adorno and Horkheimer famously said,

Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside since the mere idea of the "outside" is the real source of fear (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 11).

What remains outside of the rational world is unintelligible. The Gothic gives us the terror of the unintelligible. Hence the collapse of forensics (compromised textual evidence, e. g.) in the Gothic. The genre portrays the world of epistemic chaos.

"Nothing is allowed to remain outside", Adorno and Horkheimer claim, for in the totalizing ambition of the scientific methodology the very existence of the "outside" is the source of anxiety and dread. This "Nothing" now haunts us from beyond the limits of scientific rationality. What falls outside the scientific framework is Nothing. "Nothing – how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm?" (Heidegger 1949: 359). Writing about that which falls outside the scientific framework, Heidegger fittingly uses the typically Gothic vocabulary (of "horror" and "phantasm"). "Nothing" forms the hermetic epistemological terrain insusceptible to scientific methodology. This is why "science wishes to know nothing of Nothing" (Heidegger 1949: 359). The Gothic is possible only when science gazes beyond its own borders. It is the very idea of border, of "going beyond" (Heidegger 1949: 375) the realm of the new "enlightened" model of scientific rationality that creates a Gothic response. The "fear of the Enlightenment" (Adorno and Horkheimer speak of) is the very foundation of the Gothic. It can be claimed that Heidegger's fragment functions as a completely exposed theoretical core of the genre.

Heidegger's take on Nothing, quoted in O'Connor's story, uncannily resembles David Punter's characterization of the genre: "Gothic fiction is haunted by this: it is haunted by Nothing" (Punter 1998: 4). In the same breath, Punter evokes Derrida's famous thought that what "falls outside the text is indeed [...] Nothing" (Punter 1998: 4). Text is a world of stability and clarity (the "black on white"). "Text" means that signs are filled with meaning. What falls outside the text, what lacks a textual form is indeed beyond comprehension for we, moderns, are trained in reading the world as some sort of sensible, rational text. "Nothing" is that which is essentially "unreadable".

To say that the Gothic is haunted by Nothing (that which falls “outside-the-text”) is to describe the genre as a literary form in which all sentences eventually end up in meaningless howling (e.g., the ending of Faulkner’s gothic *Absalom, Absalom!*). Signs are “muted”, and rational structures of language collapse into semiotic rubble. Coherent texts in the Gothic are always disintegrating into the debris of fragmentation.

In the Gothic, this “Nothing” intrudes our calm, rational universe governed by science and rationality. Nothing – it’s something that we cannot put our finger on. “Nothing” is that which always remains scientifically unrepresentable. Gothic is a pervasive form of dread, never instantiating itself in a singular repelling object (contrary to the horror films). “Not: the cannibal monster is in the nursery [...] Rather: the cannibal monster may be in the nursery” (Michasiw 1998: 237–238). In an uncannily similar fashion Heidegger speaks of *Dread* (anxiety or *Angst*) in *What is Metaphysics?* We are brought face-to-face with Nothing only in the “moments of Dread” (Heidegger 1949: 365). Dread “unlike fear” is “an experience without an object — and therefore over nothing” (Schufreider 2013: 314). This lack of object is specifically Gothic. “It is not just that we do not see, but precisely that we cannot see” (Kavka 2002: 227) that makes the crucial effect of the genre. Dread is essentially Gothic.

4. Gothic dread

In *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Heidegger in strangely Gothic phrasing speaks of situations in which we experience “everything that is” as something “other” which “comes to us in dread”, “when one feels something uncanny” (Heidegger 1949: 366) as a “soundless voice which attunes us to the horrors of the abyss” (Heidegger 1949: 385). Heidegger employs the term “uncanny” (“one feels something uncanny”, “ist es einem unheimlich”). Coincidentally, this concept (unheimlich)⁷ is the crucial “theoretical model” of the Gothic, famously promoted by Freud himself in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny” in which he offers an analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Gothic story “The Sandman”. “Of all Freud’s essays, this is the one that Heidegger must have read most closely” (Krell 1992: 49).

“Uncanny” describes the class of situations in which something long-familiar and intimate suddenly appears as ultimately unfamiliar (Hogle 2002: 6). *Unheimlichkeit* is “the denial to the human being of ‘any ultimate reliance on a constant and familiar order of things’ (Geiman)” (Withy 2015: 6). It is a description of a world passing strange: as when a dead loved one emerges again (from beyond the grave) as a dark, undesirable visitor. It is a place where nostalgia is turned into repulsion and terror.

⁷ *Unheimlich* is an uncanny word itself for the prefix un- is “both necessary and utterly superfluous. For *heimlich* means what is [...] familiar, homelike, homey. Yet that same word, *heimlich*, also means what is *geheim*, secret, covert, furtive, and hidden [...] *occultus*” (Krell 1992: 51).

"Uncanny" denotes a terrible visitation of the (once) Familiar. In those rare moments of dread, the once familiar and tamed world around us suddenly appears as something strange and unfamiliar, as if there is some kind of inherent Gothic duplicity inscribed in the very core of the world (a *Doppelgänger*, a common trope of the Gothic, is literary replica of this terrifying capacity of the Familiar to "surprise" us with some buried, hidden, secret "life"). As when in our paternal home, where every inch can be reconstructed in our memory, a cavity of some sort is suddenly discovered behind the wall, an uninvestigated secret chamber that instantly renders the house "haunted" and "unhomely". "Heigh-ho, nobody home, as the child's ditty says" (Krell 1992: 51). The "uncanniness" is "for Heidegger a fundamental structure of existence" (Krell 1992: 49).

The "uncanny" bespeaks "the power or presence of an Other or Stranger that secretly haunts the sphere of one's own, estranging one from oneself and yet nonetheless requiring hospitality" (Withy 2015: 7). This is the plot of O'Connor's "Good Country People" put in a few words. Manley Pointer, the master of nihilism, the one who has "been believing in nothing ever since" he was born (O'Connor 1971: 291), familiarizes Hulga with "the sense of the terror into which the abyss of Nothing plunges us" (Heidegger 1949: 392). When Hulga accepts Manley's invitation to a date, she does so in the belief that "Manley is a vulnerable innocent, a naive fundamentalist" (Di Renzo 1993: 76) who needs to be freed, to use famous Kant's phrase, from his "self-incurred immaturity". The bizarre date between a cunning materialistic philosopher and naive "Jesus freak" ends up in an abandoned barn-loft. Hulga instructs Manley that one has to take off the blindfold in order to "see that there's nothing to see" (O'Connor 1971: 288). This senseless, arrogant, pseudophilosophical twaddle is, in reality, an eerie "precognition" or a self-fulfilling prophecy of what will happen to Hulga – for she is to be confronted with Nothing.

After they climb to the abandoned barn loft, Hulga quickly discovers that Manley is not a naive Bible salesman. He carries in his valise a Bible, but blasphemously hollowed-out one that contains a flask of whiskey, condoms, and an obscene pack of cards. The childlike salesman is revealed to be a true "demonic stranger" of the Gothic. He manages to steal Hulga's prosthetic leg, leaving her incapacitated and disoriented in an abandoned barn-loft. "There is nothing to hold on to. The only thing that remains and overwhelms us whilst 'what is' slips away, is this 'nothing'" (Heidegger 1949: 366). She is left incapacitated in "darkness and solitude (*Dunkelheit, Alleinsein*)", which are "two principal sites and abodes of the uncanny according to both Freud and Heidegger" (Krell 1992: 51). She tries to speak to Manley but her words turn into random twaddle for "Dread strikes us dumb. [...] The fact that when we are caught in the uncanniness of dread we often try to break the empty silence by words spoken at random, only proves the presence of Nothing" (Heidegger 1949: 367). Hulga is lacking

her prosthetic leg, and indeed, the symbolic and artificial ground of her being. She is left “naked”, devoid of any tool or structure to help her stand on her own feet. Heidegger “associates the stark nakedness of our being (not at home) in the world with the abyss and with mortal anxiety (*der Abgrund, die Todesangst*). [...] The only possible home for *Dasein* is the [...] *Un-heimlichkeit*” (Krell 1992: 51). Hulga is left completely exposed in her vulnerability, stricken deaf and dumb in the face of Nothing as such⁸.

Hulga “says that she does not believe in God, [Manley Pointer] remarks, but he, he goes on to say, has been believing in nothing ever since he was born. What this means” John Burt claims, “is that Hulga does not really know what it is to live in a world without God, and that that world is not grand and free as she imagines it to be, but tawdry and small and vicious and full of people like Manley Pointer” (Burt 2008: 348).

Hulga’s subtle, theoretical atheism is ironically revealed as a peculiar sort of “innocence” in her final confrontation with Manley Pointer’s real, practical nihilism. She has been outmanoeuvred into a literal innocence. At this point, Hulga is confronted with the uncanny version of her own ideology. She is faced not with a naive Christian but with the cunning sadist who already knows what Hulga is trying to teach him: that when you remove the blindfold, there’s nothing to be seen. “And indeed Nothing itself, Nothing as such, was there” (Heidegger 1949: 367). Manley is the radical, consequent version of Hulga’s own belief: he is the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hulga’s faith. Manley is the actor of Nothingness who allows Hulga to see the truth of her fantasy⁹. Here, the logic of “the uncanny” is made obvious. Something that was once familiar returns now as terrifyingly unfamiliar. O’Connor’s story is an elaborate exercise in uncanniness.

5. Leaving the gothic: O’Connor’s purgatory

Immobilized in the abandoned barn loft, focalized by the dusty light piercing through the decrepit roof structure (the light resembling the golden beam of epiphany

⁸ The motifs of blindness, of taking-off the blindfold, the scenery of an abandoned barn loft (as a dim place of concealment) joined with an apparent epistemological ambition to finally reveal some ultimate truth about the world (to move from *doxa* to *episteme*, from hearsay to knowledge) make of this wooing scene a parody of epistemological “myth” delineated in Plato’s allegory of the cave. Prisoners chained in darkness (note the peculiar Gothic imagery of confinement) have to be freed and dragged out to the light of the sun (to lose their sight, blinded by the annihilating light). Hulga’s nihilistic version of Plato’s myth (one has to remove the blindfold only to see that there’s nothing to be seen) is suddenly and violently overturned: she is the one who is chained and detained (and literally so, at the end of the story) in the darkness of unknowing and disorientation.

⁹ The finale of “Good Country People” echoes the famous “lesson from psychoanalysis”. Freud has noted the paradox of the traumatic realization of our innermost fantasies. When he “writes ‘If what (subjects) long for most intensely in their fantasies is presented to them in reality, they none the less flee from it’, his point is [...] that this occurs [...] because the core of our fantasy is unbearable to us” (Žižek 2006: 55–56).

that singles out the former tax-collector in Caravaggio's famous *The Calling of St. Matthew*), Hulga cannot rely anymore on any kind of former knowledge or belief.

Often in these moments of nihilation, O'Connor's characters are able to see the uncanniness of the world. There are fine moments at the finale of her stories where the sense of terror is replaced by an almost religiously intoned awe. "For hard by essential dread, in the terror of the abyss, there dwells awe (*Scheu*)" (Heidegger 1949: 386).

However, there is a further theological point in O'Connor's story. The "ruins of being" – "an existence that is always 'falling', always 'ruinous', even 'ruinant'" (Krell 1992: 50) torn apart by the approachment of Nothing – are always "fertile" in her prose. The "abyss of Nothing" (Heidegger 1949: 392) in "Good Country People" strangely resembles a Purgatory of sorts where one is to be purged of everything artificial, so that potentiality of a new life could appear. The prerequisite of salvation in O'Connor (as in the purgatorial eschatology of her religious faith) is the devastation of the artificial self. This is hinted by Chad Rohman in his analysis of O'Connor's story: "Left 'without a leg to stand on', Hulga is made whole. [...] Ravished, reduced and embarrassed, the one-legged monster is one step closer to becoming Joy" (Rohman 2014: 284). In "Good Country People", the wholesomeness of the self is achieved by the dismemberment of the "artificial limbs".

References

- Adorno, T. W. and M. Horkheimer (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment (Philosophical Fragments)*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Berthin, C. (2010). *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burt, J. (2008). Flannery O'Connor. In: S. Berkovitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. 7; Prose Writing (1940–1990)*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 347–355.
- Davison, C. M. (2014). The American Dream/The American Nightmare: American Gothic on the Small Screen. In: C. Crow (ed.), *A Companion to American Gothic*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 488–502.
- Di Renzo, A. (1993). *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque. Sine loco*: Southern Illinois University.
- Dickinson, E. and T. H. Johnson (ed.) (1960). *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Elliott, K. (2013). *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction: The Rise of Picture Identification, 1764–1835*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Heidegger, M. (1949). What Is Metaphysics? In: *Existence and Being*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 353–398.
- Hogle, J. H. (2002). Introduction: The Gothic in the Western Culture. In: J. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–20.
- Jameson, F. (2003). *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kavka, M. (2002). The Gothic on Screen. In: J. H. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 209–228.
- Krell, D. F. (1992). “Das Unheimliche”: Architectural Sections of Heidegger and Freud. *Research in Phenomenology*, 22, 43–61.
- Michasiw, K. I. (1998). Some Stations of Suburban Gothic. In: R. K. Martin and E. Savoy (eds.), *American Gothic: New Interventions in National Narrative*, Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 237–258.
- O’Connor, F. (1971). Good Country People. In: *The Complete Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 271–291.
- O’Connor, F. and S. Fitzgerald (ed.) (1979). *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House.
- Poe, E. A. (1994). *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, and related tales*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Punter, D. (1998). *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body, and the Law*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rohman, C. (2014). Awful Mystery: Flannery O’Connor as Gothic Artist. In: C. Crow (ed.), *A Companion to American Gothic*, Maiden and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 279–289.
- Schufreider, G. (2013). The Nothing. In: F. Raffoul and E. S. Nelson (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, London: Bloomsbury, 311–318.
- Sorensen, R. (2017). Nothingness. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (16 December 2017) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/nothingness/>>.
- Williams, A. (1995). *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Withy, K. (2015). *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1986). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Woessner, M. (2011). *Heidegger in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Žižek, S. (2006). *How to Read Lacan?* New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co.