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ABSENT FATHERS, AMBIGUOUS FATHER:

WALKER PERCY AND THE SCANDAL OF CHRISTENDOM

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1999

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

NOV. 20, 1998
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1-21/98
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

CONTENTS

Chapter

Introduction

On the occasion of his seventy-first birthday (May 28, 1987), Walker Percy told congratulating friends: "I am the oldest living Percy ever--I am a survivor." From anyone else, such words would appear solipsistic, even bizarre. But those familiar with Percy can recognize in the statement a hard-won trophy, reflecting his achievement in surmounting the burden of a family tendency towards depression and early suicide, beginning with his great-great grandfather, Charles Percy, in 1794. When Percy was one year old, his paternal grandfather killed himself; at eleven, his father did likewise; two years later, his mother died in a car accident. Percy's fiction can be understood as an attempt to deal with these catastrophic losses by turning to the world of imagination to replenish a literal world depleted by death. It is not simplistic to see Percy's writing as a series of elaborations on the theme "Why I **didn't** commit suicide."

Freud argues that the death of a father is the most disturbing event in every man's life because of the barrier against death the father represents in the son's mind; this trauma can only be intensified if the son is young and if the father commits suicide. Self-murder must have appeared attractive to Percy, not only as inevitable family destiny, but as a logical choice. His literary hero Albert Camus believed that suicide is the **only** philosophical question,

and said, "Now that we have rejected God, we have only two options: suicide, or the acceptance of absurdity." Percy's father chose the former; his cousin and foster father, William Alexander Percy, the latter. In an essay entitled "Stoicism in the South," Walker Percy describes his guardian as a man whose "finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him." The dominant faith of the Percys has been summed up as "the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius with a leavening of Episcopal frivolity and a ballast of Presbyterian Calvinism" (Douglas, 7).

But William Alexander's Stoic noblesse oblige--to keep going from sheer sense of duty--though attractive, was not enough for his adopted son. Mere existence without adequate spiritual foundation was what Walker Percy came to reject as "death-in-life." He explained to an interviewer that his reaction to his father's death was that he "didn't feel guilty or responsible the way some children of suicides do.... I was angry. And I was determined not only to find out why he did it but also to make damn sure that it didn't happen to me" (Tolson, 73). Percy's fiction exposes the inadequacy of his philosophical inheritance: ethical Stoicism, and what can be called "liberal Protestant agnosticism." The author wanted to preserve his life by finding a better alternative.

Characters who remain fairly consistent throughout a

writer's career--like Thomas Wolfe's or Hemingway's--tend to be autobiographical. The protagonists of Percy's novels are as immediately recognizable as Updike's angst-ridden major characters and Hemingway's stoical heroes. Each is an alienated, upper-middle-class white male. Each believes, at least at times, what Binx Bolling says: "As long as I am getting rich, I feel that all is well" (**M**, 25). All enjoy the sensual life, drinking, overeating, neglecting their professional duties, chasing several women at one time, and all experience the guilt associated with these pursuits. They daydream, and seem incapable of managing the details of their lives. All are torn between settling for what Binx calls the "Little Way" of the ordinary, passive life and their great ambitions to rise to the top of their professions, win the Nobel Prize, or prove the existence of God.

But each comes to a moment of recognition that everyday life is a sham, an evasion of the tragedy of the human condition. Will Barrett sums this feeling up in **The Second Coming**: "The lives of other people seemed even more farcical than his own.... How did they manage to deceive themselves and even to appear to live normally, work as usual, play golf, tell jokes, argue politics? Was he crazy or was it rather the case that other people went to any length to disguise from themselves the fact that their lives were farcical?" (4). The turning point comes when the protagonist realizes that

his affluence cannot shield him from being anxious, depressed, abstracted, alienated--often to the point of considering suicide.

Increasing the alienation is the fact that each protagonist has a weak father who either tries to or does kill himself, and Percy's fiction moves the protagonists toward confrontation with that fact. As they become more alcoholic, disoriented, depressed, they also move closer to recovery. Percy's novels reflect his medical training with their benign authoritarianism, moving from a diagnosis of the illness toward treatment leading to recovery. Health means seeing the world anew, celebrating the ordinary, and transforming it from the mundane to the mysterious, all of which involve a leap of faith and a quest. The protagonist realizes he can choose both the leap and the quest if he wishes to escape despair. At the critical moment the hero is enabled to see himself not as an organism among organisms but as a pilgrim and a wanderer, a homeless creature on earth, separated from other men and from God. Percy's major characters, even Lancelot, move towards affirming Catholicism as the antidote to their fathers' despair.

In his own life Percy realized early on that the answer he was seeking could only come from religion. But orthodox Christianity was not his first faith commitment. Percy

states that, by his senior year of college, science "was a religion for me; I believed that any problem, anything wrong, could be solved by one or another of the sciences" (Coles, 62). However, this path proved as inadequate as his guardian's Stoicism. Percy realized that science could not reveal anything about a specific individual except insofar as that individual resembled others.

> If the first great intellectual discovery of my life was the beauty of the scientific method, surely the second was the discovery of the singular predicament of man in the very world which has been transformed by this science. An extraordinary paradox becomes clear: that the more science progressed and even as it benefited man, the less it said about what it was like to be a man living in the world. (**MB**, 22)

Percy saw that science could explain "how" but not "why." It has no answer to the questions "Why are we here?" and "What is the moral way to live?" Asked "How did everything begin; how will everything end?", the best science can do is respond "accident." To science, humanity, in historian Carl Becker's memorable words, is

> ...little more than a chance deposit on the surface of the world, carelessly thrown up between two ice ages by the same forces that rust iron and ripen corn, a sentient organism endowed by some happy or unhappy accident with intelligence indeed, but with an intelligence that is conditioned by the very forces that it seeks to understand and control. (**The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers**, 14)

To Percy, such an account did not seem to be true, and had no explanatory power. Even if life could be reduced to chemis-

try, he was convinced that man could not; to Percy, language proved human singularity and separation from the material realm.

But the inability of science to explain human uniqueness and provide purpose is not readily apparent to most people. Because of its spectacular success in acquiring knowledge, science has achieved in the minds of many Americans a patina of omniscience which prevents other forms of knowledge from being taken seriously. Despite some postmodern suspicion of science in feminist and humanist circles, "scientific" remains a magical word, virtually a synonym for objective, thorough, quantifiable, modern, hard, real; an invincible antidote for obscurantism, real or imaginary. Such privileging of quantifiable knowledge has helped erode Western man's confidence in value judgments, despite the counter-claims made for intuitive perception since the Romantic era. Percy laments the result:

> What has happened is not merely the technological transformation of the world but something psychologically even more portentous. It is the absorption by the layman not of the scientific method but rather of the magical aura of science, whose credentials he accepts for all sectors of reality. Thus in the lay culture of a scientific society nothing is easier than to fall prey to a kind of seduction which sunders one's very self from itself into an all-transcending "objective" consciousness and a consumer-self with a list of "needs" to be satisfied. It is this monstrous bifurcation of man into angelic and bestial components against which the old theologies must be weighed before the new theologies are erected. Such a man could not take account of God, the devil, and the

> angels if they were standing before him, because he has already peopled the universe with his own hierarchies. (**MB**, 113)

Carl Sagan's documentary series **Cosmos**, with its smug assurance that "what you see is all there is," epitomized scientism for Percy, who saw Sagan's naturalism as a faith commitment the astronomer appeared incapable of subjecting to critical examination. Percy pokes fun at this product of a debased Christendom in his satirical self-help book, **Lost in the Cosmos.** Percy came to believe that human thought, especially scientific thought, can get nowhere without acts of faith (as Butler reluctantly concludes at the end of **The Way of All Flesh).** Contemporary philosophers such as Ian G. Barbour, Michael Polanyi, and Stanley Jaki acknowledge that science is incapable of grounding itself, relying as it does on unprovable faith presuppositions, e.g., that the universe is ultimately intelligible, that the same experiment will always yield the same result, and that the laws of science apply equally everywhere in the universe. Science, therefore, is the superstructure rather than the foundation of rationality.

Three years of Freudian analysis while he was in medical school convinced Percy that psychology was also unable to deal with the mystery that man is, unable to provide meaning. Freudian theory reduced all human complexities to the subconscious erotic drives of the id. Percy understood himself as

a creature of conscience and free will, not just a bundle of appetites, drives, and lust for power. Even more important, he believed it was impossible for an analyst to act simultaneously as an objective scientific determinist and at the same time as an advocate of such values as "maturity," "adjustment," and "emotional growth" to his patients. Percy was aware that every estimate of values involves some criterion of value which cannot be arrived at empirically. In an essay entitled "The Coming Crisis of Psychiatry" Percy observes:

> Man spends his life as though he were not the center of the supreme mystery but rather diverting himself.... Either we have outgrown monotheism, and good riddance; or modern man is estranged from being, from his own being, from the being of other creatures in the world, from transcendent being. He has lost something, what he does not know; he knows only that he is sick unto death with the loss of it.

Percy believes that this mystery in human life must be approached in another way. His novels reflect admiration for science and psychology but also recognition of their limitations. Thus he negotiates with an audience awed by science and awash in therapy--acknowledge the technical excellence and value of these disciplines, while demonstrating the emptiness that results from trying to build a life on them alone.

In 1942 Percy experienced a double crisis: he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis, and his beloved foster-father died. While the world's nations engaged in industrial-scale slaughter made possible by science and technology in service

to irrational ideologies, Percy had leisure to study, and he concentrated on French and Russian literature. Existentialism, whether atheistic or Christian, seemed congenial. Its starting point--the individual, needing transcendence and forced to choose a path--reflected Percy's awareness of having to decide between life or suicide. The 19th century precursor of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, seemed to express Percy's own hunger for meaning and rejection of every type of materialist reductionism. Especially appealing was Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel's attempt to rationalize the universe, and his emphasis on the church's assurance of salvation through ritual and sacrament. These later led Calvinist theologian Karl Barth to observe that the Danish thinker was on a trajectory which must result in his becoming a Catholic, had he lived longer; for this reason, Barth refused to list Kierkegaard among the great Protestant thinkers. In 1946 Percy and his wife took that step, one form of the "leap of faith" which Kierkegaard regards as necessary for a truly human life.

Catholicism gave Percy a non-reductive approach to the mystery of human life. It was immensely appealing, with its strong, systematized and comprehensive body of theological teachings, at once insistently rational and dedicated to the defense of mystery, grounded in extra-personal truth yet insistent upon the supreme sovereignty of the self, free to

choose or reject revealed truth. Percy became convinced that the Catholic view is the only one that makes whole and consistent sense of human experience. Another attractive element was that its answers were given with a unique level of **authority.** Percy noticed a serenity in those Catholics he knew, which he attributed to the church's claim to teach infallibly (Quinlan, 32).

Of course, every religion claims to be true and to offer benefits; such claims are hard to verify. Choosing among them, therefore, is primarily a choice between competing authorities (often determined by how well they satisfy the individual's emotional needs). Tradition and authority are usually understood as indispensable to revealed religion, but they are now highly suspect. In contemporary society, postmodernists claim that all observations are relative to the perspective of the observers. Since each sighting is a partial fiction and external authority has been deposed, we seem to be unable to distinguish between competing construals of how things are. Even objectivity is widely resented as somehow authoritarian, as a burden on freedom, imagination, and reinvention of self.

"Authority" is usually defined as **power,** the power to command and exact obedience. Postmodernism sees power (coercive self-interest) as the basis of all human relation-

ships and transactions, and desires the dismantling of narratives to expose their hidden interests and oppressive intentions--whereupon it assumes that the old assumptions about foundational reality will be abandoned. Perhaps for this reason those who exercise religious authority in Percy's fiction are powerless, as well as marginal and unattractive; but they have earned the authority to speak and act for God by long service. Although some readers (like Robert Coles) greeted Percy's Catholic themes with enthusiasm and possibly regarded the author as a religious authority in his own right, Percy was careful to deny this. He adopted Kierkegaard's distinction between a "genius" who possess a compelling skill and an "apostle," one who exercises religious authority by virtue of divine calling.

Despite not being an "apostle," Percy was motivated by his religious commitment to communicate the insights which had inoculated him against suicide. In a 1971 essay entitled "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World," he claims that

> ...not being called by God to be a prophet, he [the novelist] nevertheless pretends to a certain prescience. If he did not think he saw something other people didn't see or at least didn't pay much attention to, he would be wasting his time writing and they reading.

Along with his religious faith, what Percy wanted to communicate was his growing uneasiness with American society, its

racism, sexual hedonism, and autonomous individualism, as well as the tepid Christianity which condoned or at least did not challenge these.

An inheritance from his adoptive father gave him the leisure to write, and he began slowly composing essays on linguistic and philosophical subjects (published in 1975 as **The Message in the Bottle**). Modestly successful, Percy hungered for a broader audience and turned to fiction. Two unpublished novels followed, which the author judged failures due to their prolixity and, more important, the overt proselytism each contained (Ciuba, 75). This was an early instance of a continuing problem for Percy. How was he to convey the Catholic message which had become his intellectual center? So hard was Percy's task, so steep the obstacles he faced, that his final success constitutes a major achievement.

Percy's younger contemporary, Flannery O'Connor, was aware of the difficulties in such an undertaking. According to her, Catholic writers possess two sets of eyes: their own, which observe the world, and the Church's, which peer through the material world to the larger realm of Christian truth. "It would be foolish to say there is no conflict between these two sets of eyes," wrote O'Connor. "There is a conflict, and it is a conflict which we escape at our peril, one which cannot be settled beforehand by theory or fiat or faith"

(**Mystery and Manners**, 180). At their best, O'Connor claims, Catholic writers work with and draw from this tension. At their worst, they avoid it, either by writing only from the perspective of the Church (thereby creating what she called "pious trash") or by using only their personal vision (thereby fashioning works "merely in the fashion of a camera").

As she matured as a writer, O'Connor became even more circumspect about the possibilities of Catholic fiction. In the early 1960s she wrote: "The very term 'Catholic' novel is suspect, and most people who are aware of its complications don't use it except in quotation marks. If I had to say what a 'Catholic' novel is, I could only say that it is one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in the world of things and human relationships." She added that such writing "will be a strange and, to many, perverse fiction...which gives us no picture of Catholic life, or of the religious experiences that are familiar to us, but I believe it will be Catholic fiction" (**M&M**, 89).

Given such a latitudinarian perspective, the question might well be asked: What serious work of fiction is **not** "Catholic"? The question has greater force since O'Connor states that such writing will eschew any representation of religious life. The theoretical common ground Percy shares

with O'Connor is contained in that innocent-sounding phrase, "represents reality adequately." Both authors want to avoid any hint of proselytizing lest this mar their fiction; also, they wish to disassociate themselves from earlier generations of Catholic writers (such as Mauriac and Greene) who use fiction to wrestle with religious problems and thus "do not represent reality adequately." The challenge for a religious writer in the contemporary period, as these two authors perceive it, is to convey intelligible and absolute truths without being obviously "Catholic" and without violating the bounds of what fiction can do. By this criteria, Percy must be judged as less successful than O'Connor; despite his deft use of silence (especially in **Lancelot**), Percy finds no alternative to regularly presenting Catholic religious practice in his novels.

But how to reach a society, or at least an elite culture, whose cultural perceptions are radically different? An additional problem confronting an author wishing to communicate in a technological age is described in a prophetic poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, in her collection **Huntsman, What Quarry?**

> Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
> Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
> Of facts...they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
> Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
> Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
> To weave it into fabric.

Words themselves are a major part of Percy's communication difficulty. Our age faces a situation which never existed before: information glut. From millions of sources all over the globe, through every possible medium--lightwaves, airwaves, tickertapes, computer banks, telephone wires, television cables, satellites, printing presses--information pours in. Behind it, in every imaginable form of storage--on paper, video and audio tape, on disks, film and silicon chips --is an even greater volume of information waiting to be retrieved. Information now comes indiscriminately, in enormous volume, at high speeds, disconnected from meaning and import. The data flood makes information seem less vital, less affecting, by inflating it and turning it into another disposable commodity. Inevitably it will make its "consumers" less able to see information as in any way transforming. As the poem suggests, our culture seems to lack the "loom" necessary to deal with this data flood.

Modernism's decay has spawned three heirs, each seeking to fill this vacuum: fundamentalism, with its attempt to return to the premodern; syncretism, with its New Age and neognosticism; and postmodernism, with its skeptical nihilism and moral relativism. Percy attempts to discredit all of these. The first two are heavily satirized, while the third is implicitly rejected by the novelist's faith in words and his offer of religious faith as a comprehensive alternative

vision.

But the hallmark of postmodernism is precisely its distrust of any such universal or totalizing discourse. In fact, distrust or opposition is itself the best description of postmodernism. It opposes determinacy, synthesis and comprehensiveness in favor of indeterminacy, deconstruction and fragmentation. Postmodernists emphasize the deviant, not the type. Where others seek "authenticity," the avant garde rejects the "authentic self" as an illusion, an attempt to reify a mere collocation and ensemble of social roles.

Where their predecessors esteemed the work of art as a serious, self-contained, absolute, and finished work, produced by an autonomous creative artist, postmodernists emphasize art as an arena of playfulness, irony, process, referentiality, performance, and incompleteness in which the audience participates in the creation of meaning. They tend to think anti-foundationally, believing that truths are constructed by social groups and their languages; dismiss science and philosophy as totalizing "metanarratives"; and view history as nothing more than a network of agonistic language games. At the core of postmodernist theory is the assertion that language is a self-referential prison which cannot take in truths about the world outside, but can only construct meanings out of itself. There can be no transcendent Logos; the

only reality is virtual reality. Postmodernism is aptly summarized by Richard Rorty: "Truth is what your colleagues will let you get away with saying."

For a Catholic writer, such beliefs are toxic. Catholicism is a religion built upon exaltation of the Word, whose God not only called the world into being through words but is linguistic in His very nature. Any nominalistic view of language as the "play" of signifiers, or of words as merely arbitrary tokens of meaning, is fundamentally anti-thetical to a Catholic understanding. (In his autobiography, William Alexander Percy speaks of Christianity as "the beautiful dead language" incapable of saving his three adopted sons (**Lanterns on the Levee**, 310)). Percy laments the devaluation of words, especially where language of grace and redemption has been "worn smooth as poker chips" through overuse and familiarity. A big part of our current alienation, as Percy sees it, is the exhaustion of our symbols. It is significant that all of the writers who appear in his fiction produce only mountains of cliches and dreary, predictable sex scenes.

A writer, Catholic or otherwise, has only words to employ, whatever the level of their exhaustion. To encourage his readers to rediscover and thus affirm the value of ordinary life, Percy must renew the old terms or find new ones. Woven

throughout Percy's corpus is his belief that man is still able to be open to the redemptive right uses of language even though now living in a world where it is everywhere debased. Language itself is at once for Percy the index to and the instrument of man's entire range of possibilities: the great good of saying and knowing and doing truth, the evil of erecting Towers of Babel all over the landscape. Faith in the power of art is therefore as implicit in Percy's novels as his religious faith is explicit; fiction must now communicate what sermons no longer can.

The deafness of his daughter and his difficulty communicating with her increased Percy's own life-long fascination with language. He saw in its symbolic manipulation the core of what sets man apart from the rest of creation. Borrowing from C.S. Pierce, Percy developed his "triadic" theory, an interaction involving the relationship among a person, an object, and the word that names the object; thus language establishes and maintains a relationship between man and nature. This gives human consciousness a seemingly irrefutable uniqueness, and is thus for Percy another weapon against secular materialism, which tends to deny or downplay any such singularity.

In fact, postmodernism has decentered the human subject, insisting that the self is little more than a social con-

struct. The individual, in this view, is not a soul, a mind, a psyche, or a will--and is certainly not made in the image of God. Any residual ontology that implies a "real" self able to choose and reason, love and judge, needs to be abandoned. We are to recognize instead that individuals are but random collections of virtual states of consciousness, with no underlying ground, no principle of unity, and no predetermined boundaries. To Percy, such a view cannot rightly shape souls or societies. It has no enduring depth, no capacity to grasp who we are or to guide us as to what we ought to be about, and can do no more than coast on the social and moral capital derived from the centuries of the Christian era.

But the situation of postmodernism is not uniformly bleak for the Catholic novelist, nor was its predecessor necessarily more hospitable. With its "totalized" enlightened faith in secular, rationalistic, and demystified modes of explanation for all things, modernism was by and large a bitter enemy of Christian orthodoxy. Postmodernism represents a defeat for the materialistic paradigm. Newly suspicious of science--as "masculinist," logocentric," "Eurocentric"--it offers a kind of backhanded support to Percy's rejection of scientism. Many religious thinkers are attracted by postmodernism's accent on the limitations of reason, against the hubris of Enlightenment rationalism. Moreover, because it rejects universal standards for truth, postmodernism makes

it now more difficult to marginalize traditional religious perspectives on the old scientistic grounds that such perspectives have failed to meet some objective standards to which all educated people should assent.

Postmodernism has also to a great extent discredited classical atheism, since this rests on the idea of objective truth. Atheism now appears to postmodernism, as it already did to Romanticism, as too narrow, as in a sense conceding too much to believers in allowing them to appropriate divinity to themselves. The approved postmodernist attitude is to affirm spiritual reality everywhere in the universe. (This does not entail conceding, however, that life has any meaning beyond that which we give to it or that there exists a reality which transcends our efforts to grasp it but that nonetheless exercises claims on us.)

Postmodernism also allows cultural room for religion in a way that modernism did not. "Multiculturalism" accentuates this possibility, especially insofar as it undercuts notions of commonality in favor of tribal forms of association, each with its own characteristic brands of cognitive "difference." In the postmodernist dispensation, religious believers too can claim the coveted status of "outsider" or "marginal," and triumphantly call themselves "resident aliens" with a unique contribution to offer.

What is this contribution? Both Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy would affirm that Catholic fiction is unique in being concerned with three central truths: the fall of humanity, redemption and judgment. The profound erosion in our communal belief in the power of language to express truth makes terms like "fall," "redemption," and "judgment" suspect. A Catholic writer faces the dilemma that translating these terms into contemporary social or interpersonal reality (with their atheistic presuppositions) risks emptying them of content, while using such terms without modification risks creating a work which speaks only to believers. What is a writer to do where words cannot be trusted?

Without a clear answer, with only implicit faith in the existence of truth and the power of words to convey it, Catholic fiction continues to affirm the fundamental mystery and sacramental character of human existence and the reality of the supernatural. Likewise, it affirms our radical incompleteness and the genuine possibility of redemption. But redemption only **begins** in this life, as Percy tells an interviewer:

> I think my writings reflect a certain basic orientation toward, although they're not really controlled by, Catholic dogma....So, to me, the Catholic view of man as pilgrim, in transit, in journey, is very compatible with the vocation of a novelist because the novelist is writing about a man in transit, man as pilgrim. I think it would be a disadvantage, for example, to be a Freudian and a novelist. (Carr, 325)

Thus Percy can offer only an "informed" pilgrimage, a tentative victory of meaning over absurdity, easily lost. Hence his appreciation of surviving longer than his ancestors, and his refusal to present utopian visions.

The assumptions of postmodernism force Catholic writers like Flannery O'Connor or J.F. Powers to probe the most extreme of human experiences, pressuring language's revelatory powers to articulate the movements of the spirit, still trusting/affirming the power of language to reveal the truth of the invisible world; those who write it are, as O'Connor implies, the searchers and discoverers of the real. In an essay entitled "Notes for a Novel" Percy explains why religious writers must reach for extremes:

> The novelist uses every ounce of cunning, craft and guile he can muster from the nether regions of his soul....The tools of his trade have come to be violence, shock, insult, the bizarre....How can one possibly write of baptism as an event of immense significance, when baptism is accepted but accepted by and large as a minor tribal rite somewhat secondary in importance to taking the kids to see Santa at the department store.

The tradeoff is clear. If religion accepts the room multiculturalism makes for it as another voice, it does so at the cost of forfeiting its claim to be anything other than a subjective preference or mere opinion. Yet, judging by the procession of his novels, Percy grows more and more confident of the value of his message, less reticent about foregrounding

it. He sets out to assert his countercultural truths and, in **The Second Coming**, achieves something close to a redemption of words in the teeth of linguistic skepticism.

Such skepticism is not the only obstacle Percy faces in presenting his message. Christianity may not have promised an earthly utopia, but its historical and current failures are not such as to inspire confidence. To whatever extent the United States is a "Christian nation" with only nominal Christianity, Percy has another hurdle to overcome. Finding evidence of American religiosity is easy; judging its significance is more difficult.

For example, in the presidential elections of 1992, there were constant allusions to America as not only a religious nation but one with a special, divinely ordained "mission." All the major candidates declared their personal commitment to faith. George Bush told a convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, "I want to thank you for helping America, as Christ ordained, to be a light upon the world.... One cannot be America's President without a belief in God, without a belief in prayer." Bill Clinton, interviewed on an interdenominational religious cable network, declared, "If I didn't believe in God, if I weren't in my view...a Christian, if I didn't believe ultimately in the perfection of life after death, my life would have been that much more different."

Ross Perot was a Presbyterian who backed traditional family values. Pat Buchanan, a Catholic, advocated an America based on traditional moral standards.

The religious position of these candidates reflects the United States as a whole. Among the advanced industrialized nations of the West, America alone remains religious in more than a nominal sense. In his book **The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s**, George Gallup reports that nine Americans in ten say they never doubted the existence of God, eight in ten believe that they will be called before God on Judgment day to answer for their sins, eight in ten believe that God still works miracles, and seven in ten believe in life after death. Moreover, 90% pray, 88% believe that God loves them, 78% say they have given "a lot" or "a fair amount" of thought to their relationship with God during the past two years, and 86% say they want religious training for their children (76, 84).

Survey data also shows that Christianity is the religion of most Americans. A full 84% of Gallup's respondents said that Jesus was God or the Son of God; even 72% of the unchurched gave that response, up from 64% in 1978. About three-quarters of the nation's citizens had at some time sensed Jesus' presence in their lives, and 66% reported having made a personal commitment to Him. A mere 8% of Americans were

without a religious preference, and even they, in the words of Gallup, "express a surprising degree of interest in religion and religious belief." 69% of blacks and 61% of all Americans expressed a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in organized religion (**PR**, 77).

In 1990, a poll of 113,000 Americans commissioned by the Graduate School of the City University of New York found that only 7.5% of those surveyed said they had no religion, while 86.5% of the population were Christian. Jews represented 1.8% of the respondents (in 1947, Gallup reported that America was 6% Jewish). The Pacific Northwest was the area with the least church attendance, while the South had the highest level. (Gallup concurs: "Those with no religious preference are more likely to be young, male, well-educated and to live in the Northeast or Pacific Coast region (**PR**, 118)). The same polls, taken in 1991, showed a modest rise in religiousness in America over the previous three years. About seven out of ten adults reported membership in a church or synagogue. Eighty-six percent of teens said they believed that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God. 59% of those interviewed said they agreed completely that a personal faith in Jesus Christ was the **only** assurance of eternal life, and another 17% agreed "somewhat." Eighty-one percent believed the Bible to be the literal (32%) or inspired (49%) word of God (**EC**, 112-14).

In 1992, the sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, following a careful analysis of data collected by the Bureau of Census, concluded that on the eve of the American Revolution only about 17% of Americans belonged to churches. By the start of the Civil War the figure was 37%, by 1906 it was slightly more than half, and in 1926 this had increased to 56%. The numbers continued to rise until by 1980 church adherence was about 62%. America appeared to be more religious (or at least more church-affiliated) in the year Ronald Reagan was elected President than in the colonial era of the "Great Awakening" (**The Churching of America, 1776-1990,** 92-3).

The statistical profile of contemporary America given above has been corroborated by numerous surveys. A Harris poll taken in July 1994, for example, revealed that 95% of the sample believed in God and 90% in heaven. Of the four in five Americans who described themselves as Christian, 89% believed in life after death, 87% in miracles, and 85% in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ (**EC,** 53). Even 52% of the non-Christians surveyed expressed belief in Christ's Resurrection! Reviewing the data, Gallup concluded that "the degree of religious orthodoxy found among Americans is simply amazing....Such a nation cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as secular in its core beliefs." Only India of the world's larger nations reported a higher degree

of religious interest (**PR**, 91).

Perhaps Americans exaggerate their degree of religious commitment when surveyed, feeling a need to appear more faithful than they really are. Yet even this would be an indication of respect for religion. In any case, the evidence makes it impossible to regard the United States as a secular nation. A truly secular society would have numbers approximating those found in Great Britain or Scandinavia, where interest in God is minimal and church attendance is extremely low (about 2.2% in the Church of England on an average Sunday). Historian Alan Gilbert has defined a thoroughly secular society as "one in which norms, values, and modes of interpreting reality, together with the symbols and rituals which express and reinforce them, have been emancipated entirely from assumptions of human dependence on supernatural agencies or influences." This description does not fit the America of 1776, 1865, 1900, or 1997.

Given this Niagara of data, why does the notion of America as a "Christian" nation seem so counter-intuitive? Asked to comment on Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that America is a nation "with the soul of a church," British journalist Alistair Cooke responded, "That's true, but it also has the soul of a whorehouse." In 1990 evangelist Billy Graham declared that the U.S. was no longer a Christian nation. It

is, he said, "a secular country in which thousands of Christians live and have substantial influence" (EC, 25). Personal experience suggests that, as a way of thinking and experiencing, religion is clearly marginal to most of the institutions in which our culture is now embodied: science, government, corporations, leisure activities, the military, aesthetics, and education.

One explanation for these conflicting perceptions is the disproportionate power of various groups. Sociologist Peter Berger notes that, if Indians are identified as the most religious nationality and Swedes the least, America is a nation "of Indians ruled by Swedes" (SC, 12). That is, most Americans are religious, but a very influential segment Berger terms "the knowledge class" (those professionally engaged in disseminating information)--academics, lawyers, journalists, filmmakers, social scientists--is determinedly secular and defines the boundaries of acceptable public opinion. Religion, in their view, is at best a purely private activity, with no place in the public realm. Following their lead, most people have internalized the cultural expectation that public language is relativistic and permissive, while the language of obedience to normative moral tradition is essentially private. The first language is one of permission, while the second threatens to impose; most Americans have been taught that it is un-American to

impose one's views upon others.

Berger marshals strong evidence to support this hypothesis. The Media Research Center found that of 18,000 network news stories in 1993, only 212 dealt specifically with religion, and over half of those concerned scandal (**RA**, 44). Since 1982, the Supreme Court has followed the "endorsement test" on church-state questions. This principle holds that public authority may do nothing that might be construed as a sign that religion is a good thing, that it is a component of human flourishing in a way that what the justices call "nonreligion" is not. This makes the government what University of Chicago law professor Mike McConnell calls "a relentless engine of secularization." Jeff Sagansky, president of CBS Entertainment, told an interviewer in 1994, "The first thing you learn as a program executive is never program anything whose content has to do with religion and God. It isn't hip." Numerous writers (including Thomas Sowell, Lynne Cheney, Dinesh D'Souza, Richard Bernstein, and Stephen Carter) have richly documented the emphasis on secularism and "nonjudgmental" thinking in public schools and the dominance of university liberal arts departments by the political (and non-religious) left.

But the influence of the "knowledge class" cannot by itself account for the strong intuition that America is a

secular nation with a Christian veneer. Very different information from the polls of Gallup and others was discovered in an in-depth random survey of 4,001 Americans conducted by a team of political scientists in 1993. Their study concluded that 30% of Americans are totally secular in outlook, 29% are barely or nominally religious, 22% are modestly religious, and only 19% (about thirty-six million people) regularly practice their religion. In explaining what counted as "regular practice," researcher John Green said, "We're looking at people who meet a religious minimum according to their own traditions" (**Disciples and Democracy**, 87). If this study is accurate, the vibrant faith pollsters hear about in telephone surveys is either greatly exaggerated or not vitally linked with much of the public's attitudes and actions.

A majority of Americans tell pollsters (64% in 1991) that there are few moral absolutes. 43% say they rely upon their personal experience instead of outside authorities when weighing issues of right and wrong. Only three people in ten view Scripture as the ultimate authority in matters of truth. In 1988, 38% of Americans were unchurched, a figure which represents almost seventy-eight million adults. Gallup found that overwhelming majorities, churched and unchurched, agreed with the statements that "people should arrive at their religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue" and

"one can be a good Christian or Jew without attending religious services" and "what is true for me is not necessarily true for other persons" (**PR**, 25). These responses reflect a tendency to understand freedom as autonomy, living in accordance with a law one has given oneself, a freedom not connected to any notion of the good or the true beyond self-satisfaction. They also reflect the postmodern suspicion of authority noted earlier. If language cannot tell us the truth, then philosophy (the love of wisdom) is replaced by rhetoric. Language becomes an effort to convince--which is to say exercise power over--other people. In this situation, authority is inconceivable. If all speech is rhetorical, there can be no authoritative speech.

The responses also demonstrate the individualism inherent in Protestantism and the Enlightenment. Such individualism is at the core of American Christianity. Sociologist Robert Bellah, in his influential book **Habits of the Heart**, suggests that Americans are now unable to talk about religious experience because religious language has been supplanted by therapeutic language, with therapy itself taking on a quasi-sacred character.

> Our culture increasingly celebrates therapy as an all-purpose panacea--from the public confessionals of daytime talk shows, through presidential retreats featuring group encounters and hug-fests, to the diffusion of "therapy-speak," as in "getting in touch with one's feelings" and "needing one's space." Personal salvation is no longer expected to be found

> exclusively in a pew or on one's knees. The therapist's office is the new sacred place. (**HH**, 35)

The substitution of psychology for spirituality (on a massive scale) makes religious concepts unintelligible unless expressed in therapeutic terms. Bellah speaks of the nation as having "260 million supreme beings" and of the widespread tendency of individuals to construct their own personal faith from congenial elements of numerous religious traditions. He calls this kind of personal synthesis "Sheilaism" and concludes that most Americans are not interested in orthodox Christianity but are searching for a personalized religion that meets their own individual needs. We desire, it seems, to sing the songs of Zion in the temples of Buddha or Isis.

Such eclecticism is a characteristic in harmony with our historic sense of personal independence as well as the considerable socioeconomic mobility we have long enjoyed. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof concludes: "Typically Americans view religious congregations as gatherings of individuals who have chosen to be together, in institutions of their own making and over which they hold control--fostering what sometimes, in the eyes of observers from other countries, appears as 'churchless Christianity.'" For Americans, "religious authority lies in the believer--not in the church, not in the Bible, despite occasional claims of infallibility and inerrancy on the part of some" (**A Generation of Seekers**,

49). In **Lancelot**, Percy uses the character Raine to satirize self-constructed faith as lacking authority, even for its creators.

Americans have long claimed the right to define truth as they see it. This applies to modern Catholics as well, given the massive changes since the Second Vatican Council. Gallup reported that 77% of Catholics claim to rely on their own consciences rather than papal teaching in making difficult moral decisions (**PR**, 39). Other polls show Catholics lending strong support for contraception, "safe sex" education in schools, the ordination of women, and abortion, all positions officially opposed by their church (Pierre Hegy, **The Church in the Nineties**, 69-85).

Yet consistent moral relativism, in practice, is hard to find. Even in contemporary liberal circles, where tolerance and moral relativism are understood to reign supreme, a noble rage about the delinquent condition of the world is unmistakable. Those familiar with the secular avant garde can testify to its moral passion for purity: pure jokes, pure speech, pure earth, sky and sea, pure food and pure bodies, even undiluted equality. In fact, all American reform crusades down to the civil rights movement have appealed to eternal truths.

Close examination also reveals the superficiality of

Christianity in modern America. As noted above, the pious rhetoric reported to pollsters is not necessarily an indication of deep-seated, life-changing commitment. William Bennett's 1993 **Index of Leading Cultural Indicators** documents important trends in American life. Between 1960 and 1990, when the population increased 41%, there was a 560% increase in violent crime, a more than 400% increase in illegitimate births, a more than 200% increase in the teen-age suicide rate, and a nearly 200% increase in divorce. The percentage of children living in single-parent homes had more than tripled, and the fastest-growing segment of the criminal population was the nation's children. In 1990, 2.9 million couples lived together without marriage--up 80% from 1980 and 454% from 1970. African-Americans are killing each other, going to prison, and becoming addicted in record numbers, yet Gallup reports that "American blacks are, by some measures, the most religious people in the world" (**PR**, 88). Such statistics indicate an ability to divide the spiritual from the material realms of existence.

Most Americans spend the great bulk of their time and energy pursuing power, cash, status, and pleasure, and have little knowledge of the faith they profess to hold. Gallup refers to a nation of "biblical illiterates." Only four in ten know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount; fewer than half of all adults can name the four Gospels; only three

teen-agers in ten know why Easter is celebrated; ten percent of adults believe that the name of Noah's wife was Joan of Arc (**PR**, 44). Sociologist Robert Bezilla notes that only slightly more than half of U.S. Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians believe in the devil, while roughly the same number accept ESP. A third of the Methodists and 31% of the Presbyterians believe in astrology. Fifty-six per cent of the Lutherans and forty-nine per cent of the Methodists believe in UFOs. While 73% of Americans believe in hell, 77% think their own prospects for going to heaven are excellent or good (**Religion in America**, 45).

This kind of shallow religiosity provides a satirist like Walker Percy a host of inviting targets, and he is not slow to shoot. But the state of American Christianity, two thousand miles wide and two inches deep, makes serious talk about faith difficult for a novelist. Religion has been overwhelmed by the culture, producing what is rightly called cultural Christianity. Of course, religious acculturation takes place at all times and in all places. But Christianity becomes cultural Christianity when the faith is so dominated by a culture that it loses much or most of its authenticity, when believers go about their lives pretty much the same as those who have no faith at all.

In essence, the same thing has happened to Christianity

as to the words which express it. The concepts have become too familiar, cheapened by repetition and inflation unlinked to reality. Redeeming the debased language of grace also means redeeming the innocuous religion it has come to represent. And American Christianity **is** innocuous, tending to be upbeat, easy, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love for God. There is no guilt, no punishment, and the eternal payoff in heaven is virtually certain. In short, the American environment has diluted Christianity to the point where it is at ease with basic secular premises about personal conduct and the meaning of life. It provides what German theologian Dietrich Bonhoffer called "cheap grace," which he defines in **The Cost of Discipleship** as "the justification of sin" and as merely "the grace we bestow on ourselves."

This situation can be categorized as a scandal. Being a Christian in the U.S. seems to require not only faith in the supernatural, but faith that true Christianity is more than what American culture says it is. (Flannery O'Connor would argue that, for a Catholic, yet a third level of faith is required--trust in a Church which often requires its members to suffer more from it than on its behalf.) The dismal moral climate in an American society pervaded by religion increases the difficulty of Percy's task. Unless he

can find a way to separate the nominally Christian culture from Christianity, his project--presenting such faith as the answer to contemporary malaise--is hopeless. His potential audience is likely to be either nominally Christian already, or what German Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher once called the "cultured despisers" of religion, in either case uninterested in Percy's message.

This means Percy must separate Christianity from its concrete manifestations. Borrowing from Kierkegaard, he therefore distinguishes between "Christianity" and "Christendom." The latter is the central body of religious doctrine, with its concept of divine grace and salvation through an incarnate Savior. Christendom is a geographical area which has nourished everything that has grown up around this creed.

Percy's work in large part is an attack upon Christendom, which has consistently either compromised with political tyranny or been responsible for such tyranny. Despite (or because of) its veneer of Christianity, European and American Christendom rarely allowed Christian ideals to influence decisions. Christendom is characterized by the "enlightened" inclination to explain and forgive all bad conduct, or even to call it Christian. For Percy, Sweden is the ultimate example of what Christendom has done: nominally Christian, it

is in fact a completely secular, therapeutic society.

Christendom in America is best illustrated by the fact, as Binx Bolling says, that ninety-eight percent believe in God. This condition of a replete and plenary Christendom with only faint Christian practice is Percy's topic: "The American Christian novelist's 'dilemma' is that though he professes a belief which he holds saves himself and the world and nourishes his art besides...Christendom seems in some sense to have failed" (**MB**, 116). This failure is preeminently a moral one.

> There is besides the devaluation of its vocabulary the egregious moral failure of Christendom...in the sector of everyday morality, which has acutely concerned Americans since the Puritans. Americans take pride in doing right. It is not chauvinistic to suppose that perhaps they have done righter than any other great power in history. But in the one place, the place which hurts the most and where charity was most needed, they have not done right. White Americans have sinned against the Negro from the beginning and continue to do so, initially with cruelty and presently with an indifference which may be even more destructive. (**MB**, 117)

America's treatment of minority peoples shows as perhaps no other issue the gap between its ideals and reality. "Every Southern writer," Percy says, "must come to some kind of terms with the Negro. He can no more avoid it than a Negro writer can avoid writing about the white man (**MB**, 132). Percy is keenly aware that the intensely Christian South has been the most intransigent region in supporting racist views

and practices. But the situation has changed. In an essay entitled "Random Thoughts," Percy explains how. "The astounding dimension of the change is that the virtues and faults of the South are the virtues and faults of the nation, no more no less" (502).

Nor is moral failure confined to race relations. Percy has a keen eye for detail in describing American scenes, and he resolutely opposes what might be termed a sort of "democratization of vice" as a result of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. In fact, Percy's religious beliefs and desire for moral strictness give a decidedly anti-liberal cast to his fiction. Despite his lampooning of Nixonites, super-patriots, Birchers, racists, latter-day Babbitts and other reactionaries, the satire at their expense is overshadowed by that directed at the scientific salvationists of the left, New Age activists, post-Christian clergymen, sexual liberationists, utopians, "equalitarians," and all others he regards as false "humanists" whose common purpose is to deny the unique status of human beings as created by God. Since the groups who provide Percy's favorite targets of satire are likely also to include most readers of serious fiction, it is not difficult to understand the critical antagonism his work has provoked.

At the heart of Percy's conservatism is a sense of human

limits, an understanding that life is fragile and uncertain, and that we are fools to suppose that we are in control of our destinies. Theological liberalism in particular threatens Percy because it results in the loss of self-confidence and authority by Christian churches. Guilt for association with colonialism, remorse for complicity in the horror of the Holocaust, and increasing doubt about the truth of Christianity's doctrines in the harsh light of secularist rationalism has led many putatively Christian intellectuals to embrace pluralism and abandon any exclusive truth claims. In their estimation, all creeds and dogmas are human constructs, and they no longer regard religious faith as a disposition of reason toward revealed truth.

Such liberal Christianity is another aspect of the scandalous accommodation of faith with contemporary culture. In Flannery O'Connor's words, it works "to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer, to banish intellectual distinctions,...and gradually come to believe that God has no power...cannot reveal Himself to us... and that religion is our own sweet invention" (**M&M**, 112). She might have added that it stresses the goodness of human nature over original sin, emphasizes the love of God rather than His wrath, gives more weight to religious experience than doctrinal purity, disparages the sacramental nature of the faith, is uncomfortable with miracles and the super-

natural, and argues that "progressive" ethics are the test of religious truth. In his book **The Kingdom of God in America,** theologian H. Richard Niebuhr aptly summarized the tenets of liberal Christianity as "a God without wrath brought a man without sin into a kingdom without judgment, and redeemed him by the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Theological liberalism's counterpart is the moral liberalism exemplified by the sexual revolution. Unbounded personal autonomy and moral relativism produce anarchy, and Percy sees liberalism as powerless to counter this or justify obliging social truths that are in accord with human flourishing. The exaltation of individual free choice, the single-minded pursuit of one's own satisfaction, freedom, and preferences, has put the fidelity owed to others into full eclipse. Percy is pleading that by God's grace we can--we must--live lives that are obligated by other persons and their needs.

Percy's answer, presented as indirectly as possible, is traditional Christian orthodoxy and morality. He sees life as a given, implying a giver, implying that the human community is not the source of value and valuing, but rather the community of those whose work it is to learn what the valuing means. Above all, Percy argues for marriage as a necessary discipline to restrain sexual anarchy; so important is this that Harold Bloom says it almost displaces the divine

in his thought. Yet once again a contemporary audience is likely to be skeptical, because the marriage covenant is no longer how our cultural elite interprets family, civilization and religious faith. When Immanuel Kant redefined marriage as "a contract for the mutual exercise of the genitals," he was anticipating the increasingly prevalent American view that marriage is a purely private act, a contract between autonomous individuals for whatever ends they happen to seek. In this perspective, high divorce rates are welcome evidence of increasing personal freedom.

Percy invites his readers to consider an alternative to such endless pursuit of one's own interests, preferences, and satisfactions. He knows that religion has no value unless it offers something other than what the culture already provides, and he's betting that Americans will not be forever willing to pay the price of meaninglessness in exchange for the license to do what they want. But with the moral failure of Christendom evident to everyone, what can Christianity offer but more disappointment, more broken promises?

Dealing with this failure is made easier for Percy because the Christian doctrine of original sin not only explains the origin and endurance of evil, it also rules out any utopian hopes. According to this teaching, man is captive to sin and is unable through his own resources to be

good. Christian eschatological doctrine also makes the realization of the absolute in history an impossibility, because sin has broken human harmony and cannot be healed by any means short of conversion. This kind of realism is both a strength and a weakness; if religion teaches people to be failures, as time destroys all human accomplishments, it also encourages acceptance of the status quo.

Some critics convict Percy of complacency of this sort. They focus on what they consider his willful omissions, including the accusation that he refuses to endorse any political program to alleviate the world's ills. In his article "Walker Percy and the Politics of Grace," Cecil Eubanks makes this charge:

> Percy's vision of individual authenticity or salvation or escape from the malaise is so imbued with the notion of the "sovereign pilgrim" and so highly critical of abstract solutions that attempts at political or social reform, institutional or revolutionary, seem by comparison to be gnostic.

Where Eubanks says "politics" he seems to mean "utopian politics," and he overlooks the novelist's insistently communal intentions. Percy is not against social progress; witness his opposition to racism, as documented by all biographers. But as **The Thanatos Syndrome** makes clear, he suspects that utopian ends require totalitarian means.

And there is another reason Percy's message is unlikely

to appeal to those who still believe in perfectionism. He suggests that life can be dull, boring, meaningless even or **especially** under conditions of democracy, peace, stability, and substantial social justice. His value as a writer is increasing precisely because he speaks to the fear we are all beginning to feel after 1989--that not only is utopia impossible, more of what we have will not make us happier. His protagonists are disillusioned despite "having it all," and Percy comments that if his black characters become prosperous they will only find the same alienation. By emphasizing rediscovery and affirmation of the value of ordinary life, his fiction suggests the possibility of coping without the need for escaping into those utopian fantasies whose pursuit has spilled so much blood in our century.

Percy considers his message to be a substitute for the stew of materialism, hedonism and nihilism which our culture lumps together and offers as "humanism." Rebuilding on these ruins is impossible, he suggests, without religious faith. Percy offers the intriguing idea that obedience to religious authority may not be the surrender of freedom, but the exercise of freedom in response to truth. Freedom that is **not** ordered to truth is but captivity to impulse, appetite, and license. Today religion is the champion of universal truth and of universal human rights based on the dignity of man created in the image of God. Thus the genuine achieve-

ments of the Enlightenment, which were thought to have been secured against Christianity, are now most firmly secured and advanced by Christianity. Relishing that irony, three hundred years after Voltaire Percy says, "Get married, go to church, cultivate your garden--with your fellow flawed pilgrims."

Chapter II

THE MOVIEGOER

By virtually every measure, the 1950s should have been the apogee of the "American century." Having just triumphed in history's greatest armed conflict, the United States controlled half the wealth, more than half the productivity, and two-thirds of the machines of the entire world (Halberstam, 115). But despite general affluence and rising living standards, the era produced a series of memorable protests against the perceived conformity and stifling nature of American culture. The price for greater material comforts seemed to be freedom and individuality. If Depression-era critics chronicled the failures of American capitalism, those of the Eisenhower years criticized its successes.

As the '50s progressed young people gained status; no longer gawky "adolescents," they were now "teen-agers" to be taken more seriously. Simultaneously with this elevation they experienced a gradual erosion of confidence in their elders and the traditional moral codes they inherited. Marlon Brando, James Dean and Elvis Presley were the first of many to sense the change and cash in handsomely by posing as misunderstood "rebels." For many young adults, a middle-class, white collar future began to look uninviting, confining. The greater one's success, the stronger the trap--increasing stress, decreasing security--all for

suburban affluence without purpose. Writer Ron Rosenbaum notes that the original version of **The Invasion of the Body Snatchers** was about "the horror of being in the suburbs. About neighbors whose lives had so lost their individual distinctiveness they could be taken over by alien vegetable pods--**and no one would know the difference.**"

When it first appeared, **The Moviegoer** was received as another example of the anti-philistine genre, unique in fusing an existentialist perspective with an American idiom. But what sets Percy's novel apart from such works as **The Lonely Crowd, Death of a Salesman, White Collar, The Organization Man, What Makes Sammy Run, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit** or its close contemporary **Rabbit, Run** is the self-conscious irony of its protagonist and the author's religious preoccupation. Percy is determined not to echo those artists who, in his view, "attacked the spirit of the age [but] had nothing to offer in its stead" (**MB**, 26). Agreeing with them that America is somehow off-track, Percy employs a less dramatic tone, combining criticism of "cultural Christianity" with a subtle suggestion that real Christianity may help right things.

If **The Moviegoer** is unique in its religious concerns, it resembles the other protest fiction in being generically American rather than regional, despite its Louisiana setting.

Southern writers in the twentieth century have spent their energy proving that the South is different from the rest of the country, with its strong evangelical religious faith and brooding memory of defeated glory. But in **The Moviegoer**, the South is pretty much like everywhere else, pretty bad. Post-Christianity has reached the Delta, now a spiritual desert. Christendom is dying because it can no longer convey a sense of purpose.

From the Christian perspective, such desolation is to be expected--the Fall and consequent estrangement from God are basic, irreducible facts of existence; paradise cannot be regained by human effort. But in Christendom, scientific humanism has replaced this understanding with promises of an earthly utopia, as Percy notes:

> So the scientists and humanists got rid of the Fall and reentered Eden, where scientists know like angels and laymen prosper in good environments, and ethical democracies progress through education. But in so doing they somehow deprived themselves of the means of understanding and averting the dread catastrophes which were to overtake Eden...
> Then Eden turned into the twentieth century. (**MB**, 24)

Secular dreams of inevitable progress have been discredited by the facts of recent history; yet the weakening hold of Christian faith, even in the South, means that the traditional tools for understanding and coping with alienation are no longer accessible.

New Orleans, like the rest of America, now lives off the diminishing moral capital inherited from a religious past, observing secularized Christian holidays like monks reciting a sacred language whose meaning they no longer understand. To the extent the city is still widely associated with adventure and the exotic, its reputation provides an ironic contrast with the everydayness endured by Percy's suburban-moviegoing protagonist and the living death he sees everywhere. The book's dominant symbol is the last week of Carnival, culminating in the Mardi Gras parade, with its monstrous and mechanical gaiety. Carnival is now a useless preparation for a Lent no longer observed.

In this environment medical language is of no help, because it defines illness in terms of what is normal. But in American Christendom, the people most at risk are those who have all their "normal" needs fulfilled, as Percy explains:

> ...something has gone badly wrong with Americans and American life...which has nothing to do with poverty and ignorance and discrimination. Indeed it is the very people who have escaped Tobacco Road and moved to the exurbs who have fallen victim...What increasingly engages the Southern novelist as much as his Connecticut counterpart are no longer the Snopeses or Popeyes or O'Connor's crackers or Wright's black underclass but their successful grandchildren who are going nuts in Atlanta condominiums. ("Random Thoughts," 509)

By the usual psychological or physiological standards such

people meet the criteria for health, yet they experience themselves as commodities, or as nothing. Percy's work as a whole suggests that, if the problem lies beyond science, so must the cure.

The novel's epigraph, "...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair" is from Søren Kierkegaard, Percy's philosophical mentor; it hints that the theme will be a life of despair unaware of itself. Percy calls this the "malaise," and **The Moviegoer** is his most extensive analysis of the sickness. Malaise is the "pain of loss" (106)--loss of a father-like God, loss of meaning, loss of hope that things can be otherwise, with a remainder of unsatisfying self-absorption. It is characterized by everydayness, which, the novel's protagonist tells us, "is the enemy" (127). Everydayness is connected with routine and the anonymity of people in mass, resulting in numbness and anxiety.

Kierkegaard describes malaise in terms of dispersion and anonymity. Defining his own age as "essentially one of understanding lacking in passion," he writes: "By comparison with a passionate age, an age without passion gains in **scope** what it loses in **intensity**" (**The Present Age**, 68). The result is a devitalized existence which loses itself in trivia and boredom. Things are no longer even visible, being so

absorbed into their symbols that they cannot be appreciated.

In **The Sickness Unto Death**, Kierkegaard compares man's three possible planes of existence--the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious--to the levels of a house. In each stage the individual attempts to find how to live and how to die. The aesthetic man, diverted by temporary sensual attractions, lives in the basement; the ethical man, the ground floor; while the religious man inhabits the attic. He states that

> ...unfortunately this is the sorry and ludicrous condition of the majority of men, that in their own house they prefer to live in the cellar. The soulish-bodily synthesis in every man is planned with a view to being spirit, such as the building; but the man prefers to dwell in the cellar, that is, in the determinants of sensuousness. (346)

Each level offers increasingly more adequate answers about how to live, but only in the religious stage, Kierkegaard believed, does man really learn how to live and die. After getting their fill of money, depression, sexual excess, and contemplation of suicide, Percy's characters move to the brink of leaping up from the cellar to the attic.

Another aspect of malaise is inauthenticity, the result of conformity to the crowd and consequent loss of personal sovereignty. Society threatens the individual by valuing his functions rather than person. People defer to the judgment

of "experts," and hence are denied authentic experience. They become consumers insulated from reality, absorbing experiences packaged for them by others. Once aware of playing this false role, the individual has only two options--self-deception, or escape. For Percy, the artist has a major role in combating alienation, because he, like an Old Testament prophet, has the unpleasant task of pointing out what others are content to ignore.

> It is the artist who at his best reverses the alienating process by the very act of seeing it clearly for what it is and naming it, and who in this same act establishes a kind of community.
> ("Mississippi: The Fallen Paradise")

The Moviegoer essentially describes the protagonist's progression from a life of diversions to a greater admission of his despair, then to a search for faith in a world which is hostile to it.

In its approach to these "big ideas," however, the novel is always whimsical rather than pompous. Its narrative consists mostly of the obsessions of its narrator, the half-baked and humorous musings of a man with a meditative, yet adolescent, tilt of mind. But the whimsy does not undermine the seriousness of the author's desired role as moral arbiter. **The Moviegoer** marks Percy's first employment of the mock heroic, an Augustan genre well suited to convey moral themes without heavy preaching, allowing Percy to explore the

distinctly nonheroic life of characters, who, like their creator, must come to terms with alienating or absent fathers.

Like most of Percy's novels, **The Moviegoer** has little momentum. Not much happens, but its slow pace allows it to work as an anthology of intonation and phrasing that are indelible marks of time and place. The book moves deliberately in order to give the reader leisure to notice details, which seem at first randomly scattered like the pixels in an overblown photograph. As he began to compose fiction, Percy discovered that a writer, in the act of renaming a familiar thing, can still save it from disappearing into its conventional designation, and thereby enable his reader to see it anew. Witness, for example, how the novel's protagonist describes his landlady's pet:

> One [dog] I especially despise, [is] an orange-colored brute with a spitz face and a plume of a tail which curves over his back exposing a large convoluted anus. I have come to call him Rosebud. (**M**, 35).

Throughout his works Percy will again and again exhibit an uncanny ability to memorialize a scene or occasion in a simple, vivid, picture.

The Moviegoer is narrated by John Binkerson ("Binx") Bolling, the first of Percy's Southerners of good family and impressive names. Despite these gifts, Bolling can claim neither his patrician lineage nor his own jaunty sobriquet.

Only four activities give him even an illusion of meaningfulness, and he has reduced his life to them: "I spend my entire time working, making money, going to movies and seeking the company of women" (21). He laughs and talks with others as the situation requires, but "all the friendly and likable people seem dead to me; only the haters seem alive" (87). Binx is an outsider, living among and yet apart from his neighbors, unable to subscribe to their allegiances, values and judgments. His cultivation of normality and routine in a suburban apartment sits uneasily with his ironic detachment; the resulting cognitive dissonance makes some kind of resolution necessary.

When his aunt asks him, "What do you think is the purpose of life--to go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along?" (198), Binx disavows that understanding, but can offer nothing to contradict it. He is unable to articulate any goal which would require him to commit himself to a definite course of action, alone or in company. Binx is tolerant because he believes in nothing. Living in his basement requires next to no effort, intellectual or emotional.

For the past eight years Binx has had no friends. He claims "As long as I'm getting rich, all is well" (89). But he still has a vague uneasiness; he dreads what Hemingway describes as "nada," nothingness, the feeling of "being cut

loose metaphysically speaking" (64). For this reason Binx hates to travel, lest he wake up and find himself lost, a "No one and Nowhere" (86). A visit to Chicago upsets him, and he suggests that:

> Every place of arrival should have a booth set up and manned by an ordinary person whose task it is to greet strangers and give them a little trophy of local spacetime stuff--tell them of his difficulties in high school and put a pinch of soil in their pockets--in order to insure that the stranger shall not become an Anyone. (177)

Binx fears dissolving completely into his environment and wants to avoid the danger.

Although he resembles Camus' Meursault and other characters from continental existentialist writers, Binx's closest fictional counterpart is from Yoknapatawpha. Though **The Moviegoer** is one of the few important Southern novels that is not indebted to Faulkner, Percy said in an interview that "I would like to think of starting where Faulkner left off, of starting with the Quentin Compson who didn't commit suicide....in a way, Binx Bolling is Quentin Compson who didn't commit suicide (Gulledge, 107). Both characters are Southerners, speak laconically, and are spiritual castaways indifferent to religion, but Binx has a significant advantage. Being born later, he has not even a faint memory of the romantic Southern past. Nor does he have any heroic ideals, aware that the time for them is gone. Now nothing ennobles;

the tragic nerve is also dead.

What Binx does have is irony, which, together with the very malaise of Christendom, inoculates him against the lethal fever of expectation. Quentin would rather die than give up the idealistic heritage which is his only inheritance; Binx intends to dispose of his swampland patrimony, turning his estate into real estate, a gas station. He knows the futility of trying to perpetuate a history already ruined. But irony cannot protect Binx from an equally dangerous threat; in fact, it highlights the **emptiness** of his current life.

The novel begins with a Wednesday morning epiphany. Binx has been reminded by a sudden unaccountable memory that what he calls "the search" began several years before when he was wounded, lying in a Korean ditch: "I came to myself under a chindolea bush....Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something" (7). The catastrophe of the wound, together with a feeling which Binx later admits is fear, not only defamiliarizes the world, giving it newness and value, but also makes it **visible.** For a brief moment everything is imbued with substance and reality. Binx simultaneously becomes aware of the world and achieves a temporary appreciation of it. When he later

returns to this level of consciousness, Binx will realize he must transform his aimless and apathetic rambling into a quest for identity awareness. He must seek, not an escape from present reality, but for the opposite--how to cease taking reality for granted, how to gain insight into the here and now, how he can best place himself in the ordinary and constantly renew his appreciation of it.

But after the war Binx lost this perspective and the urgency to explore his life, perhaps because death no longer seemed such a real possibility. He lost his sense of being "onto something" and slipped back into unconsciousness. So Binx returned to New Orleans and became a stockbroker, dedicating himself to an almost manic cultivation of unconsciousness. He chose a standardized life and made himself disappear. "I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me," he notes (6). Binx has hardly ever existed at all because of his inertia, his vicarious life in the movies, and his routine work where he meets his equally routine loves. His identity is now encompassed by his GI discharge, diploma, and stock certificates. He takes pleasure in receiving "a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist" (7).

Only by keeping a firm grip on these tokens and "doing

all that is expected of [him]" can Binx reassure himself that he exists. He has become so anonymous and invisible that he needs official validation to be sure he's alive. Into his strongbox, sturdy against theft and double-walled against fire, he has deposited all the certificates which preserve his somewhat dubious existence and stave off the complete dissolution of his identity. Unease gnaws at him, and his disquiet is the beginning of his realization that he is both involved in, and alienated from, his surroundings. He has hidden himself in Christendom's distractions, deep in unacknowledged despair, until he awakens once again. Binx's Wednesday epiphany allows him to recognize his transformation into the dung beetle, cozily enwrapped in what he will later describe as the age of excrement.

Bad news is one way out. Throughout **The Moviegoer** characters expectantly await some sort of apocalyptic deliverance from a comfortable but stifling existence. Christendom's everydayness is so tormenting that only the possibility of suicide or general catastrophe can bring any sensationalistic vitality. "Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its grip by brute strength," Binx speculates. "Now nothing breaks it--but disaster" (127). In fact, disaster is a welcome break from routine; even being wounded in Korea is a fond memory. "What are generally considered to be the best of times are for me

the worst of times, and that worst of times was for me one of the best." Ordeal clears the air of boredom, removes everydayness, and provides the insecurity, the distraction, even the threat of death that makes life interesting or at least tolerable.

It is only a small step from this point to a wish for some general catastrophe. The thinking seems to be, if minor disasters can temporarily relieve the malaise, what wonders the Bomb itself could accomplish! At least it would sweep away everything mundane; existence, no longer taken for granted, might gain some purpose, for jaded sophisticates and hardened Stoics alike. Binx says:

> For a long time I have secretly hoped for the end of the world and believed with Kate and my aunt and Sam Yerger and many other people that only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and to live as merrily as children do among the viny ruins. (202)

But the possibility, the likelihood, that is gnawing at Binx is: "What if the Bomb doesn't fall?" This leads to yet more despair, demonstrating the failure of trying to live a Hollywood or apocalyptic fiction instead of within the mundane constraints of life. **The Moviegoer** is anti-apocalyptic; the author ridicules the expectation that eschatological trauma will deliver America from the need to deal with the ordinary. There is to be no hiding in either grim pessimism about the present, dreams of a romantic past, or visions of

a future post-apocalyptic paradise. In other words, Percy is rejecting his Southern heritage and using his fiction to create signs pointing **away** from these "alternatives."

With no apocalypse imminent, Binx has drifted into a life of maximum sensation and minimal involvement (moviegoing). While other people treasure their own "peak" experiences, the memorable moments Binx hoards are all from the movies. "What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in **Stagecoach**, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in **The Third Man**" (5). Moviegoing is by no means a casual activity for Binx; it involves an entire ritual of study, travel, absorption and discussion. In fact, the very intensity and "labored" quality of the activity suggests an importance to him beyond mere pleasure.

Films do not give Binx escape into a dream world. Rather, they anchor him in a life which is otherwise too fluid, too contingent. He sees the "peculiar reality" of film stars, and movies convey reality to a world which no longer convincingly exists. For this reason he is careful to talk with the manager or ticket clerk, marking his theater seat with his thumbnail to remind himself he was really, **really** there. The need for movies to provide essential solace testifies to the aridity of life for Christendom's "malaisians" and their

need for an inviolable sense of reality.

Movie performers have an additional importance for Binx. Actors never make mistakes, because their lines and actions are constantly rehearsed and edited until perfect. Moreover, the lives of the characters they portray are scripted for maximum impact; we see their climactic or most exciting moments, with the everyday or trivial excised. Thus Binx judges onscreen people to be more substantial and satisfying than the spectral figures outside.

In a mock-heroic work like **The Moviegoer**, the concept of the hero and the principle of romanticism are both subjected to satiric challenge. The mock hero does not reject society outright, but rather senses an isolating discrepancy between contemporary conventions and the striving for personal uniqueness, a cleavage that reduces him to moments of emptiness and despair. His sense of ennui thus derives from his view of the social order, whether aristocratic or bourgeois, as stultifying, shallow, and meaningless. His routines of life are insufficiently stimulating, and so he clings ever more strongly to romantic daydreams.

True to form, Binx exists behind the persona of a film star, becoming "old Gable" or "Gregory Peckish" to suit the occasion. When Binx sees William Holden walking through the

French Quarter, the actor seems to be "shedding light as he goes," radiating "an aura of heightened reality" (13). But the effect of such a magical presence, celluloid or physical, is sadly brief. After Holden has passed by, Binx wonders:

> Am I mistaken or has a fog of uneasiness, a thin gas a malaise, settled on the street?...Ah, William Holden, we already need you again. Already the fabric is wearing thin without you. (14)

This supplication to his idol is ineffective, however. Holden proves unable to fulfill the role of messiah, and after the initial excitement wears off Binx is disillusioned, though not yet enough to seek something better. Such moments of graced insight, in Korea or Louisiana, however ecstatic, only provide possibility. Transformation requires sustained search and commitment to what is discovered.

Like the actors he admires, Binx has learned that one can perform a role, so he enacts the script of seducing his secretaries and increasing his income. The money he makes assuages, at least for awhile, any feeling of meaninglessness. Even the girls resemble money, interchangeable, valuable as the **promise** of something, but unfulfilling when used. His only dream is to buy a service station:

> It is easy to visualize the little tile cube of a building with its far flung porches, its apron of silky concrete and, revolving on high, the immaculate bivalve glowing in every inch of its pretty styrene (I have already approached the Shell distributor). (122)

Given Binx's favorite pastime, it is surprising that he doesn't anticipate how quickly malaise will sweep over his station; from the Blob to Reptilicus, all monsters of the period were unrelenting in their assault.

His family, Binx concedes, was disappointed that he did not go into law or medicine or pure science. "They think I am meant to do research because I am not fit to do anything else --I am a genius whom ordinary professions can't satisfy" (42-43). But he rushes to state that

> It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm thigh. (119)

This is a life of anticipated routine, and his summary of it is highly revealing. Binx borrows "Little Way" from a nineteenth-century French mystic and Carmelite nun, Therese Martin of Liseux, who made the term famous in Catholic circles. Percy was familiar with St. Therese's influential memoirs and praises what he calls her "talent for everyday life rather than the heroic deed" ("New Orleans" 88). That is, she was able to infuse ordinary life with significance, needing no apocalyptic enticement such as suicide or disaster. What she calls the "Little Way of spiritual childhood" identifies a spirituality characterized by humility, meekness, and self-emptying love. In her autobiography St. Therese describes this:

> I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by the passerby. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new. (**Story**, 207)

Therese's Little Way includes childlike confidence in divine providence and the practice of doing everything, no matter how menial or insignificant, purely for the love of God.

For Binx, however, "Little Way" suggests the **opposite** of a consuming passion for anything, let alone holiness. Like many of Waugh's characters, he has been living an extraordinary life, one of great privilege, in a most mundane way. In fact, he consciously minimizes anything in his life which might be distinctive. Far from transforming the ordinary into a source of joy or meaning, he presently sees it as "the abyss" (97). Binx's ironic burlesque of St. Therese's spiritual terminology for his own self-absorbed consumerism, voyeurism, and lechery demonstrate his Catholic upbringing, his distance from it, and the failure of Christianity to influence his behavior.

But Binx's inner deadness is even greater than that of

the dull world which surrounds him, which suggests another source for the alienation which consumes him. What eats at the moviegoer (and bedeviled his creator) is the absence of a genuine and assisting father, for whom he grieves without even fully knowing it. Binx dodges and weaves because he needs to avoid confronting the abscess of his painful family history. His father is gradually revealed to have been an ironical loner and romantic whose taste in poetry ran to the tragic death of young heroes. Bored and aimless, his deliverance came in the form of World War II, which provided escape, excitement, and death.

Dr. Bolling sought in the conflict a direction which he seemed unable to supply himself or receive from a religious faith no longer taken seriously. For him, only an epic life and heroic death were worthy of an aristocratic Bolling. Battle offered an escape from complexity, doubt and ambiguity; perhaps from isolation as well. Percy's guardian, Will Percy, wrote in his autobiography that war granted a meaning to his life that ordinary existence could not supply. Whatever their hardships, he and his fellow soldiers shared ideals, triumphs and defeats together, whereas prosaic living was "isolated and lonely" (**Lanterns on the Levee**, 223). Despite his affairs, Binx is also very lonely.

Eventually Binx has to admit that his father's irony and

romanticism did not save him, and that his wartime death was really a suicide: "He had found a way to do both: to please them and please himself....And perhaps even to carry off the grandest coup of all: to die" (127). His father, like Lord Jim, is victimized by his utopian fantasies, and his death becomes the kind of perfect, heroic gesture Binx admires in movie stars, a fatal performance which expresses Housman's Stoic world-weariness.

Binx himself knows the sweet, exhilarating temptation of a gallant last stand before the inevitable doom which is his heritage. He therefore formulates an antidote whose application might have saved Quentin Compson--"Money is a better god than beauty" (172). By promising what cannot be delivered, beauty breaks down the coping mechanisms people need in order to exist amid the humdrum routine of the everyday world. Unlike Quentin, Binx is not willing to sacrifice himself to the "whoredom" of Beauty or any other ideal. But he still needs something to **be** for.

The memories of his father threaten to expose the inadequacy of his Little Way, so he begins to search for something better. For Binx, "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (10). He has already disposed of what he calls the "vertical search." This is what science can say

about the material aspects of existence, hence "upward" into abstraction. It represents Binx's attempt to find general principles by which to organize and clarify his life. Science offers an impersonal, objective approach to reality; understanding "more and more specimens by fewer and fewer formulae....Of course you are always after the big one, the new key, the secret leverage point, and that is the best of it" (42).

However, Binx notes that scientists have their own special form of despair, associated with treating everything as an abstract specimen in an experiment. He complains of Barry Stern, a biologist he had worked with, that "he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in" (43). In a Birmingham hotel room Binx finishes reading **The Chemistry of Life**, a science text which seeks to explain "the whole universe":

> When I finished it, it seemed to me that the main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable, whereupon I went out and saw a movie called **It Happened One Night**...The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and the next. (60)

Binx here expresses the author's own disillusionment, for as an undergraduate Percy had fallen in love with the beauty and simplicity of pure science, only to discard it as an inadequate way of understanding the world. The futility of relying

on science is a subtext in each of Percy's novels, most vividly expressed in **The Last Gentleman**'s Sutter Vaught.

Binx's problem is not interpreting data, but living in the world. In Christendom's culture of scientific humanism, the perceiving individual is a remainder, something left out of the grand explanatory theory. If mathematics becomes the measure of all things, any competing way of understanding is ruled out, especially if it acknowledges the spiritual element of human existence. In a recent essay, Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin explains why:

> We [sophisticated people] take the side of science **in spite of** the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, **in spite of** its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, **in spite of** the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. (**NYRB**, 1/9/97)

The priority here is, materialism first, science afterwards. God, the traditional object of faith, has been replaced; now faith is in God's non-existence. For scientific naturalism, the inner life of a person is ultimately no different than what goes on inside a computer, or even a toaster; all three

can be understood in the same way by the same principles. This religion reduces people to mechanisms, without individuality or freedom of choice. Percy would second Allen Tate's dismissal:

> If [a man] is told that mere "operational techniques" will see him through,...he may believe it for a while, and try to realize it; but like a child after the game is over and the fingers are uncrossed, he will return to the real world, unprepared and soon to be overwhelmed by it because he has been told that the real world does not exist. ("The Hovering Fly")

Trying to live within such confines makes a person as much a castaway as Robinson Crusoe--alive, outside Eden, unable to return, certain to die--all for no discernible reason or purpose.

Yet, in a Christendom without Christianity, science is expected to answer all inquiries. Those it cannot explain are, by definition, unimportant--or not to be asked. Ultimate issues, once the province of religion, are an embarrassment to the new religion of quantification, in which materialism and rationality are the same thing. Man is exiled from the world by the very science which transformed it for his pleasure and convenience; analysis has replaced reverent wonder. But Percy refuses to accept materialistic philosophy masquerading as science. His corpus can be read as a plea for science to disassociate itself from determinism, reductionism, and materialism on the empirical grounds that

such presuppositions produce a truncated version of reality. As always, his concern is to appropriate all that is valid in secular culture, while laying claim to, and focusing attention on, truths that the secularist spirit no longer deems worthy of attention.

Scientific generalization has not clarified Binx's life; realizing this, he disposes of his science texts. Later, when he sees the phrase "the gradual convergence of physical and social science," it "howls through the Ponchitoula swamp, the very sound and soul of despair" (167-8). Even at this early stage the search has destroyed Binx's faith in the sufficiency of science to tell him how to live, and with this realization the pleasure of his "tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly" ends (168). Binx has overcome Christendom's temptation to rely on science for answers it is incapable of providing.

Percy's commentary on the inadequacy of scientific humanism turns to satire when Binx, on the train to Chicago, daydreams about Dr. and Mrs. Bob Dean, septuagenarian sexologists. Seeing their book **Technique in Marriage** leads Binx to imagine them at their research, "as solemn as a pair of brontosauruses, their heavy old freckled limbs twined about each other" (167). The portrait of these "scientists" turning sex into grotesque experiments is not only hilarious,

but suggests the inadequacy of science to explain the mysteries of human life; outside its own sphere, a misapplied science can only reduce the act of love to the horror of abstraction. This satire is reminiscent Gulliver's preference of the horses in his stable to his family; Swift and Percy are alike in rejecting uncompromising rationality as inhuman.

Binx is now onto the "horizontal search," the existential. He anticipates the reader's question: "What do you seek--God? you ask with a smile," but hesitates in answering

> ...since all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves and to give such an answer would amount to setting myself a goal which everyone else has reached....For, as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics--which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker. (10)

Binx is not sure whether the 98% have already found what he seeks or are so "sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them" (14). He is not a religious believer, but neither, Percy slyly implies, are the 98% who claim to be.

Nor can the moviegoer be classified with those who are committed nonbelievers. He describes his unbelief as "invincible," not in the sense of "unconquerable" but in its precise theological meaning of being morally inculpable. Binx

recoils from the hypocrisy involved when a callow world uses the word "God," a term so cheapened and inflated it lacks content. For this reason God is supremely irrelevant to him; mere mention of the word causes "a curtain to come down" in his head (128). The same is true for religion; "a peculiar word this in the first place, **religion**; it is something to be suspicious of," Binx comments, because it is used so glibly in an age which devalues language. Religion is not the answer, even for Percy, if it is conceived in terms given by the very culture which has diminished it and produced the malaise.

Binx is a seeker, and, if it is God that he is seeking, it cannot be the same God whose presence or absence the pollsters are measuring, a verbal construct which has no apparent effect on the lives of those who profess belief. Nonetheless, the search proves Binx has at least an implicit belief in the possibility of something better than Christendom's despair. Accepting that existence is a mystery, he hopes, perhaps unconsciously, to find an account of it with real explanatory or, better, **transformative** power.

Binx's cousin Nell Lovell typifies those who are living in inarticulate despair. When he meets her on the street, she tells him that she has just "re-examined" her values and found them "pretty darn enduring." Now Nell proudly relates

her goal: "To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off" (88). After Binx stammers the response "That's a very good," Nell explains how she and her husband sit by the fire and read **The Prophet** aloud. "I don't find life gloomy!" she cries. "To me, books and people and things are endlessly fascinating. Don't you think so?" Binx responds:

> "Yes." A rumble has commenced in my descending bowel, heralding a tremendous defecation. Nell goes on talking and there is nothing to do but shift around as best one can, take care not to fart and watch her in a general sort of way: a forty-year-old woman with a good open American face and another forty years left in her;....And then I can't help wondering to myself: why does she talk as if she were dead? Another forty years to go and dead, dead, dead. (88)

All American Christendom offers is living death of this sort to those who still desire something beyond a bigger paycheck.

In part, this inability to deliver meaning is due to a lack of consensus on religious truth and the pluralism which results. Given the widespread assumption that only scientifically verifiable fact counts as truth, existential concerns are pushed to the margins of acceptable discourse. Religion ceases to be a form of knowledge and becomes a purely private matter of feeling, opinion, and a "whatever works for you" type of pragmatism. Christendom no longer gives reliable guidance for what was traditionally called "cure of the soul"; moreover, it regards non-verifiable

concepts such as "soul" incredible. Instead, Christendom now functions as a kind of umbrella under which people may choose as few or many options as suits them. Insofar as America has become a spiritual as well as economic marketplace, Percy is extending the standard 1950's liberal criticism of "consumerism."

This is the universe of **The Moviegoer.** Binx has his quasi-sacred rituals and collection of voodoo totems to ward off hostile "rays"; Mercer, the family servant, is a Rosicrucian, seeking to harness his "secret powers"; the Lovells content themselves with **The Prophet;** five of Binx's aunts are theosophist pan-Brahmins, though the sixth is, for the moment, "still Presbyterian"; Emily is a Buddhist/Stoic; cousin Kate relies on barbiturates and suicidal fantasies while searching for a guru's direction. The very range of such mutually exclusive alternatives indicates the culture's confusion on basic principles. Moreover, in Christendom's spiritual bazaar any option chosen is unlikely to be satisfying, precisely because the basis for the selection is personal fancy. A faith which people can decide about for themselves is not a faith in the Absolute. Thus a self-constructed religious synthesis, however attractive, will inevitably lack compelling authority, as will any path, including Percy's Christianity, which is not understood to be true, but merely useful.

As of yet, this is hardly an issue for Binx; he doesn't see Christianity as either worthwhile or true. Because his mother is a Catholic, Binx states that he is one too, "at least nominally"; later he denies being a Christian and is godfather to the son of an acquaintance only "by proxy" (184). Apart from moviegoing, his most faithful spiritual commitment is to passively consume **This I Believe** each evening, a radio show in which a parade of speakers voice humanistic platitudes on the order of "I believe in people" (94).

The depth of Binx's own beliefs can be judged by his attraction to this program, which he never misses. A smooth editing process akin to that used in films ensures that nothing untoward is ever expressed on **This I Believe**; either the pundits have themselves discarded any controversial views or a thoughtful editor has done this for them. Again language is used as a way to avoid the costly recognition of truth. The result is flattering indeed, even to the home of segregation:

> On the program hundreds of the highest-minded people in our country, thoughtful and intelligent people, people with inquiring minds, state their personal credos. The two or three hundred I have heard so far were without exception admirable people. I doubt if any other country or any other time in history has produced such thoughtful and high-minded people, especially the women. And especially the South. (94)

The **niceness** Binx encounters here and everywhere astounds him, though he has the bad grace to speculate that perhaps some of

these wonderful "people believers" might hate the guts of any given individual. When he hears the concluding phrase "I believe in believing," Binx goes to bed erect, proud of America. It no longer matters what the object of the phrase is; the mere knowledge that someone, somewhere, believes in something is enough. This is a "little way" indeed. In subsequent novels Percy will develop both these themes, the luxuriant growth of exotic semi-religious substitutes for religion and the casual acceptance of vice in the "nicest" of settings.

Binx himself is never able to articulate exactly what he is searching for, but Jews provide his first "real clue." The prophet Balaam (Num 23:9) claimed that Jews were destined to live alone, and Binx identifies with their isolation. Pleased to learn that, like himself, "a significantly large number of solitary moviegoers are Jews," Binx is acutely aware of their presence. He feels this kinship despite the way American Christendom has managed to attenuate Jewish distinctiveness:

> Anyhow it is true that I am Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile. When ever I approach a Jew, the Geiger counter in my head starts rattling away like a machine gun. The fact is, however, I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my exile. (76-77)

Thus Binx has become a metaphoric Jew, one of those who are able to function in spite of not being fully integrated into

the nominally Christian society which surrounds them. The Jewish identity as exiles wandering through history testifies to humanity's pilgrimage as wayfarers seeking God; Binx's self-identification with them hints that what he is searching for is a faith to believe in and a community to belong to. Like the people who found God in the Sinai, Binx must seek his religious identity in the desert of New Orleans.

But Binx's spiritual kinship with Jews does not help him much, because America has made them indifferent to the signs God revealed to their spiritual ancestor. "Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference" (128). The Jews may be a sign which cannot be negated or emptied, but by themselves they are not enough to overcome Binx's apathy and the pleasurable glide he has evolved. He does not so much reject the traditional proofs of God's existence or deny that they might work as deny their relevance, for "even if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed" (128). Binx **knows** nothing would change because it has made no difference to the 98% of Americans who already claim to believe.

Besides, God is not abstract, like a law of chemistry, something to be proven and forgotten. Proofs would only reduce God to the realm of the everyday. Binx's vertical search has

already yielded such unimportant abstractions, enough so that he realizes they make no difference. What he seeks is something more personal, more **wonderful**, something which can confirm the mystery revealed by his Korean and Wednesday morning epiphanies. Binx half-playfully speculates whether his own lack of interest in the sacred might itself be divinely inspired, a joke played on him by a mirthful, equivocal God: "Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him" (129). Binx's apathy ironically guarantees the authenticity of his search. An indifferent seeker is less apt to misinterpret any clues out his own hunger to believe, and more useful to an author evangelizing by indirection.

Binx's great-aunt Emily (a fictional stand-in for Percy's own guardian, William Alexander Percy) offers one option, her own compelling strategy to deal with the malaise. She does not approve of his casual affairs or his listless drifting; her recommendation is that Binx adopt the traditional values of the Southern aristocracy. Since she doesn't understand how her ideals failed to prevent his father's suicide, Emily cannot see why Binx rejects them:

> More than anything else I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women--the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life. (196)

Emily expects much of Binx because he is the last of the

Bollings. This makes his carryings-on even more despicable in her eyes, for the nobility of the South were always sweetly condescending in their treatment of blacks; condemnation they reserved for lower class whites. (Percy himself once told an interviewer: "Fornicating like white trash is one thing, but leave it to this age to call it the "new morality.")

Aunt Emily may be an intact remnant of the old Southern aristocracy, all noblesse oblige and courage. Yet she has veered away from the Christian presuppositions of the Southern tradition, lacking even pro forma religious observance:

> I don't quite know what we're doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe with every fiber of my being. A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man. (45)

Emily offers no evidence for these "must" statements; she merely asserts them as if they were self-evident. She implies that this kind of stern confrontation with impersonal, implacable fate gives man a kind of nobility, even though defeat is certain.

Emily wants Binx to become a hero, a man who decides and

then acts. To her, one must do what one can and what one must, and be satisfied. Her vision includes a carefully scripted future: Binx is to give up his sybaritic life, settle down, and enter medical school. Thus he will become a traditional Southern gentlemen. Significantly, she draws her precepts from the Stoic philosophers:

> Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and a feeling of affection and freedom and justice. These words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus strike me as pretty good advice, even for the orneriest young scamp. (67)

Kierkegaard calls Stoicism "an affirming of the self without God"; returning to this pagan philosophy means being closed to mystery and denying the possibility of a transcendent spiritual order. Neither scientific humanism nor Stoicism leave room for a God to create or redeem. Despite the strength of Emily's argument Binx refuses to accept such limits, realizing that life is a mystery to be explored, not an absurdity to be accepted. In fact, he constructs his Little Way as a refuge from the life his aunt imagines for him.

When Emily speaks, Binx's neck begins "to prickle with a dreadful-but-not-unpleasant eschatological prickling" (42). Her presence produces a mixed reaction, the pleasurable fear that disaster brings. Catastrophe is welcome to both aunt and nephew, but for different reasons. For Binx, disaster is

a surprise to break the routine. Emily, by contrast, welcomes decline as a confirmation of her tragic perspective and the rightness of her withdrawal from a vulgar world. Gloom gives her the opportunity to stand firm, a matronly Epictetus:

> The world I know has come crashing down around my ears. The things we hold dear are reviled and spat upon.... It's an interesting age you will live in--though I can't say I'm sorry to miss it. But it should be quite a sight, the going under of the evening land. That's us all right. And I can tell you, my young friend, it is evening. It is very late. (45)

She sees decay and despair everywhere, from the obscenity shouted on the street to her own unstable family. Binx realizes that "for her too the fabric is dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense. She understands the chaos to come" (54). Emily interprets the decline as the predictable, inevitable result of society's forsaking the ideals of her conservative tradition. The standards she wants Binx to adopt she knows are already defeated; they have not stopped the rot, and have no prospect of doing so.

Emily's curt dismissal of Binx at their last interview demonstrates the security her outlook provides; it can comfortably accommodate any failure. She offers Binx a gospel of endurance rather than hope; her creed stresses individualism and affirmation of the self without God or promise of an afterlife, along with a rationale for regula-

ting impulse and preserving self-respect. In a world with the Snopeses on the ascendant, the only light which exists for a Sartoris is that of inner integrity.

Constantly reading **The Life of the Buddha**, Emily describes herself as "an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature, and a Buddhist by choice" (18). This combination is revealing. As with Emily herself, "Episcopalian" here has no connection to Christianity; it serves merely as a class identification. By "Greek" she means "Stoic," and Stoicism and Buddhism are alike in offering a way to achieve self-control by surmounting desire and impulse. Such transcendence produces an internal equilibrium, a studied tranquillity theoretically immune to disappointment (or joy). While Christendom ignores or hides the reality of death, a Stoic would regard such a subterfuge as cowardly. Marcus Aurelius reminds his readers that

> It is possible to depart from life at this moment. Have this thought in mind whenever you act, speak, or think. (**Meditations** II: 11)

The Stoic cultivates an awareness of death so as to relativize all present experience, a goal Quentin Compson's father achieves. Though his character is hardly noble, Jason Compson overcomes life by applying the Stoic adjective "temporary" to every situation, painful or pleasant. Quentin's refusal to adopt this attitude of indifference and

inability to find another alternative results in his suicide.

Yet there are hints that the probity and stasis of the East or ancient Rome is insufficient, even for Emily. True Stoics accept life as a cycle, understanding that what is happening now will happen over and over, regardless of what human passions dictate. But her philosophy has not made Emily content, or even merely indifferent. Once the Bomb sweeps away the detritus of a debased Christendom, she hopes a new millennium will be inaugurated. Emily envisions "the new messiah, the scientist-philosopher-mystic who is to come striding through the ruins with the **Gita** in one hand and Geiger counter in the other" (159). With his Western apparatus and Eastern scripture, she expects that this Oppenheimer-like figure will change everything, providing the spiritual renewal once given by another messiah. Remarkable by its absence in this combination of scientist and eastern prophet is any hint of Christianity; in a bankrupt Christendom, memories of the original messiah only serve to provide the template for his more adequate successor.

The prominence given to Emily and her outlook suggests how attractive Southern stoicism is to Binx, and to Percy as well. What is most appealing to author and character is not the similarity between Stoic and Christian moral teaching, nor yet the invulnerability Stoic armor provides, but rather

the obvious superiority of character it can produce. The grace and power of Emily's example is undeniable, despite (or because of) its hopelessness and solitude. However dated and inflated her rhetoric, Emily's strength of character makes her seem younger than she is. Malaise cannot defeat her; she thrives on it. If this is despair, it contains something heroic.

The life Emily recommends would doom his hedonism, but even so Binx recognizes her moral ascendancy. However, her advice that Binx "act like a soldier"--asks too little of him. It is not that Emily's values are false, merely inadequate and narrow. They resemble the tune she constantly plays on the piano, which is "as good as it can be, but not good enough" (40). Adopting her samurai discipline will not avert the coming chaos; it would merely isolate Binx in the sanctuary of his own inner integrity.

But given Christendom's malaise, Emily's virtues are compelling, at least in her presence. It is noteworthy that Binx adopts his aunt's advice to settle down and enter medical school. Had it not been for the (grace-prompted?) rediscovery of the search, Emily's triumph would have been complete. All of Percy's novels emphasize that scientific humanism's dismissal of ultimate questions is dangerous because the human desire for meaning and worship must be

fulfilled, one way or another. Even William Alexander Percy recognized that people need

> ...live words, tender with meaning and reassurance. Without them the young drift through the world, aimless, unemployed, with no certainties in their heart to give them anchorage or peace. (**Lanterns on the Levee**, 315)

Walker Percy would add that such people are prone to fill their emptiness by worshiping idols, which are not exclusively wood or metal figurines. Something is always more attractive than nothing, whether, as in **The Moviegoer**, the pagan beliefs which supplant a merely nominal Christianity or, in **The Thanatos Syndrome**, the seduction of Weimar Germany by National Socialism.

If Stoicism is the main Southern ethos, it traditionally co-existed with Christianity. In his essay "Stoicism in the South" Percy notes the different needs each fulfilled, "one for living in, the other for dying in." Binx too has this dual heritage. If the paternal side of his family is Southern stoic, the maternal branch is Louisiana Catholic. Taking his secretary to a fishing camp for a weekend seduction, Binx discovers his mother's family already there. Percy's portrait of the Smiths is the first example of what will become a standard technique throughout his novels. Those characters the author considers religiously significant are stripped of all aesthetic appeal so as to demonstrate

that inner grace (and the authority of truth) have no necessary connection with outer grace.

The Smith family, therefore, is unpolished, even crude. But they manage the difficult task of selfless and cherishing love, something Percy suggests is impossible for those who live entirely in Kierkegaard's cellar of exclusive sensuality. Unlike Binx or Emily, the Smith family is too sane, too healthy, to welcome disaster. They know what the others do not--how to get on with life, with an implicit faith that existence has meaning. Thus they have no need for ordeal.

The real significance of the weekend is Binx's encounter with Lonnie, his dying half-brother. Unlike Binx, who longs for stylized escape from everydayness, Lonnie must live intensely in the now, and in a tiny place, his own wasted body. However, the sickness is only physical; malaise has no hold on him, and his words "are not worn out" (143). Lonnie is also patient in suffering. Protected by his unassuming religious faith, he is passionate for God.

Instead of pitying himself as a victim, Lonnie turns his illness into opportunity, utilizing the situation to be useful. Approaching death does not depress him or make him dismiss life with Stoic indifference, but gives Lonnie a heightened awareness comparable to that Binx experienced in

Korea. He even disciplines his flesh further by fasting. Percy is suggesting that, if Christianity can be this transformative in someone at an extreme of debilitation, surely it can cure the malaise of those "healthy" enough to find life a burden. Taken seriously, it has the potential to infuse every moment with an increasing significance, as it has done for Lonnie.

Despite the supposed urgency of his search, Binx has so far wasted most of the week as he has wasted every other day of his life; but Lonnie's example offers him the possibility of hope. In a post-religious society full of the living dead, the dying Lonnie's faith and love make him seem curiously alive. Since he does not abstract religion from the rest of his life, he freely uses catechetical language in everyday conversation. He takes joy simply in seeing Binx, watching a movie from the hood of a car, racing around in his wheelchair. This kind of joy sets him apart. His example even influences the self-centered Binx to use his acting skills selflessly for once, terrorizing the delighted boy with his impersonation of the fierce Akim Tamiroff. Lonnie's infectious joy reflects a new way of life whose center is divine and human communion. The Smith household thrives on such unpretentious love, as powerful as their name is ordinary; even Binx finds himself "carried past by the strong current of family life" (123).

When Binx arrives, the Smiths are enjoying a feast of scarlet crabs, a family celebration which prefigures the communal celebration of next day's Mass. Christianity here is shown affirming a bond between thing and spirit, just as the Incarnation unites God and human flesh. The scene illustrates one of the strongest elements in Percy's religious outlook, his celebration of a sacramental universe. For him, the ordinary things of the world--bread, wine, water, touch, breath, words, talking, listening--have great significance. He is suggesting that the malaise is related to the apathy of a Christendom which, like Binx, is indifferent to such formative (and transformative) signs from its own religious past. Lonnie's life embodies this sacramental understanding by his unassuming faith in God and brotherhood with Binx; even his speech impediment helps make words new. In contrast to Binx's identity cards, Lonnie's wallet is full of holy cards, which provide a different kind of identity certification, membership in a community which does not practice perfection and is not separate from the world, but which provides enough hope for the boy to avoid despair.

If Buddhism and Stoicism are alike in offering studied tranquillity, they also share the same approach to suffering--eliminate it by vanquishing desire and positive expectation. Emily, though a devotee of both, has not distilled this common element; as noted above, she welcomes disaster as a

confirmation of her views and superiority. Christendom, by contrast, offers the pleasures of materialism as the universal antidote, which most Americans pretend to scorn while mightily indulging. Lonnie's Catholic faith offers the possibility of transcending suffering by using it for a selfless purpose. Believing that he can offer "his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference" (137), he suffers in particular for Binx, for whom indifference is the starting point. Before Binx leaves, Lonnie reminds him that he is still offering his communion for him (164). In Lonnie, patience in suffering is transfigured into a pure ardor for God, his authentic version of the "Little Way."

This intimacy with God has its counterpart in Lonnie's intimacy with Binx. Their sharing begins to fulfill the promise of his Wednesday morning revelation. Both brothers share fellowship as moviegoers. As they watch a movie together, Binx notices that his brother

> ...looks around at me with the liveliest sense of the secret between us; the secret is that Sharon is not and never will be onto the little touches that we see in the movie and, in the seeing, know that the other sees. (143)

The contrast between this communion of affection and Binx's loveless affairs is striking. The brothers can speak by looks alone, but Lonnie's centering on the Logos makes even worn-out words like "love" live again. When Binx speaks to

Lonnie, he does so without irony, and reflects on how the boy has affected him: "It is like a code tapped through a wall. Sometimes he asks me straight out: Do you love me? and it is possible to tap back: yes, I love you" (162). Progress; but a full resurrection of language has not yet been achieved, and only in **The Second Coming** will one of Percy's characters be able to **say** those three words.

Lonnie's religious fervor and obvious love briefly overcome even Binx's "invincible apathy," and the older brother responds with a serious and completely unself-conscious discussion about religion. When Lonnie expresses a desire to fast so as to conquer his envy, Binx reaches back to a neglected childhood catechetical training and tells Lonnie that he should not be "scrupulous," the correct term for an over-zealous mortification. And when Lonnie confesses that he is still glad about his brother's death, Binx responds, "Why shouldn't you be? He sees God face to face and you don't" (163). Now the unbelieving brother plays the role of missionary, with Binx backing into a recognition of the God whose existence seemed so irrelevant before. As with many of his characters, Percy here skillfully dramatizes the indirect and unknown routes that lead to God in spite of personal indifference and Christendom's denials.

Lonnie's vital contribution to the search is immediately

evident: as he drives away, Binx feels again the touch of despair, and now the familiar remedy of his hand under his secretary's skirt cannot work its magic cure. This attempt at "intimacy" is merely an exercise in alienation, a travesty of the communion Binx discovered with Lonnie. Percy here cautions against expecting too much from sex; it cannot sustain the burden of a loveless life. Binx needs both spiritual and sensual love. In **The Moviegoer**, as in Eliot's poetry, intercourse proves inadequate to conquer despair.

Therefore, after the shared love and communion with Lonnie, even the shapely bottom that once gave Binx "tears of gratitude" suffices no longer. The red MG, whose only virtue was that it "is immune to the malaise," now shares the infection (146). His last anodyne gone, Binx has, in the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, "hit bottom," that is, reached the state of emptiness (and readiness) where change is possible because there is no longer an alternative. As Percy's characters get worse, they paradoxically move closer to the source of health--the working through of their trauma, usually by facing the possibility of suicide. Binx is now at the point of Kierkegaard's leap--out from the basement of sensuousness and despair into the attic of faith.

What finally possesses Binx? The conflict between the Stoicism of his father's family and the Catholicism of his

mother's is not clearly resolved. By **The Moviegoer**'s epilogue Binx has settled down, married and gone to medical school, as his aunt wished; yet when he says "there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire" (200) he is refusing the Stoic ideal of tranquillity. If he tells the surviving children that the resurrected Lonnie will be able to ski, this may be merely another recitation of a theologically appropriate answer learned in childhood; or it may be evidence of a new openness to the possibility of religious faith. Binx himself wonders whether the ashes he sees on the man coming from church is evidence of real conviction or simply a facade for social climbing. Given the book's chronicle of Christendom's failures, perhaps nothing more than such ambiguity can be expected.

Yet grace has "rubbed off" on Binx. His marriage is a commitment, and an awakening to moral responsibility. For Percy's protagonists salvation requires a search for God by giving one's life for others. His confrontation with Emily constitutes a definitive break; now she--and, more significantly, Binx himself--accept that he is not a hero but an "ordinary fellow" (207). His obsession with movies and film star impersonations has disappeared, as has his longing for the Bomb. The ordinary, once an abyss to be escaped, is now a reality to be accepted. The old "Little Way" is gone; and Binx's lack of flippancy and irony at the conclusion **may**

signal a more profound new way.

The "Little Way" of St. Therese aimed at producing an unoccupied heart, an abandonment of all options except radical dependence on God. Percy's strategy as a religious novelist is a similar **via negativa**--examine the deficiencies of the main alternatives, then tacitly invite readers to discover and choose the least atrocious. This is the wisdom of the old-time gambler who, when asked whether he knows the poker being played is crooked, replies: "Why, sure, but it's the only game in town."

In many ways **The Moviegoer** is a fictional prelude that announces the chief themes of Percy's later novels, especially the exorcism of ghosts from the dead Southern past and the brief epiphanies achieved by the quester. In this novel Percy demonstrates by process of elimination that the main secular possibilities offered by American culture--materialism, hedonism, scientism--are patently inadequate, and Stoicism, while not false, is insufficiently true. If it can produce nobility of character, this comes at the cost of devaluing the world. Christianity, by contrast, offers hope beyond death and views ordinary people as potential saints worth saving rather than barbarians to be written off.

As employed by Percy, this indirect approach makes large

demands of readers, especially as the exhaustion of religious language makes it impossible for a Christian author to be explicit; the audience must search for hidden clues to understand the message. God must be invoked without being named. Percy explained to an interviewer the reason why:

> Of course the deeper themes of my novels are religious ....the so-called Catholic or Christian novelist nowadays has to be very indirect, in not downright deceitful, because all he has to do is say one word about salvation or redemption and the jig is up, you know. (Bunting 44-45)

Necessarily eschewing appeal to vestiges of man's old religious consciousness, which would reinforce spiritual indifference and make dismissal irresistable, Percy's authorial role is to make contemporary readers aware that something is missing in their lives. If they realize their emptiness, perhaps they can re-discover what has been lost.

Any change in Binx is an inner one--signaled by his patience with Kate and tenderness toward his siblings. This ambiguity contributes to the novel's artistic success; its Christian message is by necessity well camouflaged. In fact, some early reviewers saw Binx as mainly having psychological problems. Also, many perceptive readers failed to see any change in him; they concluded that at the end Binx gives up his search and gives in to the very everydayness he once wished to avoid. This is the price Percy pays to avoid being too obviously "edifying"; a similar hopeful ambiguity will

characterize the conclusion of his next novel.

Chapter III

The Last Gentleman

Percy's second novel is, formally at least, quite different from its predecessor. Where **The Moviegoer** was short, elliptical, carefully controlled, and derived from European existentialist fiction, **The Last Gentleman** is longer and looser. Although it also follows a search, the action is more varied, episodic, and unpredictable; it surveys a wider landscape, introduces a larger set of characters and chronicles a longer period. The book is a comic version of the traditional heroic quest for adventure and accomplishment, but also a classic Southern novel, one in which the sensitive protagonist suffers at home, runs away, but has to return in order to reconcile his past and present selves. **The Moviegoer** describes Christendom's malaise; **The Last Gentleman** explores its consequences, entropy and moral decay.

The closest analogy to the change between Percy's first and second novels is the similar opening up of form in the writing of an author Percy knows well: Saul Bellow. Bellow's first two novels, **Dangling Man** and **The Victim**, were short, carefully reined in, almost claustrophobic books that, like **The Moviegoer**, showed the influence of European existentialism; in **The Adventures of Augie March**, however, Bellow turned to a more expansive, episodic form that, like **The Last Gentleman**, owed a great debt to **Huckleberry Finn.** In the

first line of the novel Bellow announces the change in his fiction by having his hero proclaim, "I am an American." Though Percy's reticent protagonist makes no such overt proclamation, his epic journey across the country from New York City to Santa Fe takes its place besides Augie's and Huck's adventures as a paradigm of the American picaresque.

This novel is also the purest example of Percy's use of the mock-heroic. Nearly all of his fiction belongs to this tragicomic genre, which is particularly suited for depicting the struggles of a young male who must overcome obstacles in his filial past, find his identity, learn to co-exist with an outdated code of honor, and find a suitable mate, issues that the author faced in his own development. The genre allows Percy to explain to himself and to others those personal issues (like his legacy of suicide) too stark for direct confrontation. The mock hero does not reject society out-right but rather, like Binx Bolling, senses an isolating discrepancy between contemporary conventions and the striving for personal uniqueness, a cleavage that reduces the hero to moments of emptiness and despair. Percy also employs the genre's ironic, skeptical view of the political and martial legend of the Great Hero; in the mock-heroic, the principle of romanticism and the concept of the hero are both subjected to challenge. In a secular, industrial society Robert E. Lee-style heroism is no longer possible. Efforts to escape

ambiguity, doubt and complexity by achieving old-fashioned masculine glory must therefore take a comic turn.

Told in the third person, **The Last Gentleman** relates the experiences of its earnest but bumbling title character, Will Barrett. The book's episodic fragmentation, its jumbled events and jarring gaps, imitates both the chaotic consciousness of its hero and the country's increasingly disjointed psyche. Percy employs James's technique of focusing on a central consciousness without using first-person narration. This allows the author to depict Will's thoughts or view him from the outside as a sort of psychoanalytic case study.

In the novel, America itself has gone crazy, and this makes the comedy more satirical. Entropy, a state characterized by the increasing inability of energy to do meaningful work, also characterizes Christendom. This aimless energy distorts the lives of the people Will meets, and so he gets involved with escapades that climax in absurdity or slapstick. When this latter-day Tom Jones confronts a society without gentleness, his confusion about how to live as a gentleman only increases; he examines and rejects wildly divergent codes of gentility. As a wandering innocent, Barrett observes and thus exposes America's superficiality, materialism, racism and violence.

The Last Gentleman opens with Will living in New York City. (Like Percy himself, Barrett went there to search for a cultural existence larger than that defined by the limitations of a dying southern culture.) The North, described as a homeless land which looks bombed out, is populated by "post-Protestant Yankees" (145). In a newspaper Will sees a map demonstrating the effects of a nerve gas attack in which Central Park has been designated "Ground Zero." This, the center of liberal humanist culture and the malaise, is what he must escape from, the hallucinatory postmodern world which claims to be shorn of all illusion, back to the South.

Five years younger than Binx Bolling, Will is also a seeker. But unlike Binx he retains a belief in the possibilities of science--and thus has more to learn. He is the last of a line of increasingly problematic forebears of overrefined sensibility, born into an age that is later than the ones he seems made for. Barrett resembles Faulkner's Quentin Compson even more than Binx does. Quentin has been reduced to impotence and in-turning fury by a father who has lost all feeling for life or human relations. Similarly, Will's father Ed comes to see every deed except suicide as futile, and shoots himself. Will himself has passed from bravery through irony to ironic helplessness. Percy knew firsthand the Southern tradition of cynical, despairing fathers and weak, vacillating sons--a pattern he was determined to escape.

In fact, **The Last Gentleman** can be read as a record of how Percy dealt with the breakup of his family after the suicide of his grandfather and father. The artist converts autobiographical fact into diagnostic fiction as he turns from a satirical perspective on his Stoic Uncle Will (embodied in **The Moviegoer**'s Aunt Emily) to a darker and more primal encounter with his father Roy in fictional form. For much of the novel Will represses his feelings about his parent and instead confusedly seeks to live up to the masculine prescriptions of Southern honor upon which his family has reared him.

In the tradition of the mock-heroic, the hero constantly misreads the social conventions and makes a fool of himself in the name of honor. Barrett vainly tries to have "a face to face showdown in the street like his grandfather" with a snobbish Princeton undergraduate, but his adversary simply ignores him. Will blows up a campus memorial to Union dead, but no one even notices. On two occasions he inadvertently rebuffs sexual advances because of his confusion about "proper" courtship. Time after time Will forgets who he is and has to be rescued from fugue states that demonstrate just how repressed his traumatic memories have become.

For Will, memory is a curse, yet he cannot move into the future until he resolves his past. Amnesia is an accomplice

in his attempt to neutralize the remembrance of having been abandoned as a child; the effort this requires leaves him confused, directionless, and anxious. (The intensification of illness in each Percyan protagonist will continue throughout the novels.) The first scene of a listless Will lying in Central Park emphasizes the passivity underlying his psychic illness. Will needs to look frequently in his wallet "to make sure of his own name" (67), perhaps having blotted out the patronym which links him to the short-lived Barretts. He is undergoing therapy and working at Macy's--three stories underground. Like Binx, he is trapped in Kierkegaard's aesthetic cellar of existence.

Nor can American culture assist him. Percy demonstrates that Will's alienation is deepened by his society's failure to provide a meaningful environment. Wherever he goes Will encounters what Percy alternately characterizes as "Sweden" or "Christendom," consumption without purpose. He keeps rejecting the temptation to settle down and live an ordinary life in a noncommitted way; he suspects that this is simply not enough. When he thinks of buying a house, Will learns that the previous occupant "bored himself to death"; in other words, was destroyed by the pain of his unused talents and wasted opportunities. This possible future, what Will calls "feeding the chickadees for the next forty years" (225) is precisely the entropy which Christendom fosters; energy

without purpose makes suicide understandable, even desirable.

With comic gentleness, not bitterness or anger, **The Last Gentleman** documents the emptiness of suburban "Sweden." Percy told an interviewer that the novel asked readers to consider whether "it is better to be a drowning man, or alive and well in East Orange" (Carr, 328). The novel's most effective satire of materialism is its portrait of the patriarchal Chandler Vaught, with his immense automobile dealership, wealth, and castlelike home, the setting of which appropriately recalls Fitzgerald's descriptions of garish mansions in **The Great Gatsby:**

> The houses of the valley were built in the 1920s, a time when rich men still sought to recall heroic ages. Directly opposite the castle, atop the next ridge to the south, there stood a round, rosy temple. It was the dwelling of a millionaire who had admired a Roman structure erected by the Emperor Vespasian in honor of Juno and so had reproduced it in good Alabama red brick and Georgia marble. At night a battery of colored floodlights made it look redder still. (189)

The passage illustrates part of the lasting value of Percy's fiction, his impeccably civilized language and fine comic sense. His gift is for a laughing enjoyment between bouts with loss and desperation. The satire is so finely woven as to be barely visible, and nonoffensive. In fact, his depiction of the American cornucopia is so richly detailed, so exact, the reader may wonder at any given moment whether Percy is cataloguing, glorifying, or satirizing--or all three

at once.

Percy is always alert to the danger of tying oneself to false cultural values. His satire is aimed at the suburbs because he believes that postmodern people choose a suburban way of life and continually try to turn it into a static "paradise" in an attempt to slough off the past altogether. But they cannot simply vegetate in such lifestyle enclaves because the collapse of culture is happening there as well as everywhere else.

In terms of the American Dream with its blandishments of luxury and comfort, Will reflects that it was strange that "we are well when we are afflicted and afflicted when we are well" (240). The young man is too obtuse to understand why a consumer's paradise should produce malaise along with material wealth, but he senses the increasing failure of relationships despite Christendom's outward coziness. Some readers may regard Will's inability to be content with material security as another manifestation of illness; for Percy, such refusal is a sign of health.

Will's sickness is characterized by a peculiar reaction to the moods of others. "He felt bad when other people felt good and good when they felt bad" (22), a symptom of the general malaise which all of Percy's protagonists exhibit--

the familiar need for disaster to rescue Christendom's inhabitants from the burdens of ordinary life. The narrator comments that "If a man lives in the sphere of the possible and waits for something to happen, what he is waiting for is war--or the end of the world" and "War is better than Monday morning" (10; 74). Barrett himself wonders:

> **Here it comes again, the sweet beast of catastrophe... do I not also live by catastrophe? I can smell it out every time. Show me a strange house and I can walk straight to the door where the bad secrets are kept. The question is: is it always here that one seeks one's health, here in the sweet, dread precincts of disaster?" (89)**

In a bad environment, such as a concentration camp or war zone, life is suddenly seen as fleeting, precarious--and thus precious. But in a good environment, everydayness is omnipresent and sucks the vitality out of things. As the narrator explains: "It was not the prospect of the Last Day which depressed him but rather the prospect of living through an ordinary Wednesday morning" (23). Will is torn between the debilitating entropy he has experienced and the hope for something which can turn noise into news and thus counteract chaos. So he buys a telescope to search for a sign of his future and also to rescue the ordinary from being unnoticed.

Barrett is a pilgrim, but in a peculiarly modern sense. Like Christendom itself, he is deaf to religious messages and blind to signs. Much of the time he is disoriented, like

a man who has just escaped a major catastrophe. But such a predicament is not altogether bad: "Like the sole survivor of a bombed out building he had no secondhand opinions and he could see things afresh" (11). This perspective, combined with a sense of limitless possibility and his "radar" (akin to Binx's "nose for merde") allows Barrett to receive the signals others transmit along with, or in spite of, their words. It also tells him when conversation contains everydayness; with his acute sensibility, he can perceive the sense of a situation through the nonsense of its words. Will senses how words both conceal and reveal the aimlessness at the heart of Christendom.

Another manifestation of Christendom's malaise is almost as common as meaningless words. Throughout his journey Barrett is being assaulted by mysterious particles which come between him and his tenuous hold on reality. Like acid rain these downpour a devouring everydayness on people, objects and events; they disfigure whatever is not surprising or disastrous. The particles also leave things washed out and make people invisible to one another, prey to vague anxieties and bereft of sovereignty over their lives. Thus they are reduced to waiting for something magical or catastrophic to rescue them.

The damage this fallout causes becomes clear when Will

visits an art museum. There he finds the air "as thick as mustard gas with ravenous particles which were stealing the substance from painting and viewer alike" (19). The pictures are almost impossible to see, and as far as the museum's visitors, they are even worse off:

> From his vantage point behind the pillar, he noticed that the people who came in were both happy and afflicted. They were afflicted in their happiness. They were serene, but their serenity was a perilous thing to see. In they came, smiling, and out they went, their eyes glazed over. The paintings smoked and shriveled in their frames. (20)

Suddenly a workman falls from a skylight and everyone becomes covered with powdered white glass. In that instant the ravening particles disappear; both persons and paintings regain substance and become visible again. The reason for this is the artificial closeness which disaster creates. Before the crash, people are sunk in themselves. The accident wrests them from isolation and unites them with others because of the mutual danger, surprise, and relief at having escaped injury. The "cataclysm" (20) transforms the onlookers from passive consumers of another's aesthetics into active participants in their newly beautiful world.

The source of these noxious particles is obscure--are they a product of the urban smog or Barrett's own deteriorating condition? The narrator suggests that, "If there were any 'noxious particles' around they were more likely to be

found inside his head than in the sky" (28-29), a clever narrative ploy to make the reader suspect they are real and external, the physical manifestation of a malaise turned deadly. Whatever their origin, as far as Percy is concerned Christendom is suffering a breakdown. Millions of ordinary people are bereft by their rejection of religious truth and misplaced faith in science.

Like Will, they are denied grace because they have learned to view themselves objectively, as entities. Our tradition for understanding man is now provided by the behavioral and social sciences, a reductive hermeneutics wherein nothing spiritual is what it seems but is always the expression of something more or less primitive, the id, the chauvinism of sex or race, and so forth. As one character notes, "The price of the beauty and the elegance of the method of science=the dispossession of [the] layman" (280). By ordaining the analytic faculty as the only credible locus of event, science disinherits its users of the world it opens to them. Participation is replaced by consumption; science has so arranged the world that people don't have to experience it. Despite their self-proclaimed autonomy, they are without passion or goals.

What modernity had was authority, however beleaguered. Judeo-Christian teaching de-numinized the natural world and

substituted a linear understanding of time for the ancient cyclic view, providing a basis for the emergence of critical reason, historical consciousness and science. A person could either accept a religious worldview or take refuge in the unassailable kingdom of science, now understood as religion's autonomous rival. When, as was inevitable, the hermeneutic of suspicion was applied to reason itself, the foundations of secularism and scientism were undermined. From the vantage of postmodernism, that world of authority, whether derived from religion or science, can only evoke the nostalgia of an old movie.

In fact, when Barrett watches a silent film, he is amazed at the quickness and confidence of the people on the screen. How quaint and secure everyone seems! What things they could take for granted! The serious faces and purposeful strides show they know exactly what they're doing. Their actions have the gestural perfection Binx Bolling admired in movie actors. Will would like to imitate them, if he could only figure out how. But it's impossible. Such certainty and security have now disappeared; through Will's virginal eyes the reader experiences bombardment by particle fallout, the burden of postmodern Christendom.

This explains the novel's epigraph from Romano Guardini's **The End of the Modern World,** which speaks of the time when

"the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism" and "will cease to reap the benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies." Western culture was shaped in large measure by Christianity. Unbelieving Christendom now lives off the accumulated spiritual capital and moral assumptions (such as the equal dignity and worth of each person) left over from the ages of faith, but as they become more and more residual, the nihilism underlying post-modernity is revealed and the social fabric weakens.

If the prime satiric target of **The Moviegoer** is Christendom's satisfied consumer, that of **The Last Gentleman** is its smug psychiatrist. Percy is always wary of any kind of "expert" who prepackages reality for consumption by the layman, but the worst example of this surrender of autonomy is the client like Will who offers up his very self to Christendom's new secular priests. Although psychiatry resembles fiction in being an exploration of character and the dynamics of consciousness through manipulation of symbols, in Percy's view it cloaks itself with the mantle of objective science, refusing to concede its inadequacies. The author offers a critique as he describes Will's flirtation with psychotherapy.

Percy himself spent three years in Freudian analysis, and the portrayal of therapists throughout his fiction suggests

this experience was not entirely to his liking. Like Will Barrett, the novelist broke off therapy because he found its secular answers inadequate to deal with his predicament. (Biographers Pat Samway and Jay Tolson concur, however, that Percy owed a large intellectual debt to his analyst, Dr. Janet Rioch, and that she helped him as a patient understand his troubled relationship with his father and tendencies toward despair, depression, suicide.) Percy later remarked: "In my own experience the most valuable lesson of psychoanalysis was learning what it could not do" (Tolson, 333). That is, his troubles were not due to any disorder at the level of organism, but to the human condition; what he was seeking was salvation. He also resented having his emotional difficulties and metaphysical questions ultimately explained away in terms of sexual dysfunction. To Percy, Freud's Reality Principle, far from encompassing reality, limits it. He came to see Freudianism as having become a new kind of comprehensive religion, despite having no answers to existential questions. It also rejected transcendence, which all existentialists, Christian or atheist, recognize as an inveterate trait of human existence.

Disenchanted with Freudianism, Percy sought a more satisfying theory to account for malaise. The answer he reached, as early as his first published essay, "Symbol as Need," was that despair is caused by the inability to truly communicate.

Percy posits the ancient concept of the microcosm and the macrocosm: man is a little cosmos, or harmonious design, existing in the larger cosmos that is the surrounding universe. By calling upon the inner and the outer harmony of these two, which Percy sees as the unseen God expressing himself in time, humans receive the grace that enables moments of love and true communication to occur. His comic fiction is intended as an antidote to despair and as a signpost indicating the graced nature of ordinary reality.

For Percy, the spiritually healthy are those who accept the religious role of wayfarer, or pilgrim. The pilgrimage can only be continued by a series of "leaps of faith" based on choosing to relate oneself to the harmonious pattern. Wayfaring, then, along with choosing to relate to the divine harmony, is at the basis of the religious view Percy expresses. The author is painfully aware of the collapse of the cultural values contained within religion, education and the family--once potent transmitters of knowledge about the symbols and rituals needed for true communication. Therefore what is important for his protagonists is that they experience the pragmatic benefits of faith itself instead of what might be called "religious experience." The result is manifested in the pilgrim's gradual loss of despair and the recovery of enough love to show a real concern, not for "mankind" in general, but simply for a handful of people met on the

pilgrimage.

Thus Percy, like Dante, writes about the original subject of comedy--the movement of the pilgrim from misery to happiness. Percy wants to show how, by a series of small spiritual revelations, contemporary individuals can break through the loneliness and despair created by their narcissism and begin communicating with others. Through this communication, he suggests, people can join with others in an authentic revival of cultural values; Percy thus rejects Kierkegaard's doctrine of the "single one," the individual who accepts no binding relationship with another.

Psychiatry, in Percy's view, can only be a dangerous expedient. Not only is it unable to deal with malaise, it also prevents clients from seeing the real issues and finding the kind of religious answers which for the author are the only effective treatment. As a Christian novelist, Percy believes that anxiety is the result of separation from God because of sin. Therefore, a person can only transcend his fallen state by accepting God's grace. Psychiatrists deny this, postulating that man's longing to escape his world must be totally explicable in terms of that world; thus they are left with the desperate expedient of recommending treatments they themselves do not believe in.

Percy's characters are unable to sustain themselves with myths they **know** to be mythical, and so are left with their anxiety, like Scotty, the corporate president in **The Last Gentleman** whose only problem is that he can't stop screaming. While the psychiatrist sees anxiety as a symptom to be gotten rid of, the existentialist novelist understands it as a summons to authentic existence. Percy's people are not perfectly adjusted to their environment, nor would their creator see this as desirable. The psychoanalysts who attempt to treat them do not realize that anxiety is inescapable and have no way to explain the angst of a man whose biological and "mythic" needs are all met.

Psychiatrists also earn Percy's ire when they believe they can simultaneously maintain scientific objectivity while proposing "a value scale of rightness, authenticity; in short, a concept of human nature and what is proper to it" (**America**, 415). This kind of contradictory stance leads to such absurdities as the analyst who as a scientist does not believe in God, yet who maintains that myths of this kind are necessary for the "average person." As Percy writes, "The motto of the scientist when he is prescribing myth as a data-element necessary for mental and cultural health is: It may not be true but you had better believe it" ("Culture" 226).

But Percy's depiction of psychoanalysis in **The Last**

Gentleman is unnuanced and distorted, weakening the novel. Barrett's sessions with his analyst are mere caricature. Dr. Gamow is depicted as a fool, unaware that his patient is manipulating him by presenting false symptoms ("dancing with him" as the narrator describes it). Percy's critique is not advanced by such heavy-handed satire; at no time is the reader given any reason to see in analysis a serious discipline with at least occasional effectiveness in healing.

Moreover, contemporary psychotherapists do not necessarily concur with Freud's reduction of God to man's projection into the heavens of his need for an infallible parental figure. In **The Denial of Death**, for example, Ernest Becker insists that the task of post-Freudian psychologists has been to free Freud's thought from "the nineteenth-century reductionism, instinctivism, and biologism that Freud fettered it with"--to replace his deterministic framework with "the existential one" (39, 68). But Percy's analysis took place in the late 1930s, when Freud's theories reigned virtually unchallenged.

Percy's critical stance toward psychology is not only simplistic; it also betrays no awareness of his own literary dependence on the discipline. Each of Percy's novels contains at least one character who is by society's standards mentally sick, and it is the task of the other characters to

come to grips with this person's sickness (or maybe his sanity) and perhaps discover their own. The reader's task is similar: challenged by these strange characters to discover the nature of their illness, the reader must decide what constitutes sanity and insanity. If characters in and readers of Percy's fiction are in a sense diagnosticians of the disordered self, so too is the author; in his discussions of the role of the artist, Percy frequently compares himself to a therapist, his fiction, to a diagnostic instrument.

One particularly brilliant example of Percy's utilization of therapeutic insights in **The Last Gentleman** is the reader's gradual recognition that the "ravening particles" which haunt Will are actually the method by which he projects his fear of suicide onto society. Percy counts on his audience recognizing the possibility of such mental gymnastics for a full appreciation of his art. In fact, the reader with some knowledge of the author's background might suspect that Percy turned to writing fiction as a form of therapy, creating an external dialogue between himself and the spectral denizens of his own past.

In the case of such a colloquy with his own work, the fiction becomes an artifact which offers an explanation, rationale or gratifying outcome for some puzzling, even repulsive internal question that remains hidden beneath the

texture of the work itself. Jay Tolson points this out:

> Percy's real work in fiction began when he gave free rein to those daemonic forces raging within him, when he allowed his lack of a central or integrated self to become his real subject. (**Pilgrim in the Ruins**, 279)

Explaining the departure of his parents, his tragic familial history of suicide, and justifying his own survival takes at least equal place with a desire to offer social criticism as a motivating factor in Percy's art.

But unmindful of his own reliance on the insights and terminology derived from psychological research, Percy unconvincingly mocks these as unhelpful formulas and jargon. He attempts to mirror what he perceives as psychotherapy's reductionism by reducing it to a series of cliches. Barrett, for example, has learned from his therapist that "it is people who count, one's relations with people, one's warmth toward and understanding of people" and has sometimes achieved the goal of "cultivating rewarding interpersonal relationships with people" (8). Finally, analysis has taught Will that "we have much to learn from the psychological insights of the World's Great Religions" (8). In a rare lapse for Percy, this satirical catalogue manages to be both shallow and leaden.

Will Barrett's faith that natural causes are sufficient to explain everything, combined with what therapy has taught

him about religion--it is a tapestry of symbol and metaphor that enriches our lives, as long as we're not naive enough to think it is true--makes it impossible for him to respond to a message that is beyond rational proof, and can only be accepted on faith. Because the gap between Barrett and religious belief is so wide, the author hopes it will be easier for the reader to see the specific contours of that belief. To Percy, there is no healing for human problems until one sees their source in the perversity and sinfulness of the individual. Will's amnesia symbolizes Christendom's inability to remember its own formative insights. The second Fall is thus a forgetting of the first, which leads to the supposition that one is merely an organism adapting to an environment rather than a pilgrim seeking the hidden God.

Such rejection of the Fall, combined with unwavering utopian hope, is surely why Percy is so opposed to contemporary liberalism, particularly in theology. Percy poses the question: "Is it too much to say that the novelist, unlike the new theologian, is one of the few remaining witnesses to the doctrine of original sin, the imminence of catastrophe in paradise?" (**MB**, 106). He adds that "It is the novelist who, despite his well-advertised penchant for violence, his fetish for freedom, his sexual adventurism, pronounces anathemas upon the most permissive of societies, which in fact permits him everything" (**MB**, 110). Such sentiments inevitably give

a conservative, even Augustan, cast to Percy's fiction.

As Percy encountered the rapidly changing world of contemporary America, he was stepping from a Southern society rooted in myth and tradition into one preoccupied with history and science. Though he saw his Southern identity as a way to define himself against that world, he recognized that this definition was resistance, not transcendence. Like the speaker in Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," he stands at the cemetery gate, as it were, grieving at the inescapability of the fact that he cannot believe in the validity of the communal pieties, yet also cannot settle for an existence in which no such pieties are possible.

The order and stability of Percy's community-based world view began to crumble in his undergraduate years before new theories of psychology and sociology that spurned traditional values and morality. Positivism pervaded almost all levels of thinking, even theology. Here was Nietzsche's "weightless" society, bereft of supernatural frameworks of meaning and strict moral guideposts. Growing dissatisfied with positivism, Percy began to consider himself an exile from a culture whose moral systems lack a transcendent framework. The resulting alienation became the basis for his art and perhaps the greatest source of his power of expression. Rejecting the faiths he had once held, the Old South's Stoic tradition

(which had collapsed) science (which failed to address the deepest questions of existence), and liberal humanism (which could never, he believed, fulfill human spiritual needs), Percy turned to the Church to restore meaning and mystery to what he saw as a morally irresponsible world.

Such an option is seemingly impossible for Will Barrett. But if scientism has eliminated religion from his horizon, analysis has not solved his problems. When Dr. Gamow tells him that he has a "defective ego structure" and that he suffers from an "identity crisis," the engineer realizes his many years of therapy have failed him. Like his creator, he summons enough ego strength to break off what Percy understands to be inappropriate and futile psychoanalytic treatment, at long last preparing to act out the reality of his life. Will's question is the same as Percy's: how does a Southerner, raised by Old South ideals whose validity he cannot totally deny, live in the twentieth century? How can he survive, when he has emotional ties to the ideals of the past but cannot sustain them because he is also fully aware of his modernity?

Having for five years been "an object of technique," Will decides that he should "go over to the other side, become one of them, the scientists" (26).

> I am indeed an engineer, he thought, if only a humidification engineer, which is no great shakes as a profession. But I am also an engineer in a deeper sense: I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles gained from five years of analysis. (31)

An engineer is someone who manages things objectively, by abstract principles. Having broken with psychotherapy and squandered his inheritance, Will is now ready to begin discovering the truth he needs to escape his heritage of self-destructive despair. But he is stuck in what Binx called "the vertical search." His faith in science makes him see reality only from a distance, symbolized by his telescope. Percy challenges such naive faith, the North's counterpart to the religious fundamentalism of the South. Because he apes the scientific method in all the areas of his life, Will has also come to view himself objectively, and hence has no passions or access to his own inwardness. To Percy, Will exhibits the dangerous, godlike detachment of the Cartesian philosopher.

As Will wanders across America and back in time, he is trying to understand his father's life, first through memory and finally through revisiting his birthplace. While at the family home in Ithaca, Mississippi, he encounters the phantom of Ed Barrett and finally recalls the details which he has been avoiding. Will remembers his father's attachment to Brahms and constant recitation of Arnold's poem "Dover Beach."

But art proved to be an inadequate substitute for religious faith. Despite his nobility and dedication to civil rights, Ed was ultimately ruined by a combination of aesthetic over-sensitivity, despair at the collapse of Southern honor, and lack of religious commitment.

Although he had driven his Klan opponents out of town, Ed came to believe that they actually won, for their moral corruption had become characteristic of the age. Like Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, he could not accept the ambiguity of a fallen world, and finally saw no reason for continuing to exist in a degenerating society. The illusion of aristocratic virtue and rectitude having been shattered, the father has only his private isolated sensibility to fall back upon. "In the last analysis, you are alone," he tells his son, and shoots himself. Ed intended his suicide as a rejection of a future in which manners and honor were replaced by public defecation and fornication, precisely among the "best" people. He chose the noble death of a Stoic, dying for his impossible ideals rather than find a way to live in a flawed age for the sake of his son.

Will must learn to refuse this fatal inheritance, the secularized faith, peculiar to the South, of veneration and imitation of patriarchs like Faulkner's Sutpens, de Spains and Sartorises. His father's Stoicism told him how to die

but not how to live. That is why Will is the **last** gentleman; the role is played out. What he is beginning to realize, and wishes he could tell his dead father, is that those public values and truths upon which his life and conduct have been predicated were false, or at best only partial and ancillary. Aristocratic honor and the great horn theme of Brahms, he insists, were false victory and false loveliness because the ideals they were being made to embody were illusory, a species of ideality removed from the world. His father had felt that his struggle with the rednecks (corresponding to Walker Percy's grandfather's victory over the Klan in the 1920s, as described by Will Percy in **Lanterns on the Levee**) was the assertion of absolute integrity in a graceless modern world.

But Barrett suspects there never was any such generation of earlier heroes who were exempt from contingency and human stain, so that his father's notion of aristocratic virtue, however nobly motivated, was actually a romantic escape from the compromised actuality of human life in time. Such a view necessarily presupposed a former era in which men were better and wiser, more disinterested and virtuous than humans could ever be. Thus any change in conduct would have to constitute a falling away from perfection. Ed Barrett (and Roy Percy) tried to insulate themselves from time, change, and mortality by retreating into a private code that gave them the illusion

of human perfectability, and when this was shattered by being tested in the actual world, there seemed nothing left but to be destroyed with it.

Will rediscovers the integrity and possibility of the world in a scene reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus's epiphany in Joyce's **A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man.** In front of his family home Will sees a "tiny iron horsehead" hitching post around which an oak has grown. In that instant he realizes the source of his father's mistakes:

> **Wait.** I think he was wrong and looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place...It was the worst of times, a time of fake beauty and fake victory. **Wait.** He had missed it! It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in solitariness and not in the old sad poetry but--he wrung out his ear--but here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark that--(261)

This passage is designed as an answer to the epiphany of matter Sartre presents in **La Nausee.** Where Sartre depicts the juncture of consciousness and matter as a horror, Percy shows it to be a mysterious, comforting revelation. The iron head surrounded by bark not only symbolizes wholeness, the union of transcendence and immanence, but also represents for Percy the comic way God's grace operates--unpredictably, humorously, silently, slowly, behind the scenes. God has filled the world with such signs of His presence, but recognizing them requires humility and openness to truth. One

must stop and **wait**, a vital word in Percy's fiction.

In his moment of epiphany, Will realizes that the place to look for beauty and for truth is in the present. For the iron horse's head of the hitching post, though ornamental, was cast for use by men, while the oak that has grown around it has drawn into it time and change rather than abstracted it from all future contingency, and in the union of the two is the miracle of growth and fusion, producing a quality of excess and uniqueness that goes beyond the merely usable or fortuitously natural, even while deriving its strength and beauty from time and change.

Will himself must wait until **The Second Coming** to understand this revelation in religious terms, but he confronts and rejects his father's legacy of despair. Young Will had urged his father to wait, but Ed "missed it." So Will now resolves to find some alternative to the violent and self-defeating idealism of his ancestors, becoming a pilgrim in spite of himself. Percy and his protagonist thus decline to follow the dogmas of Stoic isolation, human perfectability, and art as universal religion to which their fathers had clung.

As long as he was in the North, Will's "radar" alerted him to ubiquitous signs of spiritual decay in the bombed out

surroundings, but the mixed signals he receives as he journeys home confuse him. This is because the South to which he returns has little relation to the place he remembers. Now it "throbs like a diesel"; it is "happy, victorious, rich, Christian, patriotic and Republican" (144). In Percy's vision the New South seems halfway transformed into a generic U.S.A. and halfway holding on to a distinctive past that moves increasingly toward self-parody. Will finds it disconcerting, despite its optimism:

> The happiness of the South was very formidable. It was an almost invincible happiness. It defied you to call it anything else. Everyone was in fact happy.... They had everything the North had and more. They had a history, they had a place redolent with memories, they had good conversation, they believed in God and defended the Constitution, and they were getting rich into the bargain. They had the best of victory and defeat. Their happiness was aggressive and irresistible. (144-45)

Yet as Will's earnest and ingenuous gaze proves powerless to prevent him from lurching into one scrape after another, the reader realizes that, far from being an area where Christendom "works," the New South is a facade behind which lie agonizing difficulties. The region's outward sheen is built upon what the narrator calls "an infinitely dreary amalgam of Fundamentalism and racism" (179).

Although many people go to church on Sunday, God is merely a feeble convention, relegated to being the ubiquitous plastic statuette on car dashboards while everywhere absent

from the lives of "believers." The South was always more interested in heroes than saints; now its religion is a purely public and superficial ritual. Residual Christianity has become another of the World's Great Religions, a prop or museum artifact which exists to provide useful psychological insights. On the radio Dizzy Dean encourages attendance at one's church for a "rich and rewarding experience" i.e., another item on the menu of self-actualization. God has no place in the New South; its religion only serves the idols of prosperity and piety.

The honor code of the Old South may have represented passionate moral convictions, but now the code is as insincere and empty as its religion. The elaborate manners of the past have become mere mannerisms, a parade of noble gestures and courteous behavior devoid of any larger sustaining context, unrelated to anything except self-interest. Ed Barrett recognized what was happening; as he saw it, blacks and whites were becoming indistinguishable. The Negroes fornicate, the preacher best of all, he says; but now the whites "fornicate too and in public and expect **them** [blacks] back yonder somehow not to notice. Then they expect their women to be respected" (78). Each will pick up the worst of the other and lose the best of himself. "One will learn to fornicate in public and the other will end by pissing in the street" (78). Nor does Ed's insight about the "democrati-

zation of vice" apply only to the South; freed from traditional restraint, the book records the moral revolution unfolding throughout the nation.

Will's ingenuous gaze records the grimly comic events and national upheaval cataloged in the novel. The increasing polarization of the country, its fall into the turmoil and violence of the mid-1960s, caused Percy to move away from the quietly ironic stance of **The Moviegoer.** His disillusionment with America began in earnest with the assassination of JFK, whose death so upset Percy that he stopped writing for a year (Samway, 212). Kennedy's death is mentioned briefly in **The Last Gentleman,** but the event's real significance is shown by Percy's trajectory from comedy to satire as his hopes darkened.

Even **The Last Gentleman**'s comedy has a very somber undersurface. The riot in Levittown over racial "blockbusting"; the campus battle over admission of a black student; the violence at the festival staged by the Writer's and Actor's League for Social Morality; the mysterious use of Fort Ste. Marie as a prison for dissidents; the weird light over Dallas--all these go beyond Will's private obsession with ravening particles and anticipate the social chaos and civil unrest of the later 1960s. The malaise Binx identified is no longer a merely private concern--Percy is suggesting that American Christendom's rejection of traditional moral norms

is beginning to produce unpleasant consequences.

The new morality is exemplified by Maileresque author Mort Prince and his latest novel, **Love**. This book illustrates a kind of double inflation within Christendom--love reduced to physical gratification, and words ridiculously cheapened. Cliché artists like Mort Prince flood the market with cheap coin and make it difficult for other writers to explore the same territory seriously. With slightly heavy-handed satire, **Love** is described as a "deeply religious" work, which embodies its author's simple philosophy: "saying Yes to Life wherever it is found." The book is "about ---ing," about "orgasms, good and bad, some forty-six," and ends on what now passes for a religious note:

> 'And so I humbly ask of life,' said the hero to his last partner with whose assistance he had managed to coincide with his best expectations, 'that it grant us the only salvation, that of one human being discovering himself through another and through the miracle of love' (106).

Mort Prince's ironic salvation reflects the Cartesian emphasis on the self as the center of human endeavor and human existence. For Prince, sex as salvation is the world's great secret.

While Percy believes that through love one can discover another and dramatizes this in **The Second Coming**, the string of adulteries Mort Prince catalogues emphasizes that love has

been replaced by a series of unsatisfying one-night-stands, becoming in the process an impersonal narcissistic attraction of emptiness for emptiness. Fidelity is now impossible because of a previous infidelity on another level--in Christendom divine love and its relationship to salvation have been forgotten.

These points are presented with a light touch; the author skillfully avoids the danger of imitating Mort Prince, refusing to let his own brand of moral evangelism become too obtrusive. Percy also shows that humanism can be as dangerously simplistic as psychoanalysis, eliminating divine love and reducing human love to sex, and that religious faith not only makes love sacred but allows it to be properly understood as something more than an itch to be scratched. The satirical episodes with Mort Prince also show why being a "gentleman" is still appealing to Barrett. As in all Percy's novels, the discredited inheritance of Christianity or even Stoicism is upgraded when compared to Christendom's present slovenly or bankrupt substitutes.

Disgusted by the way Mort Prince's sleaze is embodied in the lives of those he encounters, Will is seeking a proper way to love. He wants a gentleman's courtship rather than a love that is obscene or dispiriting, but receives little guidance. Seeking to relate to the world only through his

mind, he turns love into courtesy or lust. Frustrated by a futile science and an age which has no place for what it regards as anachronistic gentility, Will's unhappiness only increases. To be a gentleman in the old Stoic sense is impossible, and only leads to suicide. Perhaps, Barrett thinks, the charismatic Sutter Vaught can provide a workable alternative.

Vaught, a psychiatrist turned pathologist turned pornographer, is one of the author's most interesting characters, the first of Percy's dark angels, signaling the beginning of a more bitter, despairing vein in his writing. Vaught is a failed scientist who is slowly destroying himself because he believes scientific theory has made all human relations "transcendent," a fake transcendence based on rationalism and aesthetics. When he finds that this transcendence does not solve the problem of how to be human and how to live and die, he unsuccessfully seeks to re-enter the world of immediate reality through sex.

Sutter, like Spandrell, the Baudelairian figure in Aldous Huxley's **Point CounterPoint**, is an essentially religious man who seeks to drive God out of hiding by committing increasingly blatant acts of sacrilege. His belief is that the average American has been dispossessed of himself by his faith in the absolute truth of science, which teaches that

all human relationships are "based on a 'real' substratum of genital sex" (221). Sutter therefore practices lewdness as his sacrament, calculated to mock both piety and propriety. There is now no other recourse, as he writes:

> Lewdness = sole concrete metaphysic of layman in age of science = sacrament of the dispossessed. Things, persons, relations emptied out, not by theory but by lay reading of theory. There remains only relation of skin to skin and hand under dress. Thus layman now believes that the entire spectrum of relations between persons...is based on "real" substratum of genital sex. The latter is "real," the former is not. (220)

Sutter views carnality as enabling the abstracted self to reclaim the flesh and the whole realm of experience. Every woman becomes a whore, "pure immanence to be entered" by the transcendent mind (221). The autopsist proclaims fornication as the sole means of recovering mankind's lost awareness of its immanence. Love is replaced by lechery and despair. Sutter's indiscriminate liaisons embody the Guardini epigraph about love at the end of modernity. Although Sutter envisions such couplings as an antidote to life in Christendom, he discovers that his gnostic escape is short-lived and ends finally in the same spiritual destitution.

Through Vaught's words and life the author critiques that aspect of the modern malaise known as abstractionism, an affront to his own deeply ingrained incarnational outlook. Percy sees abstractionism as a Swiftian dividing of human

behavior into alternating cycles of cerebral and animal activity, with no tool to mediate between the two. While science can be abstract and gnostic, divorcing humans from their own experience, lewdness is concrete and immanent. Vaught prefigures Lancelot in alternating between angelism and bestialism, a switch that is partly symbolized by his moving from psychiatry to pathology. He epitomizes the refined Southerner who can neither accept the present nor forget the past. As he writes, "Now one begins with genital overtures instead of a handshake, then waits to see what will turn up (e.g., we might become friends later.) Like dogs greeting each other nose to tail and tail to nose" (221).

Will Barrett finds a discarded steno pad which contains Sutter's meditations (a device also employed by Saul Bellow in **Herzog**; in both novels, this allows the author to avoid responsibility for what is being said.) The notes are reflections on a series of autopsies, which are Christendom's casualties, such as the black girl killed by a falling church tower after it was bombed. The cases are recorded with unflinching realism, allowing Percy to portray America's decadence and hypocrisy:

> Main Street, U.S.A. = a million-dollar segregated church on one corner, a drugstore with dirty magazines on the other, a lewd movie on the third, and on the fourth a B-girl bar with condom dispensers in the gents' room. Delay-your-climax cream....these people who sit and talk so sorrowfully and decently are fumbling with each other under the table. There is no other alternative for them. (235)

There is no other alternative because science has demystified existence; sex is the only mystery left, and the sole escape from abstraction and the prison of the self. But sex is only a temporary solution to despair; then postcoital depression sets in, and the malaisian is left with the only remaining release--suicide, a decisive action outside the hegemony of science.

For Percy, not only is the pleasure of sexual license temporary, the decline of Christianity threatens to make it more fleeting still. Will waxes nostalgic for the sex in ancient times, which he imagines to have been uncomplicated and unfettered with guilt, like that enjoyed by the "ancient Greeks who lived in the childhood of the race" (140); Sutter claims that the contemporary need to be "geniuses of the orgasm" is far more demanding than the strictest Calvinism. He believes that Christianity, despite its problems, is still viable enough to "underwrite the naughtiness which is essential to pornography" (221). The doctor notes that this is no longer possible in totally secularized Sweden:

> When Sweden was post-Christian but had not yet forgotten Cx (circa 1850-1914), Swedish lewdness intact and suicides negligible. But when Swedes truly post-Christian (not merely post-Christian but also post memory of Cx), lewdness declined and suicides rose in inverse relation. (272)

In perhaps the final insult, impotent Christianity can provide postmodern Christendom only one last service--keeping

alive the frisson of vice by forbidding it. (It is evident from interviews that Percy, no prude, thinks the trouble with modern sex is not its sinfulness but the absence of any intelligible concept of sin that might spice it with guilt. A conscientious objector to the sexual revolution, Percy is, so to speak, dissatisfied with the current ease of satisfaction, which he perceives as cheapening something important, even sacred.)

Sutter rejects a God not worthy of the name, and those who pretend to serve Him. He writes, "Christ should leave us. He is too much with us and I don't like his friends" (293). This character is a vehicle through which Percy heaps scorn on the real religion of Christendom, liberal humanism. Sutter calls this "fornication of the spirit" and rejects it in favor of fornication of the body. He is protesting what Percy sees as the foundational crisis of Christendom. The individual as knower, epitomized by the scientist, suffers from a radical dichotomy in which the self does not fully live in the world. Rather, the mind has abstracted itself to dwell far above mundane, human concerns while the world and the body left behind become a collection of specimens, examples, and coordinates. In such gnostic dualism, the incarnate God becomes irrelevant because mankind seeks self-transcendence as it denies or perverts the flesh. It is this which has populated the world with the living dead. Thus there is a

grim appropriateness in Sutter's becoming a pathologist--the only operation now possible is the post-mortem.

In Kierkegaard's terms Sutter is a genius, someone with charisma or technical skill. But Will mistakes him for an apostle, someone with the authority to teach wisdom, and so follows the doctor into the desert as far as Santa Fe, seeking "holy faith," i.e., the knowledge by which he might live successfully. But throughout their acquaintance Sutter refuses to play the role of newsbearer. "Fornicate if you want and enjoy yourself," he admonishes his unwanted disciple, "but don't come looking to me for a merit badge certifying you as a Christian or a gentleman or whatever it is you cleave by" (176). The doctor realizes that Barrett simply wants to receive formulas from an expert rather than assume sovereignty over his own life, and refuses to cooperate. No "expert" can help Will by telling him how to live.

But if Sutter declines the role of evangelist delivering good news, he nonetheless embodies the bad news which is the only message Christendom now has, and Will manages to learn something from this father-surrogate. He suggests to Will that his confusion may be appropriate in a twisted age, the end result of Christendom's "entire melancholy procession of disasters." Like Percy' Lancelot, Sutter can find no ultimate value outside of himself to live by, but is shrewd

enough to understand that, despite its pretensions, humanity is not self-sufficient. He knows what Dostoevsky knew--everyone worships something.

Percy himself is just as pessimistic as Sutter about the direction of American Christendom, yet he holds on to the possibility of communion amid the ruins as a new start; this hopefulness alone makes possible the comic tone of his novels. His fiction can be understood as a vehicle for re-establishing an ideal of honorable, upright conduct on another basis than secularism can provide. Percy hopes to appeal to those for whom the therapeutic culture and various contemporary revolutions have failed to deliver on their promises of happiness through relaxation of restraint.

When Will catches up to Sutter in New Mexico, the doctor has nothing to tell him and states that he will commit suicide when his brother Jamie dies. Barrett perceptively discerns that Sutter is a suicidal abstractionist because he cannot endure the agony of experience, including his brother's impending death in the face of which he as a physician is powerless. Will now realizes for the first time that his mentor is "the dismalest failure, a man who had thrown himself away" (300). So far Will has rejected the North with its ravening particles, the Old South and its anachronistic notions of honor, and the New South with its unreflective

materialism. Neither father with gentlemanly idealism nor surrogate with desperate eroticism provide an adequate model for living. Will declines to join them in suicide:

> Perhaps this moment more than any other, the moment of his first astonishment, marked the beginning for the engineer of what is called a normal life. From that time on it was possible to meet him and after a few moments form a clear notion of what sort of fellow he was and how he would spend the rest of his life. (307)

Confrontation with the real possibility of death rouses Will's existential appreciation of life, even ordinary life. But he has still not found a way to live successfully; he has not succeeded in advancing to what Kierkegaard terms the "religious" stage of being; he is still an onlooker at the action of grace.

Will needs a viable alternative to Christendom's status quo. Like all Percyan protagonists after Binx Bolling, he eventually meets a newsbearer who has vital information about how to construct a meaningful life. (Percy is perhaps the only major contemporary novelist who regularly uses a variation of the **deus ex machina** to make his thematic statements clear. This results in the predictable appearance of a Catholic religious figure, usually a priest, toward the end of his novels. Reliance on this technique, and Percy's inability to find a workable alternative, are major shortcomings in his craftsmanship.)

In **The Last Gentleman** this character is Valentine Vaught. Val is a nun, whose vocation likewise came about as a response to a newsbearer's revelation. While studying linguistics at Columbia, she was approached by someone who told her that she looked half dead and wondered whether she would like to be alive. This evangelist repeated the gospel's summons to discipleship, "come with me," and offered the moribund student the life-giving Logos. Val accepted, and in six weeks took instruction, received the sacraments, and made her first vows. She explains that her alacrity resulted from the good faith of a student of language, "all I'd done was taken them at their word" (236).

Like her brother Sutter, Val looks to the exhaustion of Christendom, when she hopes "that the air would be cleared and even that God might give us a sign" (241). That is, when liberal humanism collapses after discovering it has no foundation apart from discredited Christianity, the choice humanity faces--religious faith or nihilism--will become evident. Val has established a school in a bleak landscape, surrounded by poisoned trees, the logical successor to Ground Zero. Will compares the school to "a lunar installation...a place of crude and makeshift beginnings on some blasted planet" (238). Val is a pioneer, waiting for the disappearance of the South's latest idols, instructing those who have never learned the exhausted language of Christendom. Sutter claims that his

sister acts "as if the world had ended and she was one of the Elected Ones left to keep the Thing going, but the world has not ended, in fact is more the same than usual" (298).

But Val has no need of apocalypse or its individual variant, suicide. Sutter sees only what has not happened, while his sister looks beyond the devastation to the One who came, comes, and is coming again. She witnesses to this revelation by teaching speech to children who have been raised in silence. Thus her school is not a fallout shelter and, possessing a future, she has a workable alternative to suicide. By giving words to her silent students, she gives them an entire world. Val compares them to Adam on the first day, for when they come to consciousness through language, they have the power to name.

> What's that? they ask me. That's a hawk, I tell them, and they believe me. I think I recognized myself in them. They were not alive and then they are and so they'll believe you. Their eyes fairly pop out at the Baltimore catechism (imagine). I tell them God made them to be happy and that if they love one another and keep the commandments and receive the Sacrament, they'll be happy now and forever. They believe me. I'm not sure anyone else does now. (237)

Naming confers reality on the thing named and the namer. Val empowers her students to see--first the world, then the truths of faith--and by seeing they gain a renewed earth by learning why they exist. Out of the old and in the ruins, Val creates a new order that transforms education into

revelation. When they can see creation as new and good, they are ready to hear the good news of Christianity. Val's students believe her news because they accept her authority; Percy aims to convince his more skeptical audience by compelling fictional rhetoric.

Val seeks to bring the same new life to Jamie, her younger brother. While the Tyree children are figuratively dead without language, Jamie is physically dying and equally ignorant, despite his searching mind. Val says she doesn't want him to die without knowing "why he came here, what he is doing here, and why he is leaving" (164). Like the culture which produced him, Jamie is enamored by a science unable to answer these basic questions. Val wants to instruct him as she does her students, for their catechism gives answers Christendom has forgotten and for which it has no adequate substitutes. But since Jamie will not listen to her, she enlists Barrett in the cause.

Will is a natural choice, even though he is not religious, because Jamie trusts him as a "fellow technician." Val hopes her dying brother will learn that the last word is not the entropy that has fascinated him as an aspiring scientist and now claims his deteriorating body. At first, Will wants no part of this mission; his latent Protestantism makes him recoil:

> Perhaps we are true Protestants despite ourselves, he mused, or perhaps it is just that the protest is all that is left of it. For it is in our stern protest against Catholic monkey business that we feel most ourselves. (166)

In this reflection Barrett comes close to realizing that he, like Christendom itself, uses liberal, formal religion as a safeguard against real religion. Despite his hesitation, Will becomes a reluctant apostle by resentfully accepting Val's commission, which leads to the novel's climactic baptismal scene.

Like all of Percy's spiritual messengers, Val is, to say the least, unprepossessing. She freely confesses that despite her love of Christ, she still wishes her enemies to fry in hell. Before Will leaves her mission school, she asks him to pray that she might receive the grace "not to hate the guts of some people, however much they deserve it" (238). Val is a Christian in spite of her own spiteful self. Her faith does not purge her of hatred or anger, but makes them no longer the last word on her life. As always, the author refuses to cover his apostles with bland piety; they are about as appealing and successful as the ambiguous Christianity they represent. (Percy's fiction reflects his frustration with unbelievers who are unconsciously parasitical on religious presuppositions, and believers who cannot live up to the demands of their faith.)

Sutter cynically suggests that her efforts are of no use; that in ten years the very students now so eager to learn will have either become Muslims and hate her, or will have joined the middle class, hence becoming "buggered like everyone else" (243). But Sutter is short on alternatives himself. With sex failing him, like a disillusioned aesthete he has only suicide. Sutter confronts death so as to quicken his vitality. If Christendom surrenders sovereignty of every area to science, suicide yet remains the one indisputably personal choice; but it will only produce another corpse for scientific investigation.

When he visits the dying Jamie, Will glimpses an authentically Christian answer to the problem of how to live in the frequently unattractive present. The hospital room is the book's finest and most moving scene, worthy of any nineteenth-century novelist, though its solemnity is a departure from the book's dominant whimsical tone. Percy's treatment of Jamie's last moments is graphic but emotionally restrained; he stresses the sheer physicality of death, the stink of defecation, the defaced skin, swollen face and other messy horrors of mortality, "the bare-faced embarrassment of getting worse and dying." The flesh in ruins is the equivalent of the bombed out ruins Will has so far encountered, and the New Mexico hospital is the real Ground Zero. The reader sees the contrast between reality and the futility of Ed

Barrett's notions of aristocratic honor and Sutter Vaught's subhuman mores.

Up to this point Will has sought an occasion to act with as much conviction as his ancestors, and now his desire to comfort the dying Jamie offers the opportunity. He seeks out the chaplain to fulfill Val's request that her brother be baptized and is scandalized at the priest's use of a plastic cup, as if it lessened the sanctity of the rite rather than attested to the holiness that consecrates the most profane instruments. Will is further scandalized by the homely performance of the rite and the stench of death. Again he calls upon his nominal Episcopalianism in order to invoke right appearances and exempt himself from the proceedings, while realizing that "in his entire life he had never given such matters a single thought" (313).

The chaplain is as prosaic as Sr. Val, just another serviceable vessel of the sacramental life which tries to make God real in His absence. In Kierkegaard's terms an apostle lacks the appeal of a genius, but possesses the authority of truth. When the dying boy asks why he should believe, the priest says, "It is true because God Himself revealed it as the truth!" Jamie then asks what makes him sure. Fr. Boomer responds like a pugnacious Walker Percy, "If it were not true, then I would not be here. That is why I am here, to tell you"

(318). The priest's odd impatience and apparently immutable faith contrast dourly with the desultory emotions that lie elsewhere in the room. Will listens with his "good ear" to the priest's proclamation, and finally takes part in the baptism. Death requires ritual, not, as Will supposes, technique. Serving as an interpreter between Jamie and Fr. Boomer, Will repeats the boy's whispered words of love and the will to believe. Jamie has accepted his status as a pilgrim stranger, rather than an organism in an environment.

The baptism scene contains some of Percy's best writing and manifests the novel's premise about what is required for recovering oneself. The possibility of news depends on the credibility of death. At Jamie's bedside the reality of death is emphasized, though Will, like Christendom itself, has managed thus far to avoid thinking about it. Percy wishes to reverse the cultural process which has reduced death the ineffable to death the unspeakable, "as outlawed as sin used to be," Sutter remarks. The author intends death to be an ironic kind of smelling salts, the only means strong enough to awaken those in a secular stupor and reinstate the possibility of a spiritual quest. Jamie had sent for a book on entropy, receiving instead news of salvation.

After the naming ceremony of baptism, which for Percy reveals the heart of reality, Will asks Sutter, "What

happened back there?" (321). The engineer does not understand the significance of the ritual, but he recognizes that something has, in fact, happened. In an essay entitled "How to Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic," Percy answers Barrett's question by saying that a novelist with "a necessary sensitivity to the hidden dimensions and energies of his characters" must recognize

> ...the presence of the mystery which may always erupt in their lives and which for want of a better word we may call grace. Neither he nor his characters may know why certain things happen as they do.

Someone who intends to engineer his life only on scientific principles is naturally baffled when in contact with such a mysterious reality, since science accepts no limits on what reason can explain.

But despite his resistance something has happened to Will. The shock and mystery of Jamie's death has prevented him from reducing the religious ceremony he has just witnessed to another therapeutic technique. Perhaps he also senses the dynamics of self-transcendence involved with the sacrament. In any case, while he may not appreciate this epiphany as he had the earlier one at his father's house, Will has been changed. The possibility that he may eventually follow Jamie's rejection of the death-dealing creations of secular man--symbolized by Sutter's pistol and epitomized by the first atomic bomb detonated at nearby Los Alamos--and turn instead

to faith is suggested by Will's proclamation "I'm through with telescopes." If Will is not yet ready for faith, he has at least stopped his drift toward suicide. The moments of communion he shared with Jamie have made it impossible for him to see reality as before. Intimacy allows Will to realize his identity.

It is his new state of mind and heart which makes the novel's ending one of the most thrilling episodes Percy has ever written. Mysteriously transformed by Jamie's death and the priest's words, Will finds himself suddenly able to draw on strength that flowed like "oil" into his muscles so that he was able to run with "great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds" (409). He reaches out to Sutter and admits his need and name at the same time:

> "Dr. Vaught, don't leave me. Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett--'and he actually pointed to himself lest there be a mistake,'--"need you and want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed you." (322-323)

In this Will names himself and celebrates the discovery of true identity by baring it. The phrase also says, "I will bear it," the point of greatest significance in the novel. He will not only bear but rejoice in the ordinariness that is the only way of reentry into reality, the single means of reaching the transcendent. By bringing new life to Jamie and Sutter, Will glimpses the possibility of his own new life.

He convinces the doctor to obey his summons to "Wait," a word that echoes eight times. The word emphasizes the patience and expectant hope necessary to live well in the ordinary, based on the promise of communion. Only through such bondedness can Will ever become open to the divine message which alone, Percy implies, makes a miserable world tolerable.

The Last Gentleman leans toward didacticism in the awkward "casebook" sections, though Percy never lets things get to the point of Lawrentian solemnity. The author's message is not that man must live without hope for himself or for the future, but that he should live according to his fate as fallen creature. In this view man is a wayfarer whose alienation is an inevitable result of his separation from God--**not** a psychological disorder. Psychology masks this state and offers the false hope that alienation can be finally overcome by therapeutic means.

The novel suggests that the moral norms and behavior of the past, while far from perfect, nevertheless are being replaced by something worse, a scientistic quagmire in which good and evil cannot be adequately perceived and defined and in which the traditional, though not exclusively, Catholic morality that the end does not justify the means has been virtually ignored by postmodern society.

The reader's willingness to accept this message depends heavily on the felt intensity of Will's plight, and Barrett never comes across very emphatically. Though he is often dissatisfied and suffers lapses of various kinds, he remains oddly insulated from his conflicts. A key weakness of the book lies in Percy's inability to make Will's problems seem real and involving; the audience is too detached from the engineer's mishaps. Readers can puzzle out his case, but such an understanding is no substitute for the real existential anguish Percy would like us to feel. Barrett's struggles are hardly involving enough to compel sympathetic recognition; as he moves from the depths self-absorption to the threshold of religious faith he seems at a distance from any suffering his journey may inflict.

Additionally, the book's success requires accepting the philosophical limitations Percy imposes. The author presents life as what Kierkegaard, speaking of faith, called an either/or proposition. This can be stated as a choice between post-modern chaos and the growth of new cultural values based on a vision of transcendence. Saul Bellow once said that the novel of ideas becomes art only when

> the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength. Without this a novel of ideas is mere self-indulgence....The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides.

The Last Gentleman easily meets this criteria. But it ends up being convincing only to those who already share Percy's views, precisely because it limits the choice to one of two extremes. But the moral poles to which Barrett and Sutter are drawn--lewdness versus saintliness, salesmanship versus suicide--seem appropriate only to a particular adolescent crisis. For these reasons, with all of its local brilliance, **The Last Gentleman** is largely unsuccessful in establishing a common ground upon which believers and unbelievers could appreciate Percy's craft and accept his message.

Chapter IV

Lancelot

Lancelot, Percy's fourth novel, is what the author calls "a small cautionary tale" of sexual obsession, attempted suicide, and multiple murder. Dispensing with the usual Percyan comedy in order to examine the problem of evil, it poses the question of how to respond to an absurd, decadent society. Years before writing it Percy had admitted that "a good deal of my energy as a novelist comes from **malice**--the desire to attack things in our culture" (Brown, 8). Of all his novels, only **Lancelot** embodies this determination in every line. The book is the most apocalyptic, sexually charged, Southern, and in some ways his most personal piece of fiction--the only one in which the protagonist turns to violence. Its bitter irony and elements of the tragic mark Percy's closest approach to Flannery O'Connor.

Only in **Lancelot** does it become clear that Percy's novels in sequence recapitulate the cycle described in each book--of a son's discovering his father's suicidal hopelessness, being sucked into a severe depression by that knowledge, and escaping only when a hellish descent into the emptiness of the self shows him that faith in God is the lone alternative to suicide. In this Percy's fiction mirrors the Christian vision of brief Edenic existence, fall into sin, and possible final redemption. **Lancelot** depicts Percy's wayfarer at the

darkest night of his soul, near the point of Dante's hell so deep the only way is up. This sets the stage for the romance of **The Second Coming**, with its renewed hope and faith.

Once again there is a symmetry between the work of Percy and Saul Bellow, this time thematic as well as stylistic. Bellow's **Mr. Sammler's Planet** has much in common with **Lancelot**. Both are superb examples of what Northrop Frye designates as "second phase satire," or literature assuming the responsibility of moral instruction. In their own ways both are strident protests against the moral revolution of the '60s, characterized by Bellow as "the right to be uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions...." Absent from the two books is the genial, forgiving comedy which graced both authors in the past.

The novels also share unappealing protagonists, though Percy and Bellow obviously hope that the unpleasantness of the characters should not detract from the incisiveness of their comments. Sammler, an upholder of Apollonian values, suffers from a hardening of his jocular arteries as he stridently lashes out at the Dionysian excesses of the times, the "sex-excrement-militancy" he abhors. Both authors ask: should man continue to struggle with the old forms, or should a new beginning be made, in Virginia or on the moon? Perhaps

the major difference between the two is that Percy writes from a religious stance, while Bellow is lamenting the difficulties of being a humanist in the contemporary world.

In **Lancelot**, the author shifts his attention from consciously alienated readers (who are likely to sympathize with his concerns) to the larger audience of Christendom's placid and self-satisfied consumers. At first, the protagonist appears to be another of Percy's disoriented but attractive heroes; the audience, lulled into lowering its defenses, is jolted when the tone shifts and the threat of secular and religious apocalypse is revealed. Written at the height of the popularity of formalist and structuralist reading, Percy anticipates that the conventional reader will find the novel unfinished and therefore flawed and that the radical reader will seek an absolute closure, a "solution" to the story's apparently unsatisfactory ending.

Percy puts his complacent audience through an ordeal so as to impel a more critical look at "everydayness" and the gaps in its understanding of the world. The reader's quest to discover with certainty the structural significance of **Lancelot**'s ending propels him on a quest which, in a real sense, is the same as the narrator's, and one incurring the same consequences--"deconstructive" consequences, experienced as an interpretative calamity. For Percy, such calamitous

experience is the requisite preparation for the mea culpa--in this case, an acknowledgment of the insufficiency of reason--which must precede faith. **Lancelot** is a book about faith and about the interpretative center necessary for there to be faith, or indeed any meaning at all. As always, the author expects that readers, confronted with the emptiness at the center of Christendom and the absence of a larger spiritual purpose, will stop thinking of themselves as organisms and consumer units and be forced to seek a compelling alternative--which Percy does not yet provide.

The author's reticence makes **Lancelot** not only a new stylistic departure, but also a risk. The gamble lies in creating a character who embodies a Sartrean worldview Percy rejects and letting him go unanswered in the novel. For Sartre, the self, alone and empty, can sustain itself only by seizing the freedom to create a self out of its own nothingness. Other persons constitute a threat to that self-creation. For Percy, the self is rooted in connectedness with others and sustained in celebrating that connectedness--in language, in commitments to others, and in sacramental signs connecting one to God, the other who is the ultimate ground of existence. By contrast, Percy's choice of a first-person narrator in a confined space makes **Lancelot** an intensely focused but extremely limited vision--what can be seen from the window of an isolated self.

After being shocked into consciousness by a devastating revelation, this unusual narrator tries to create an identity by using his new-found freedom to act out the desires of his will, without regard for the consequences to others. Radically isolated and dominating all speech, he is a risky protagonist for a writer who wishes to suggest that language demonstrates what kind of creatures we are--beings inescapably connected with one another. Percy is willing to put his ontological convictions to the test by letting the elements of point of view, plot, and characterization build a case that is not his own, that of moral relativism and personal autonomy. He takes these bedrocks of Christendom and presents their possible, perhaps likely, consequences.

Everything in the novel belongs to the form of the dramatic monologue. The principle action is contained in the protagonist's past-tense narrative of the last days of Belle Isle plantation and of events in his earlier personal history which are significant in foreshadowing the disaster. The story is related by Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, a Louisiana lawyer in his forties, to a priest whom Lance calls "Percival." Percival is a medical doctor who gave up his practice and converted to Catholicism in a Kierkegaardean leap of faith as a way to exorcise his melancholy Southern heritage, described as the family tendency to "depression and early suicide" (151). The priest listens to Lancelot's

five-day torrent of invective but his voice is heard only in monosyllables at the novel's end. In championing their diametrically opposed ideals, these two are knights errant in the moral wasteland that is Christendom.

Creating a dialogue but presenting only one side allows monomaniacal rage to dominate the narration. In this Percy takes another chance--putting important cultural criticisms into the mouth of such a character risks having the audience dismiss them along with his other delusions. Lance's Juvenalian rantings against society contrast with Binx's or Will's ironic observations on the hollowness of postmodern life. Yet in an era of alibis, "legally accurate" statements, spin control, political correctness and outright deceit, there is something refreshing about Lancelot's forthrightness and passion. Perhaps this is what Percy meant when, referring to **Lancelot**, he told an interviewer: "Maybe there are times when an honest hatred serves us better than love corrupted by sentimentality, meretriciousness, sententiousness, cuteness" (Colby, 122).

Within the confines of **Lancelot**, language itself no longer seems to "signify" for either storyteller or listener. Indeed, the fragment of a sign that Lance sees outside his narrow window--"Free & Ma B"--suggests that the most basic building blocks of communication no longer offer any sort of

viable link between one person and the next. As he observes to Percival (speaking for Percy as well), "To **make conversation** in the old tongue, the old worn-out language. It can't be done" (22). As if to confirm this observation, Lance is excited by the possibility of communicating with the inmate next door by simple knocking.

Lance's narration nearly overflows with conversations and incidents replete with questions, hesitations, multiple meanings and misunderstandings. But such limitations of communication are not accidental in this case. For Lance, story-telling is a means of "correcting" untidy reality. In the actual world, truth may be elusive and complicated, but in his narrative, the narrator disdains "waffling bullshit," clarifying his position through a black/white reduction of moral choices. (Despite its limitations, such a reduction may be seductive to those of us tired of the complicated--and often fruitless--ironies of modern life. Percy's fiction itself can be understood as offering a similar choice of either/or, faith or nihilism.)

Lance's strategy is to restrict Percival, along with the reader, to his own narrow view. He wants to escape as far as possible the responsibility entailed in addressing himself to another person. By avoiding Percival's questions, by taking refuge in irony and giddy humor, Lance refuses to engage his

audience sincerely.

By his own admission, Lance needs to talk to someone about what has gone wrong with his life. And yet he uses language in a way that disclaims the dire realities of his situation. Instead of exploring with Percival his complicity in the events of the past, he tells a story which minimizes his own guilt and exaggerates his power and freedom. To such a man, the rule and conditions which symbolization and inter-subjectivity impose on language threaten his personal autonomy. Believing that he is his own sovereign, that his deliverance depends on himself alone, that he must denounce God, society, indeed, anyone or anything that would restrict his power and freedom, he looks upon language primarily as self-advertisement.

While Lance reshapes reality according to personal imperatives, he lacks sufficient confidence in his transforming powers to include much diversity in his private sphere. Like the narrators of numerous contemporary novels--**The Bell Jar, The Blood Oranges, Lolita, The World According to Garp,** etc.--Lance manages to order the events of his story only by drastically limiting his field of vision. His voice sometimes assumes the same tone as his wife's actor friends--flat and bored, tending to trail off, as if he were not really listening to himself. He is like the narrator of **Gravity's**

Rainbow or **The End of the Road**, aimlessly exhausting permutations of meaning.

Lancelot yearns to make a clean break with the past and its reified symbols and start again. He wants a new time and age, a new language and a new set of stories--signs, in short, that can signify and establish the possibility of "true communication" (12). Yet despite his earlier statements that the language of the past is worn out, his narrative is based on the very stories and fragments of the past that he rejects. Above all, his vision of a new age to be created in Virginia bears a suspiciously strong resemblance to the old, mythic South.

In his rage and paranoia Lancelot becomes one of Percy's most riveting characters. This is another example of the paradox Milton encountered: that in art Satan always threatens to steal the scene from God. But in the present case, the attractiveness may not be accidental; Percy once commented that he had a real affinity for Lancelot, and even identified with him (Tolson, 368). The merging of character and author is most evident where Lance denounces both the decline of American mores and the Catholic Church's betrayal of its own militant heritage vis-a-vis the secular world. Percy clearly rejects Lancelot's activities and plan; he does not reject Lancelot or his diagnosis. In fact, it is not too

much to see Percy in **both** main characters: the eloquent denouncer of iniquity paired with the believer powerless to speak for a Christianity which has failed.

Lance's position as a storyteller speaks to Percy's own, for Lance's faults--his utter confidence in his own views, his limitation of choices to an either/or, and his evangelizing--are temptations to which Percy as a Catholic novelist is given. In seeing a version of himself as author in Lance, Percy gains a disturbing perspective on himself, but a challenging one. His involvement with Lance embodies an active dialogic stance, rather than standing apart from his narrative, as Lance does. Stories speak significantly to their creators' situations, and Percy believes that consciousness of one's self arises from turning not inward but outward; these intersubjective encounters between self and other consciousnesses (including textual ones) shape not merely the best therapy and art but the best lives.

The time is All Souls' Day, 1976, when all the dead souls Lancelot has been involved with return to haunt him. After killing his wife and three others he has been detained in a therapeutic playpen, where scientific humanism deposits those whose behavior is inexplicable and thus is "explained" reasonably as being unexplainable and for which the guilty are not held responsible. Accordingly, Lance's crime is never pun-

ished and he feels no guilt. On the last day he says that he has been "cured," declared "psychiatrically fit and legally innocent" (249) and that all arrangements have been made for his release.

It appears that the state has no valid grounds for holding him, except the same grounds on which he must be, or already has been, found innocent of the crimes at Belle Isle; i.e., insanity. Once he is "cured" he must be released. Officially Lancelot is now sane. Privately, the experts may agree that he is dangerous and likely to repeat his previous offenses; professionally, the same experts agree he meets the official criteria of sanity and thus is entitled to his freedom. Situations of this type, Percy implies, are inevitable as long as the nation depends on various "experts"--legal, medical, or other--to make its moral decisions.

Lance has been confined in the "Center for Aberrant Behavior," a title which recalls the "Progress and Advice Room" in Barth's **The End of the Road**, with its "Mythotherapy" and "Alphabetical Priority." The name also suggests another aspect of Christendom's problem. Fancy jargon in the naming of projects and institutions (such as the "Qualitarian Center" in **Love in the Ruins**, a euthanasia facility) is always a sign in Percy's fiction of the pernicious reign of "expertism." Society long ago abandoned terms like "prison" and "jail" in

the designation of these unpleasant places. The official euphemisms represent the tendency of experts to cope with a bad thing by calling it something else. The behavior may not go away, but the new terminology makes it seem to be under stood and under control. Crimes are not crimes at all; they are manifestations of illness which deserve hospitals, not prisons. This medicalization of deviance results in a kind of creeping exculpation in which people begin believing there is no such thing as evil and no one is to blame for anything, all being victims of forces beyond their control. And when a perpetrator like Lance is not sick, the society which produced him must be.

In Christendom as portrayed in **Lancelot**, not only are the terms "crime" and "prison" eliminated, but even "sickness" and "hospital." What was once a sin, then a crime, then a manifestation of insanity, is now merely a type of "behavior." Not even **errant** behavior, but **aberrant** behavior. Is the Center for observing, confining, understanding, correcting, or fostering the behavior? And what behavior? A clue to the disordered nature of its mission is that its admissions policy makes no distinction between perpetrators and victims. Lance blew up a house and murdered four people; in the un-locked (cell? room? unit?) next to him is Anna, a woman who had been gang-raped, slashed, and left for dead on a river bank. Their only commonality is that both are "behavers."

In Percy's view, the negative impact of Christendom's reliance on experts and their euphemisms is not limited to the realm of rehabilitation; religion has also been infected by the culture's therapeutic virus. Thus not only has crime been philosophically eliminated, but so has sin. Lancelot asks Percival whether he is "one of the new breed" who believes that evil is only a category, like Satan himself (21). Through his protagonist Percy heaps scorn on modern Christian theology, Protestant and Catholic, which has aped its secular counterparts and abandoned the traditional perspective that understands people to be free but responsible, hence capable of sin. (Sin is absent from most of Percy's work because he doesn't see it operative in the world about him. He views contemporary society not as immoral but as amoral, missing the moral dimension and so incapable of acting either morally or immorally.)

Lancelot is a seeker, a questing spirit among anesthetized souls and one who dares to plunge into the "heart of darkness" (216). Awakened to his own mysterious existence by the catastrophe that often makes decisive action at last possible for Percyan characters, Lance declares that he will begin searching. He probes his wife's behavior with a relentless, prurient, yet analytical curiosity--but his more profound curiosity is ontological.

Like Raskolnikov, Lance is bent on establishing whether such a thing as evil is exists or whether people are simply cunning animals governed by self-serving drives. (The book's parallels with **Crime and Punishment** are numerous. There is the same prison window through which the characters view the outside world, the similarity of Sonya and Anna, the sacramental and eucharistic images that haunt both heroes in spite of the terrible "dream" of reality both have.) "'Evil,' he says, "is surely the clue to this age, the only quest appropriate to the age. For everything and everyone's either wonderful or sick and nothing is evil" (138); that is, in the opinion of liberal humanists and social scientists. He is willing to search back through his disordered memory of the events leading to his confinement in order to find "one sin," "one pure act of malevolence" (138).

In seeking what Christendom has taught him no longer exists, Lancelot becomes the first of Percy's searchers to look for sin. He says, "My quest was for a true sin--was there such a thing?" (140). The question is deliberately taunting, as Percy intended, and Lance's search for an answer to it reveals the author's complex strategy. Percy uses the question to highlight what he sees as a central truth about modern Western society--the loss of the sense of sin as a spiritual, metaphysical reality, or, to state the matter differently, the loss of a sense of sin as a fundamental flaw

in the order of being.

Modern culture, as Lance recognizes, has tried to reduce evil to an empirical datum. In this culture human action is viewed as a naturalistic response to wants, needs, and desires. Therefore an "evil act" is seen as only a manifestation of behavioristic impulses. Lance's unholy grail now seems as distant and unattainable as its Christian counterpart was in medieval times, because his own thinking is not untouched by therapeutic presuppositions.

> Yet, as everyone knows, mothers and fathers who beat and kill their children have psychological problems and are as bad off as the children. It has been proved that every battered child has battered parents, battered grandparents, and so on. No one is to blame. (139)

Lance does not consider even Hitler an adequate example of pure evil, on the familiar grounds that he might have been acting under the influence of psychological factors beyond his control. Percy slyly implies that a society which could theoretically exculpate a Hitler is unlikely to have much success explaining evil or dealing with it.

Lance justifies his quest for sure knowledge of pure sin as a negative proof of God. "If there is such a thing as sin, evil, a living malignant force, there must be a God" (72). As he puts it to Percival, "God may be absent, but what if one should find the devil?" (138). In the end he will decide

that his quest has failed, "that there is no unholy grail just as there was no Holy Grail" (231), but the novel illustrates that Lancelot has simply searched for sin in the wrong place--in others rather than in himself. Despite his determination to find the sinful truth, Lance cannot see his own spiritual perversion; he is so obsessed with ferreting out wickedness in others he misses his own arson, adultery, sodomy and murder.

Lancelot's search illustrates the massive cultural change of the last few decades. Until recently Southern writers did not have to send their protagonists on a quest for sin. William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell and Robert Penn Warren portray characters who choose evil and are blamed for it. Secular liberals of the North may have assumed that human nature is basically good and that any surface flaws can be corrected by sufficient application of money, science and benevolent legislation; the more tragic outlook of the South knew better. Because their history encompassed the clear injustice of slavery, Southern authors have been able to portray right and wrong unself-consciously, without irony. For them, there was no remedy for evil in psychology, therapy, or law; only the Stoic satisfaction in virtue or the Christian hope of heaven. As Richard King notes, the literature of the Southern Renaissance was informed with a sense of sin and a knowledge of guilt.

But no longer, if Percy is in any way representative. Now the guilt has run out. The memory of slavery has grown cold, as the flatly unemotional treatment of blacks throughout Percy's fiction suggests (including Elgin, the MIT genius who helps Lancelot). Even the unsavory racist history of more recent times seems distant, and white Southerners are no longer necessarily diehard segregationists. Lancelot himself was an ACLU liberal fighting for black emancipation in the 1960s, an attitude which changed to benign indifference in the 1970s. Now Lance is no longer preoccupied with racial questions; he simply assumes that the battle for civil rights has been won.

Even more significant than racial progress in reducing the sense of sin is the overwhelming media influence of secular, unheroic America, which has penetrated and eroded the South's unique consciousness, including its two traditional sources of moral guidance. Strident, fundamentalist Christianity increasingly seems rural and old-fashioned, while Stoicism has been worn away by psychological pragmatism and economic opportunism. The South's guilt has become homogenized into the same type of general smiling uneasiness experienced throughout the nation; black and white now alike go their own way under the noncommittal mask of what Percy (in **The Second Coming**) calls "standard U.S. politeness."

Up to this point, Percy has been content with a detached, Horatian satire of contemporary amorality. The strongest emotions expressed by Binx Bolling or Will Barrett are boredom and curiosity. Now through the persona of Lancelot Percy scourges Christendom's lack of moral responsibility, especially in the area of sex. Enraged by a sexual revolution made inescapable by the promiscuity within his family, Lance lashes out at "this cocksucking cuntlapping assholelicking fornicating Happyland U.S.A." (158). Such rages allow Percy to vent his own fury against Christendom's decadence while parodying it at the same time.

Like its predecessors, the novel is a dialogue between Christianity and Stoicism; where **Lancelot** differs is in its more vehement expression of the author's disgust. America, in Percy's eyes, refuses to accept the full implications of either worldview, unwilling to accept the demands of its de jure religious commitment or to face the implications of its de facto paganism/secularism. Percy defines his prophetic task as a novelist in the book's epigraph from the **Purgatorio:**

> He sank so low that all means
> for his salvation were gone,
> except for showing him the lost people.
> For this I visited the region of the dead...

Although the eventual fate of Lancelot may be uncertain, the "salvation" of the reader has been clearly undertaken by showing him the lost. Just as Percival's lagging faith is

revitalized by his exposure to Lance, so Percy hopes that readers will recognize Christendom's decadence, and refuse to continue existing contentedly in its bog of purposelessness and vice.

Lance's vitriol is aimed at just this kind of "muddling through," because he despises compromise and ambiguity. He stands apart from a world which seems incapable of recognizing and naming omnipresent evil, and in any case sees itself as sinless:

> The mark of the age is that terrible things happen but there is no "evil" involved. People are either crazy, miserable, or wonderful, so where does the "evil" come in? (139)

In an interview Percy hinted at his approval of such a full-blooded mentality when he said, "The Lancelot character represents an honor code. If he had lived in the 12th Century, he would have been a Crusader who believed in an idea, just as the Israelis in modern times have a noble idea" (Mitgang, 20). Christendom's refusal to abide by Christian moral teaching and its similar rejection of what Lance calls "the Southern-Greco-Roman honor code" frustrates both author and protagonist.

Lancelot thus represents the traditional Stoic ethic which guided Southern aristocrats for generations. His fierce revenge and insistence on cleaning up the wasteland

are aspects of a sincerely held, perhaps even admirable, honor code. In a world of moral decay and relativism, Percy asks, what grounds are there for rejecting it? (This is reminiscent of Bertrand Russell's acknowledgment, in a 1948 BBC radio debate, that although he found Hitler's actions "personally distasteful," he had no basis for judging them "wrong.") In an interview, Percy asked why Lance's actions appear so abhorrent:

> What he is doing is carrying the [Stoic] ethic to its logical conclusion. If he has been cuckolded by somebody...then what he does is **kill** him. That's what Ulysses did, and we look on Ulysses as one of the great heroes of Western culture. Ulysses and Telemachus kill everybody! Lancelot only kills three people [sic]...And we applaud Ulysses. (Con, 209)

Once again Percy brings it down to either/or. The choice is between the tradition of the stoa and the church. If readers opt for anything but religion, the implied question is, "On what grounds?" Where there are no absolutes, nothing can be said to be "better than," not even the good of the majority against a scratch on a tyrant's finger, or the lives of those an autonomous individual finds inconvenient. Put another way, the question is: How do we avoid the intolerance of false simplicity without slipping into the quagmire of relativism?

Lance was not always a seeker or self-styled messiah; before the catastrophe he was content to drift. Indeed, **Lancelot** is the story of a man who, like the complacent

readers at whom the novel is aimed, was once locked into a stultifying routine. In college his life seemed full of promising achievements. President of the student body, Rhodes Scholar, Golden Gloves finalist, he even scored the longest punt return on record. But over the next twenty years Lance felt

> ...a gradual, ever so gradual, slipping away of my life into a kind of dream state in which finally I could not be sure that anything was happening at all. Perhaps nothing happened. (57)

Nothing seemed to happen because Lance could no longer act with the self-confidence he exercised in college. Finding himself overwhelmed by the sameness of ordinary life, he began replacing action with spurious activity of custom and career. Finally, he reduced his life to just four activities: listening to Beethoven, drinking, reading Raymond Chandler, and watching the TV news.

News programs gave Lance the illusion that something was happening in his own life. Bored and idle, every drunken hour he monitored the reports, no-news from nowhere. Tranquilized by the same everydayness known to Binx Bolling, the somnambulist in two decades repeated the generational decline of Will Barrett's family (and Christendom) from heroism to paralysis to reverie. In retrospect Lance realizes that like Rip Van Winkle he had been living in a kind of slumber for years, working as a liberal attorney in civil

rights cases, then beginning to drink often enough to stay pleasantly comatose while his younger wife Margot played at restoration and acting, having failed to restore him more than briefly as part of her property.

The final absurdity is that Margot installed the drunken and impotent Lance in a room to write his memoirs "like Jeff Davis at Beauvoir" (18), as if he was leading a life worth the effort of description. Lance never realized his compulsiveness, inertia and discontent until one day he received real news. As he was about to sign a release form for his daughter's summer camp, he noticed that her blood type made it impossible for him to be her father. His ordeal began with this perception, which involved ferreting out the truth that his honor had been stained by an old sexual magician named Merlin.

A violent reaction to this discovery is inevitable. Blood purity was an obsession in the Old South because miscegnation threatened to undermine the power of whites over blacks. Lance's great-great grandfather cut the throat of a man who made the mistake of suggesting the Lamars had black blood. Now only violence can cleanse the polluted Belle Isle, indeed, the Augean stables of American Christendom. In Lancelot's view, both have sunken into the same corrupt, sensuous world of false Hollywood glamour; apocalypse is the

only appropriate response. He retrospectively compares the effect of his discovery with that of an astronomer's cataclysmic predictions:

> The astronomer sees a dot in the wrong place, makes a calculation, and infers the indisputable comet on collision course, tidal waves, oceans rising, forests ablaze. The cuckold sees a single letter of the alphabet in the wrong place. From such insignificant evidence he can infer with at least as much certitude as the astronomer an equally incommensurate scene: his wife's thighs spread, a cry, not recognizably hers, escaping her lips. The equivalent of the end of the world... (45)

Whether or not the world will end, the need for an end and for a new beginning is starkly legible in the signs of the times. Lancelot's litany of those signs builds to a wholesale denunciation of the homogenized hell he sees:

> Washington, the country, is down the drain. Everyone knows it. The people have lost it to the politicians, bureaucrats, drunk Congressman, lying Presidents, White House preachers, C.I.A., F.B.I., Mafia, Pentagon, pornographers, muggers, buggers, bribers, bribe takers, rich crooked cowboys, sclerotic Southerners, rich crooked Yankees, dirty books, dirty movies, dirty plays, dirty talk shows, dirty soap operas, fags, abortionists, lesbians, Jesus shouters, anti-Jesus shouters, dying cities, dying schools, courses in how to fuck for schoolchildren. (156)

Whatever else he may be, Lancelot is a moralist disgusted with the cynicism and corruption of the present. He cannot tolerate the pornographic age he inhabits, once he awakens and escapes his various forms of impotence.

The discovery of Margot's adultery makes the broken-down

old boozer a knight meeting justice and quickens him with "a secret sweetness at the core of dread" (41). The ambivalence of joy in the heart of despair is a fit response to the destruction of his old empty life and the prospect of a new order in which action at last seems possible. He has encountered the defining event which will call for decisive action on his part. Epiphany shoots Lance into a new realm of freedom and possibility; it exposes the past as void and introduces a future he can at least claim as his own. As he steps free from the Big Sleep of routine nonexistence, Lance finds himself at the entrance of a new world:

> There was a sense of astonishment, of discovery, of a new world opening up, but the new world was totally unknown. Where does one go from here? (42)

After spending twenty years in which nothing happened, Lance learns that he can make action possible in his own life as well as in the lives of others. Now he will no longer be a consumer of news; moving from pathos to melodrama, he creates the sensational headlines that punctuate his narrative. This recently acquired ability to decide and dramatize forms the basis for the rest of the novel. Lance chooses to spy on his wife and destroy Belle Isle so as to demonstrate his complete freedom to act. His new sovereignty could have led to a less self-obsessed end rather than to the willful horror he creates, but only, Percy hints, by accepting and imitating Percival's example of a life based on religious faith.

Margot's infidelity is especially shocking because it repeats an accidental revelation in Lancelot's childhood. Sent by his mother to get some money from a sock drawer, the boy found ten thousand dollars and realized that his father was guilty of taking the kickbacks he had denied accepting. Lance remembers that his father's whole feckless life amounted to a series of minimum achievements and incomplete actions, including the very real possibility that he was cuckolded by his wife's distant cousin; Lance may not even be his son.

Lancelot is, in fact, more nearly a blurred reflection of his own father than the prophet of a new order he pretends to be. He may despise his father for withdrawing from the world, for succumbing to graft, for "permitting" his wife's infidelity, but these are qualities, after all, that Lance shares with his father to a great extent. Ultimately, Lance's condemnation of his father and his dreamy brooding over the past and poetry offers an all too apt indictment of Lance himself.

The family had denied the rumors about his father because the Lamars "were an honorable family with an honorable name" (42). As Lance uses the word, "honor" is clearly a property of hereditary social status. What his father did would have been for a man of undistinguished lineage merely dishonest.

Dishonor is reserved for those who are judged--by others and by themselves--according to an ancestral code. Lance insists to Percival that his discovery of Margot's infidelity, although it reminded him of the money in his father's sock drawer, was really "something quite different" (42). But this is dissimulation. The first, intensely personal, pain he felt in imagining Margot's "ecstasy" with another man finally gives way to a growing sense of dismay, not at what she has done, but what she was.

As he watched Margot fawning upon the movie crew, courting their pretentious favor, knowingly allowing herself to be exploited for both sex and for money, Lancelot came to the sickening conclusion that he has not only been cuckolded, but cuckolded in a marriage which is beneath him. His house had been taken over, he himself had been shunted aside, by a band of plebeian mountebanks, insufferable trash. But then he suffered the indignity of realizing that his wife was one of their company, Texas **nouveau riche.**

Salting these wounds (and carrying the family's dishonorable betrayals to the third generation) is Lancelot's son, a draft dodger and sometime poet. Lance is obviously ashamed of the boy and reluctant to talk about him. He tells Percival that the youth has become a homosexual from sheer terror, frightened rather than worn out or exhilarated by the

insatiable lust of all the girls he knew:

> ...he is a homosexual now and I can understand why. He told me that he was terrified of all the pussy after him....He found it easier, the scared little prick, to be with other scared little pricks. And I can't say I blame him. (177)

Intelligent though he is, Lancelot does not possess enough self-knowledge to recognize how conveniently this view serves to obscure his own failures as a father.

As Lance alternates between enraged denunciations of aberrant sexual behavior and his professions to "understand" it, his reliability as a narrator, and more important, his credibility as a cultural critic, becomes more questionable. The explanation of his son's homosexuality is obviously what a cuckolded avenging angel would want to believe, but if Lance's character is to be understood as a vehicle for voicing serious criticisms of America-as-Sodom, details like this undermine it.

The reader also wonders the extent to which Lancelot is speaking for Percy here. Of course it is possible that the author attributes the sexual revolution to the unleashing of women's desire made possible by contraception, agreeing with his protagonist that America has turned into "a nation of 100 million voracious cunts" (177), but far from providing confirmation of Christendom's decadence, this would suggest that

Percy's diagnoses are just as outrageous as Lancelot's prescriptions.

What makes Percy especially vulnerable to charges of misogyny is the depiction of women in his fiction. He is notorious for creating female characters who are one-dimensional, mentally ill, helpless or otherwise pathetic. Frequently too, they are mere sexual playthings for the male leads. Lance's own misogyny reaches a peak when he reflects upon Augustine's account of the Visigoths' rape of nuns, who "enjoyed it despite themselves"--"no doubt howled with delight," he adds (72). He covertly tries to sell to Percival the notion that the very fabric of civilization depends upon there being sweet helpless women in the home to nurture their husbands.

Lancelot thus both voices and parodies the most extreme misogyny, as well as exemplifying what Northrop Frye describes as the biblical tradition of representing the demonic in feminine terms. Maternal and bridal figures merge to create a single demonic image of womanhood during Lance's hallucination of the Lady of the Camellias. "Our Lady" of course refers to the Virgin Mary, whereas "Lady of the Camellias" is the courtesan Marguerite Gautier from Dumas's **La dame aux camelias.** This mysterious composite figure appears immediately before the Belle Isle inferno, signifying a merging of

the mother, temptress and demon roles. (Biographer Pat Samway notes that Percy considered his mother's death when he was thirteen to be another suicide and was even less forgiving of her abandonment than that of his father and grandfather.)

When Margot in her death agony tells Lancelot that he expected her to be either a lady or a whore, but never a woman, the reader wonders whether Percy hasn't unconsciously merged with his sexist narrator. He never denied the flatness of his female characters, but took pains to blame this, like Dickens, on ignorance, hoping perhaps that the audience would be willing to overlook this lapse or put it down as a mere flaw in craftsmanship. To less sympathetic readers, **Lancelot** may seem less a way of saying something than of avoiding responsibility for what is said, whether its satire of decadent Catholicism, the sexual revolution, or female emancipation.

In this respect **Lancelot** again recalls **Mr. Sammler's Planet.** Artur Sammler, a variant of the Plautine **serrex iratus,** dwells on the failings of promiscuous youth and liberated, willful females, but, like Lancelot himself, has an underdeveloped heart and overdeveloped mind. Each is loath to acknowledge his own failings. Sammler is named after Arthur Schopenhauer, who denounced women as "that

under-sized, narrow-shouldered, broadhipped and short-legged race," and he shares his namesake's pessimism and views, denouncing women as the raunchier and more destructive of the species, literal skunks, responsible for the large-scale revival of Roman paganism sweeping the nation.

In any case, the recognition of all this family dishonor might have relieved Lancelot of the need to be a gentleman in a traditional sense. He does speak mockingly of his "sweet Louisiana Anglo-Saxon aristocracy gone to pot" (81); he does realize that the venerable order of the gentleman has ended, while the new and private cosmos of the secret sinner has begun, where fathers are thieves, wives are whores and sons are queer. But this knowledge does not free Lance from the past; instead, it makes him dream of a Final Solution which will do for Christendom what he has already done to Belle Isle, followed by a fresh start which will re-establish the honor code of the Old South.

Bereft of a vigorous religious heritage (his father's Anglicanism being little more than a limp aesthetic reverie), Lancelot by default began worshipping his wife. Her genitals became the ark of the covenant, the locus of the sacred; he also imagined them as the transformation of the divine into flesh, the Eucharist. When Percival apparently asks about God, Lance observes:

> You have got hold of the wrong absolutes and infinities. God as absolute? God as infinity? I don't even under stand the words. I'll tell you what's absolute and infinite. Loving a woman....What else is infinity but a woman become meat and drink to you, life and your heart's own music, the air that you breathe? Just to be near her is to live and have your soul's own self. (128-29)

The worship of this idol leaves Lance quite vulnerable, as his extreme reaction to her infidelity proves. Margot gone is the divine lost, being negated. Lance was spawned by the Christendom he despises, and like Christendom has come to believe that the orgasm is the only earthly infinity, either an infinite good or infinite evil, but in any case beyond all categories. The intensity of sexual pleasure makes sexual betrayal inexpressibly offensive.

Lancelot had at first reasoned that in his cuckolding, only cell tissue and membranes were involved, the body and not the spirit, but somehow this purely physical interaction takes on a significance that deeply affects his mind. He becomes so transformed that gradually in his recollected fury he develops what might be called his "sexual theory of history."

> First there was a Romantic Period when one 'fell in love.' Next follows a sexual period such as we live in now where men and women cohabit as indiscriminately as in a baboon colony--or in a soap opera. Next follows catastrophe of some sort. I can feel it in my bones. Perhaps it has already happened. (35-36)

By his speculation that if sex offers the greatest happiness

it then is logically the source of the greatest evil, Lance is suggesting that the concern with purity, marriage and fidelity are vitally important, thus in effect arguing for the Christian view he otherwise rejects. Here Percy joins Nietzsche in mocking those who, like George Eliot or Lancelot, seek to retain aspects of Christian morality while jettisoning the Christianity which justified it. (For Percy, Sartre--the atheist concerned with man's alienation--is a religious writer; Samuel Richardson, defender of the Christian ethic without regard to faith, is not.)

Lance links his deep resentment of his mother's and wife's infidelity with the nation's fall from what he perceives to have been its earlier concern for chastity. He goes so far as to consider that the course of his own life recapitulates somehow the history of America regarding sex, in the move from purity to permissiveness as the moral force of Christianity weakened. He no longer regards adultery as the mere interaction of molecules. It is also a denial of his being, encouraged in a culture that shows X-rated films openly and legally in movie theaters. Lance blames women far more than men for this situation because they have allowed themselves to give so freely. He observes: "I understand young men don't have to go to whore-houses any more" (14). From the viewpoint of his new-found puritanism, there are no ladies now; all women are whores, including his mother.

When he excoriates Christendom's current sexual license, Lance does not recognize that he is as much a symptom as a savior. The man who once made a religion of his oral/genital joys with Margot before they were married--glorying in the "sweet dark sanctuary "of her private parts, in a "communion" of cunnilingus (171)--now emerges as self-appointed scourge of the new "Sodom." Outside his cell window, posters advertising movies with titles like **The 69ers** and **Deep Throat** offend his newly holy and wrathful eye. He considers Christendom's lax sexual standards the chief symptom of moral deterioration. (Lancelot's claim to be a prophet unwilling to tolerate the sins of his age is, of course, undercut by the reader's realization that he is its "finest" product, and his rage has no real reference point because he believes in nothing himself.)

Having come to consciousness, Lancelot sees that the nation lives like an animal in heat, and denounces every form of what he regards as "the great whorehouse and fagdom of America" (176). Although he claims that sexual intercourse should bring an ecstatic awareness of what is infinite, he perceives that the nation has perverted it into a source of sin. In the extremity of his moral outrage he comes to resemble a biblical prophet. Like John the Baptist, who denounced Herod's adultery and heralded a new age, or Hosea, also cuckolded by his wife, this latter-day seer cries, "I'll

prophesy: This country is going to turn into a desert and it won't be a bad thing. Thirst and hunger are better than jungle rot" (158). Lancelot pronounces doom upon the corrupt world revealed in the lives of his false parents and faithless wife.

Also like the Jewish prophets, Lancelot's diatribe exposes the way established religion has betrayed its own ideals, preferring instead to compromise with prevailing cultural trends. Biographers note that, while writing **Lancelot**, Percy's faith was unsettled. Jay Tolson explains the source of this uneasiness: "Part of Percy's religious troubles at this time derived from the ongoing upheaval in a Church which he had expected to remain unwavering" (368). Lancelot often attacks Catholicism, recalling its militant historical past and comparing this unfavorably to its miserably compliant present. Given that he has had no connection with the Church, these gratuitous statements most likely reflect Percy's own feelings of betrayal:

> I might have tolerated you and your Catholic Church, and even joined it, if you had remained true to yourself. Now you're part of the age. You've the same fleas as the dogs you've lain down with. I would have felt at home in Mont-Saint-Michel, the Mount of the Archangel with the flaming sword, or with Richard Coeur de Lion at Acre. They believed in a God who said he came not to bring peace but the sword....Now you've taken the sword from Christ. (157)

Percy is suggesting that the modern Catholic Church must

return to its more formidable, uncompromising, violent past. What Lance constantly refers to as "the old Catholic way" is the way of "the stern Christ of the Sistine" (178); lonely, painful, religious martyrdom. However deep his delusions in other areas, however unconvincing his identification with self-sacrificing religious figures of the past, Lancelot recognizes the demanding nature of authentic religious faith, as foreign to modern Christianity as self-denial is to secular America.

The novel is just as much a chronicle of the failure of contemporary religion as a satire on secularism. Percy shows that secular humanists are parasites living off a tradition they despise, much like an uninvited guest grumbling about how bad the food is. Yet Percy even-handedly acknowledges that Christian conservatives bear much of the blame for the weakening of their tradition, since their recent contributions seem counterfeit--proclaimed as heavenly currency but coined for trade in this world, often for hellish purposes. Lancelot's example: "Billy Graham lay down with Nixon and got up with a different set of fleas." No wonder Christendom has failed, given this type of performance.

Lancelot is unique in Percy's fiction, but his nearest counterpart is Sutter Vaught in **The Last Gentleman.** Like Sutter's casebook, filled with indictments of contemporary

American politics, religion and sexual mores, Lance's dramatic monologue reveals that beneath its bitterness lies a deeply religious sensibility. The vehemence of the denunciations by these diabolical characters is an ironic index of their desire for faith, for both reflect the New Testament injunction that it is better, if one cannot be "hot," to be "cold" rather than "lukewarm" in belief. Neither is willing to accept a religious faith which accommodates itself to Christendom's decadence. Such rejection of lukewarmness corresponds to Percy's judgment of the contemporary situation in America.

The movie being made at Belle Isle demonstrates America's appetite for depravity. Little more than pornography disguised as costume drama, the setting is a run-down Southern plantation whose frustrated inhabitants yearn for some sort of liberation. But the savior who arrives is a hippie ("He's the new Christ, of course" producer Merlin proclaims), a decadently empty version of a moviegoer's messiah who can only save the townspeople from their sexual inhibitions. This hero rapes, with her tacit consent, a librarian (played by Margot) while a sheriff has an affair with a "half-caste, half-wit swamp girl." Trapped together in a manor house by a hurricane, these and other refugees divert themselves by a mass orgy, which allows them to "discover their common humanity." Jacoby, the director, has only one concern,

constantly repeated: he wants to hear the rapist's zipper on the film's soundtrack.

If Northern secularism has gone south, Hollywood has moved east; its disease of spectacle and smut now infects the whole country. Lancelot describes his predicament with a telling phrase: "Things were split. I was physically in Louisiana, but **spiritually** in Los Angeles" (112; italics added). The revelation of Margot's adultery blasts him from the prison of moderation (Louisiana) to what Nathanael West described as America's "dream dump," the toilet of the west. Lance immediately recognizes his new surroundings because of his immersion over the years in Raymond Chandler, a writer who constantly re-wrote the allegory of the good man in the Great Wrong Place, the underworld of La Reina de Los Angeles. This celluloid world is even more of a false deliverance for Lance than it was for Binx Bolling.

Hollywood's degeneracy is on full display as Lancelot watches his wife engage in simulated sex while she works in a film directed by her current partner in adultery and produced by her former lover. The movie company mindlessly spouts an ideology of joyful, healthy sexuality while secretly practicing fornication and sodomy. Their offscreen lives are as empty as their performances on film, for they debase sexual love whether in front or behind the camera. They

claim that any erotic act is life-enhancing, echoing Christendom's own rationalization of its sexual license. Such pretentious justifications for behavior previously considered sinful is precisely what Christendom now substitutes for living Christianity.

Nor is Christendom unmindful of other needs. With a kind of serial sincerity the film crew drifts in and out of crystal healing, Scientology, astrology, numerology and Christian Science. In a novel buffeted by winds, the actors "were hardly here at all, in Louisiana that is, but were blown about this way and that, like puffballs" (112). Their current choice for spirituality is a New Age "California cult" called "I.P.D.," short for Ideo-Personal-Dynamics. An actress assures Lancelot that I.P.D. is more scientific than astrology, being based not merely on the influence of the stars but on evidence of magnetic fields surrounding people.

This cultural vanguard invades Lance's ancestral home and turns it into a "location." Southern history is reduced to cartoon level so as to provide sleazy fare for the overcoat crowd. Worse yet is the way the town's inhabitants fawn over the wacky film crew:

> Town folk...acted as if they lived out their entire lives in a dim charade, a shadowplay in which they were the shadows, and now all at once to have appear miraculously in their midst these resplendent larger-than-life beings. She [Margot] couldn't get over it...

> she had for a moment been one of them!
> Presently Mrs. Robichaux, a dentist's wife, whom all these years I had taken to be a mild comely content little body, showed up from nowhere and told Raine she would do anything, **anything**, for the company: "even carry klieg lights!" (152)

The local populace is thus complicit in the exploitation of their heritage. Tacitly acknowledging his shameful kinship with Mrs. Robichaux and the other moviestruck townspeople, Lance goes on ironically to Percival: "The world had gone nutty, said the crazy man in his cell. What was nutty was that the movie folk were trafficking in illusions in a real world but the real world thought that its reality could only be found in illusions. Two sets of maniacs." Despite his scorn for Hollywood, Lance at last can find no way to deal with the invaders but to try outdoing them at their own game.

Pondering Margot's betrayal, Lancelot wonders, "Does one need to know more, ever more and more, in order that one put off acting on it or maybe even not act at all?" (89). His problem is Hamlet's, and he adopts his forerunner's device--the play within a play. In pursuit of his awful knowledge Lance makes his own film. He is not only producer and director, but also script writer and entire audience. As a knight of the Unholy Grail, he tells Percival that he seeks to answer "the must fundamental question of all." This, he explains, is whether people are "as nice as they make out and in fact appear to be, or is it all buggery once the door is

closed?" (131). Dramatic evidence is provided by his home video of the various surreptitious lovers. Once again his wife is the star.

Lancelot has more knowledge of movies than he affects, and the film he makes is inspired not so much by cinema verite as by **film noir**, that school of movies in the forties and fifties which used detective stories to depict a world-view inspired by the pop culture of French existentialism. Lance could not have identified so closely with Raymond Chandler and Philip Marlowe without knowing that Chandler, as both novelist and script writer, is credited as one of the key influences on **film noir** and that the movies made from his novels are regarded as classics of the genre. Lance's account of the events to follow, as he sees himself as Philip Marlowe, will therefore be haunted by the strategies and images of **film noir**, in which the unredeemed darkness of the world hides the lust, greed, and betrayal of its denizens--until, if ever, the detective jabs into their corner with his flashlight.

The private film also provides a superb example of Percy's mastery of his craft. The author has a way of applying his imagination powerfully to particular moments so that they epitomize the whole of the narratives in which they occur. Here, the adulterous activities of Margot and the

movie crew are made to seem demonically lurid by the defective filming, which reverses colors so that clothes are light and faces dark, and provides voices so furtive as to be almost indecipherable.

Making his own pornographic **film noir** also gives Lancelot time reflect on his disgrace and plan an appropriate revenge, for both his cuckolding and the movie crew's contempt. The script for **their** movie had included a portrait of Lance himself, in the person of Lipscomb, the librarian's cuckolded husband and plantation owner. Lipscomb "has lost his ties with the land, nature, his own sexuality; he keeps wringing his hands while the plantation goes to pot" (184). At the film's conclusion this sad sack is to "gently subside into booze and Chopin" while his wife leaves with the Christ-like rapist. Merlin explains to Lance that the rape is a "kind of sacrament and celebration of life" that frees her from her impotent husband. Though he is too egotistical to acknowledge any similarity between himself and Lipscomb, it is easy to imagine the vindictive delight Lancelot must have taken in writing a very different ending for himself as master of Belle Isle.

Discovering that his wife services producer and director while dreaming of playing the innocent Nora in "A Doll's House," Lance decides quite simply to kill them all. But

first he sodomizes the actress Raine, trying to discover the truth about evil, which must be "the great secret of life, the old life that is, the ignominious joy of rape and being raped" (252). Thus he himself is hypocritically complicit in Christendom's second sexual period, the contemporary stage in which he sees people acting like baboons; he justifies his action by proclaiming the use of his lance to probe "the heart of the abscess and let the puss out" (236).

Lancelot diverts gas from a partially capped well into the ventilation system of the sealed house and then balefully enters its poisonous darkness. While the hurricane rages without, the cold Lance pierces ever deeper into the bedrooms of those who sport in adultery and perversion, until, at the center, he ruthlessly lances the infections with penis and knife. As he slits the throat of Jacoby he commits the ultimate sin in Percy's fiction, that of cutting off communication with another; the word, potentially the symbol linking speaker and listener, becomes mere wind, empty of meaning. Lance, assured of the justice of his cause, will now proceed to apply this type of medicine to Christendom on a larger scale.

Lancelot is different from Percy's other novels in that the protagonist perversely rejects any world but his own. In isolation he looks to a new order, a utopia, which will be

nothing less than the creation of his conception of the past. He ends up with a vision of a new order where knights clear the land of villainy and from which traditional Christianity will be excluded altogether. If, as Lance says he has discovered to his satisfaction in the Belle Isle holocaust, there is simply no such thing as sin, then it follows that there is no need for redemptive grace. Christianity will thus be written off, having failed in any case to inculcate virtue in its adherents. Given all this, anyone who, like Lance, knows what he wants is free to start over from scratch. Christendom trumpets its relativism, toleration and respect for personal autonomy; Lance takes it at its word and proposes a new kind of society marked by intolerance and imposed discipline.

As his answer to the age of Sodom Lancelot suggests a cauterizing revolution which will reconfigure the nation's destiny. He tells Percival:

> You have your Sacred Heart. We have Lee. We are the Third Revolution. The First Revolution in 1776 against the stupid British succeeded. The Second Revolution in 1861 against the money-grubbing North failed--as it should have because we got stuck with the Negro thing and it was our fault. The Third Revolution will succeed. (185)

He sees the Third Revolution as an "innocent" new beginning in Virginia, which will "str[ike] at the very root and vitals of Christianity" (187). What Lance alternately calls

his "New Reformation" will not include the "Jewish-Christian commandments" but nonetheless will usher in the sternly virtuous reign of the "strong and brave and pure of heart" (179), men who are willing to den[y themselves] to be strong," when "if there cannot be love...there will be tight-lipped courtesy between men" and "chivalry toward women" (158). Lancelot's vision seeks to unite the gestural perfection Binx Bolling admired in movie stars with the ethical code of Will Barrett's ancestors.

Percival prods Lancelot repeatedly on the question of what the role of women will be in the new world he envisages. Lance responds: "Women? What about women?...Freedom? The New Woman will have perfect freedom. She will be free to be a lady or a whore" (179). His conception of "perfect freedom" is noteworthy. But when Percival continues to press him, Lance abandons all pretense to rational consistency, and shortly contradicts himself:

> Don't women have any say in this? Of course. And we will value them exactly as they value themselves. They won't like it much, you say? The hell with them. They won't have anything to say about it. (179)

Lance no longer worships women; he fears and despises them. He recognizes his need for them, of course. But he loathes himself for the desiring; and the self-loathing is inevitably projected back upon the object of desire. Hence in taking his revenge, he not only commits murder, but sexual violation

and mutilation.

Lance even has an initial candidate for the new type of woman he has in mind. This is Anna, a social worker who has been gang raped and now lies speechless in an adjoining cell. No small part of his attraction to her is a morbid fascination with the story of the gang-rape she suffered. Lance attempts to speak with her by a knocking on the water pipes between their rooms, illustrating the difficulty of communicating in Christendom. Interestingly, Lance does not demand a virgin for his restoration project in Virginia, only an innocent who will not commit adultery, and he considers Anna's survival through ordeal sufficient to restore her innocence.

Christianity may have failed to produce virtue, but Lance is determined that his New Reformation will not fail. Future citizens will be strong and pure of heart, "...not for Christ's sake but for their own sake. There will be virtuous women who will be proud of their virtue..." (178). Gentlemen must begin to recognize one another by

> a stern code: a gentleness toward women and an intolerance of swinishness, a counsel kept, and above all a readiness to act, and act alone if necessary...with stern rectitude valued by the new breed and marked by the violence which will attend its breach. (158)

This last explains his murder of the film crew. The new society he envisions will know the difference between fidelity

and betrayal, uprightness and perversion, with the latter immediately excised. To the priest's pious objections that the world has already been redeemed, Lance disdainfully points to **The 69ers** poster and scornfully says "Look out there. Does it look like we are redeemed?"

The abrasive ideology he dreams of will not stoop so low as its Christian predecessor in accommodating license. In particular, Lance prophesizes that Christian love will not be part of the age to come:

> ...the new order will not be based on Catholicism or Communism or fascism or liberalism or any ism at all, but simply on that stern rectitude valued by the new breed and marked by the violence which will attend its breach. We will not tolerate this age. Don't speak to me of Christian love. Whatever became of it? I'll tell you what came of it. It got mouthed off on the radio and TV from the pulpit and that was the end of it. The Jews knew better. Billy Graham lay down with Nixon and got up with a different set of fleas, but the Jewish prophets lived in deserts and wildernesses and had no part with corrupt kings. (158)

The voice reviling Christianity's failure is Percy's own, but in denouncing the nation's infidelities Lancelot strikes a familiar note. His mixture of denunciation and utopianism; his belief that it is possible to escape the past and transcend the limitations of the present; his individualism and rejection of authority; his determination to begin again in pastoral harmony; all of these demonstrate an unmistakable American quality in Lancelot's vision.

There is more than a hint of French ancestry as well. Lancelot's delusional plan to establish a utopian society is ultimately rooted in an ethic made possible by the Sartrean understanding of freedom, and thus constitutes Percy's warning about the dangers of a philosophy grounded in the self alone. He believes salvation lies in communion, while Lance embodies what Percy sees as perhaps humanity's most destructive resistance to intersubjectivity--the myth of the autonomous self.

According to Percy, with the collapse in the Western world of the traditional Judeo-Christian framework of belief and order, the postmodern self turns inward to itself as the seat of all knowledge and value. Sartrean freedom does not require the individual to select a rational or conventionally virtuous solution. In fact, it includes the possibility of the autonomous self (like Lancelot) choosing irrationality to achieve meaning, and the likelihood of this keeps increasing, given the deluge of conflicting moral positions in the postmodern landscape. The dramatic expansion of the range of information, moral opinions and viewpoints to which people are exposed long ago shattered any parochial univocality.

By now Lancelot has discredited himself and his vision. The reformer who wishes to restore a lost sacredness to sexuality has committed murder and sodomy with no self-reproach.

With his past actions and future plans revealed, the reader inevitably wonders about Lance's sanity. Is he crazy, despite Christendom's official certification of his mental health? Or, if judged insane, is he any more so than he needs to be to survive in the society in which he lives? Lancelot makes some frightening statements about life in Christendom, but it is much too convenient to dismiss him as a madman. If he were indeed mad and therefore not responsible for his life, there would be no moral questions raised by his actions and his opinions would not have caused Percival's rediscovery of faith. Lancelot chooses the Stoic tradition as an instrument to tackle contemporary problems, and his reasoning cannot be written off as madness just because it is a secular revolution he plans.

Yet Lancelot's scheme is harebrained and serves to distance him from the author; it is as if Percy endorses Lance's diagnosis, then steps back as the character sketches his absurd proposal. In fact there is no reason to suppose that living in Virginia, with or without Anna, will succeed where all else has failed, to make Lance happier or wiser, or any less dangerous, than he has ever been. His two religious ardors, first as himself a devout 69er and then as the prophet of doom to all who practice such foulness, can be seen as but two different phases of the same obsession. In any case the reader knows that Lance is unlikely to become one of

the "tight-lipped gentlemen" he champions; he is incapable of holding his tongue in either a sexual or political context.

In the unlikely event his plans were realized, the future Lancelot envisions would still be unsatisfying, and he lacks faith in it. He admits to Percival that neither actions nor right convictions are in themselves efficacious in meeting the problem of evil. He hints at this when he says at the end:

> I can see in your eyes it doesn't make any difference anymore, as far as what is going to happen next is concerned, that what is going to happen is going to happen whether you or I believe or not and whether your belief is true or not. (210)

Having said this, Lancelot has already conceded the failure of the promised Third Revolution. Moreover, his very narration constitutes a concession to the priest's views. It is a confession, though he defies the priest to say so and denies that he wants forgiveness. (Reconciliation is as meaningless for Lancelot as it is for Christendom, both of whom find God absent and sin unable to be seen.) But he tells the story because he knows that he is not well, saying at one point, "A fox doesn't crawl into a hole for year unless he is wounded" and, a little later, "But what went wrong with the other new life last year? I must find out so I won't make the same mistake twice" (108). Thus while he spews out his moral outrage, he is being revived and confron-

ted with his own failures through talking, through accepting the gift of another's listening.

When at the last minute Anna refuses his offer to go to Virginia, he comes up with a "solution" that "is as clear and simple as an arithmetic problem" (225). Oddly, it involves the God whose existence Lancelot had previously deemed irrelevant. Lance is willing to give God some time, reasoning that, if He exists, He will not continue to accept the Sodom of present-day America. If God fails in His duty to punish the sinful nation, Lance will assume command and "start a new world singlehandedly" like a puritan Lucifer.

An appealing alternative to Lancelot's demonic vision is needed, the presentation of which is the point of Percy's **oeuvre**. This alternative remains unspoken. The novel's ending, therefore, is not so much ambiguous as unfinished. Percy is relying on the reader to supply the final message in order to qualify Lancelot's projection of the future. The reader cannot avoid the nagging conviction that the unheard message is accessible, something he **should** know. Though no other option is given, the text supports, even demands, a conjecture. The possibility must be an alternative to both the intolerable Sodom of contemporary America and the impossible vision of Lancelot.

Some clues are given. As Percival, Kierkegaard's knight of faith, confronts the evil which Lance incarnates, he rediscovers his vocation. Though Lance has dominated the discourse, Percival poses a constant reproach, especially to the murderer's effort to reduce the range of possible relationships between men and women to lust, ultimately to sadism/masochism. Recognizing that perfect adjustment to the present is not possible, Percival nonetheless gives no indication of returning to an idealized past or any other utopian dream. Accepting his own limitations and those of the era, he now intends, in Lance's sneering words, to "forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives" (256). All these signs constitute the priest's way of coming to selfhood. This will not be a life of grand exploits, but the infinitely more difficult task of fighting everydayness in Christendom.

Percival's future, therefore, is--more of the same. Percy's fictional representatives of this option seem caught up in the paltriness of the age, and though they seem if anything too easily able to live with it, this may be their chief strength. The approach of "it's wrong--so don't do it--but if you do forgiveness is possible" is better, Percy implies, than hopeless utopian dreams. Percival's family history, like that of his creator, is one of depression and early suicide, and thus perhaps he could only live with the

present by rejecting nostalgia and putting the past in its place.

In perhaps the most memorable line of the novel, Lancelot has contemptuously instructed his interlocutor, "Don't talk to me of love until we shovel out the shit" (179). The priest obeys; he only speaks a series of reassuring "yeses" at the close, affirmations that are not so much statements as acts of love. Positive statements have become worn out; they somehow lack the vibrancy of negative ones, just as Lancelot seems more substantial than Percival. Of course, Lance was never able to discover a sign of the evil he was looking for, so it may be too much to expect that the priest's words will be anything more than a broken sign which may frustrate or stimulate in a world perched between an apocalyptic ending and a new beginning.

A further important possibility is that **Lancelot** represents a turning point for Percy. Having confronted and expressed his own disillusionment with the religious faith on which he had staked so much, perhaps this novel reflects a mature coming to terms with the Christian doctrine of original sin, which posits an ineradicable level of evil in all human enterprises. Never having believed in the possibility of a utopian society, Percy now bids farewell to the hope that on an individual level people will ever be much better

than we have come to expect through experience, whatever their religious, philosophical or political creed. The love that **Lancelot**'s conclusion hints at, therefore, is the best possibility within human reach, and still offers Christendom's inhabitants their best chance of reaching the divine. This, at least, is the direction to which his fiction will now turn, toward an exploration and renewed appreciation of everyday love.

Chapter V

The Second Coming

If **Lancelot**, with its protagonist's murder of his guests, acceptance of nihilism, and blasphemy, is Percy's **Macbeth**, then **The Second Coming**, with its miraculous uniting of lost lovers, fanciful promise of a harmonious community, and ultimate transformation of the tragic into the comic, is his **Tempest**. Marking a switch from bitter irony to romance, Percy calls **The Second Coming** "my first unalienated novel." Indeed, in this sequel to **The Last Gentleman**, Percy picks up the later life of Will Barrett and has him fall in love and finally work through the legacy of his father's suicide. This resolution, combined with an unambiguous connecting of the twin search for divine and human love, marks the culmination of Percy's fiction.

The book's title (with a conjunction of sacred and bawdy significances) reflects its thematic and tonal complexity. On one level it is an autobiographical account of a man's facing the full implications of his father's suicide and of his own self-destructive urges. On another level the novel is a romance--a fairy tale about an older man who finds sexual fulfillment with a beautiful young girl and escapes life's complexities with her. Plausible love stories with happy endings are rare in fiction that purports to treat in any way realistically the life of our jaded, skeptical era. In his

previous novels Percy was no exception to this rule. He presented much amorous activity, generally so as to satirize America's sexual revolution. But before **The Second Coming** there was no successful representation of the love of man and woman that is at once solemn and full of delight.

Though its mode is radically different from **Lancelot**'s, **The Second Coming** shares its predecessor's technique of presenting dual protagonists who are in a sense the complements of a single personality. In the later book Percy identifies Will Barrett and Allison Huger, a young escaped mental patient with whom Will falls in love. The narrative structure consists of counterpoint--first a chapter of Will's consciousness, then one of Allie's. Both experience great psychological difficulties and are considered in need of permanent commitment by their families. The novel alternates between Will's and Allie's separate attempts to face their problems outside of institutions, then brings them together so as to allow them to outwit pursuers and keep their wealth, sanity, and each other.

The Will Barrett of **The Second Coming**--bored, despairing, nearly fifty--is outwardly a profoundly changed man from the shaky young protagonist of **The Last Gentleman**. The youthful Barrett wandered all over America, ending up as a witness to the advent of grace without being fully aware of its presence.

The sequel takes up his life decades later with Barrett inwardly still an anxiety-ridden searcher longing for meaning. He once again is trying to repress memories of the shot that ended his father's life, and finds himself engaged in the same quest as before.

This predicament is puzzling, given what the reader knows of Barrett's past from **The Last Gentleman**, which Will himself seems unaware of. The same situation that opens the former novel opens **The Second Coming**, with the same protagonist once again lost and therefore forced to repeat a similar process of discovery, apparently having forgotten the powerful events of thirty years before. The narrator of **The Second Coming** asks:

> Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a train? And how is it that death, the nearness of death, can restore a missed life? (124)

Two points are made: one, that Will II has missed his life, and, two, that death or the nearness of death is the condition for restoring his life. But the latter has already happened to Will I--death in the persons of his father and of Jamie, and nearness to death in the threatened suicide of Sutter Vaught. Will I's destination was Holy Faith (Santa Fe), where he is an observer, participant, and interpreter in the miracle of saving water, guided by two extraordinary ministers--Val, knowingly, and Sutter, unknowingly. Although

not yet accepting faith, Will I is left at the end of **The Last Gentleman** joyously affirming life, rejecting Sutter's gnosticism.

Such repetition not only weakens the achievement of the former novel by discrediting its life-affirming conclusion, but also reveals that what Henry James said about himself is also true of Percy--that he wrote the same novel over and over again, playing variations on his central perception. Thus what appears to be a sequel is actually another variation of Percy's only subject--discovery. All of his novels are about the arduous work of detection, because it was in the act of reconnoitering that the author found salvation. Like Binx Bolling, Percy knew himself to be equipped with a good nose for merde, and the spreading stench of it, North and South, made the focus of his art the search for something better.

This writer's strength (and weakness), therefore, lies in his fixation on the merde that earlier Percys died to avoid facing and his discovery of something that yet makes life worth living--that being is better than nonbeing. Percy's attempt to turn autobiographical fact into diagnostic fiction accounts simultaneously for the depth of his passion and limitation of scope. This is one reason the reader never sees anything of the protagonists' lives after they come to

the brink of faith in Percy's novels. (Another is that he wished his Catholicism to be unobtrusive. The fiction dramatizes the need and the self-knowledge that led him to it but does not publicize the solace he found in it--as if that would be blasphemy.)

Will II married a wealthy woman, moved to New York, and inherited all her money when she died. Now he has returned to the South, to Linwood, North Carolina, thus completing the same geographic circle as Will I. After retiring early, and being voted "Man of the Year" by the Rotary Club, the narrator asks, "Had he not succeeded in his life in every way one can imagine?" (12). But worldly success has not made Will happy, and the progress of the novel is his retracing of his life to find the point at which it all went wrong. Though he had initiated this process in **The Last Gentleman** (when he returned to his father's house and relived in memory Ed Barrett's suicide), Will had not been ready to remember enough to put his father's ghost fully to rest. This novel is thus the "second coming" of that ghost, finally forcing Will to reject Ed's despairing example and choose life.

Will is seemingly alone in his unease in the midst of his affluent, self-satisfied mountain community of cultured atheists and sports-playing Christians, Christendom in microcosm. In his article "Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time," Percy

explains the significance of this setting when he says that he is interested neither in "the sociological horrors of the Old South," nor in the urban decay of the New South, but in "the more elusive apocalypse of the country club, the quaint Vieux Carre, the 5,000 happy midwest tourists who visit a tastefully restored mansion on the River Road." The professional gentry of Percy's South live in a world of such consummate charm and style that evil seems absurd amid the abundant well-being. Yet catastrophe continually breaks into these ideal environments, challenging the blithest spectators and consumers to turn renewal into something more than another building project.

On a Sunday, Will receives a revelation. As in Updike's **Rabbit, Run**, the epiphany comes, not in one of Linwood's thirteen churches, but in a sanctuary of the secular city: the golf course. In both novels the Christian and pagan options are contrasted, with divine grace operating behind the scenes, away from the churches which no longer seem capable of offering spiritual sustenance. Barrett stands "on the edge of a gorge in old Carolina, a talented agreeable wealthy man living in as pleasant an environment as one can imagine" and thinking nonetheless of "putting a bullet in his brain" so as to cure "the great suck of self" (14). While watching the ball, Will slips into an involuntary memory of an old sweetheart, loses his balance, and blacks out. The collapse

brings his world to a crash but also eventually allowing him to discover the possibility of romantic and religious passion. Its immediate effect is to disturb Will's plans to perpetuate the present leisurely game of life by generating unfulfilled longing. Falling down awakens him from years of dozing to discover, like Lancelot, that he has never lived and that life is made possible by an ordeal.

An agnostic, Will is astonished to discover that his desires converge on God. In fact, the novel is a comic, prose version of T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion." Common themes are numerous: the problems of age and aging, and of the failure of desire; questions of the nature of man's tenancy of the earth and his own body; the uncertainties of the quest for sacramental aid and for understanding of the universality of the church, notably including the mystery of Christ's mission to the Jews. Like Eliot in all his major poetry, Percy is concerned with understanding the relationship of past and present as key to the future, as well as portraying the degeneracy of contemporary society.

After his collapse, Barrett begins to wonder why Jews are apparently disappearing from North Carolina. Throughout Percy's fiction Jews feature prominently as an irreducible, undeniable sign of God's existence; to the author, Judaism's perdurance reminds an unbelieving Christendom of a transcen-

dent order, of an absolute, of mystery, of judgment. All the churches in town sport signs, but none can be a sign for Will, since they do not seem to influence the behavior of their members. He remembers his wife's belief that Jewish survival exemplifies "God's plan working out" and that their exodus to Israel would be a harbinger of the apocalypse. Barrett thus becomes obsessed with the biblical prophecy that Jews must be gathered to their homeland and converted to Christianity in anticipation of the second coming of Christ to judge the world. Himself uncertain as to the true significance of the Jews, Will begins a search for proof of God's existence and for portents of the coming end. He is yet unable to know whether the observed signs of the Last Days comprise a coded, divine inscription or a self-generated delusion, a symptom of alienation and madness.

After remembering his childhood crush, another memory reveals the death at the heart of Will's life. While bending under a fence to retrieve a golf ball, a vibrating wire echoes a moment from more than thirty years before. The sound reminds Will of the twanging that he heard as a twelve-year-old when he followed his father under a fence in a Georgia forest. On that day he experienced catastrophe but not revelation, as both he and his father were wounded by Ed's shotgun. He recalls that after being shot he crashed to the ground, just as he has again fallen years later. Both

memories challenge Will's complacency by awakening desire. His recollection of the hunt intimates the mystery that changed everything in his life.

Eventually Will comes to realize that Ed was in love with death, and that the elder Barrett tried to murder Will so as to prevent him from having to discover the futility of life. Will's father loved death so much he wanted to share it with his son. Having failed to kill the boy in the forest, Ed succeeded on himself the next time in the attic of the family home. Will meditates on his father's triumph:

> And what samurai self-love of death, let alone the little death of everyday fuck-you love, can match the double Winchester come of taking oneself into oneself the cold steel extension of oneself into mouth, yes, for you, for me, for us, the logical and ultimate act of fuck you love fuck-off world, the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing moral flesh, the coming to end all coming, brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart... (148-49)

Here, in Percy's only Faulknerian sentence, suicide is equated with solipsistic sexual experience, the only alternative Ed Barrett could see to a life of despair. He transformed love and death into sex and suicide, then united the two. As with Quentin Compson, the suicidal vision of the father is embodied in a mechanistic view of sexuality. Eros without love equals Thanatos, a total inversion into narcissism and symbolic onanism. By taking the shotgun into his mouth, Ed aimed at "the ecstasy of love" in the only form he could

imagine it, a blast that would destroy his world and achieve the final, supreme orgasm.

Will suffers from a profound sense of guilt at having survived the death his father had wanted him to share. He muses: "I have been living yes, but it is a living death because I knew he wanted me dead. Am I entitled to live?" (324). Such memories give Will a sense of urgency; they speak of the temptations death offers to those in existential despair. (For readers familiar with the Percy family history of suicide, they are almost painfully poignant.) In **The Last Gentleman**, protective amnesia had prevented Will from seeing much; but with this defense no longer shielding him, he realizes that he has inherited his father's anger as well as those genes that seek nothingness rather than life. It is not physical death he abhors, but death-in-life. Now he knows what his father knew and what Ed had hoped out of a curious kind of love to spare him.

Ed's voice is still insistent in Will's mind. It represents all those who are obsessed with the death wish of this violent century. The question that haunts Percy is the one that fretted Camus--why do we not commit suicide? Will Barrett becomes Percy's most developed figure of the ex-suicide, the prophetic "nought" who explores man's spiritual predicament. Barrett's repeated references to his father as

"old mole," shows that he ironically recognizes their re-enactment of the archetypal struggle between that other son who anguished over the emptiness of words, suicide and the all-demanding father figure--Hamlet himself. Moreover, unlike Quentin Compson, Barrett becomes aware that although his father literally misses killing him on the hunting trip, he infected him with a despair that has governed most of his life. "By now I have learned...that he didn't miss me after all, that I thought I survived and I did but I've been dead of something ever since" (324). Will discovers, in short, that he is a spiritual suicide, which is the real legacy inherited from his Stoic (and absent) father. Percy's novels likewise allowed him to name death and so become an ex-suicide artist.

Sitting in his Mercedes like a latter-day Richard Cory, Will contemplates his wealth and social status, then puts a Luger to his head and considers shooting himself. Shortly after, a doctor reminds Barrett that he had asked earlier whether the tendency to commit suicide is inherited. Such questions never surfaced in the minds of Percy's earlier protagonists. Now in middle age, Will realizes that his entire existence has been a reaction to an event he can barely remember, and that "only one event had ever happened to him in his life" (52). Any hope Will has of authentic life depends on a return in memory to face the trauma of

being shot by his father.

Will's recollections give him the necessary insight to judge the living death of himself and his age. The stricken survivor realizes that he tried to escape his father's fatal love by rejecting all that Ed's life embraced. Will left Mississippi for the North so as to live "an ordinary mild mercantile money-making life," like Binx's "modest" existence in Gentilly. But to no avail. The son simply used up his time executing wills. Barrett reflects, "I can't believe I spent all those years in New York in Trusts and Estates and taking dogs down elevators and out to the park to take a crap" (73), an entire lifetime reduced to the ordure that his father saw so clearly. Yet in trying to "turn 180 degrees away from you and your death-dealing" (72), he substituted a mediocre life that was never really his own but only a fashionable collection of the activities supposedly pursued by prosperous and cultured New Yorkers. Hence Will turns 360°, back to where his father stood, with no plausible reason to avoid suicide.

Barrett is not alone in searching for a way to live in a barely tolerable world. In alternate chapters the narrative focus shifts to Allison Huger, a recent escapee from three years confinement in a mental hospital. Like Will, Allison tried to relinquish her life, and, like him, eventually shoul-

ders its burden. While Will idled away his time and considered suicide, Allie sought escape in madness. She has an elaborate metaphor for her periodic withdrawals into autism, "going down to my white dwarf" (93). Allie sits under tables, confronting knees rather than faces; thus she no longer has to meet glances. Madness is a ticket to escape, for it voids her responsibilities to others: "Sometimes she thought she had gone crazy rather than have to talk to people" (96).

Prefigured by Anna, the rape victim in **Lancelot**, Allison is a "new woman" whose goal is self-reliance. She also regards herself as a rape survivor, for shock treatments have left her feeling violated. Having been cut off from the world, her freshness of perception makes her an even better vehicle than Will for debunking American life in the 1980s. Allie's thoughts have a simplicity, directness and honesty that renders Christendom's residents ridiculous in their poses. Isolated and outcast, she embodies the novel's theme of retreat from a damaging society.

Like Thoreau, Allison goes to the forest to escape the deceits which surround her, making a new start in an isolated, abandoned greenhouse. Since society practices its lies principally through misuse of language, Allie decides "This is a good place to make a new start with words" (82). Her literal, point-blank honesty, coupled with amnesia, uncertainty, and

lack of practice talking to people "outside," makes her speech odd but effective. Allie reflects that the words she hears from others have a confusing duplicity:

> Something happens to words coming to me from other people. Something happens to my words. They do not seem worth uttering. People don't mean what they say. Words often mean their opposites. (82)

Characters in **The Second Coming** are divided between those who reveal themselves through language and those who use it to disguise their true motives. Disguisers talk a bastardized blend of down-home southernisms, terms from pop psychology, and contemporary slang that is a parody of honest communication.

Allie is Eve in a new garden, Allison in a glass house wonderland of words. When Will first approaches her home, the setting sun gives it the appearance, by turn, of an ark and a cathedral, Old Testament and New Testament emblems of salvation. Her reclaimed greenhouse with its giant wood stove thus becomes a shelter from every kind of winter: lies, insincerity, dependency, old age, and life without passion, love or faith. If cold is the enemy, then heat is a friend to be sought out, sustained, and shared with others.

Conventional religion provides no refuge from ubiquitous boredom and frigid nihilism. Throughout the novel Percy continues his attack on Christendom, with his dual protagon-

ists lost in the most religious town in the most religious state in the most religious region of the most religious country in the world. The author gives the impression that it has all become too dull even to satirize, as if the facts themselves were caricature. Whether as the death-in-life that Will knew in New York or the actual death Ed cultivated in Mississippi, Will's memories reveal the doom reigning not just over the Barretts but over the entire era that he calls the "Century of the Love of Death" (112). Before coming to recognize the revelation of grace in his own life, Barrett must confront the absurdity and even the spiritual jeopardy of his own and others' delusions.

Instead of comparing Stoic and Catholic worldviews, as in **The Moviegoer** or **Lancelot**, Percy again takes up the dialectic of **The Last Gentleman**, that of believers and unbelievers. In Christendom, religious faith is often corrosive, defacing the lives of those who embrace it. Typical of such loveless believers is Barrett's Japanese chauffeur, whose surly insolence is so provoking that the mild golfer barely avoids striking him. Yamaiuchi's arrogance is rooted in his membership in the post-Armageddon reign of the 144,000 elect anticipated by Jehovah's Witnesses. At first glance, Barrett's daughter is more positive: Leslie is a born-again Christian who has no use for church, priests, or ritual. The narrator slyly notes that "she believed this, and...[her fiance] be-

lieved a California version of this" (158). Will is suspicious of her faith, for this grimly ardent woman lives without joy, hugging too readily and speaking of love too glibly.

More exotic alternatives to conventional religion are no better. The Age of Aquarius at least recognizes the sterility of Christendom, but can only offer foolish palliatives. A New Age prophet named Marge Cupp teaches children to swim before they can even walk. She sees this "California principle" as an alternative to the "screwing" of normal life, and advises "leaving the sad failed land life behind and leaving it soon enough and young enough before it screwed you up for good, and going back to the original environment" (160). Barrett's old girlfriend Kitty likewise accepts a faddishly occult stew of astrology, reincarnation and the laws of karma. Will easily detects the boredom and perfunctoriness of Kitty's beliefs and judges her to be another Californian like Marge Cupp.

Percy's satire uncovers the golden state's notorious emptiness, superficiality, and Hollywood veneer masquerading under the guise of formal religion. California Christianity is illustrated by Jack Curl, an Episcopal priest who has trouble talking about faith except in cant phrases. When Will asks him directly whether he believes in God, the clergyman takes refuge in a joke: "Well, if I didn't, I'd say I needed

some vocational counseling, wouldn't you?" (137). Curl finds it preferable to live a lie rather than tell one. Fully up-to-date, liberal in theology as well as fashionably ecumenical, he respects all religions because he believes in none. His ecumenism voids truth by assuming that all religious disagreements are meaningless.

A marvelous comic creation, Curl is a literary descendant of the fat friar, just wanting everyone (especially himself) to be happy. He is also kin to Rev. Jack Eccles in Updike's **Rabbit, Run**, another preposterously unbelieving clergyman, another vehicle for attacking so-called "progressive" Christianity, a creed both writers consider too insubstantial to affect anyone's destiny in this life or the next. These hucksters are not religious wayfarers; instead, they are in the business of extending Christendom. Curl wants to use by Barrett's money to establish "love communities" and retirement villages. His Christianity is but a masked form of secularism, suitable for those who don't know how to think clearly or how to avoid self-deception. Religion of this type, Percy implies, is little more than infidelity tinged with the poetry of Christianity; it has lost any power to transform personal, social and cultural life.

After summarizing the creeds of the various guests at his house, Will concludes that the late twentieth century is

either a new age of faith or an age of madness in which everyone believes everything. Yet such crazy latitudinarianism does not include a sane unbelief. Will's critique includes examples of unbelievers whom he finds to be "as insane as a French intellectual" (98). As a rule, the more intelligent an unbeliever, the nuttier he is, in Will's estimation. Despite a cheerful outward accommodation to a godless world, atheists like Lewis Peckham love death almost as much as did Ed Barrett. Level headed, skeptical, with a cultured love of the arts, Peckham seems to represent the best of contemporary humanism. Yet he is as blind to mystery as any cow; his reductionistic presuppositions allow him to read Dante only for the "mythic structure." Will faults Peckham's naturalistic blindness because it never goes beyond the culture and compassion of humanism to consider the possibility of belief. Later Percy's ultimate condemnation is passed on Peckham--readers are told that he takes Erich Fromm more seriously than God or Dante!

Peckham's faithless faith--an aestheticism that has ripened into a suicidal, Rupert Brookeish fascination with life's end--reminds Will of Ed Barrett's romance with Nazi Germany. He cannot understand why his father, who often spoke of Weimar, never mentioned nearby Buchenwald, where "the horrified Patton paraded fifteen hundred of Weimar's best humanistic Germans" to witness the camp's horrors,

atrocities perpetrated by those with a refined taste for Beethoven and Goethe. Will asks his spectral parent, "...is not this in fact, Father, where your humanism ends in the end?" (132). Ed fought the Nazis, but brought home their gods, admiring Germany's disciplined death worship and collecting SS memorabilia. The author implies that this is the ghost haunting Peckham's godless religion of high culture.

The whole repulsive age is denounced in a letter Will sends Sutter Vaught. Part jeremiad, part suicide note, part letter to the lukewarm Laodiceans, this missive at the novel's center presents a comprehensive verdict on Christendom. Those who place faith in everything from religion to astrology "think they know the reason why we find ourselves in this ludicrous predicament yet act for all the world as if they don't" (190). The trouble with Christians is that they have "killed off more people in recent centuries than all other people put together" (188). Nevertheless, they may still have the truth, though their presence en masse as either Southern Baptists or Irish Catholics is intolerable. Why, Will wonders, "if the good news is true...are its public proclaimers such assholes and the proclamation itself such a weary used up thing?" (189).

Worse yet are the unbelievers who are incapable of realizing the essential farce of existence and so never require an

explanation. Will wonders about the golfers who perform such a ludicrous rite as sailing little balls through meadows, silently understanding that playing golf "was after all preposterous but they had all assented to it and were doing it nevertheless because, after all, why not?" (48). Unbelievers in Percy's fiction speak and act absurdly but never face the Absurd. They have not come to consciousness and so do not search, while believers who have sensed the mystery at the heart of reality live unaffected by it.

Disgusted with both, and weary of life without purpose, Barrett decides he can no longer live with the likes of Lewis Peckham and Jack Curl. Giving in to his family heritage, he addresses his deceased father as Hamlet did, saying, "Very well, old mole, you win" (162). But Will refuses to simply kill himself, because "it dawned on him that his father's suicide was **wasted.** It proved nothing" (182). Since Ed's death was no more than a private escape, Will decides on an improvement. He thinks he might as well use up his own worthless existence to force God to prove **His** existence, thus turning his extinction into an experiment in revelation. Ed Barrett was sure that there were only two alternatives--the numbing death in life that he despised and the violent death that he desired. His agnostic son aims to discover whether there might yet be a third possibility: life itself, the life of God.

Will Barrett's despair reflects Percy's own search for male guidance as a literary subject and quite probably as a personal quest for a father. Will's gyrations are perhaps what Percy avoided by accepting religious faith and writing fiction. The longing for a godlike father is not a rare focus in Southern novels--there is Thomas Wolfe's **Look Homeward, Angel**, for example, Allen Tate's **The Fathers**, and William Faulkner's **The Sound and the Fury.** Significant action is necessary if the protagonist, like his creator, is to escape depression and come to terms with an absent father. Self-discovery often begins with the pursuit of intimacy with a father, but the **right** father is never really found.

Unmindful of the biblical warnings against putting God to the test, Will's sense of abandonment and search for a father drives him to demand recognition from his heavenly Father. God-haunted and death-hearted, he determines to challenge God to show His face, as Jacob did when he wrestled with the angel. The golfer-turned-seeker therefore designs a Promethean way of putting the question to the deity, "a situation in which one's death would occur if and only if God did not manifest himself, did not give a sign clearly and unambiguously, once and for all" (192). Though he is a typical resident of Christendom--proud, autonomous, unbelieving--Barrett will nonetheless confront the divine Father, and require of Him a blessing.

Will therefore decides to descend into Lost Cove cave to await a theophany "like some crackpot preacher in California," as the intrusive narrator observes. Once there he plans to subsist on tranquilizers while waiting for the deity to communicate. Barrett expects what he calls the "ultimate scientific experiment" to have one of three outcomes: (A) God speaks, and thus exists; (B) God does not speak, and so is an illusion; or (C) God refuses to manifest Himself. The third possibility "comes to the same thing as far as we are concerned," that is, makes God as irrelevant to humanity as if non-existent (193). Will admires the beauty of his own scheme, which is surefire infallible. If God speaks, all will be well. If He remains silent, the seeker will die--but the death will have proven something. Will is pleased that at least it will no longer be necessary to listen to preachers "haranguing about God's existence" or to professors "haranguing people about God's nonexistence and mythic structures" (193).

Although on the surface Will's elaborate philosophical experiment appears to be a decisive, even heroic, action, this appearance is deceiving. Lewis Lawson suggests that in devising the project, Barrett is actually motivated by a simple idea: he will "retreat to the womb, go back before the moment of desire or alienation, renounce his will, and put it into God's hands as to whether he will or will not be born

again" ("Walker Percy's Prodigal Son"). This insight nicely captures the essential passivity at the heart of Barrett's challenge. Suicide requires decision, a choosing between life and death, a choice made necessary by the previous (unchosen) event of one's birth. (As Jean-Paul Sartre once remarked, "Anyone who does not commit suicide is retroactively agreeing with the fact of his birth.") The cave retreat not only allows Will to evade a direct decision to kill himself, but also in a sense to reverse "Will Barrett's" entry into a life he did not will and will no longer bear.

Seeking truth, Will makes his spelunking quest on behalf of those he despises, which by this time encompasses just about everybody. Percy demonstrates what he surely hopes is an appealing evenhandedness as his protagonist characterizes both groups. Believers, like the "fifteen million Southern Baptists" who populate Christendom,

> ...think they know the reason why we find ourselves in this ludicrous predicament--yet act for all the world as if they don't, and are repellent precisely to the degree that they embrace and advertise that truth" (188).

But the agnostic, scientist and humanist, is worse "because of the fortuity, blandness, incoherence, fakery, and fatuity of his unbelief" (189). That is, unbelievers are "crazy" in not bothering even to seek an explanation for the "preposterous" situation of their existence and certain

mortality (189). Through Will, Percy speaks directly to the educated unbeliever, who is

> ...born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, shits, fucks, works, grows old, gets sick, and dies, and is quite content to have it so. Not once in his entire life does it cross his mind to say to himself that his situation is preposterous, that an explanation is due him and to demand such an explanation and to refuse to play out another act of the farce until an explanation is forthcoming. (189)

Agnostic though he is, Will intends at least to put the question. He won't choose death as his father did, or bet on God's existence, as Pascal suggests, or merely have faith; instead, he will conduct the supreme form of what Binx Bolling calls "the vertical search." Given Percy's history of satirizing the hubris of scientists who reject any theological perspective and likewise refuse to recognize that reason has limits, canny readers may suspect that the grand experiment will not come off as planned.

While in the cave, the shadows that pass before Will depict the major events of his life and times. He moves from his rationalistic demand for empirical evidence of God's existence to a series of memories and fantasies. This is because, as the narrator notes,

> ...unfortunately things can go wrong with an experiment most carefully designed by a sane scientist. A clear yes or no answer may not be forthcoming, after all. The answer may be a muddy maybe. (213)

Amid flashbacks and fantasies, Will discovers what Lancelot could never understand: reason's attempt to seek ultimate truth shipwrecks when logic and the scientific method confront a world of mystery that they are ill-equipped to measure. But it is within these baffling precincts that the cunning God of the novel may act, a God of surprises who keeps appearing in ways that Percy's seekers never anticipate.

Will Barrett realizes that Lost Cove cave is not a laboratory yielding definite answers about God, but a problematic realm which provides no escape from the necessity of making choices--to live or die, to have faith in God or faith in nothing--without any kind of proof. He finally learns that one can and must proceed despite limited understanding. Without final knowledge of ultimate mysteries, Will now knows at least that he can act, he can live, without knowing everything.

The ultimatum to the Almighty thus fails to prove Will's hypothesis, while yet succeeding in a way that he never imagined. If Will receives any sign, it is an achingly comic comeuppance, a humorous token to a foolish man from an ironic God. After seven or eight days of fruitless waiting in his amateur grave, he develops a severe toothache, breaks his flashlight and nearly his leg, which forces him to abandon the experiment. Whether the malady "was God's doing or ordin-

ary mortal frailty, one cannot be sure" (213). The narrator prefers to reserve judgment, yet both alternatives may be correct. The implication is that God has not altogether refused the revelation that Will sought. It is only that He declines, as is His wont, to let the human seeker determine the time, place and manner of His appearing. Though Will sins, in Christian terms, by affronting God, he is nevertheless offered grace. Barrett gradually comes to suspect that the toothache is in fact a sign that God wants him to live, but first he needed to be taught to recognize his own helplessness and dependency. Like each of Percy's protagonists, Will has to get sick before he can get well.

As engineer and quasi-scientist, Will lived in his reason exclusively; but the toothache, a "hot ice pick shoved straight up into his brain" drives him where he must go--out of his mind. The gnostic quester is forced by his body to come back to his body. "What does a nauseated person care about the Last Days?" the narrator wonders in the midst of this comic chastisement (213). Will's nausea is not a sickened response to the horrors of existence but a violent physical corrective to an existence that has become too abstracted and too dependent on a supposedly omnipotent reason. It cures the golfer of a more dangerous "sickness unto death" and restores him to the incarnate world where Kierkegaard's (and Percy's) God may truly be known. The element of humor

is a reminder that Kierkegaard perceives the comic to be the stage just prior to the religious.

Driven out of his head and out of the cave, Will stumbles through the stained glass window of the adjoining greenhouse. His pride humbled, Barrett has fallen, but into grace, for he soon falls in love with Allie, who becomes his second coming. Her miraculous appearance gives Will a last chance to unlearn his father's despairing message that love and death are inextricably linked. And love leads to the clearest intimation of God's entry into their lives. Allie escapes for the first time the "everlasting self sick of itself" when she feeds and bathes Will after his surprising entrance into her shelter. She gives him the life by which to deny what he calls "the living death in all its guises." Barrett's plunge into the greenhouse begins the affair with Allie and God which will save him from his self-destructive heritage. Seeking God, he finds the woman and learns through their subsequent romance the signs of, and summons to, a divine passion.

Percy's understanding of religion--as a radical bond that connects man with reality and so confers meaning to his life --makes it possible for both speech and sexuality to provide a link with the realm of the sacred. Since words and flesh are the ways by which his seekers connect themselves to the world and to others, they point to the most fundamental bond

for Percy: religion. If God's Word became flesh, then both language and incarnate love may lead to the divine image at their source. Percy's lovers discover that the goal of communicating with the divine is already beginning to be achieved in human communion. Here the author creates his most fully imagined romance, his most lovingly embodied and completely conceived revelation of the union at the heart of selfhood.

In a beautiful dialogue that gradually becomes explicit, Percy links the mystery of language with the mystery of sexual love. As she listens to Will speak, Allie reflects,

> She could not hear his words for listening to the way he said them....Was he saying the words for the words themselves, for what they meant, or for what they could do to her?...Though he hardly touched her, his words seemed to flow across all parts of her body. Were they meant to? A pleasure she had never known before bloomed deep in her body. Was this a way of making love? (262)

The lovers' words are as integral to their communion as their physical union. Her previous sexual experiences were simply empty motions, acts of despair. But with Will she, and he, discover a new, fresh language, not the deadly rhetoric of convention. (Percy has always insisted that the writer, especially a Christian writer, must also do this to overcome the dead weight of trivialized, cheapened words.)

Allie says she thinks Will has something for her and asks

what. Will, perhaps only now realizing what is the word he wants and what the thing is, says, "'Love. I love you....I love you now and until the day I die'" (355). None of Percy's characters has ever said this before. Allison joyfully speaks in tongues their holy intimacy; Will listens without deafness. Having always wondered what to do with himself at four o'clock in the afternoon, he promises to be with her at that time every day. Four o'clock on a dull afternoon is a critical time in Percyland because it tests the joy of living when superficial or temporary excitement no longer satisfies.

In previous books Percy most often depicted the act of love as a painful, degrading, or frustrating, if sometimes moderately amusing, experience; just as often it was a cold, totally impersonal and dehumanizing gratification. But the lovers in this novel are not disposed merely to "use" one another in the satisfaction of an indifferent lust. Nor in their moments of physical intimacy does either partner maintain any of the attitude of emotional and intellectual detachment that characterized the couplings and non-couplings described in the author's earlier stories. Moreover, important though it is, the successful quest for human love presented here is to be seen in the larger design of the novel as defining only a stage in the lifelong search for religious faith. Will's coming into the greenhouse makes possible the

lovers' mutual coming to God.

Allison is not what Will gets instead of the revelation he sought when he entered the cave. During his sojourn with her in the greenhouse, it might appear that he finds the delights of her company all-sufficient and has abandoned the search for God. But in the end he comes to see Allie, rather, as a gift from God. With his house empty, Barrett takes her to a Holiday Inn. Though he owns houses, hospitals, hostels, and retirement residences in the most religious spot in the world, Will has no home in Christendom. After their motel rendezvous the two lovers set about building their own little Eden, tending the garden in the greenhouse, to love and labor until they die. A comparison of this green and happy land, this **locus amoenus**, with Lancelot's insane utopian schemes shows where Percy has really been going.

The realization of this union in love and faith is not immediate. But as soon as he recovers from the trauma of the cave and his re-birth to the outer world, Will puts his new knowledge to use. While not repudiating his father's bitterly pessimistic evaluation of the modern world, he does reject all aspects of the "death-in-life" that Christendom offers:

> Death in the guise of belief is not going to prevail over me, for believers now believe anything and everything and do not love the truth, are in fact in des-

> pair of the truth, and that is death. Death in the guise of unbelief is not going to prevail over me, for unbelievers believe nothing, not because truth does not exist but because they have chosen not to believe and would not believe, cannot believe, even if the living truth stood before them, and that is death. (272-73)

If Lancelot Lamar adopts a destructive solution to despair, in Freudian terms the way of thanatos, Will Barrett adopts a constructive solution, the way of eros. Thanatos entails seeking a life of pleasure without biological or other responsibility, free from the ugliness or pain of aging, the consciousness of dying; it is, in short, a seeking not of life but death-in-life. Thanatos is but another name for the great sickness of despair that has been Percy's more or less constant theme from the beginning of his career as a novelist.

Will throws away the guns he has inherited, finally rejecting the temptation to kill himself in order to live for Allie's love. In soliloquy he again catalogues what he repudiates: "Death in the form of isms and asms shall not prevail over me, orgasm, enthusiasm, liberalism, conservatism, Communism, Buddhism, Americanism, for an ism is only another way of despairing of the truth" (273). The revelation given to him in the cave is the one Quentin Compson and Lancelot failed to find--the knowledge of this century's, his father's, and indeed his own love of death. Now he can stand over against it and name it.

Barrett finds a locus of meaning--an authentic self--by discovering the secret to overcome suicide. The secret is not only his love for Allie, but also the gift he receives to name, and break free of, the destructive influence of his father's Stoic rhetoric, as Quentin could not do. Here the merging of character and author is nearly complete; as Will names death in its many forms he becomes an implicit surrogate for Percy, the artist as ex-suicide, one who gains power over creation by his acts and words. He explicitly affirms the religious connection between earthly speech and the ultimate source of word and vision. This also marks Percy's clearest declaration of difference from Faulkner (another imposing father he needed to get away from) on the matter of Quentin Compson and as a southern writer. Percy moves beyond Faulkner's humanism, recognizing its inadequacy as a response to suicide in an age of despair. Reaching this point of choosing life has been the goal of all Percyan protagonists; Barrett's rejection of death is the climax of Percy's fiction.

For Will, death can no longer hide under the guise of religious, social or political institutions. At the end he understands these forms to be the manifestation of the devil in his time, for only the "father of lies" could have conceived "all the deceits and guises under which death masquerades" (272). The survivor then indicts his own father: "You gave in to death, old mole, but I will not have it so....I

choose life" (273-74). None of Lancelot's shouting so eloquently approaches these statements in their concise rejection of decadence or in their demand for something better. Renewal comes through God's grace in offering both divine and human love. Will thus awakens to far more than he knew to wish for.

Getting rid of the weapons is a rejection of scientism as well as suicide; this action frees Will to abandon any kind of naturalism or determinism and accept the mysterious, non-quantifiable gift of Allie's love, which in turn produces gratitude and a desire for an even higher love. As Percy writes in his self-interview "Questions They Never Asked Me":

> This life is too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then to be asked what you make of it and have to answer "Scientific humanism." That won't do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e., God. In fact I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less.

This passage suggests Percy's close affiliation with Will Barrett; both demand an existence which includes truth and love, with God as the ground of these. That eros wins at the end of **The Second Coming** is an emblem for how one may yet turn back the tide of violence, apathy, and boredom; seize once again the sovereignty for one's own life away from "experts"; and turn the massive potential for apocalypse--personal, national, and global--toward the equal potential for

love.

Having rejected suicide and established a deep love relationship with Allie, Will is at last ready to go even further. He rejects Jack Curl's desiccated liberal religion and also that of his deceased wife, which he terms "a New York Episcopal view of an Anglican view of a Roman view of a Jewish happening" (156). Instead he approaches an old priest named Fr. Weatherbee, and tells him that he himself does not believe and does not want to enter the church. Still, Barrett adds that "it does not follow that your belief, the belief of the church, is untrue" (358). When the priest indicts America as the most generous yet most selfish and unhappy of lands, his critique is close to Will's own and the seeker is willing to listen to him because he seems to know something--and Jack Curl obviously does not. Barrett opens himself up to further revelation by declaring himself "willing to be told whatever it is you seem to know" (358).

The Second Coming ends, therefore, as **Lancelot** ends, with the protagonist awaiting the message of authority from a priest, whom he calls "Father." This indicates that Will has transferred his allegiance from his earthly parent to the representative of his heavenly Father. Will has lost his interest in "signs and wonders" and his impatience to witness the apocalyptic "Second Coming." He has also resigned his

quest for a special and private revelation which took him to the cave. As a sign of his new orientation, Will asks Fr. Weatherbee to officiate at his wedding to Allie. The sacrament of union testifies to the concourse of human and divine love that Will is discovering. A sacrament, an outward sign of inward grace, is a mode by which meaning becomes incarnate in reality; it is the ultimate sign. Seeking God, Will finds Allie and learns through their romance the sign of, and summons to, a divine passion.

Fr. Weatherbee believes in Apostolic Succession, the doctrine that the divine teaching authority received from Christ has been passed down through the Church, and this becomes another revelatory sign for Will. He confronts the clergyman with his persistent notion:

> In any event, the historical phenomenon of the Jews cannot be accounted for by historical or sociological theory. Accordingly, they may be said to be in some fashion or other a sign. (357)

Apostolic Succession goes back to Christ who was, of course, a Jew. The Jews are the common denominator between Will and believers--therefore Barrett thinks he is "on the track of something." Will says he refuses to believe all of the old priest's dogmas, "Unless, of course," he has "the authority to tell me something I don't know" (358). Barrett is even willing to have the priest declare his own authority, without demanding proof. What Fr. Weatherbee represents Will accepts

as the answer to all the questions he has put to all those he temporarily considered authorities.

What Fr. Weatherbee knows, and, as an apostle, has the authority to proclaim, are the signs of the visible Church, a sign of God for those who seek, and the good news of salvation. He lives in response to the Christian revelation, grounded in communion with others and with God. The priest fails to understand present-day America and prefers to tell of his Christian community in Mindanao, which believes "the Gospel whole and entire, and the teachings of the Church." The old priest continues: "They said that if I told them, then it must be true or I would not have gone to so much trouble" (359).

Fr. Weatherbee is a newsbearer, Kierkegaard's apostle of the news from across the sea, and tries to bring those who have come to realize their wayfaring status to a second coming through love and faith. Like Lonnie, Sister Val, and Percival, he is simple, unpretentious, even unattractive. His authority rests solely on his being appointed and sent by God. The faith of Percy's apostles is never simply a matter of orthodox belief and practice. Rather, the message is the Word that has been taken into their lives, the lives that have been renewed by love.

"What do you want of me?" Fr. Weatherbee asks, which

sparks Barrett to reflect:

> His heart leapt for joy. What is it I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of the giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have. (360)

Will senses he must have both of these kinds of love if he is to be fulfilled after a lifetime of deprivation; the two are mutually inclusive. Since people define themselves by their relations to others, the struggles of all Percy's protagonists to discover who they are and where they belong have been compounded because their most important "other"--their father --died in despair when they were children. Barrett ends his inner dialogue with Ed and appears ready to begin it with God. With this Father he will try another dialogue--one concerned not with the dead past, but with the promise of eternal life.

Percy's Kierkegaardian man of infinite possibilities has "willed," he has chosen, and he is on the brink of the religious stage. What Will is just beginning to realize is that no modern millennium is impending, but Will's own return, his resurrection, has occurred. It is the result of all the seemingly gratuitous things that have "happened" to him. Will has given Allie words and then recognized in Fr. Weatherbee a sign of the Word and his own need of that particular message. The erotic love of two flawed creatures for one another

opens up into a transcendent love for all men and for God. Having come to himself, Will Barrett comes to Allie and in the end to the God whose gradual coming into his own life he almost overlooked. One senses Percy's delight in this his most happy ending.

Conclusion

Walker Percy never ceased being influenced by his medical training, which continued to inform his novels through the doctor's keen eye for precise and lovely details. A moralist primarily, a stylist and writer of poetic prose secondarily because of his devotion to theme, he attempts to portray in his novels what medicine never considered, the peculiar situation of one's being in the world and under God. Neither the Stoicism nor the scientism in which he had been schooled left room for God to create or redeem. But in discovering a new vocation as a Christian novelist, Percy rejected such closure in order to explore the openness of human existence to its divine source and end. He concentrates on the discovery of something that makes life worth living: the faith-inspired knowledge that being is better than non-being. Such faith is the central and final issue in all his fiction.

Writing allowed this pathologist to exorcise the competing demons that beset him and to analyze those of the twentieth century. Percy's art is a kind of therapy, simultaneously for himself and his audience. He is prescribing the difficult, tentative steps to cure an alienated individual: watching, listening, and waiting for signs of God's grace working in the world; regaining an appreciation of life through ordeal; resisting the temptation of agnostic scientism, and rejecting the Stoic ideal of the solitary, autono-

mous self in favor of participation in domestic life and religious communion.

This medicine is combined with a kind of black humor, built upon Percy's talent for scrutinizing the mundane, frustrating details of middle-class American life. But Percy's fiction is never searing or bitter. What particularly enlivens it is the gusty humor that blows through the novels, leaving the startled reader with a residue of sanity and wisdom that permits the thought that the world is a larger place than the weighty evils so brilliantly satirized by Percy would have led one to expect. His relieving humor perhaps comes out of his own sense of involvement in a fallen world, for humor almost always speaks of a recognition that the individual sinner is beyond self-justification. Percy's indictment is thus rescued from the intense jeremiad of his mentor Kierkegaard by his recognition of himself as all too much a citizen of his age, a participant in its failures.

Given the burdens of his own past, Percy is a writer who, rejecting the mode of remembering, embraces the mode of revelation. His attraction to Christianity rested upon a sense that Christ had brought news from without, news that illuminated the human predicament in a way that people had been unable to do. With the slipping away of this inherited insight, Percy feared the worst. In particular, he feared the sever-

ing of the bond between the spiritual/intellectual and the physical worlds that had been held together by Christian incarnational theology. With the abandonment of such an ideological model, Percy emphasized, love was reduced to personal feeling, while the state and the public world in turn hardened into a technological apparatus that was empty at the core. His distinctive contribution as a novelist was to focus all these themes vividly within the compass of a scattering of memorable lives and places, most of them within easy reach of his Louisiana home. Percy accomplished this by pinpointing the anxieties and depressions brought on by contemporary American culture and only then working back to probable causes, which he attempted to show lay far beyond the scientist's power to rectify.

Percy diagnoses the spiritual malaise of Christendom by examining and dramatizing the illnesses of his heroes. He disclaims being anything more than an artistic diagnostician (since in Kierkegaard's terms he lacks the credentials of an apostolic newsbearer whose acceptance is contingent upon the audience's faith). Yet, like Dante's wayfarer in **The Divine Comedy**, Percy had secured the authority to write about death and despair, having faced them directly. Virginia Woolf once said that most authors failed to treat such matters with much authenticity because

> ...to look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion-tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism. ("On Being Ill," 10)

Percy has this courage, along with a sense of irony and basic hardheadedness which save him from Woolf's denigrated "raptures of transcendentalism."

Woolf's comment underscores a problem contemporary writers face: the difficulty of making convincing, or even intelligible, the moral foundation on which a book is built. But religious writers insist upon the reality of such a foundation or upon the urgent need for and possibility of establishing such a foundation if anyone or anything is to signify. Religious morality is suspect, it would appear, because it at least implies a specific basis for the grounding of value. Many readers who enjoy his plots and satire may refuse to go further with Percy because what he has to say about faith and science is hard to read without flinching, without re-examining the "taken for granted" assumptions of agnostic orthodoxy. This is unfortunate; such readers allow themselves to miss the full richness of Percy's comic voice and his similarity to traditional satirists like Swift.

Percy is undeniably somewhat unusual today because he is old-fashioned; a traditional, conservative moralist in a time

when the qualities denoted or implied by such adjectives are passé, opaque, or just plain missing from many books and readers. Percy thus had to fit his views and temperament to the interests, sensibilities, even the tolerance, of our world. He persisted in seeking to specify a core of value rather than allowing himself to give up or to dwell on adventure and experience for their own sake or to delight in the ingenuities of technique. Since Percy took seriously the writer's function as moral arbiter, his challenge was to discover a voice that would not bore or bludgeon the reader with heavy preaching.

Thus the question which arises is, how skillfully have his pronouncements been woven into the narrative? Does Percy let his thumb get too much in the picture? Hemingway thundered that

> Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over. For a writer to put his intellectual musings, which he might sell for a low price as essays, into the mouth of artificially constructed characters which are more remunerative when issued as people in a novel is good economics, perhaps, but does not make literature.

Percy disagrees; his argument is that if an author does not have some message he is wasting his time writing. One of the achievements of Percy's art, therefore, is his success in presenting controversial positions while yet preventing moralism from dominating the narrative. His long apprenticeship

as a writer--from 1945 to the late 1950s--suggests that this was no easy task. But Percy's slyness, and his lingering allegiance to the Southern Stoicism in which he was bred, compel him to remain true to his own eyes and prevent his fiction from becoming unduly moralistic.

And more. Many contemporary writers are like advertisers who have to stress marginal differences to conceal basic similarities. But Percy is the reverse. He must make concessions to sound even a little like the others. By a constant play of metaphor and acute literalness--seeing a thing as something else, seeing it as precisely itself, a whipsaw arrangement--he recreates the world, and gives readers the run of a brand-new sensibility. (The breadth of his talent--and appeal--can be seen in the lack of critical consensus as to where his best work lies. Each of Percy's six novels is championed by major writers and critics as his finest effort.)

But perhaps this novelist's greatest achievement is the way he uses art as a means to deal with one or another aspect of his troubled family history. The novels become mock heroic vehicles to express subsurface rage, grief, and puzzlement over the parental deprivations he suffered. Percy was somehow able to link art and depression, translating suicidal and despairing thought into depictions of how people may reach out in spiritual hunger, while yet presenting their

dilemmas in a comic way. The artistic expression of his own self-doubt captures the imaginations of many sensitive readers who may have experienced similar struggles or who, like Percy, simply refuse to accept any form of materialistic reductionism and see in his fiction (and biography) the hope of something better.

Because it so well summarizes and concludes the basic themes of his fiction, **The Second Coming** offers the opportunity to analyze the success of Percy's work overall. The novel is a deliberate effort to avoid ambiguity, to do more than merely satirize contemporary mores; it is also an attempt to offer answers and state them plainly. Life, for Percy, becomes a search for shared consciousness, for a communion of mind, for the affirmation of self which can only be found in the reflection of another. Failure to find this--a circumlocution for love--leads to nothingness, an emptiness of mind and soul. Percy's authoritative newsbearers renew sight by recovering the primordial force of speech, returning language to the service of the Logos. Yet revelation never brings any direct and immediate awareness of the Divinity.

Once Will Barrett sees that, yes, his father abandoned him, but, no, abandonment is not the necessary shape of all human relationships but merely the shape of that one, he can reject death and choose both God and woman, summarized in his

sense of himself as "betrayed and victorious and sly" (270). And this describes more than just Will; the slyness of God, the irony of his having to disguise Himself in the postmodern world in order to offer men eternal happiness, is an important idea in all Percy's novels.

The pattern of the essential Christian mysteries, Percy suggests, survives in the modern world not in the activities and observances of any institutional body--it is, perhaps, least of all discernible in deliberately "religious" usages--but primarily in the most intensely private, most uncalculated, purely personal encounters. In the churches a man like Will Barrett can see little evidence of God's presence. But Percy argues that, for those capable of seeing, those who refuse to deceive themselves, the true state of affairs is perhaps more obvious now than it was in any earlier period of history. Humanity has only the alternatives of religion or nihilism, and must choose one or the other. Percy's satire is aimed at what he sees as the current consensus: that people profess one, while acting as if they believed the other.

The truth of Christian doctrine--the mystery of fallen man's absolute and total dependence upon divine grace, upon a power which he is yet totally and absolutely free to accept or reject--is a truth of which an audience can be convinced

only by faith. Percy is suggesting that Christianity continues to have vitality, and still makes sense of the experience of human existence as nothing else does for anyone who seeks a conviction of purpose in his existence and cannot find it in any of the ideological "isms" Barrett lists in his catalogue of rejections. To Percy, Christian redemption is still available, on the same terms as always.

But a fundamental ambivalence polarizes his fiction as Percy tries to make his art stretch to straddle two widely disparate approaches to life--idealism and a more pragmatic, empirical position. He seems to be urging idealism and acceptance of the status quo simultaneously. Because the author refuses to commit himself entirely to one view, his answers are often contradicted by opposing suggestions in the same novel, creating, at best, a precarious balance of opposites. (This thematic confusion has a stylistic counterpart in the abrupt, **deus ex machina** entrance of formal religious elements into the conclusions of his novels.)

One answer Percy offers is a forceful rejection of escape. Because the business of living in Christendom has always daunted and nearly defeated his analytic protagonists, escape appears as a seductive temptation to them. In this they resemble Faulkner's characters, prone to suicide and passive abdication in the face of an unsatisfactory existence. In

The Sound and the Fury Quentin Compson kills himself rather than accept a world where honor, pride, and truth seem to have no place. In **Light in August** the Reverend Hightower chooses another means of escape--he merely retires from living. In **The Second Coming** Will Barrett fluctuates between these ways of repudiating life.

Throughout the novel Will toys with the idea of suicide. If life is "senseless and farcical," why not swiftly end it as his father did? He also considers the other seductive path: evasion. One need not commit suicide; one can simply wait life out, sitting idly on the sidelines. In many of Percy's novels, sedentary abdication figures as an enticing alternative to living. Lancelot Lamar sits in his pigeonnier, waiting for the six o'clock news; Binx Bolling sits passively in movie theaters; in **The Second Coming** Sutter Vaught watches M*A*S*H reruns while waiting for retirement, and Will, early in the novel, realizes that up to now he has missed his life, the way a man might miss a plane.

Allison Huger is Will Barrett's counterpart in **The Second Coming**, and her story matches his. Like Will, Allie tried to relinquish her life and, like him, eventually rejects defection in favor of commitment. While Will idled away his life and considered suicide, Allie sought refuge in madness. Just as Will escapes from a convalescent home, so too does Allie

escape from a mental hospital; both are choosing freedom with its concomitant responsibilities; both are taking charge of their lives. By hoisting the stove from the ruined house to the greenhouse, Allie proves that she can shape reality to meet her needs.

At the end of the novel Allison and Will, two people who had shunned society, are planning a return and reentry. They resolve to marry in a church and have children. All such plans herald a triumphant return to the world of cooperative living with others; the lovers reject defection in favor of commitment. Percy's solution is clear: man must eschew escape and live among the human community, fostering and supporting man's institutions. It is a wise-sounding plan, but not a feasible one, given the world the author depicts.

While Percy advocates commitment to society, the society he has described is an inferno of sordid passions, discontent, and gnostic foolishness. Implicit throughout **The Second Coming** is the suggestion that because Christendom deadens life, only outsiders, those who live apart from the human community, are still vital. Will is contaminated by his contact with the living dead, but his constant "dropping out" through fugue states gives him a new perspective and some measure of protection; Allie is a stranger to the world as a

result of electroshock treatments and thus can give life to Will; Fr. Weatherbee spent fifty years among remote Philippine natives and no longer understands his own people. These characters seem like oases of health in a dying landscape. Christendom deadens life, and Percy's people are healthy and whole exactly in proportion to their estrangement from it. Allison, the character most remote from ordinary life, has by this very fact the strength to hoist Will Barrett, the contaminated modern man, when he falls.

Of all the people in **The Second Coming**, only the two leads and Fr. Weatherbee are spared caricature. The rest, the society members with whom Will and Allie mean to live and work, are lampooned. Can the two lovers "achieve their lives" interacting with people like these? No; the reader is unable to accept the possibility of survival and success within society as seen by Will. Here and throughout his fiction Percy has been too successful in condemning Christendom and the death-in-life to which its inhabitants are condemned. Without some improvement in the world Will sees, his and Allie's pledge of allegiance to the human community must seem doomed to failure.

Moreover, the "commitment" of these characters must also be viewed skeptically. The evidence suggests that Will and Allie are building their own little Eden as much as rejoining

society. Their new world will be an unstructured natural environment, a greenhouse removed from any other habitation with a constant temperature ideal to grow living things. (They will even employ the elderly in fanciful gardening and building projects.) This enchanted woodland scenario bears no little resemblance to a utopian dream. **The Second Coming**'s wonderful romantic ending thus seems to endorse the very idea Percy repudiates elsewhere in the novel; escape turns out to be a viable option after all.

The problem, then, of Percy's depiction of Will and Allie as poetic lovers whose sanity appears as madness to an insane world lies in the author's romantic willingness, for the most part, to allow his lovers to avoid that world. If **The Second Coming** were a movie, Binx Bolling would pronounce it "inauthentic." By allowing Will and Allie to escape into a near-perfect environment, Percy contradicts his earlier work: since Binx, Will in **The Last Gentleman**, and especially Lancelot, end their struggles with ambiguous victories at best, the perfection of Will's triumph appears suspect. It is an unconvincing finale, which the character Kitty unwittingly suggests when she comments "Same old Will. Same old Huck Finn lighting out for the territory" (280). Percy had found fault with the conclusion of Twain's book precisely for the reason that there can be no real ending to it--one escape demands another, and another. It is therefore ironic that

Percy, in the novel that culminates his fictional effort, identifies his most mature protagonist with a boy--and with a boy's evasions.

For these reasons Percy's answer of commitment to society as it is lacks persuasiveness. Even as the author urges man to join the ranks of humanity, his presentation of those ranks suggest that he is dissatisfied with and discouraged by mankind's inadequacies. On one level, Percy proposes a pragmatic approach to human problems: man should accept what is and work within the system, assisted as necessary by grace. Beneath the surface, however, Percy idealistically longs for a better world. His inability to resolve this tension weakens the persuasiveness of his ideas.

Percy's dilemma is not unique. The history of recent times argues against the plausibility of creating a better world, while not having extinguished the desire for such a world. The rise of communism and fascism--the great, abortive utopian undertakings of our century--did much to cast doubt upon the validity of belief in human progress, as World War I had earlier undermined the idea of such progress as inevitable. We cannot conceive of history except by thinking of human relations as imperfect and therefore changing. The very concept of history contains within it the concept of human estrangement in some form, and, accordingly, of power

relations, a central pre-occupation of postmodern thought. Hence the notion that perfect communion might be attained within history, or even by means of a gradual transition beyond history, is impossible.

Moreover, the very Christianity Percy champions likewise casts doubt on the possibility of realizing his desire for a better world. This is because Christian revelation presupposes an enduring situation, one constituted fundamentally by the radical and deliberate alienation of the human race from God. The situation is moral and thus is often referred to in connection with the phrase "original sin." But it is also ontological. This means that man cannot change it merely by resolving to be better. It can only be changed by God.

Original sin is, as G.K. Chesterton noted, the one orthodox doctrine for which empirical evidence exists; because of it Christianity disbelieves humanity's proud schemes for its own deliverance. Christianity also casts doubt on all utopian ideas by presenting its own "utopia," the kingdom of God, as something other than a historical and human possibility: a community to be realized only with the end of history and only on the initiative of God. While not denying the notion of progress, Christianity rejects any secular utopia, not only because it is impossible but also because it degrades people by reducing them to the scale of history.

Christianity is thus not a religion of escape; at its heart lies the sinner and the humdrum mediocrity of life. It commands acceptance of the banal, the boring, and the repetitive. These especially are the vehicles of grace as surely as are, for the human body, the repetitive beating of the heart and the steady circulation of the blood. Such mundane realities are undervalued until their rhythms threaten to come to a halt--which suddenly reveals how precious they are, and how miraculous each strong, steady beat of the weakening heart really is.

Percy knows this; his characters awaken to the value and possibilities of existence only through the shock of ordeal. His stories also embody the realization that man's condition is always one of alienation--in existential terms, that his freedom will always cause him anguish. This may be the reason that Percy, as Cecil Eubanks scathingly notes, refuses to embrace any kind of political remedies in his fiction ("Eschatology and the Politics of Grace"). Eubanks points out that the author's answer to modern malaise seems to be a turning away from the world in an introspective search for personal satisfaction, rather than an attempt to transform the culture. Certainly the orthodox Christianity Percy champions as the antidote leaves him no alternative; it stresses that God is the answer but must be found in the ordinary, that gnostic escape is neither possible nor desirable, and

that original sin undermines even the best of human efforts at comprehensive progressive change.

Inevitably, then, alienation must draw from Percy an individual and tentative, rather than collective and final, cure. He counsels trusting that truth exists, even if it cannot entirely be known and the world appears senseless. The contradictions evident in his work--idealism and pragmatism--are the inevitable result, in Christian terms, of the conflicting demands of transcendence and immanence. One should, he teaches, focus on the here-and-now, rejecting visions of the impossible and accepting an inevitably imperfect world. Yet Percy refuses to relinquish the claims of transcendence. His protagonists sense their elevation, dislocation, and separateness from the things of this world. Without rejecting their embodiment they continue to ask metaphysical questions. In the same way Percy says that visionaries and pragmatists are both right. Each answer is valid; neither is complete by itself.

Comedy is the element by which Percy achieves some level of reconciliation between these polarities. Gods in the Greek epics were essentially comic figures because, unlike tragic human heroes, they were beyond death. Percy's Catholicism likewise allows him to represent the divine-human drama as comedy, albeit a dark one, wherein there is no perma-

nent destruction and man, for all his guilt, is continuously accepted by God. Kierkegaard notes that "The religious individual has as such made the discovery of the comical in largest measure." This insight explains the lack of bitterness and despair in even Percy's darkest satirical passages. For him the world is, with all its tragedy and waste, a graced arena of preparation for a more perfect encore.

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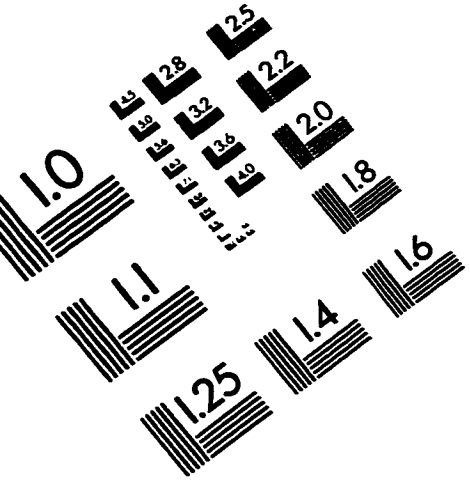
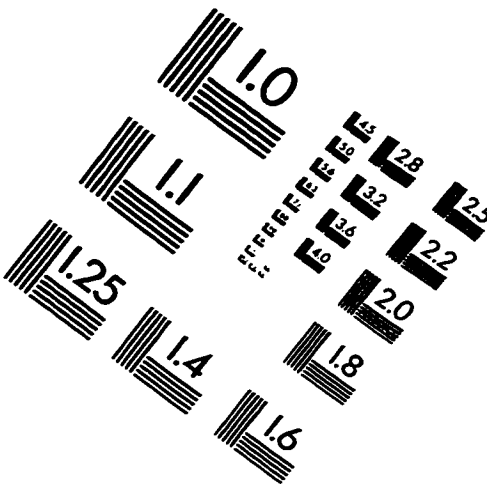
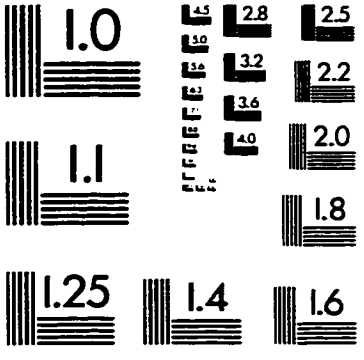
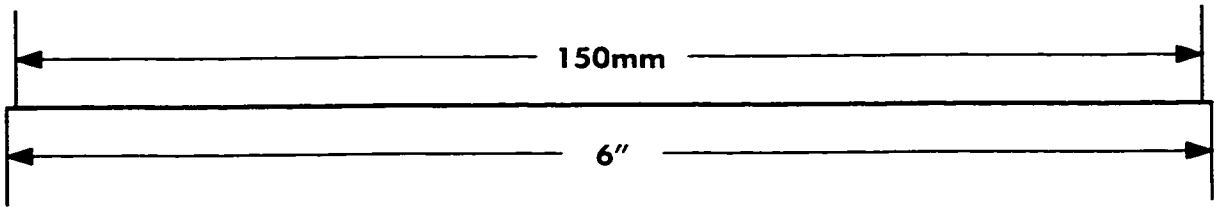
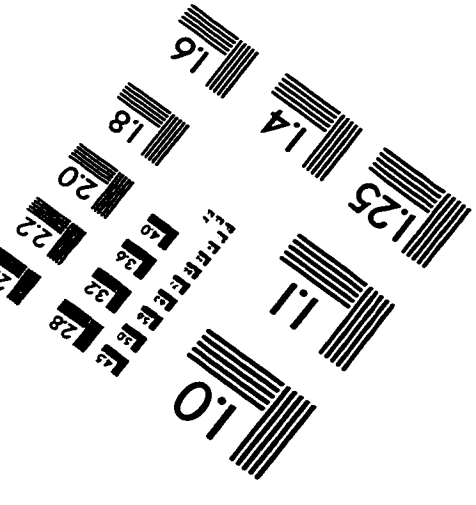
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)











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