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Walker Percy's Importance in the Twenty-First Century

Rhonda Renée McDonnell and Karey Lea Perkins

In "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise" Walker Percy asserts, "Something is indeed wrong, and one of the tasks of the serious novelist is, if not to isolate the bacillus under a microscope, at least to give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable" (206). How fresh that line reads today, as collective attention is turned to diagnosing illness and seeking means of inoculation against disease. Percy's use of medical language is the result of his education at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he developed his stance as a diagnostician. After a life-altering illness of his own (tuberculosis), Percy's attention turned away from medicine and toward philosophy, ultimately leading him to fiction writing. However, he never abandoned his orientation to the world, remaining a doctor to the end, even addressed throughout his life as Doc Percy by friends and neighbors in Covington, Louisiana.

Percy presciently identified the turmoils of our current age. In the second half of the twentieth century, his characters experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies while he observes in the culture around him that people falsely believe all is well. Percy writes, "[T]he novelist . . . feels more and more like the canary being taken down the mine shaft with a bunch of hearty joking sense-making miners while he, the canary, is already getting a whiff of something noxious and is staggering around his cage trying to warn the miners, but he can't understand them nor he them" ("State" 139). For much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, such was the behavior of the Western world, but that is no longer the case. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, as Percy predicted, the jig was up. Societies, not just in the USA but across the Western world, fragmented under increasing pressure from political polarization. While medications for mental health ailments long have been on the rise (Ilyas and Moncrief 393), those increases intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (DeAngelis). According to *The New York Times*, "We are depressed, anxious, tired and distracted. What's new is this: Almost

a quarter of Americans over the age of 18 are now medicated for one or more of these conditions" (Schwartz). Percy wrote during the age of avoidance about those maladies people were experiencing, naming those maladies that people were not willing or able to acknowledge. Now, we are more likely to acknowledge our troubles, but what do we do next? Are prescriptions the answer? And what about the continued political and social turmoils that Western societies are facing? As Percy predicts in *Love in the Ruins*, "There are Left states and Knothead states, Left towns and Knothead towns but no center towns" (16). This situation isn't a unique ailment of the USA: England, France, Germany, and other countries face similar polarization, with left and right increasingly at odds and little to no middle ground. At the same time, the trusted old conveyors of mores, churches and schools, are under fire.

In the past, as Percy notes, people had ways to combat disaster that are not open to us in the present:

> It is one thing to live in bad times where a common language is spoken, values and beliefs shared in common, like the fourteenth century, which had the Black Plague but also had Langland and Chaucer, one of whom wrote about how bad things were and the other told stories and cheered everybody up and both were understood. It is something else to live in a time of great good and evil which nobody understands, where there are many kinds of discourse each of which makes a kind of sense to its own community, but where the communities don't make sense to each other . . . ("Novel-Writing" 158-59)

Reading his words now creates the charge of recognition that Percy describes in his essay, "The Man on the Train": "Yes! that is how it is!" (83). That may be reason enough to study Percy, but his writing has more to offer than an identification of our current troubles. Knowing that he sees the world we now inhabit suggests that he may provide some direction to us. We suspect it is his contemplation of the existential anxieties that are so much a part of contemporary life that first draws readers to him. Certainly that was the case for both of us. However, once readers are immersed in his writing, the existential top layer peels away to reveal profound questions and an attempt to answer those questions with nothing less than a radical anthropology, a theory of humanity.

This Walker Percy issue of the *South Atlantic Review* is the result of some sobering realizations. First, we have been aware that Percy's genius seems to be fading from the college syllabi that once introduced him to a generation of students. Early in our scholarship of Percy, mentioning his name resulted in knowing nods and recollections of

reading (at least) *The Moviegoer*. Now, in the twenty-first century, that is rarely the case. Nothing eats away at the soul of an academic more than hearing a quizzical "Who?" when the subject of lifelong study is mentioned. Of course, one might say that he is in good company. A great many of the once-heralded twentieth-century authors who were on those syllabi with Percy are suffering the same fate. Particularly those who, like Percy, wrote novels that have proven difficult to bring to the big screen or who, like Percy, did not write short stories. The second realization was of Percy's increased relevance during "these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and the . . . death-dealing Western World" (Percy, *Love* 3). After years of a pandemic and increased political polarization across much of the Western world, incidents of rage, mass violence, free-floating anxiety, depression, and general malaise abound. We seem to have arrived at the crises Percy predicted over the course of his career, which leads to our third realization. Percy is as essential as he has ever been—perhaps even more than in the past. We did not compile this issue as a vehicle for blind adulation of Percy. Rather, we gathered Percy scholars to take a variety of approaches to Percy, to see what he has to offer to denizens of the twenty-first century.

In this special issue, we offer you essays covering the gamut of Walker Percy's work from a variety of perspectives. Michael Kobre's "We Wear the Mask: Race and Representation in the Fiction of Walker Percy" examines race in the works of this Southern author growing up and writing in the heyday of the strife-torn civil rights movement of middle twentieth-century America. Gary Cuiba's "Hearing Percy: Deafness, Fatherhood, and Fiction" discusses deafness and American Sign Language in Percy's life and novels; Percy had a deaf daughter and spent his career studying language and semiotic. H. Collin Messer discusses Augustinian influences on suicide and baptism in *The Last Gentleman*. Rhonda McDonnell's "Southern Hauntings: William Alexander Percy's Influence on Walker Percy" uses Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* to chart Percy's growth to independence as a writer and illuminate some more obscure passages in his novels. Karey Lea Perkins's "Reading by the Numbers: The Peirce-Percy Semiotic in Walker Percy's Fiction" and Kenneth Laine Ketner's "The Emergence of Walker Percy's Radical Anthropology" both elucidate Percy's unique semiotic anthropology, particularly the influence of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, illuminating its impact on Percy's novels. Lamar Nisley's "Walker Percy's Diagnosis and Prescriptions for the 21st Century" examines the prophetic Percy's continued relevance and importance thirty years after his death while Farrell O'Gorman's "Coming in from the Porch: Walker Percy and the English Department" offers suggestions and guidance for

teaching an oft-overlooked Walker Percy in today's literary classrooms. Finally, Stacey Ake provides an incisive and entertaining review of Percy's newest book, the posthumously published *Symbol & Existence: A Study in Meaning* (2019).

Readers, we wish you long and continued triadic joy in the intersubjective experience of reading Percy and reading about Percy.

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We Wear the Mask: Race and Representation in the Fiction of Walker Percy

Michael Kobre

Early in Walker Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, his protagonist and narrator, Binx Bolling, the wastrel son of an old Southern family, goes to visit his aunt and has an awkward exchange with her Black butler, in the first inter-racial encounter in Percy's fiction. Binx, who lives in a self-imposed exile from the traditions of his patrician family, is painfully aware that neither he nor Mercer can comfortably inhabit the old roles of master and servant. "My main emotion around Mercer is unease," Binx says, "that in threading his way between servility and presumption, his foot might slip. I wait on Mercer, not he on me" (220). Though Mercer has served the Bolling family for generations, the pretense of mutual devotion that he and Binx enact in this scene—wearing the first of many masks that will figure into the relationships between Percy's White protagonists and the Black characters who also people their world—is particularly *now*, on the cusp of the 1960s, even harder to sustain. "Mercer," Binx tells us, "has dissolved somewhat in recent years. It is not so easy to say who he is any more" (22).

Never simply the "faithful retainer" that Binx's Aunt Emily believes him to be, "a living connection to a bygone age," Mercer has also used his position managing the household for his own benefit, "getting kickbacks from the servants and tradespeople" (23). Moreover, Mercer wants to see himself as something more than the servant of a White family. While Binx listens as Mercer tries to engage him in a conversation about "current events"—"but they still hasn't the factories and the—ah—producing set-up we has"—Binx remarks dismissively in his narration that "Mercer has aspirations. . . . When he succeeds in seeing himself, it is as a remarkable sort of fellow, a man who keeps himself well-informed in science and politics" (23-24). To Binx, Mercer exists now in a kind of liminal space between multiple selves—much like the way he stands physically while Binx watches him make a fire as they talk, "facing neither me nor the fire but in a kind of limbo" (23). Mercer is not content anymore simply to be a butler, but, at least in Binx's

estimation, he's not always so sure of himself either as an urbane, informed man of the world.

In this brief moment, we catch our first glimpse of the changing social and racial landscape that Percy's characters must navigate. In fact, Binx's words about Mercer—"It is not so easy to say who he is any more"—apply as well to Binx himself and to so many of Percy's other White characters. Published in 1961, *The Moviegoer,* like Percy's second novel *The Last Gentleman* from 1966, takes place in a country being transformed by the struggle for racial equality, as his third novel, *Love in the Ruins* from 1971, imagines how that struggle violently upends a fragmented America, in a vaguely futuristic satire shaped by the increasing polarization and violence that Percy saw around him at the end of the 60s. In each of his first three novels—all shaped, in different degrees, by the turbulence of the 60s—Percy embraces a conviction expressed in a 1968 interview with Carlton Cremeens: "I don't see how anybody, any serious writer living in the South, or in America, for that matter, who is writing novels, can avoid the social issue of race because, particularly in the South and recently in the whole country, it is the number one issue of this society. In the South it always was" (17).

But although Percy was an advocate for racial equality—"I don't march in picket lines," he told Cremeens, "but I am completely convinced of the rightness of the Negro struggle for civil rights" (17)—his novels are ultimately more concerned with the way that this changing racial landscape affects his White characters. While *The Last Gentleman*, as we'll see, sends its protagonist, Will Barrett, another troubled scion of another old Southern family, on a journey through a South (and North as well) racked by conflict, the struggle for civil rights is really only a dramatic backdrop to its White protagonist's anomie and romantic misadventures. A scene inspired by the violent response in 1962 to James Meredith's enrollment as the first Black student at the University of Mississippi, for instance, functions in the novel mostly as a plot mechanism, a bit of comic business that separates Will from his flighty inamorata Kitty Vaught and allows Will to continue his picaresque journey alone. Ultimately, Percy's treatment of what he called "the social issue of race" focuses more on how the undoing of an old racial hierarchy challenges his White characters' understanding of themselves. In that scene with Mercer, for instance, Percy's focus is on Binx's "unease" at not being able to behave like a proper master, not whatever confusion or ambivalence Mercer might feel as a servant. And yet Percy's almost preternaturally acute protagonists do at least perceive a more complex reality in their interactions with Black characters. Sly, evasive, and given to wearing masks of their own—as when Binx assumes the mannerisms of any number of movie

stars or Will in *The Last Gentleman* manages to make each member of the Vaught family believe "that he was his or her special sort of person" (49)—Percy's protagonists also recognize that the graciousness and deference of the Black servants and laborers who surround them is a kind of mask too—even if, in the end, Percy's protagonists are unable (or perhaps not curious enough) to imagine what's concealed behind that mask.

At the most basic level, characters like Binx and Will (and to a lesser extent Tom More in *Love in the Ruins*) live in the aftermath of the "momentous change" in the South that Percy detailed in his 1956 essay "Stoicism in the South," in which he described the "dissolution of the old alliance" between upper-class White Southerners and Southern Blacks (83, 89). Where the patrician class had once been "the champion of Negro rights in the South, and of fair-mindedness and toleration in general" (83), those upper-class White Southerners, who also found their authority challenged by White populists, turned their backs on the civil rights movement and retreated instead to a kind of Stoic pessimism "which took a grim satisfaction in the dissolution of its values" (85). Rather than seeing the struggle for civil rights as a moral crusade, the Southern patrician, Percy suggests, saw only "the insolence of his former charge—and this is what he can't tolerate, the Negro's demanding his rights instead of being thankful for the squire's generosity" (86). As Percy's biographers Jay Tolson and Patrick Samway and critics like Farrell O'Gorman have shown, the evolution of Percy's own views on race was directly linked to his conversion to Catholicism in his early thirties, particularly through the influence of two Jesuit priests and civil rights activists, Fathers Louis Twomey and J.H. Fichter, at Loyola University, where Percy received instruction for his conversion (O'Gorman 72). Though Percy, as Tolson has shown, embraced segregation as a young man (Tolson 129), by the time he wrote "Stoicism in the South," his faith had taught him to see the struggle for racial equality "in the Christian scheme [as] the sacred right which must be accorded the individual, whether deemed insolent or not" ("Stoicism" 86).

To be sure, however, the civil rights struggle is only incidental in *The Moviegoer*, part of the landscape but at a distance from the events of the novel, and only ever mentioned directly when Binx's Aunt Emily, in a wide-ranging expression of the Stoic's pessimism, suggests that "minority groups . . . blackmail the government" (223). If, as Percy said in 1968, "the social issue of race . . . is the number one issue of this society," Binx never mentions it or thinks about it. It certainly doesn't come up in the conversation about "current events" with Mercer, whom we might expect, given his pride in being "well-informed in science and

politics," to be well-aware of the activities of Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—although it's also likely that Mercer, behind the mask of the "faithful retainer," also knows that there are some subjects he shouldn't bring up with his White employers.

In fact, the only other moment when Binx interacts—sort of—with a Black character happens at the climax of the novel.[1] At this point Binx has betrayed Emily's trust and taken her stepdaughter Kate—a haunted woman who flirts with suicide and is the only person who sees through Binx's masks—on a business trip to Chicago without telling Emily. Cast out by Emily, seemingly expelled from the graces of his affluent family, and forced to confront at last the existential despair that he's tried to hold at bay throughout the novel (as so many other readings of *The Moviegoer* have discussed), Binx experiences a crisis of faith as he sits with Kate in her car parked outside a church and sees a Black man pull up on the street behind them. This Black man, "more respectable than respectable . . . more middle class than one could believe," sees Binx and Kate watching him in their rearview mirror and performs a casual gesture of blowing his nose with his handkerchief before he goes inside the church, presumably to celebrate Ash Wednesday (233). To Binx, the simple act of the Black man reaching for his handkerchief and blowing his nose is "a magical placative gesture" (233), a kind of performance, in fact, designed to signal his comfort here on this street, in a racially divided country, outside what was then the only integrated Catholic church in New Orleans (O'Gorman 78). But because of the color of this man's skin "it is impossible to be sure," Binx tells us, that he has received ashes after he walks back out of the church, an uncertainty that expands in Binx's narration into a contemplation on the possibility of faith itself (235). As he watches this Black man, Binx repeatedly remarks that "[i]t is impossible to say why he is here" (235). Is it a routine errand, a gesture that middle class respectability demands, or a true act of faith? As O'Gorman writes, "Binx glimpses through the actions of the black stranger—and his inclusion in a Christianity truly practiced—the possibility of a new life as a believer" (79).

But in this genuinely epiphanic moment, we're reminded as well of the typical relation of Percy's White protagonists to the Black background characters who also populate his novels. This "more middle class than one could believe" Black man whose brief stop at church becomes a crucial waystation in Binx's journey exemplifies what Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* describes as "the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them" (viii). Like virtually all of Percy's other Black characters, this man appears in the novel to reveal something to a White character and to serve as a marker of

Binx's transformation. Moreover, while Binx's inability to say why this Black man is here surely reflects the mystery of faith, all the things that Binx finds "impossible to say" about him also reflect Binx's inability to imagine his inner life. As much as Binx can clearly perceive the face this man presents to the world *as* a kind of presentation—as a mask, that is—he doesn't try to or cannot see what's behind it.

But if *The Moviegoer* barely acknowledges the civil rights struggle, Will Barrett's journey in *The Last Gentleman* takes him across its landscape. In *The Last Gentleman*, Will struggles with the legacy of his "honorable and violent" family's traditions and Stoic values, as they tried and failed over successive generations to live by a code of honor and a sense of class identity that were increasingly anachronistic in a changing social and racial structure (6). Unable to come to terms with his past—including, as we discover gradually, the repressed memory of his father's suicide—Will has fled to New York City at the beginning of the novel, spent five futile years in analysis, and is afflicted with fugue states in which he suffers "spells of amnesia" (7). In fact, as the novel's title tells us, Will's predicament reflects exactly what Binx said about Mercer: "It is not so easy to say who he is any more."

Ultimately, the action of the novel takes Will back to the South, when through a deftly staged comedy of coincidental meetings and eavesdropping, Will spots Kitty Vaught, a young Southern heiress, struggling with her identity too, and he becomes entangled with her family, only to be hired as a kind of companion to her brother Jamie, who's dying of leukemia. When the Vaughts decide to take Jamie home to Alabama, Will, who's accidentally left behind at first, follows them and begins a journey that will put him on the fringes of the civil rights struggle and force him, in isolated moments at least, to consider the complexity of racial relations in a changing landscape.

These moments begin in broad comedy when Will is picked up hitchhiking by Forney Aiken—whose name itself signals the comic tone of this sequence—a white photojournalist who's darkened his skin to slip under "the cotton curtain" and expose the injustices inflicted on Southern Blacks (101). Will's adventures with Forney—who will return much later in the novel, at a folk theatre festival in Will's hometown—provide an opportunity for Percy to satirize what he called in a 1957 letter to *America* magazine, "the Northern ideologist: the ritualistic liberal who sacrifices the human encounter for the abstract liberal passion" ("A Southern View" 91). The initial episode with Forney also allows Percy to depict the reality of racism in the North too, when Will and Forney stop in the iconic Long Island suburb of Levittown and Forney is mistaken for a "blockbuster" trying to buy a house and integrate the neighborhood.

But the novel's depiction of race becomes more nuanced when Will rejoins the Vaughts and they arrive, first, at a beach hotel in Georgia. There, we're told in the narration, in a third-person voice that tracks closely with Will's consciousness, that the graciousness and deference of the hotel staff is itself a kind of mask: "A hundred servants waited on them, so black and respectful, so absolutely amiable and well-disposed that it was possible to believe they really were" (134). As Will observes, "One or two of them were by way of being characters and allowed themselves to get on a footing with you," so that a particular servant who teases Will about his habit of reading a book of maxims displays "a special sort of boldness, even a recklessness, which he took to be his due by virtue of the very credential of his amiability" (134). Always carefully attuned to the way others present themselves, Will recognizes that this man's "amiability," his way "of being [a character]" is a kind of mask too that's carefully shaped to negotiate a delicate balance of power.

Indeed, when Will and the Vaughts arrive at their home in Alabama, "a castle fronting on a golf course" (147), his perceptiveness—or "radar," as it's called in the novel—unsettles the Vaughts' servants:

> He baffled the Negroes and they him. The Vaught servants were buffaloed by the engineer [as Will, who's convinced he can engineer his life according to scientific principles, likes to think of himself] and steered clear of him. Imagine their feeling. They of course lived by their radars too. It was their special talent and it was how they got along: tuning in on the assorted signals about them and responding with a skill two hundred years in the learning. And not merely responding. Not merely answered the signals but providing home and sustenance to the transmitter, giving him, the transmitter, to believe that he dwelled in loving and familiar territory. He must be made to make sense, must the transmitter; must be answered with sense and good easy laughter: sho now, we understand each other. But here came this strange young man who transmitted no signal at all but who rather, like them, was all ears and eyes and antennae. He actually looked at them. (151-52)

In this remarkable passage, Percy delineates the mask of Blackness that the Vaught servants present to their White employers as a façade of "loving and familiar territory": "*sho now, we understand each other*." Moreover, he recognizes, in part at least but with no comment or extended examination, that this mask has been shaped over centuries and is essential to "how they got along." And he tells us as well how this

presentation is received by its audience, of the "sustenance" and comfort they derive from it. Indeed, as the narration goes on, we're told that this comfort is so great that White Southerners don't even need to look at their servants: "A Southerner looks at a Negro twice: once when he is a child and sees his nurse for the first time; second, when he is dying and there is a Negro with him to change his bedclothes" (152). Hence, the remarkable fact to the Vaught servants is that Will, as careful an observer as any of Percy's protagonists, "actually looked at them."

In "Hybridity and Racial Identity in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*," Brannon Costello suggests that what Will calls his "radar," that ability he shares with the Vaught servants to be "all ears and eyes and antennae," is a form of "cultural hybridity" from postcolonial criticism. Will's struggle to at least transcend the rigid binaries of race and class that he inherited, in a Jim Crow South that was its own kind of colonial system, is, Costello suggests, like the struggle of former colonial subjects and masters who try to forge new identities through "a hybrid position uncompromised by colonial polarities" (16). Achingly aware, as Costello argues, that he can no longer "perform his aristocratic whiteness" (17), Will develops his own radar and, I'd add, his own repertoire of masks that align him with the finely tuned "radars" of the Vaught servants and help him understand how this mask of "loving and familiar territory" serves them.

In recognizing these intricately masked interactions between Blacks and Whites, Percy acknowledges the essential truth of Black texts like Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.[2] Percy sees clearly what Kevin Young in *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* calls the African American tradition "of hiding one's self, life, loves, and more, often in plain sight" (23). But if Percy understands that the masks his Black characters take on are essential parts of "how they got along," he stops at that point. He does not consider or perhaps cannot imagine what Dunbar, among others, tells us about what these masks conceal:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties. (1-5)

In not seeing and perhaps not even imagining the "torn and bleeding hearts" or the "tortured souls" that Dunbar reveals behind the masks, Will stands in relation to *The Last Gentleman*'s Black characters in much the same way that Binx exists alongside and interacts with that

Black man outside the church on Ash Wednesday. Binx's and Will's respective radars are finely attuned to the "myriad subtleties" these Black characters present to them, but for all the exquisite sensitivity that Binx and Will and Percy's other protagonists use to examine and comment on the inner lives of so many of the White characters they interact with, they can't really imagine the inner lives of the Black people who surround them and often serve them. As Binx admits, "It is impossible to say."

In a comparable way, although *The Last Gentleman* takes place at a turbulent point in the civil rights struggle, the novel consistently evokes those events and then turns away from them. When Will, Kitty, and Jamie enroll at the University of Alabama after they've returned home, a subplot is introduced about the imminent arrival of the school's first Black student, in a narrative thread that's clearly inspired by the violent conflict at the University of Mississippi when James Meredith integrated the school in 1962. But when Will's classmates gather at the Vaught home and freely trade racist jokes—"Do y'all know the difference between a nigger and an ape?" (209)—Will is at once baffled by their hatred and almost apologetic in his characterization of the White Southerners who voice it:

> They're good chaps and so very much at one with themselves and with the dear world around them as bright and sure as paradise . . . they knew what they wanted and who they hated. Oh, why ain't I like them, thought the poor engineer, who was by no means a liberal—never in fact giving such matters a single thought—but who rather was so mystified by white and black alike that he could not allow himself the luxury of hatred. Oh, but they were lordly in theirs, he noticed, as he hobbled along. (210)

To some degree, Will, who can't say clearly "who he is any more," reacts here to what he perceives as the comfort of these young men in their own identities and their assurance of their own privilege, so that their hatred is even "lordly." Will's readiness also to excuse their unremitting racism—"They're good chaps"—is a manifestation of the kind of distorted, almost parodic language that Will continually adapts throughout the novel when he tries hardest to convince himself that it's still possible for him to live an unconflicted existence as a traditional Southern gentleman. At such moments, particularly when he describes what he believes to be the proper sort of feelings for Kitty—"She was his sweetheart, his certain someone. He wanted to hold her charms in his arms" (54-55)—he lapses into a kind of self-parody that

signals the artifice and impossibility (and Will's half-repressed awareness of that impossibility) of what he *thinks* he wants to believe; his need here to convince himself that these young men are "good chaps" is only another example of that pattern. But in another passage when Will recoils in frustration at the guilelessness of a young Black servant, David, who "had not caught onto either the Negro way or the white way" and "was not cunning enough" (152-53), Will's frustration with David is mixed with guilt at the hatred and oppression that he believes David will inevitably suffer and here too, although in less ironic tones, a desire to at least partly expiate the Whites who inflict that oppression: "They're going to violate you and it's going to ruin us all, you, them, us. And that's a shame because they're not that bad. They're not bad. They're better than most, in fact" (154). Will's insistence that "they're not that bad," an insistence so urgent that he repeats it three times in a row, is not ironic here. It's rooted in a genuine ambivalence toward the Southern history he's inherited and an inability to sever his bonds with the White friends, acquaintances, and family members who embrace or support those old systems of oppression.

No wonder then that the scene dramatizing the violence that finally breaks out when the Black student arrives on campus isn't really about that violence. At this point in the plot Will is trying to convince Kitty to accompany him when he will take to the road again to catch up with Jamie, who's disappeared from the Vaught home with his older brother, the mysterious Sutter, once a brilliant psychiatrist and diagnostician who's ruined his career yet seems to Will to be a kind of wise man, with an abstruse journal that he leaves behind for Will to puzzle over. But when Kitty insists to Will that they return to campus to pick up a textbook, they arrive in the middle of a riot, as white men with shotguns and other "dark figures" race past them (227). In the midst of this, for just a moment, Will has a quick encounter that embodies the raw terror and hatred that fuels this violence:

> A girl, a total stranger, appeared from nowhere and taking him by the coat sleeves thrust her face within inches of his. "Hi," he said.
>
> "He's here," she sobbed and jerked his clothes like a ten-year-old. "Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" she sobbed, jerking now at his lapels. (227)

Although Percy vividly dramatizes the casual horror of this young woman's reaction, in her childish distress and vehement thirst for blood, this moment passes without comment. Instead, the riot at the university, barely two pages in the novel, devolves into comedy, when

Will, in a bit of sheer slapstick, is accidentally knocked unconscious by a group of students running toward the school's Confederate monument with a flagstaff that may be flying the Confederate flag. In the elaborate mechanism of the novel's plot, this turn of events separates Will from Kitty, who's been made to take shelter in her sorority house, for the remainder of the book. Later in the novel, in fact, Will simply thinks of the riot as "the ruckus on the campus" (248).

The novel's only other direct reference to the historical events of the civil rights struggle comes when Will reads a passage in the journal that Sutter left behind for him. Most of Sutter's journal is filled with autopsy notes (he works sometimes as a pathologist) and elliptical philosophical musings on sex, alienation, and God, which are often structured as Sutter's half of a dialogue with his sister Val, who's converted to Catholicism, become a nun, and runs a school for Black children in a poor rural county. But here, at a moment in the novel when Will's odyssey finally takes him back to his hometown, Ithaca, Mississippi—where he promptly sees a civil rights protest at the Courthouse and turns away from it, "[h]aving had enough of ruckuses and police sirens" (241)—he stumbles on a passage in Sutter's journal describing the autopsy of a 13-year-old Black girl killed in a church bombing that's clearly modeled on the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. "Brain: frank blood in subdural space, extensive laceration right cortex; bomb shards," Sutter writes in a list of clinical details that feels willfully abstracted (as a kind of mask perhaps for Sutter's horror) (242). But just as Will turned away from the "ruckus" at the courthouse a page earlier, Sutter abruptly changes the subject of his journal after the autopsy notes. "But never mind the South," Sutter writes, before beginning again the quarrel with his sister over faith (242).

Will, however, cannot quite escape the South so easily and becomes embroiled in a confrontation with the local police when he runs into Forney again, here in Ithaca for the folk theatre festival he'd mentioned earlier and seemingly in flight from the police after the "ruckus" at the courthouse. When Will, Forney, and Forney's companions—a Hollywood actor, the actor's girlfriend, and an edgy Black playwright who's a parody of James Baldwin—take shelter at a local bar, The Dew Drop Inn, run by a Black proprietor, "named Sweet Evening Breeze who was said to be effeminate" (249), they're confronted by two police officers, and "for once," we're told, "things became as clear [to Will] as they used to be in the old honorable days" (256). When one of the police officers hits Breeze with a blackjack and then menaces the actor's girlfriend—"Where's the poontang?" he'd said when he first entered the bar (255)—Will is finally stirred to action and knocks him out. But even

if Will can in this moment, in Costello's words, "perform his aristocratic whiteness," he acts at least as much to protect a White woman's honor as to redress an injustice inflicted on a Black man. What really matters here in the novel's values is that Will is finally, briefly able "to say who he is" in this confrontation. Once again, "the social issue of race" functions as a backdrop to a White character's personal struggle.

In doing so, this moment sets up the novel's pivotal scene, which follows immediately afterwards, when Will stands outside his childhood home and finally confronts the memory he's repressed of the night his father killed himself. Over the course of the novel, in what is really a kind of trauma narrative, Will has remembered his father's suicide in brief, incomplete fragments, enacting what Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* calls the "insistent return" of the traumatic event (5). Now we see in full the events of that night, when Will's father, having actually just prevailed in some kind of conflict with the Klan, stood on the same sidewalk where Will stands now, listening to Brahms on a gramophone on the porch behind him and voicing what Percy in "Stoicism in the South" called the Stoic's "grim satisfaction in the dissolution of [his] values" (85). For Ed Barrett, the White population's increasingly open display of sexuality—Ed watches from a distance couples parked in their cars along the levee—further dismantles old racial hierarchies; as Costello writes, "He believes that by bringing their sexuality into public view, white people undermine their morally superior position and give blacks a vantage point from which to question white authority" (20). But for Ed this loss of clear moral and racial distinctions—that looming inability, for him too, "to say who he is any more"—is unbearable, driving him ultimately to turn back into the house and kill himself with a shotgun. Will's struggle here, after he's reconstructed this memory at last, is to imagine a way of being, an identity, that's different from his father's. If part of that different way of being is to forget about the old code of Southern honor and just embrace the beauty and ordinariness of a summer night instead—what Percy, commenting on this scene in his essay "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," calls Will's "glimpse of the goodness and gratuitousness of created beauty" (221)—Will must also renounce those old racial hierarchies. Consequently, the moment when Will touches an old iron hitching post embedded in the coarse bark of an oak tree and experiences "the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark" is followed by Will's awareness of a Black man, "a young man his own age," walking down the sidewalk towards him (261, 262).

In the past, in such an encounter between a White and a Black person, the old hierarchies demanded a kind of ritual deference—". . . it had been his, the Negro's business, until now, to see him first"

(262)—even as those old hierarchies provided a structure for familiar, seemingly easy interactions across racial differences (although, as we see in the memory of one of these conversations a few pages earlier, these interactions were masked too, as Will remembers a Black man talking with his father and "working him of course for the fifty cents or five dollars or what, but working him as gracefully as anyone ever worked, they as good at their trade as he at his" [259]). But for young men of Will's generation, living in a different historical moment, there is "nothing to say," a change expressed in the prose of the novel when the boundary between Will's consciousness and the novel's third-person narration dissolves entirely and Will slips into a Faulknerian register that might have been adapted from the fourth chapter of Faulkner's *The Bear*:

> You may be in a fix and I know that but what you don't know and won't believe and must find out for yourself is that I'm in a fix too and you got to get to where I am before you even know what I'm talking about and I know that and that's why there is nothing to say now. Meanwhile I wish you well. (Percy, *Last Gentleman* 262)

In these lines Percy explicitly acknowledges that the real concern with "the social issue of race" in *The Last Gentleman* is "the fix" that White characters like Will find themselves in as old racial structures are challenged and forced to change. Apart from benign expressions of support—"Meanwhile I wish you well"—the novel has nothing to say about the goals and the significance of the struggle for racial equality that was transforming America. The only hint at an agenda for the future is found when Will, after fleeing from "the ruckus on the campus," stops briefly at Valentine Vaught's school for poor Black children, founded ironically on the grounds of an old segregated academy, which looks to Will like "a place of crude and makeshift beginnings on some blasted planet" (238). Val's work embodies what Percy calls the Christian's recognition of "the sacred right which must be accorded the individual" ("Stoicism" 86). But even here, most of the scene with Val is focused on her explanation of her conversion, and Sutter later in a passage from his journal mocks Val's work and predicts her failure. Her students will ultimately reject her, he asserts: ". . . ten years from now it won't even mean anything to them: either they'll be Muslims and hate your guts or they'll be middle-class and buggered like everybody else" (243).

That future, in fact, is what Percy explores in his third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, a sprawling satire that takes place in a decaying America in a then-futuristic 1983, complete with vines sprouting through the pave-

ment and sleek "bubbletop" cars (37). The novel's antic plot follows the temptation of its narrator, Dr. Thomas More, a disgraced psychiatrist recovering from a breakdown who invents a device that is capable, in his words, of "measuring and treating the deep perturbations of soul" (29). Though he's older than Binx or Will, in his mid-forties, Tom is an acute observer like them and wears his own kind of mask too, what he calls his "Southern trick of using manners and even madness guilefully and for one's own ends" (108). But when Tom's "Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer" (30) is hijacked by a shady bureaucrat who may or may not be a genuinely diabolical figure—the novel is, among other things, a variation on *Faust*—the hidden passions and hatreds of Tom's neighbors are released and the device itself, which is powered by radiation from heavy sodium, threatens to trigger a cloud of noxious fallout that will unleash even more inner demons. These events happen against a backdrop of a failing and deeply polarized country, riven by political tensions that mirror the divisions of the 60s, including a long unpopular war in a foreign country—Ecuador, that is. Ultimately, in Tom's Louisiana community, these political tensions threaten to explode in an armed rebellion by Black radicals, called "Bantus" in the novel, who live in an outlaw community of hippies, dropouts, and radicals in a swamp that's not far from the segregated suburb of Paradise Estates where Tom lives.

In this fear of Black violence, *Love in the Ruins* is likely inspired by the anxiety that Percy expressed in a letter to his daughter Mary Pratt in 1966 when she was in college in Washington, D.C., a concern so urgent that he wrote his warning in all caps: "WE LIVE IN UNSETTLED REVOLUTIONARY TIMES. A LARGE SEGMENT OF THE NEGRO POPULATION IS SO ALIENATED FROM THIS AFFLUENT SOCIETY THAT THEY ARE VERGING ON MASS CRIMINALITY. FOR GOD'S SAKE, TAKE NO CHANCES AT ALL" (qtd. in Samway 247). In the novel though, this anxiety takes on almost cartoonish tones (which, to be fair, a lot of other things in the novel do too). The leader of the Bantus, Uru, speaks in revolutionary clichés—he promises to "[t]ake what we need, destroy what we don't, and live in peace and brotherhood" (327)—and, as we learn, he wears a kind of mask too, although it's a different mask from the ones worn by the Black characters in Percy's previous novels. Uru's clothing, an African herbalist's tunic, and even his name—"We have no Jew-Christian names," he declares (300)—are part of an assumed identity for the former Elijah Washington, a professional football player with a Ph.D. in political science. In the context of Percy's satire, these trappings of the Black Power movement appear as inauthentic as Tom's mother's home, a recreation of Tara from *Gone*

With the Wind, and the figures of Black jockeys that White transplants from the North put on their lawns in Paradise Estates.

No wonder then that when Uru evokes the Western world's history of racial enslavement and oppression in a conversation with Tom after he's been temporarily captured by the Bantus, Tom is dismissive. "What would you do about the four hundred years?" Uru asks, which prompts Tom to say, "I'd stop worrying about it and get on with it. To tell you the truth, I'm tired of hearing about the four hundred years" (301). And yet Tom's breezy advice to stop worrying about the past and "get on with it" runs counter to the novel's own historical vision, which is expressed in almost Faulknerian terms (again) when Tom ruminates at length on the decline of the United States near the beginning of the novel:

> Was it the nigger business from the beginning? What a bad joke: God saying, here it is, the new Eden, and it is yours because you're the apple of my eye; because you the lordly Westerners, the fierce Caucasion-Gentile-Visigoths, believed in me and in the outlandish Jewish Event even though you were nowhere near it and had to hear news of it from strangers. But you believed and so I gave it all to you, gave you Israel and Greece and science and art and the lordship of the earth, and finally even gave you the new world that I blessed for you. And all you had to do was pass one little test, which was surely child's play for you because you had already passed the big one. One little test: here's a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. That's all. (57)

Here, in the way that the Black man outside the church in New Orleans stepped on to the stage of *The Moviegoer* to provide an occasion for Binx's spiritual epiphany, the entire population of Africa exists to test the morality of "the lordly Westerners" destined by God for mastery of "the new world." In this sweeping historical vision, which reaches back much further than 400 years, that "helpless man in Africa" embodies on a global scale what Toni Morrison calls "the Africanist presence" in literature by Whites. As Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness" (17). Here, then, Tom's "fears and desires" for the destiny of those "lordly Westerners" are manifest in an Africanist presence that exists primarily to be violated by Whites and perhaps later redeemed by them also, to reaffirm their own generosity and moral capacity. Just as the significance of "the social issue of race"

in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* is what it means for the identities of the Bollings and the Barretts and Whites like them, here the history of slavery and racial oppression—what Tom brusquely calls "the nigger business"—is significant only as a test for white morality.

In the end, Percy virtually abandons the subplot of the Bantu revolution at the end of the novel and lets its resolution play out off-stage. In the book's climactic scene, while a host of minor characters infected by the fallout from Tom's stolen lapsometers yell slogans at each other, a state trooper tells Tom that the Bantus have only carried out some vandalism in Paradise Estates. As we learn later, in the novel's epilogue, their revolution "was a flop; they got beat in the troubles five years ago and pulled back to the swamp" (385). In fact, Percy even relies on a kind of *deus ex machina* to resolve the novel's racial conflicts when oil is discovered in the swamp and the Bantus get rich and simply buy the homes in Paradise Estates, embracing the same bourgeois values as the previous White homeowners and perhaps even fulfilling Sutter Vaught's prediction in *The Last Gentleman* that poor Southern Blacks, like Valentine Vaught's students, would ultimately become "middle class and buggered like everyone else."

And yet, for all of Percy's seeming impatience to wrap up the whole plot thread of the Bantu revolution—in Tom's words, to "get on with it"—*Love in the Ruins* offers at least one scene that examines racial conflict in a way unlike anything else in his fiction. The scene is set up when Tom, after wandering through the town and taking regular pulls from a bottle of Early Times whiskey, passes out and is helped by a black friend, Victor Charles, a laborer and church deacon who's become involved with the Bantu revolution. Throughout the novel, in fact, Victor helps shield Tom from Uru and other Bantus. "Doc, all I want to do is help you," Victor says, offering Tom his own version of the Vaught servants' mask of "loving and familiar territory." "You say to me, do this, that, or the other, and I'll do it," he assures Tom (146). So after Tom recovers from fainting, Victor helps him get to a local bar, The Little Napoleon, which is owned by Tom's friend, Leroy Ledbetter. Victor's presence in the bar—walking through the front door, no less—is an incursion into a segregated space, and Tom, with all the exacting perception of "myriad subtleties" that Percy's watchful protagonists always deploy, carefully notes the intricate dance of manners that both Leroy and Victor enact, which takes them to the verge of violence and then allows each man to back away—but only after Leroy realizes that Victor stepped into the bar in a proper deferential way, helping a White man. Leroy retreats to small talk about the weather that may or may not be directed at Victor, and Victor "withholding perhaps 20 percent acknowledgement (2 percent too much?) . . . leaves by the side door"

(151). Yet even though conflict has been averted, Tom is still disturbed. In contrast to Will's exaggerated insistence that young men trading racist jokes and planning to violently resist integration are "good chaps," Tom experiences nothing less than terror when he remembers how Leroy came close to violence five years ago also—at the beginning of the troubles with the Bantus—when he refused to let a Black couple bowl at the Paradise Lanes that he and Tom had then co-owned.

In a remarkable meditation that follows Victor's "near infraction of zoning" (151), Tom tries to understand how Leroy—"the sort of fellow, don't you know, who if you run in a ditch or have a flat tire shows up to help you out" (152)—could be ready to react so violently to a Black couple who simply wanted to go bowling:

> Where did the terror come from? Not from violence; violence gives release from terror. Not from Leroy's wrongness, for if he were altogether wrong, an evil man, the matter would be simple and no cause for terror. No, it came from Leroy's goodness, that he is a decent, sweet-natured man who would bind up a stranger's wounds. No, the terror comes from the goodness and what lies beneath, some fault in the soul's terrain so deep that all is well on top, evil grins like good, but something shears and tears deep down and the very ground stirs beneath one's feet. (152)

In James Baldwin's 1965 story "Going to Meet the Man," a racist Southern deputy is presented as an unremitting monster who sees Blacks as "no better than animals" and is sexually aroused by violence against them (1333). Yet for all the horror of Baldwin's racist deputy Jesse, the terror that Leroy inspires here is more disturbing. As Tom tells us, "if he were altogether wrong, an evil man, the matter would be simple and no cause for terror" (152). It's precisely because Leroy's hatred is so thoroughly mixed with his "goodness" that even Tom, who sees a little of himself in Leroy "as another seventh-generation Anglo-Saxon American," feels unsteady too (152). In this passage, in contrast to our glimpse of that young woman crying "Kill him!" in the riot at the university in *The Last Gentleman*, Percy tries to understand the capacity of ordinary people for blind, unreasoning hatred, forcing us, if only for a moment, to consider that "fault in the soul's terrain" that corrupts Leroy and so many others too.

In the end, of course, it would be too simple to condemn Percy for not writing more politically engaged novels, works more comfortable perhaps to contemporary progressive sensibilities. As much as Percy was tempted to moralize on matters of faith—"What I really want to

do is to tell people *what they must do and what they must believe if they want to live*," he confessed in a 1962 letter to Caroline Gordon (qtd. in Tolson 300)—he had no interest in attaching an overt political message to a novel. "There's no greater danger to fiction, I think, than ideology," he said in a 1983 interview (Jones 278). If *The Last Gentleman,* for instance, ultimately turns away from any real engagement with the Civil Rights Movement, it's simply because that's not the novel Percy wanted to write. The book he had to write instead was really about Will's struggle to survive his father's suicide and the glimpse of faith that may help him do that. And yet Percy's own finely tuned radar and scrupulously precise eye for detail also capture the "myriad subtleties" of Whites and Blacks interacting with each other through masks and manners. And in this recognition Percy affirms Ralph Ellison's assertion in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" that the act of masking itself "is in the American grain" (55). From the masks that Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ellison's own Invisible Man, and the Vaught servants, among others, assume to negotiate a world ruled by Whites, to the homespun masks of open-handed simplicity contrived by men like Benjamin Franklin and Abe Lincoln, "America," Ellison says, "is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past" (55). In Walker Percy's fiction also, we see this America—violent, contradictory, and never as simple as it seems. Here, too, we wear the mask.

Notes

1. There are occasional glimpses of other black figures in the background of the novel. The most haunting is an image of a Mardi Gras parade with "a vanguard of half a dozen extraordinary Negroes dressed in Ku Klux Kan robes" whose "fierce black faces" excite the crowd, in a precursor of the fear of Black power we'll see in *Love in the Ruins* (62).

2. ". . . [O]ur life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days," the narrator's grandfather says in *Invisible Man*, "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). As Patrick Samway notes, "Walker thought highly of Ellison's work" (255).

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Hearing Percy: Deafness, Fatherhood, and Fiction

Gary M. Ciuba

In a 1980 interview, Henry Kisor, the book editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, asked Walker Percy if he ever contemplated writing a novel in which the main character was deaf.[1] The journalist knew that Percy had a daughter who was deaf from an early age and a grandson who was partially deaf. Kisor himself would later write a memoir about growing up deaf, *What's That Pig Outdoors*?, for which Percy provided the foreword. Percy responded, "My daughter's been quite severe with me about that. She says, 'Why don't you write about the cause of the deaf, the predicament of the deaf?' She's very militant about discrimination against the deaf. I don't know what exactly she wants me to do, but . . . " (Kisor 196). Perhaps Percy was stymied by the imaginative identification required for such fiction. He earlier wondered, "Do you think that anybody who's not deaf could write such a novel? Do you think a hearing person could ever really know what it means to be deaf? My daughter says it's impossible" (196). However, writing about deafness seemed less of an unspeakable challenge for fellow hearing writers of modern Southern fiction, whose works Percy knew and often admired: William Faulkner (in *Flags in the Dust* and *The Mansion* as well as "Elly" and "Hand Upon the Waters"), Eudora Welty (in "The Key" and "First Love"), Carson McCullers (in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*), Flannery O'Connor (in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and *The Violent Bear It Away*), and Harry Crews (in *The Gypsy's Curse*) (Holditch 32). And unlike those writers, Percy had the advantage of being homeschooled in deafness, for he and his wife worked assiduously to facilitate the education of their daughter Ann. Percy's longtime friend and fellow novelist Shelby Foote cited Ann's deafness as the major influence on Percy's life and writing (122), but despite publishing six works of fiction, Percy never wrote a novel about "the cause of the deaf, the predicament of the deaf" (Kisor 196).

Percy's authorial reticence might make it seem that deafness gets "deafened" in his fiction. However, just as a largely unrecognized "deaf presence" in nineteenth-century American literature has been identified by Christopher Krentz (64), deafness in Percy's novels does not so much disappear as linger like a formative trace, there but not there,

taking up space in the margins, glimpsed before it seems out of sight again. Deafness may be repressed in Percy's work, yet it gets expressed even in and by its obvious absence. Deafness does not provide the immediate context for Percy's fictional world; he does not focus on deaf identity, the use of American Sign Language (ASL) or of hearing aids and other assistive technology, the richness of deaf culture, or the struggle of deaf people to gain access and equal rights in a hearing-centered world. Rather, deafness serves as the pretext and subtext of Percy's fiction: pretext because Ann's deafness preceded Percy's six published novels, and subtext because Percy's writing sublimates and subsumes deafness, sometimes even creating substitute ways of voicing it. Percy's fiction was "after Ann," after the discovery of her prelingual deafness, but also after her in a kind of pursuit, after her by way of response, and after her as a form of tribute.

Percy's practice of writing deafness both out of and into his fiction echoes the way that he heard Ann's deafness. Influenced by the oralist approach that dominated pedagogy in mid-twentieth-century America and perhaps by the medical understanding of deafness that Walker gained as a physician, the Percys wanted Ann to be able to speak and understand speech. They were thus typical of most hearing parents in the 1950s in rejecting the use of sign language for teaching their deaf child. It would not be until a decade later that the publication of William Stokoe's *Sign Language Structure* (1960) and his co-written *Dictionary of American Sign Language* (1965) would inspire scholars in linguistics and deaf studies to begin rediscovering a cultural understanding of deafness that was centered on sign language. Although the basis for such deaf identity could be traced to the founding in 1817 of what would become known as the American School for the Deaf, the commitment to education through sign language was increasingly challenged by advocates of oralism and of postbellum nationalism and assimilationism. When a conference of hearing educators in Milan resolved in 1880 that deaf students should be primarily taught to speak and read speech, it set the pattern that still prevailed at the time of Ann Percy's education.[2] Deaf parents continued to teach sign language to their children at home, but most schools promoted oralism for their deaf students, ninety percent of whom had hearing parents (Moore and Levitan 184). The Percys pursued this phonocentric goal by hiring Doris Irene Mirrielees as Ann's teacher. She emphasized learning to read, write, speak, and understand speech through practice that was connected with day-to-day activities. And after Mirrielees left the Percy household, Ann's parents continued her life lessons in language. So imbued were the Percys with the Mirrielees method that Percy's wife once turned Walker's being stopped for a speeding ticket into

an impromptu writing lesson for Ann while they were still in the car (Samway 202-03). Hearing Ann's deafness as not-hearing, Percy took a similarly ear-centered approach to pondering the signs that fascinated him in his fiction and nonfiction.

Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning, which Percy worked on during the 1950s but which was only published in 2019, reads like a semiotic exploration of the linguistic issues that Percy was facing in teaching Ann. It is typical of the way that Percy's writing sidles up to deafness. It does not focus on language acquisition by deaf children but writes deafness obliquely by exploring language itself, especially the verbal kind that is paramount for oralists. Central to the book and to all of Percy's subsequent work is the distinction between signs and symbols. Percy argues that whereas signs involve a stimulus and the biological or habitual response of an organism in an environment, symbols link the giver and receiver of specific forms to the world that they jointly formulate (*Symbol* 50-59). Thus, smoke might be a sign of fire, thunder might be a sign of rain, and, as Percy suggests, "The same relation of signification could be made to take place in a deaf organism by using a blue light to announce rain" (176). A sign expresses a causal or conditioned connection, but a symbol expresses denotation and identification. Percy's emphasis on the symbol sought to avoid the extremes of the current rivalrous positions in linguistics—the mechanistic tendencies of behaviorists like B. F. Skinner to explain language acquisition in terms of imitation and operant conditioning, and the overly intellectualized approaches of nativists like Noam Chomsky that attribute such learning to a linguistic instinct and innate mental structures. For Percy, language is as affirmatory and intersubjective as any of the lessons designed by Mirrielees. When a name is shared, as when the teacher or parent shows the deaf child what is meant by "sun" or "walk," the word expresses the mutual celebration of a co-intended person, object, or activity. It binds two people together in a relationship that Percy tellingly hears as involving "a Namer and a Hearer of the name" (181).

If Percy's reference to a "Hearer" privileges the ear in such naming, that priority accords with the education in the word that Ann was receiving in the Percy household. In *Symbol and Existence,* he is especially attuned to "those peculiar mouthy little sounds which we humans make," "the little grunts and hisses and explosions that one man utters and another man somehow understands to 'mean' something else" (10, 36-37). Percy recognizes that a symbol is not exclusively verbal. He admits that symbols include not just "sounds that tremble in the air" but also "gestures that can be seen" (35). He affirms that "a symbol is that sensible (spoken word, written word, gesture)" enabling

users to share their understanding of the world (73). However, Percy tends to emphasize words rather than gestures as his basis for pondering language. Perhaps Percy favors the verbal because he too readily associates the gestural with the signal, with the sequence of stimulus and response that he views as characterizing animal interaction rather than human communication. In *Symbol and Existence* Percy regrets that R. P. Blackmur titled a collection of essays *Language as Gesture* after its opening piece. Although Blackmur viewed language, especially in poetry, as one form of symbolic gesture, Percy hears the title by way of Herbert Mead's very different "conversation of gesture." Such a "conversation" might be exemplified by two dogs fighting over a bone or two boxers feinting and parrying; it depends on "a sequential order of gesture and counter gesture" (181, 214). Mead contrasts such unconscious communication with the conscious communication via significant symbols, which involve precisely the intersubjectivity and co-intentionality that Percy values. Following Mead, Percy asserts that "It is, in fact, only when the gesture, word, or thing is endowed with symbolic meaning, that is, united with a significance other than itself, that it takes on the properties which Blackmur attributes to it" (214). Percy clearly understands the symbolic possibility of gestures, but as a father raising a deaf daughter to be oral, he tends to overlook such potential in favor of what Mead helped him to hear as "the uniqueness of the vocal gesture" (152).

Despite Percy's partiality toward the aural and oral symbol, much of what he writes about speech in *Symbol and Existence* might be applied to the visual symbolization of sign language. Perhaps Percy's distinction between a sign and symbol prevents him from recognizing that a sign in ASL would be considered a symbol by his own description of symbolization as "the *pairing* of two elements, the gesture and the thing, under the relation of identification" (59). Just as Percy claims that such naming by pairing always involves at least two people (64-68), ASL joins users in affirming a common meaning in the sign. Just as Percy recognizes that the vocable—like the "rr" in "berry"—is the "perfect symbolic material" because it is so empty that it can readily take on meaning (88), each of the phonemes that compose the sign—such as the shape, movement, placement, or palm orientation of the hand(s)—is insignificant in isolation but gains meaning as part of a larger system. And just as Percy believes that words may sound like what they signify (77), certain iconic signs in ASL—for example, two palms joined together that then open partly to indicate "book"—look like the objects that they represent. However, even though Percy's semiotic work may have readily made room for signed language, he repeatedly focuses on voiced and heard language. The uttered word is

so significant that Percy even claims, "the first man who spoke was, almost by minimal empirical definition, the first man" (58).[3] Although such an audiocentric approach may sound Percy's preference that his daughter's education be based on speaking rather than signing, it risks confining to an oralist framework his understanding of symbolization in *Symbol and Existence* and in his subsequent fiction.

The novels that Percy published after putting aside *Symbol and Existence* are triumphs of hearing the vivid and changing oral culture of the South. And as Michael Kobre has argued, Percy turned his sensitivity to speech into the kind of dialogic artistry where the Bakhtinian conflict of voices articulates a clash in ideology (3). In such a clamorous fictional world, some of the traces of Ann's deafness seem so slight that they may easily be undetected. Approaching deafness sideways, Percy never imagines a character who is as profoundly deaf as McCullers's John Singer. Rather, he creates characters who may be partly deaf or hearing impaired or hard of hearing. Percy's emphasis on the ear and voice explains why his deaf characters are often minor figures in the novel, or why the deafness plays a minor part in the life of a more important character. Yet Percy writes so many characters who have some degree of deafness that the deafness hardly seems accidental, even if the references seem rather incidental in many of his novels. In *Love in the Ruins*, Victor Charles, who rescues the shaky would-be savior Tom More when the doctor collapses, is "slightly deaf." And so, he "cups an ear" and inquires, "What say, Doc?" after Tom exclaims, "For Christ's sake" (148). When More later debates with Dr. Buddy Brown to decide the fate of an elderly and incommunicado patient, the Director strains to listen. He shouts, frequently puts his hand to his ear, calls for More to speak louder, and repeatedly asks, "Eh? How's that?" (225, 227). In *Lancelot*, the title character's father-in-law is "deafened" and cups his ear to hear better when Lancelot asks him to stop his joking mispronunciation of words with young Siobhan (54, 56). In *The Second Coming* the addled Father Weatherbee has difficulty in hearing Will Barrett importune him in the novel's final pages as Will tries to figure out some new life after his old world has ended. Faced with an apocalyptic plague in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the returning Tom More has to make sure that his wife's "good ear" is not pressed to the pillow when he talks with Ellen in bed. "She's deaf in the other," More observes (53; cf. 55). Such occasional references to deafness serve as briefly noted character traits or occasions of comedy rather than signs of a fully developed identity or cultural membership. Ear-centered readers might hear them as further signs of the difficulties of communication in the modern world that Percy continually explores. As ham radio-operator Father Smith observes in *Love in the Ruins*, "They're jamming the air

waves [. . . .] They've put a gremlin in the circuit" (184). In Percy's fiction, words are no longer working, no longer being heard. However, if "deafness" prevails even among those who have ears to hear, such a metaphorical understanding still privileges hearing. It positions orality as the favored and advantageous opposite against which deafness is defined as a defect and deficiency.

Whereas deafness seems significantly peripheral in much of Percy's fiction, it comes closer to the center in *The Last Gentleman* as Percy considers its role in relation to the Southern ideals of the title. Early in the novel the narrator reports of the would-be gentleman Will Barrett, "Save for a deafness in one ear, his physical health was perfect" (8). The diagnosis implies that deafness is an imperfection: the initial exception in the narrator's sentence, slightly formal and oldfangled as befits the tradition of the last gentleman, qualifies Will's otherwise ideal well-being. His single-sided condition reinforces Percy's approach to deafness as audiological rather than cultural and gives Will a stronger connection to the hearing world that Percy so valued. As Will travels from the Northeast to the South and finally to the Southwest in an odyssey to discover how he might live in the post-gentlemanly world of the 1960s, the narrator repeatedly mentions that Will cups his hand to his ear and strains to hear, that he wrings out his ear, and that he has a deaf side, a "bad ear" or a "good ear." The novel still understands Will's deafness from a medical and oral perspective, but its two dozen references to Will's hearing make deafness significant in Will's struggle to live up to the title of the novel and then to live beyond it.

When Will's picaresque journey brings him to the white enclave of Levittown, he makes the question of hearing into an *affaire d'honneur*. He travels with a John Howard Griffin-like photojournalist who has darkened his skin to explore racism in America, and so he gets mistaken by an anxious group of property owners for the representative of a blockbusting real estate agent. The confused Will makes the ensuing dispute center on civility, not on civil rights, and civility centers on speaking and understanding speech correctly, not on being understood as deaf. After Will is offended by the tone of one householder who calls out to him, the last gentleman wonders, with the archaic diction and questioning self-consciousness of his family's tradition, whether he has reached the ultimate test of his identity: "could it have come at last, a simple fight, with the issue clear beyond peradventure?" (136-37). Although Will knows that the property owner is addressing him, he makes this consummate moment of honor depend on hearing rightly his churlish adversary. He asks, "Are you speaking to me?" and when the man inquires if Will is from Haddon Heights, New Jersey, Will puts his hand to his ear and over-courteously replies, "Sir?" His

would-be challenger curtly retorts, "You heard me," dispensing with the formality that Will brings to this chivalric face-off. Will does not respond in kind but speaks with mannered politeness: "'Sir, I don't believe I like your tone,' said the engineer, advancing a step with his good ear put forward." The narrator explains how the dilemma of the would-be gentleman is related to his deafness:

> Perhaps the time had come again when you could be insulted, hear it aright, and have it out then and there as his grandfather used to have it out. But there must be no mistake. "You were speaking to me?" he asked again, straining every nerve to hear, for nothing is worse than being an honorable deaf man who can't be certain he is insulted. (137)

Will needs such audible reassurance because one of the requirements for any duel in the Old South was to be sure that an offense against the honor code had been committed (Bruce 32). Will seeks to follow the tradition of his ancestors, but his conviction about how to act is compromised by his deafness in one ear. Family legend preserves the memory of how his great grandfather did not hesitate to challenge the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan to a confrontation in the street, yet Will is more like his father and grandfather who lacked the certainty of such an older ethos. Although the young Southerner gradually senses the threat of these Northern segregationists, he addresses their manners rather than their morals. And although Will suspects that he has been slighted, his deafness makes it difficult to establish if the same kind of challenge from his venerable Barrett past is now repeating itself. The last gentleman seeks to hear his way back to an old-fashioned duel and to his family ideal—beyond his father's despair and grandfather's doubt to an undistorted reception of the unequivocal word. Will tries to gain such conviction by confirming that he is indeed the one being addressed and by voicing his umbrage at his would-be rival's minatory tone. Yet such attention to hearing makes the hyper-polite young man sound like an anachronism, especially compared to his loutish opponent. Despite Will's punctiliousness, the duel in the making never lives up to its fierce precedent from the Old South. Instead, it degenerates into the comic violence of slapstick. Even as Will advances toward his foe, he suffers the most ungentlemanly of indignities—he is smacked on his nose, sore from allergies, by a maniacal hausfrau. In the modern North, Will never gets the chance to be "an honorable deaf man who [can] be certain he is insulted" (137).

Percy connects deafness and honor once again when Will heads South and returns to his hometown of Ithaca, Mississippi. There, the

last gentleman puzzles over the legacy of his family when he confronts the earsplitting reverberations of his dead father's duel with himself. Ed Barrett's psychic quarrel ended in suicide because he could not live as a gentleman manqué. As Will virtually relives the night when his father shot himself in the attic of his family home, he recalls his parent's unwavering sense of honor in a society that had betrayed his ideals. The elder Barrett nostalgically yearned for a South of ethical absolutes, yet he beheld an era of such moral laxity and ambiguity that gentlemen could no longer be distinguished from bribers and fornicators. Since Ed Barrett would not bear the intolerable burden of living like a gentleman in a dishonorable age, he died like a gentleman in the Southern Stoic tradition. From the front steps of the family house, the younger Will heard the discharge of the double-barreled shotgun, "a single sound, yet more prolonged and thunderous than a single shot" (318). Will has lived in the aftermath of that extended explosion, as if his father's death had entered his own body through the ear and resounded through it for years. Although *The Second Coming* will provide a yet more grievous explanation of Will's hearing loss, in *The Last Gentleman* it sounds like a repercussion of the suicidal blast that marked the failure of the whole gentlemanly tradition. In Levittown, Will's deafness caused a rowdy comedy of manners in which the would-be hero tries to live out an outdated ideal, but in Ithaca, his deafness seems caused by a family tragedy that has left Will traumatized. Whether it is the North or the South, deafness signifies a disability in Will: the last gentleman is unfit and ineffective for the modern world.

Will finds healing from his violent past through moving toward a different kind of hearing. His punning reorientation to what is presently and palpably "here" is detected by sight and affirmed by touch. After Will recalls his father's suicidal shot, he puts his hand to his ear in a characteristic gesture as he realizes that his death-dealing parent was mistaken: "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—he shook his head—that—" he fingered, the spot where an oak tree had surrounded the metal horsehead of a hitching post (318-19, emphasis mine). On the night of his suicide, Ed Barrett had listened to the Great Horn Theme while his son tended to the music on the Philco. The Brahms piece became the anthem for the demise of a romantic idealist. Having attended to the sweet and sad allure of his father's impossibly high-principled life, Will resolves to listen to a less melancholy and less transcendent music. He wrings out his ear as if trying to hear what is "here," under the very nose that was battered at Levittown while he sought to live out the noble tradition of

his forefathers. That gentlemanly ideal was utterly over "there"— an aspiration so sublime that his father could only achieve it in choosing death rather than disgrace. But Will returns to "here," the physicality of his partially deafened body and the tree-engirded hitching post to which Will had been barely attentive earlier in the scene. Manifesting what is concrete and immanent yet also intriguing, baffling, and oddly super-abundant, it is the very moment and place of being that Percy views naming as affirming for the community of language users. Will's rediscovery of the wood and metal at hand provides an exhilaratingly tactile sign of the mystery that invites his pursuit.

Will follows the trail of hereness to the deathbed of his friend Jamie Vaught. Commissioned by the teen's sister Val to oversee the youth's baptism, the partly deaf Will becomes an intermediary in the dialogue leading to Jamie's reception of the sacrament. In the hospital, the representatives of the hearing world assigned to care for Jamie's body and soul look on without quite understanding. Dr. Vaught's medical approach to hearing is exemplified by the way he "laid an ear to the bony chest" before making a "sign" to the priest to administer the sacrament (389). Father Boomer, as his name loudly proclaims, also makes listening central to his ministry. As he tries to determine if Jamie is disposed to be baptized, the plodding cleric twice asks, "Son, can you hear me?" (387). It is the deafened Will who gets beyond the doctor's focus on the heartbeat and the priest's niceties about hearing, for he is attuned to the orientation of Jamie's heart. Will moves nearer to the dying youth, "cocking his good ear but keeping his arms folded as the sign of his discretion" (387). Although hearing is still physiologically and metaphorically valorized, Will listens on a level deeper than Dr. Vaught or Father Boomer can apprehend. Throughout the colloquy that precedes Jamie's baptism, Will becomes the "interpreter" for the dying youth (388). Jamie's lips move, but the clergyman cannot understand his replies or questions. So, Will listens and voices for the hearing Jamie as if reversing the way that deaf people might rely on an interpreter to interact with the non-deaf world. Will's heartfelt bond with Jamie frees him from the doctor's reductive physicality and the priest's religious formalism. It quickens him to gain a profounder form of perception beyond mere hearing.

When Will returns to Percy's fiction fourteen years later in *The Second Coming*, the older Barrett seems to have lost the vitality that he discovered at the end of *The Last Gentleman*. His malaise provides the basis for a kind of mystery story in which Percy further explores the deadness and deafness that the violent Ed Barrett left to his son. Although Percy did not originally conceive of *The Second Coming* as a sequel to *The Last Gentleman* (Holditch 19), he created continuity be-

tween the two novels by again making Will's deafness a defining trait. The narrator notes, for example, the many physical accommodations—cupping his "good" ear, cocking his head to favor his "good" ear—that signified Will's deafness in his first fictional coming. For *The Second Coming*, like its creation for Percy, is an exercise in coming back, in returning to and rediscovering what the middle-aged and moribund Will considers "the most important event in his life" (3). On that signal day, the twelve-year-old Will was left with a "perforated and permanently deafened left middle ear" after a hunting mishap with his father (59). As Ed Barrett's twelve-gauge Greener keeps resounding in his son's memory, Will comes to realize that his despairing father did not accidentally injure him but intended to kill him. In *The Last Gentleman,* Will's deafness seemed the psychosomatic sign of a wound that the son bears after hearing the double gunshot blast of his father's suicide. In *The Second Coming* Will's deafness is revealed to have a more deliberately hurtful etiology. It is the physical consequence of a gentlemanly tradition that turned away from honor-bound duels with rivals and turned inwards—toward the family, toward a father not just shooting himself but shooting his son. However, in both novels, deafness is a deadly patrimony, the most baleful bequest that a hearing-centered culture could imagine. It is connected with the effect of a father's violence on his son, not with the fatherly solicitude that Percy showed for his daughter's oral education. Since Percy's father and grandfather killed themselves, he seems to have used the deafness in his own household as a way of fictionalizing for Will Barrett the disturbing legacy of such suicides. Will's partial loss of his hearing is the result of a childhood tragedy that continues to take its toll, for the adult Will lives out the murderous rejection that he felt from his father. He loses his will to live. And he judges the modern world of believers and unbelievers as having succumbed to a similar death-in-life. Only through discovering his love for Allie, a young woman so disturbed that regular words seem to fail her, does Will escape his fatal inheritance and come for a second time to the exuberance and intimation of religious mystery that heartened him in the last pages of *The Last Gentleman*.

Much as Percy writes Ann's deafness by imagining partially deafened characters such as Will Barrett, he also rewrites the speech-centered emphasis of her homeschooling so that it accords with his ear-centered fiction. In a double triumph of oralism, it underwrites moments when hearing characters, not deaf ones, come to new semiotic life through rediscovering spoken language. Percy's nonfiction provides the context for viewing such epiphanies through a deaf lens, for it repeatedly cites a similar moment in the life of seven-year-old Helen Keller. The blind and deaf girl touched the fount of language when she understood that

the water flowing over one hand was named by the W-A-T-E-R that her teacher Anne Sullivan was fingerspelling in the other. Out of "the accounts of the deaf-mutes and other unfortunates who did not discover the use of language until a comparatively late date—late enough to recall it," Helen's is Percy's paradigm for the human entry into the world of language (*Symbol* 55). Although Percy mentions the remarkable lives of such deaf and blind women as Marie Heurtin and Ludivine Lachance (178), none of these cases of linguistic discovery captures Percy's imagination as does Helen Keller's. Her initiation becomes for him a symbol of symbolization itself.

Percy may have found Helen so appealing because her prominence in American culture was enhanced by regional and personal associations. By the 1950s when Percy began to write on Helen Keller (1880-1968), she was the most well-known deaf person in America—author, nominee for the Nobel Prize, advocate for the rights of women, workers, Blacks, and people with disabilities. Helen's celebrity was further increased by the TV (1957), stage (1959), and film (1962) versions of *The Miracle Worker*, William Gibson's drama about how Anne Sullivan helped to transform Helen from a feral-like child to a human being through introducing her to the world of language. The climax of the play is the revelation that Percy repeatedly ponders and marvels at—Helen's semiotic discovery at the well-house. Percy's appreciation of Helen may have been deepened by less popular sources. Susanne Langer's 1942 *Philosophy in a New Key* and Ernst Cassirer's 1944 *An Essay on Man,* both of which Percy cites in *Symbol and Existence*, discuss Helen's moment at the pump in terms that Percy would echo. And since that pump was located in Alabama, the setting gave Percy a Southern connection with Helen.[4] The Birmingham-born novelist suggested this bond with the blind and deaf girl from Tuscumbia when he gave "The Delta Factor," an essay from *The Message in the Bottle* in which he quotes Helen's account of her well-house discovery, a personal subtitle: "How I Discovered the Delta Factor Sitting at My Desk One Summer Day in Louisiana in the 1950's Thinking about an Event in the Life of Helen Keller on Another Summer Day in Alabama in 1887." Finally, Percy may have made Helen such an exemplary figure in his writing because her semiotic realization as a seven-year-old in Alabama helped Percy to understand young Ann's homeschooling in Louisiana. Much as Helen addressed Anne Sullivan as "Teacher," the Percys always thought of Miss Mirrielees as "the Teacher." Recalling her work, Percy writes, "the Teacher hit upon what Helen Keller had discovered in her own way, the unique human trick of symbolizing, of putting together word and thing" ("Foreword" viii). Mirrielees enabled Helen's well-house discovery to take place in the Percy household, first

for Ann as she learned language, and then for Percy himself as he understood her learning in terms of the semiotic theory that he proposed in *Symbol and Existence*.

Percy may have found additional personal significance in Helen's revelation at the well-house because it seemed to correlate with his belief that Ann should be educated through verbal language rather than signed language. The scene at the pump was not a breakthrough into orality, even though Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* popularized the fictional image of Helen voicing "wah-wah" as she named the water. Nor was it a breakthrough into American Sign Language, even though Helen learned that a series of fingered shapes spelled water. Although ASL may use the manual alphabet for proper names or for concepts without agreed-upon signs, fingerspelling W-A-T-E-R is not the same as signing it by touching the three middle fingers of the dominant hand to the lips more than once while the thumb and little finger are held together, and the palm faces to the side. Rather, Helen learned a symbol many times removed from its referent—a series of hand shapes that represented the printed alphabet that represented speech sounds that represented the flow from the pump. Although Helen discovered that "the gesture in her hand *was* the water" (*Symbol* 59), Percy regarded her as intuiting the symbolic power of words. He did not consider that such a discovery might be the foundation for a language of gestures and hands. Helen's semiotic breakthrough was into the letters at the root of literacy, and this logocentric focus had more in common with Percy's preference for oral education than with the manual education that was marginalized from Helen's youth to Ann's.

Percy's emphasis on orality echoed the way that Helen's subsequent learning was directed not toward signed language but toward the word. She wrote in an 1899 letter that she did not consider sign language useful for those who were deaf and blind. She found the swiftness of the signing difficult to follow, believed that it would interfere with learning English, and argued that if deaf people could not learn to speak, they should rely on the manual alphabet (*Story* 256). Instead of signing, Helen gave primacy to the word—the word read and touched, the word spelled and spoken. When Helen attended Radcliffe, Sullivan transliterated Helen's classes and her college textbooks, many of which were not available in Braille, into her hands (*Teacher* 96-7). Helen's education in the spelled word was complemented by her training in the spoken word. Sullivan would coach Helen in speaking by having her student feel her teacher's lips or throat as she spoke (*Teacher* 63). But although Helen also received speech training from Sarah Fuller, principal of the Horace Mann School in Boston, in 1890, her efforts at voicing were not readily intelligible. Only twenty years later when a

singing teacher at the Boston Conservatory of Music taught Helen to emphasize voice production over articulation did Keller's speech improve somewhat. She eventually began a fifty-year career as a traveling lecturer, giving talks that were usually brief and well-rehearsed (Lash 114-15, 392; Neisser 176-77).

Although Helen Keller has been reimagined as a character in works ranging from avant-garde fiction to historical fiction for children, Percy never portrays Helen in his novels at first hand.[5] Rather, he continually reinvents Helen's moment of insight at the well-house so that her entry into fingerspelled literacy is refigured as an entry into the orality that Percy championed. In *The Last Gentleman*, Will Barrett learns about such a linguistic awakening when he visits the school where Val Vaught teaches. In the piney woods of Alabama, her students discover language just as did the Alabama-born girl who inspired "The Delta Factor." "The children are dumb," Val explains to Will. "They can't speak." The deafened Will misinterprets the pejorative word once routinely paired with "deaf" and judges that the children are "mentally retarded." Val clarifies, "No, I mean they're dumb, mute. Children eleven and twelve can't speak. It took me six months to find out why. They're brought up in silence. Nobody at home speaks. They don't know thirty words. They don't know words like pencil or hawk or wallet" (286-87). Val gives no reason why no one speaks in these families and why such silence prevails in so many families. Her students are not so much deaf as inexplicably deprived of the opportunity to use their ears and mouths.

In the Old South, schools such as Val's were viewed as a way to remedy the defects of "the deaf and dumb." Students could become Bible-reading members of the church, productive citizens of the region, and enlightened members of society (Joyner 40-43). And there, a boy could become a gentleman, the last of which breed may be Will himself. Through schooling, according to one 1859 report from the Mississippi Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, the deaf child could "be pleasing and ever fascinating by elegance of manner, by the beauty and grace of his gestures, by the intelligent expression of his countenance, by the cultivated quickness of his perceptive faculties, by the skillful use of the pen, and even by the elegance and beauty of his language" (qtd. in Joyner 43). However, unlike the "children of silence," as deaf people were often called in the nineteenth-century South, Val's charges can hear. So, she lives out her vocation as a nun by turning the site of the pedimented Phillips Academy, where the favored sons of Dixie once learned Greek and military science, into a haven for the most lowly of children to learn spoken language. Amid the dilapidation of the old South, these eleven- and twelve-year-olds, who are near the end of the critical period for language acquisition, become "gentlemen" for a new

age by entering the very orality that Ann discovered in the Percy household. As Val recounts their coming to life, "They are like Adam on the First Day. What's that? they ask me. That's a hawk, I tell them, and they believe me" (289). Like Helen who sought to learn the name for everything once she understood the name for water (*Story* 24), these children are reborn into a paradise of language.

In the fictional Tyree County of *The Last Gentleman*, Percy creates a mysterious space to foreground the significance of learning spoken language despite its earlier absence. Each of Percy's subsequent novels displaces the narrative of language acquisition by the deaf Helen Keller—or Ann Percy—and replaces it by some version of the linguistic advent that Val beheld among the so-called "dumb" but hearing students at her academy. In *Love in the Ruins*, Helen's revelation at the well-house lives on in Mr. Ives, the elderly amateur linguist who has become "mute" to protest the culture that consigns him to obsolescence (159). However, the self-silenced Ives returns to speaking when he is called into dialogue by Dr. Tom More during a medical hearing. The exam would determine whether he is to be consigned to the euphemistically named Happy Isles Separation Center for euthanasia or for the euphoria of a living death induced by electrical stimulation. Raging at this deadly form of elder care, the hale octogenarian comes to hearty life through the rejuvenating force of language. In *Lancelot*, Anna, having been gang-raped and subsequently institutionalized in the room next to Lancelot's, progresses from silence to tapping on their common wall and finally to fully recovered speech. In *The Second Coming*, Allie, the runaway from a psychiatric facility, finds words baffling, but she gradually recovers her ability to engage in language through her love for Will Barrett. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Father Smith, the spiritual guide for Tom More, has retreated into the silence of a watchtower because language has become so evacuated, but he eventually resumes speaking to help the doctor understand the fatal affliction of the title.

All of these examples of the Helen Keller phenomenon follow the pattern of rediscovering the possibilities of symbolization through recovering spoken words. Given this emphasis on orality, perhaps the most startling semiotic breakthrough in Percy's fiction happens toward the end of *The Thanatos Syndrome* and in the most unexpected of ways: Van Dorn, one of the masterminds behind the titular plague and one of its eventual victims, reclaims his identity as *Homo loquens* through a novel form of therapy: he learns sign language. The remedy may seem like one more example of what John Desmond has noted as the novel's tendency to tidy up plot points and overly manipulate characters, except for the fact that the novelist as oralist uses it to introduce a belated but passing recognition of sign language (218). Never before

had Percy written ASL into his fiction; indeed, as the father of Ann, he opposed its usage. He once wrote an angry letter to the *Times-Picayune* to criticize the 1979 TV movie *And Your Name is Jonah* because he regarded it as promoting the teaching of sign language (Samway 343). A few years later he decided not to accept a seat on the Board of Trustees of Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts college for deaf students, because its commitment to sign language left little room for Percy's own oralist orientation (Samway 367; Tolson 445). However, in his last novel Percy acknowledges the liberating power of sign language when Van Dorn, who has lost the ability to use speech, regains his humanity after learning how to sign from an ape. The gorilla Eve had participated in the kinds of experiments with sign language that Allen Gardner and Beatrix Gardner as well as Duane Rumbaugh and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh began publicizing in the 1960s and 1970s but that Percy himself questioned (*Signposts* 118, 281-82). Like some variation on Anne Sullivan, Eve introduces the stricken Van Dorn to sign language, yet when he makes a transition from signing to speaking, the arrant opportunist abandons both the ape and ASL. Bereft of anyone with whom to sign, Eve is returned to Zaire, where she "was last seen squatting alone on a riverbank, shunned by man and gorilla alike" (*Thanatos* 345).

Like Eve, signing seems left behind at the end of the novel, which brings back Mickey LaFaye, the patient who first presented Tom with symptoms of the Thanatos Syndrome, to speak her way toward convalescence. She had earlier been one of those who used fragmented sentences that told of how incomplete and disconnected the deadly affliction had left her. Such speech reminded Tom of "the two-word chimp utterances described by primatologists—'Tickle Washoe,' 'More bananas'" (69). However, when the recovering Mickey visits Tom in the last pages of Percy's last novel, she communicates not with the signs that Eve taught Van Dorn but with words. "Well?" Tom inquires after Mickey becomes strangely quiet—a well-placed silence that is followed by a moment of expectant orality, "She opens her mouth to speak" (372). Percy suspends the novel on the primordial moment of *Symbol and Existence*, "that extraordinary situation in which one man utters some sounds and another man, listening to him, does not respond to these sounds as signals but rather takes the meaning of the speaker, understands what these sounds re-present" (71-72). Tom never reports Mickey's speech, for the novel simply ends with a literal benediction, "Well well well" (372). The tripled word, which echoes the first ones that Mickey spoke in the novel, has rung over eighty times throughout *The Thanatos Syndrome* as noun, adverb, adjective, and interjection. In a novel where the plague-contaminated water supply has run with

death, the resonant "well" proclaims that Tom stands at the well-house of speech, the semiotic springs where Helen Keller discovered language through fingerspelling W-A-T-E-R. And once again Percy stands there, hearing, with Ann as well.

Notes

1. I write this essay as the hearing father of a culturally deaf son. It has become common for almost fifty years to refer to deaf people who regard deafness as purely a biological and medical condition as "deaf" and those who regard it as a cultural identity expressed through American Sign Language as "Deaf." However, some scholars have argued that the practice may seem elitist, exclusive, and essentializing; see, for example, Brueggemann (177-81, 188 n.3) and Wrigley (17-18, 54-55, 104-11). This essay consistently uses the lower case in referring to deaf people, but it also contends that Percy had an oralist rather than cultural understanding of deafness.

2. Useful historical background on the "war of methods" (oralism vs. ASL) can be found in the works by Baynton, Burch, Nomeland and Nomeland, Van Cleve and Crouch, and Winefield.

3. Percy thus disagrees with theorists from Vico and Condillac to William Stokoe (in *Language in Hand*) who have proposed that humans used signing before they developed speaking (Rée 132-34).

4. Nielsen's essay explores the Southern identity of Helen Keller, which might have strengthened Percy's bond with the deaf-blind girl.

5. See, for example, the books by Madeline Gins or Sarah Miller.

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Curing Death in Life: Suicide, Baptism, and Augustinian Realism in *The Last Gentleman*

H. Collin Messer

. . . We know now that the modern world is coming to an end . . . at the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies . . . Loneliness in faith will be terrible. Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another . . . the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean.

-Romano Guardini, The End of the Modern World

It was more than being a Southerner.

-Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*

In his 1971 essay, "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World," Walker Percy frets over the nearly impossible vocation of being a religious writer. The Christian novelist, writes Percy,

> calls on every ounce of cunning, craft, and guile he can muster from the darker regions of his soul. The fictional use of violence, shock, comedy, insult, the bizarre, are everyday tools of his trade. How could it be otherwise? How can one possibly write of baptism as an event of immense significance when baptism is already accepted but accepted by and large as a minor tribal rite somewhat secondary in importance to taking the kids to see Santa Claus at the department store? (118)

For all of his consternation, which he would coyly reprise throughout his career, Percy had already written about baptism as an event of "immense significance" just a few years before penning this lament. My contention here is that Percy's 1967 novel, *The Last Gentleman*, must resolve in baptism, but only if it does not resolve in suicide. Percy determines in his second novel to answer what Albert Camus called in *The Myth of Sisyphus* the most pressing philosophical question of the twentieth century—suicide—with what Percy regarded as the most ubiquitous of ancient Christian signs—baptism. Jay Tolson con-

firms this hunch in his description of Percy's early work on *The Last Gentleman*. One way or the other, Tolson says, this novel would have significant religious and philosophical dimensions: "Percy knew very well where his novel was heading. He knew he was writing about the wanderings of a lost southern romantic, a spiritual as well as physical odyssey that would lead the troubled protagonist to a vision of possible salvation in the act of baptism (not the protagonist's baptism . . . but the baptism of another of the novel's characters)" (304-305). Indeed, in the narrative's most crucial scene, Will Barrett witnesses a baptism that engenders in him a capacity for openness and connection that is presaged in the novel's apocalyptic epigraph by the Catholic priest and philosopher Romano Guardini.

Clearly, this would be a Catholic novel in a deliberate sense—much more so than *The Moviegoer*. For any serious fiction writer, such an undertaking is a risky business, as Percy well knew: "If you get caught writing a 'religious' novel—about God, Judaism, Christianity—you are dead. You'll be read by a few people. As one of my characters says, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer,* 'Whenever anyone says God to me, a curtain goes down in my head.' I have to be careful when I talk about grace. I have to be extremely allusive" ("Walker Percy Talks about" 239). Nevertheless, from Will's general befuddlement to Ed Barrett's stoic anguish and Sutter Vaught's voluptuous *thanatos*, existentialist disquiet so permeates the lives of Percy's characters in *The Last Gentleman* that the decisive vindication of either "grace" or despair seems painfully unavoidable. It is a rare reader who can come to this novel without being somewhat discomfited by the problem of suicide. Likewise, the novel's ending forces a confrontation with Christian baptism and the story it tells about our predicament as fallen and finite creatures. This is not to read *The Last Gentleman* reductively—far from it. Rather it is to discover within the novel profound lineaments of Percy's existentialist realism.

For such an ambitious project, Percy required a sturdy philosophical scaffolding, and his peculiar approach to existentialism was close at hand. In pursuing his meditation on suicide and its sacramental alternative, Percy engages with two existentialists in particular. The aforementioned Camus is Percy's most obvious contemporary interlocutor. However, I contend that Camus's Sisyphus essay is only of negative use to Percy. Moreover, it is just an essay, and not a narrative in the true sense. For more affirmative guidance and inspiration, both philosophically and dramatically, Percy turns to St. Augustine of Hippo. My purpose here is to highlight a couple of key dialectics. As a foregrounding to Percy's larger aim in *The Last Gentleman*, I explore Camus and Augustine as important influences for Percy. Then, in my reading of

the novel itself, I elucidate the dramatic and philosophical tension that Percy creates between the solipsistic despair of suicide and the intersubjective hope of the Christian sacrament. Finally, I analyze the climactic events in Santa Fe, with particular focus on the baptism and death of Jamie Vaught.

In 1955, about a decade before the publication of Percy's second novel, Camus insisted that only one question really mattered: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest . . . comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 3). By the end of his essay, Camus has rejected suicide as a worthwhile response to life's absurdity. To rebel against the grim logic of suicide, he writes, "gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life" (55). In his charitable critique of Camus, John Desmond asserts that the Frenchman takes this stand "as part of the existentialist revolt against the absurd, against the awareness that we are all condemned to death in an inexplicable universe" (1). Admirable though this conviction may be, Desmond still finds it wanting, especially as it makes no room for our neighbor:

> Camus finally rejected suicide . . . but not on the traditional Christian grounds of divine prohibition . . . Camus's emphasis is on each individual's recognition of his fate. Awareness and the choice to revolt are matters of personal consciousness and will; they are not particularly *communal* concerns. In fact, in Camus's writings such as his novel *The Stranger* (1942), individual revolt is often set against the community and its norms. It is predicated upon one's sense of exile from the world, an awareness of unmitigated existential solitude. (1)

As Desmond rightly discerns, Camus's best shot is to propose an ethic that chiefly (and perhaps unrealistically) requires a heroic capacity for stoic self-reliance. Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus seems only capable of speaking in the first person singular: "Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness, I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide" (64). Under this "rule of life" Camus's ex-suicide is necessarily an isolato. Central to Percy's scheme, in contrast, is an *intersubjective* imperative that will find its ultimate expression in a compelling vision of the communion of saints.[1]

Although Percy will ultimately find Camus's reasons for choosing against suicide to be anemic, we should note key points of convergence between the two. Percy applauds Camus for the gauntlet he throws down in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In fact, in an unpublished essay written just a few years before Camus's death, Percy makes common cause with him in finding Enlightenment modernity (which Percy elsewhere refers to as "the METHOD" or the "objective-empirical method") to be woefully inadequate in its understanding of the human predicament:

> The METHOD which is so prevalent in America does not really have any use for the Christian language of Fall and Redemption, even though Americans consider themselves Christian and even though they are acutely aware of the alarming symptoms of boredom and anxiety and are perfectly willing to try religion or anything else if it will only cure the symptoms. Albert Camus who is an atheist and who sees the world as an absurd place has nevertheless set forth in his last book *The Fall* a picture of man which is a great deal closer to the Christian concept of wounded human nature than the cheery Pelagianism of the *Reader's Digest* with its Christian veneer and its heartwarming anecdotes.[2] ("Which Way Existentialism")

Along with Camus, Percy looks askance at the mid-century modern west of which the deeply wounded Will Barrett is an unwitting denizen. Both humorously and gravely, Percy dramatizes modernity's meager resources. Will earnestly avails himself of the best that the modern metropolis has to offer, but Percy's ironic narration undercuts any hope we might have that Will can find what he needs in New York:

> There were times when he was normal as anyone . . . He read well-known books on mental hygiene and for a few minutes after reading felt very clear about things. He knew how to seek emotional gratifications in a mature way as they say in such books. In the arts, for example. It was his custom to visit museums regularly and to attend the Philharmonic concerts at least once a week. He understood, moreover, that it is people who count, one's relations with people, one's warmth toward and understanding of people. At these times he set himself the goal and often achieved it of "cultivating rewarding interpersonal relationships with a variety of people"—to use a phrase he had come across and not forgotten. (11-12)

To understand Will's difficulty here, we must grasp how vapid are these *technics*, especially as they purport to address the predicament of the modern self. As early as his 1955 essay, "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes," Percy undertook to dismantle such therapeutic anodynes:

> It is just when the alienated commuter reads books on mental hygiene which abstract immanent goals from existence that he comes closest to despair. One has only to let the mental-health savants set forth their own ideal of sane living, the composite reader who reads their books seriously and devotes every ounce of his strength to the pursuit of the goals erected: emotional maturity, inclusiveness, productivity, creativity, belongingness—there will emerge, far more faithfully than I could portray him, the candidate for suicide. (480)

In Will Barrett Percy does in fact faithfully portray just such a candidate. What does Camus have to offer him?

Having frequently described himself as an ex-suicide, Percy of course agrees with Camus's conclusion that one should choose against suicide; however, Percy's Christian faith demands that he discover a better reason for his own rejection of suicide than those Camus offers. In Percy's papers, housed at UNC Chapel Hill's Wilson Library, Camus's works are well represented in Percy's personal library. In addition to Camus's novels, one of the most heavily marked and annotated volumes is Percy's copy of Germaine Bree's eponymous study, *Camus* (1962). At one point in his extensive notes on the inside back cover, Percy focuses in on Camus's cry (as quoted by Bree) of "Save Man!" His response to Camus is just one plaintive and scrawling question: "Why?" Percy demands a reason. Why is man worth saving? Saved for what? The son and grandson of suicides, Percy (and by extension his intensely autobiographical avatar) needs a reason to live, more than just a reason not to do himself in. As the narrator remarks early in the book, Will's problem also goes beyond some tired Faulknerian dilemma: "It was more than being a Southerner" (10). As much as *The Last Gentleman*'s comedic power derives from Will's hapless search for a genteel code, Percy is ultimately concerned with something more than Stoic ethics. The question of how to act is manifest, but even more pressing for Will is figuring out how to *be*. Percy's castaway needs news, but he also needs rescue.

We might add, the castaway needs more than a philosophical essay. Following Dostoevsky and O'Connor, among others, Percy had in *The Moviegoer* discovered the phenomenological novel as his bread and

butter. In a 1972 interview with John Carr, Percy recalls this important transition to fiction:

> The philosophy I was interested in was what was then called existential philosophy. Of course, the word no longer means much. It still means a concrete view of man, man in a situation, man in a predicament, man's anxiety and so on. And I believed this view of man could be handled very well in a novel, and I was interested in phenomenology, which is very strongly existentialist: the idea of describing accurately how a man feels in a given situation. And that's certainly novelistic. (61)

Having chosen this mode of fiction, Percy fittingly looks to Augustine and especially to his *Confessions*, which reads like an existentialist novel. Where Camus explores suicide philosophically in an essay, Augustine dramatically considers baptism in a memoir. Furthermore, just as *The Last Gentleman* grapples with the competing and ultimate choices of suicide or baptism, so too does Augustine's *Confessions* make a crucial turn away from death-dealing despair in its poignant recollection of the baptism of a dying youth.

Augustine's writings, particularly *Confessions*, cast a long shadow over Percy's thought, and my argument here is part of a larger excursion in which I examine Percy's novels and essays through an Augustinian lens, with particular attention to Augustine's existentialism. On more than one occasion, Percy himself invites comparison between Augustine's approach and his own. For instance, one of his last essays, "Physician as Novelist," facetiously describes the Augustinian origins of *The Moviegoer* and its protagonist, Binx Bolling: "The novel . . . became a narrative of the search, the quest . . . [and] landed squarely in the oldest tradition of Western letters: the pilgrim's search outside himself, rather than the guru's search within. All this happened to the novelist and his character without the slightest consciousness of a debt to St. Augustine or Dante" (193). Augustine's despairing restlessness is just as acutely experienced by Will as it is by Binx. In the Carr interview, Percy actually insisted that Will "was worse off" than Binx "because he was sick; he was really sick . . . He's a drowning man, clutching at straws, really on the ragged edge. The abyss was always yawning at his feet" (66-67). Even so, as Percy told Carr, "The question . . . is whether it is better to be a drowning man, or alive and well in East Orange" (67). In imagining Binx and Will and nearly all of his main characters, Percy takes a number of existentialist cues from Augustine.

According to Augustine's definitive biographer, Peter Brown, the Bishop's memoir is unique for its time. Augustine's ancient life story, Brown asserts, is communicated via "a new, classic language of the unquiet heart" (169). In Book I of *Confessions*, Augustine is mystified and distressed by the alienation endemic to his very existence: "What, Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death" (Chadwick 6).[3] In this disquiet, or "shakiness" (to borrow one of Percy's favorite terms), Augustine prefigures a type of pilgrim who becomes a recognizable headliner in Percy's novels.

Thus, Will's predicament reveals a striking kinship with Augustine's. Both young men suffer what Percy would often describe as the plight of the stranded self: the self that is restless in the world and stuck with itself. Augustine's famous supplication, "O God, ever the same; may I know myself . . . That is my prayer" (*Soliloquies* 2.1.1), aptly applies to Will, even if he doesn't pray. Finally, both young men forcefully grapple with Stoicism, the regnant worldview not only in Augustine's Rome and but in Will's Ithaca as well. Beyond these similarities, Augustine's and Will's respective struggles with chastity is a hefty subject for another essay altogether. Suffice it to say that Will Barrett's ability to act—his "will" in fact—is comically but decisively divided in terms that Augustine would understand.

For all of their chronic restlessness, however, Augustine and Will Barrett come to themselves in a world that the old Bishop and Percy regard as a good world, not a Manichean phantom nightmare. As Lewis Lawson has suggested, both writers (and their characters) inhabit a post-Platonic world, in which shadows and ideal forms have been radically reconfigured and ultimately fulfilled by a condescending and incarnate Logos: Jesus Christ.[4] Peter Brown notes that by the time he wrote *Confessions*, "Augustine had come to the firmly rooted idea of the essential goodness of created things" (325). Moreover, writes Brown, "if the material world, and with it, the human body had been a perfect gift of God, it could never be treated as second-best" (327). Following Augustine, Percy forthrightly rejects the Cartesian Gnosticism of his own age and through characters like Will Barrett undertakes to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. To suggest how Augustine makes common cause with Percy in such a project, I first detail the terms in which Augustine casts baptism in his *Confessions*. With this foregrounding, I turn to the climactic chapters of *The Last Gentleman* with hopes of vindicating my view that Augustinian thought significantly shapes the fictional fate of Will Barrett and his friends.

In a memoir full of dramatic recollections, the baptism and death of Augustine's un-named friend in Book IV of *Confessions* remains one of

the most powerful. With literary force, the older and wiser Augustine looks back on one of the most painfully formative events of his youth. In the year 375, Augustine returns home to Thagaste in Algeria from his studies in Carthage. A proud, charismatic, and zealous Manichee in his early 20s, Augustine gathers a coterie of boyhood friends around himself, and convinces one of them to become a Manichee as well. His dear friend—now a heretic like Augustine—unexpectedly falls gravely ill and lapses into a coma. In desperation the young man's family has him baptized as a Christian while he is still unconscious. The friend then rallies and awakens. Augustine is vaguely scandalized and even amused by the primitive baptism: "I attempted to chaff him, expecting him to join me in making fun of the baptism he had undergone" (Boulding 97). However, in Peter Brown's words, his friend has come "to his senses strangely changed; even his intellectual development is now seen as penetrated, at every turn by the mysterious force of the 'Name of Christ'" (222). The friend does not take kindly to Augustine's chaffing, and in fact chides him for mocking the sacrament! Undaunted, Augustine resolves to dissuade him from his Christian superstition once he is "in normal health again" (Boulding 97). However, while Augustine is away his friend unexpectedly swoons and dies "in the flower of young manhood" (96).

Robert Coles has described the deathbed scene in *The Last Gentleman* as something worthy of nineteenth-century fiction.[5] We might include this episode from *Confessions* in the same genre. His friend's death finds Augustine devastatingly unprepared, not only emotionally but philosophically. Contra the Manichean insistence that the death of the body is in fact a liberation and not to be grieved, Augustine is unconsoled: "Black grief closed over my heart and wherever I looked I saw only death" (Boulding 97). Looking back on his anguish and confusion, Augustine notes the comprehensive philosophical poverty of the moment: "I had become a great enigma to myself, and I questioned my soul, demanding why it was sorrowful and why it so disquieted me, but it had no answer. If I bade it, 'Trust in God,' it rightly disobeyed me, for the man it had held so dear and lost was more real and more lovable than the [Manichean] fantasy in which it was bidden to trust" (97-98). The Gnostic ephemerality of Manichaeism renders the sect's beliefs impotent, lacking any solidity in the midst of this ultimate crisis. As Augustine grapples with the bodily death of his friend, Manichaeism is pathetically ineffectual.

What of baptism then? Initially, it adds insult to injury. Devout Manichee that he is, Augustine at first regards the baptism as a ludicrous scandal, especially in its rudimentary physicality and particularity. Such a sacramental affirmation of both the physical body as well as

such a mundane thing as water insults the sophisticated Gnosticism of Augustine's Manichean imagination. Even more, baptism's greater offense is its signification of membership. The Church's baptismal water is thicker than the blood of kinship ties—and it is thereby a grave challenge to clan loyalties like those that existed among the close-knit "elect" of the Manichee tribe. As such it is an affront to the inherent solipsism of young Augustine's Manichean identity. Even worse, given the disdain with which Augustine relates to the Catholic Christians during his Manichee phase, we sense that young Augustine is scandalized by the simple-minded north African Catholics with whom his friend becomes connected via baptism.

However, baptism in Augustine's mature understanding takes on contours that are salubrious and comforting. In *Confessions* and elsewhere in his writings the Bishop is helpfully reassured by his belief that the sacrament has salvific power even in the face of human lassitude. Brown explicates Augustine's mature view of baptism with an eye on the crisis faced by his younger self in book IV of *Confessions*. For the older and wiser bishop, "the rites of the church take on an objective and permanent validity. They exist independently of the subjective qualities of those who 'participate' in them: in a way Augustine never claimed to understand, the physical rites of baptism and ordination 'brand' a permanent mark on the recipient, quite independent of his conscious qualities" (222). The power of baptism lies less within the recipient of the sacrament than in the sacrament itself. Moreover, Augustine humbly conjectured, the objective, "conscious" understanding of those who receive baptism, or even those who witness it, cannot fully comprehend its means of efficacy.

Augustine's theological convictions as a bishop and church father would help shape the very catechism that a converted Walker Percy embraced wholeheartedly. However, as Percy often fretted, how to translate these convictions into artful fiction? To appreciate the daring task facing Percy in dramatizing his theological and anthropological convictions as a Catholic Christian, we should consider again his question for Camus: "Why?" Why save man? Why not commit suicide? To give this question its due, Percy goes beyond Augustine in some important respects, as he offers in *The Last Gentleman* not only a serious consideration of Christian baptism, but also an extended (and equally risky) meditation on suicide that stretches from Ed Barrett's self-inflicted gunshot (which literally echoes throughout the novel) to Sutter Vaught's grim but formidable arguments for suicide in a mad and hypocritical post-Christian age.

Percy pursues these weighty questions in the second half of the novel mainly through the meandering arguments of Sutter Vaught and

Val Vaught. Quarrelsome but friendly siblings, Sutter the coroner and Val the erstwhile nun are the most honest and forthright members of their family when it comes to confronting Jamie's illness and impending death with philosophical and religious seriousness. Chiefly through Sutter's casebook, as well as a couple of cryptic conversations between Val and Will, Percy deftly presents a rich discourse without disrupting the novel's dramatic flow. Strangely enough, both siblings are mindful of a sacramental dimension of reality. In a remarkably believable tête-à-tête, Sutter and Val energetically debate the meaning and efficacy of the Eucharist and Christian baptism.

Val's sacramental imagination is to be expected. Much to Will's consternation (but Percy's approbation), she speaks bluntly of Catholic things. In their very first conversation, Val imposes on Will by suggesting that "it may fall to you to tell [Jamie] . . . about the economy of salvation" (210). A few minutes later she audaciously charges Will that "Jamie's salvation may be up to you" (212), insisting that it may fall to Will to see that Jamie is baptized. Most importantly, she expresses her deepest worry: "I don't want him to die without knowing why he came here, what he is doing here, and why he is leaving" (210). In his irritation at such an imposition, Will nevertheless senses that Val has complex motives: "But was her request true Catholic gall, or what is something she had hit upon through a complicated Vaught dialectic? Or did she love her brother?" (212).

The most important and surprising voice on the other side of this "complicated Vaught dialectic" is Sutter, who also broaches the issue of baptism with Will. Ironically, Sutter is the first character in the novel to utter the word, "baptism." Like his sister, he brings it up with Will upon their very first meeting:

> "It happened in this fashion," said Sutter, more lively than ever. "My father was a Baptist and my mother an Episcopalian. My father prevailed when Jamie was born and he wasn't baptized. You know of course that Baptist children are not baptized until they are old enough to ask for it—usually around twelve or thirteen. Later my father became an Episcopalian and so by the time Jamie came of age there no one to put the question to him—or he didn't want it. To be honest, I think everybody was embarrassed. It is an embarrassing subject nowadays, even slightly ludicrous" (223).

As much as he seeks to dismiss the matter, Sutter is clearly haunted by the possibility of a sacramental mystery, and he poignantly shares with Val the hope for discovering with Jamie some meaning in the youth's

life and death. This is crucially borne out in one final rejoinder to Val on the last page of his casebook: "I became depressed last summer when I first saw Jamie's blood smear, depressed not because he was going to die but because I knew he would not die well, would be eased out in an oxygen tent, tranquilized and with no sweat to anyone and not even know what he was doing. Don't misunderstand me: I wasn't thinking about baptism" (373). Perhaps Sutter protests too much, but Percy clearly connects Val and Sutter in their shared hope that Jamie's death will be made sense of somehow, to them and to him. At this low point, Sutter actually attempts suicide: "Went to ranch, shot myself, missed brain, carried away cheek . . . I saw something clearly while I had no cheek and grinned like a skeleton. But I got well and forgot what it was. I won't miss next time" (373). We may be forgiven for puzzling over this "something" that Sutter sees but forgets. Percy is almost too inscrutable here, though I read this enigmatic remark to be fitting in terms of the apocalyptic (that is, revelatory) baptism scene that will soon unfold.

As the plot progresses toward Santa Fe the argument between the two siblings leaves Will dumbfounded as ever about what he should do or think. Once he arrives in the city of "Holy Faith," however, Will is rather swiftly caught up in a striking series of clarifying conversations and events that reward our careful attention. To begin, we must acknowledge that the artistic risk here for Percy is double: not only is he undertaking to portray a stock maudlin scenario that has been too often abused for sentimental purposes, but he is also seeking to do so in religious terms. It is at this point in the narrative that Percy's use of Romano Guardini in the novel's epigraph makes fullest sense. For Will and Sutter, Guardini aptly describes a world in which pretense has been stripped away. With Percy's sympathy, Sutter has dismissed the cultural Christendom that has reduced baptism to a hollow social ritual. Sutter's and Will's loneliness and separateness in the desert is acute, and they bring this alienation to the baptism.

As for the baptism itself, I do not undertake here to explain what happens to Jamie Vaught. Augustine has ably instructed us that the sacrament and its efficacy unto salvation is in some respects ineffable. Percy presents the episode directly and without special pleading. In fact, it's something of a wonder to consider how the scene achieves its dramatic intensity. From the very ordinariness of the priest—Percy describes his manner as "mercantile" and "workaday"—to the most bland and unassuming of hospital rooms, the setting doesn't convey to us the power of the moment (406-07). Likewise, the liturgical resources are slim. The whole thing is pared down and bare bones, including the ordinary clouded water glass from which the priest pours *tap* water on

Jamie's head. Although this is perchance truly the "Wrinkle in Time" (307) that Sutter evokes earlier in the book, with Will we can be forgiven for asking "What happened back there?" (407).

However, over and against the solipsism of suicide, the baptism is vindicated by the intersubjectivity it begets among those who remain. Guardini's post-modern world is one in which recognizing the despair of inoperative cultural Christendom—and its attendant danger and animosity—might push us toward authentic connection with the other. This is apparent in at least two instances. First, for all of his American league umpire ordinariness, the priest—with Will's help—doesn't "let go" of Jamie. As humdrum as he is, the priest seems to understand afresh that this baptism has truly connected him to Jamie as part of the mystical body. Not only does he faithfully preach the Gospel to Jamie simply and clearly in what Jac Tharpe describes as "sublime rote," but he also lingers thoughtfully over the dead young man for a good while after it's over (76). The most astounding instance of connection is that between Will and Sutter. Beyond what they may or may not consciously understand, the baptism they have witnessed has not only perhaps saved the dying, but has also affirmed the goodness of the world in which those who remain must live.

The sacraments as Augustine and the Church understand them confer great value on the created world and existence itself. I think this truth makes the conclusion of the book plausible, even if Will understands very little of what he has witnessed. On the one hand, our view of Sutter is now clear. He is pathetically inadequate to the task of living, and maybe even unable to consummate the suicide he desires. Although Will has finally seen that Sutter is a failed father figure, "the dismalest failure, a man who had thrown himself away," Will still moves toward him (381). Will is now undoubtedly aware that Sutter cannot fulfill the role of genius-guru in his life, but the young man still declares his need for Sutter as a friend. The baptism that Will has witnessed has somehow wrought in him the courage to reject the stoic isolation that killed his father. In a world open and clean, Will chooses to love his friend and pleads with Sutter to "Wait" (he says it five times in the novel's last two pages). In response Sutter astoundingly does for Will something that Ed Barrett chose not to do. He waits. Sutter forgoes a selfish suicide and sticks around to hear yet another question from his friend. Thus, a novel that has skirted the edge of despair comes to a close with palpable delight as Will runs to catch up to Sutter with "great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds" (409).

Percy's unpublished essay, "Which Way Existentialism," is merely a series of fragments, ranging in topics from St. Thomas and Camus to "Reader's Digest" and "Father Knows Best." One wishes that Percy

would have returned to it at some point. Even in its incomplete state, however, the essay provides a compelling description of Percy's realistic but hopeful approach to existentialism. Furthermore, the essay anticipates and helps us to make sense of the fate of Will Barrett as we find him at the end of *The Last Gentleman*:

> Man is indeed a wayfarer shipwrecked on a strange shore, but he should not be afraid to draw the consequences from what he sees, that he exists and the world exists through no doing of his or the world's. Nor should he be afraid to look for a sign in the strange country he inhabits, a veritable something which exists here and now in the world and which will last until the end of time.

For Percy, as for Augustine before him, the world's and our own existence is a hopeful signpost, worthy of our wayfaring and attention, and only truly understood in the company of others.

Notes

1. Percy embraced intersubjectivity mainly through his deep engagement with the work of Gabriel Marcel. In her study, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels*, Mary Deems Howland offers a useful description of the term as both writers use it:

> In both his philosophical essays and his plays, Marcel focuses on the day-to-day encounters that the individual has with other individuals. Pointing to our tendency to cut ourselves off from others and our concomitant need for other people, Marcel stresses the value of ordinary interchanges that people experience in the family, the business world and the church. No individual is ever completely cut off from others, even though to live an authentic existence is to struggle, requiring real effort on the part of the individual to remain open, to search out those "others" who can be loved. As Marcel sees it, one never ceases to be *homo viator*, one who must search for ways to become more open to the ambiguous but real ontological presence that surrounds the individual like a sea. The victory for Marcel lies in the search itself, a search made in hope and good faith, and most importantly, a search made in company of other people. (4-5)

Percy clearly has Marcel in mind as he describes Will in an 1968 interview: "I suppose the physical travels of my main character were the physical analogue of his spiritual odyssey. He was on the move geographically and spiritually at the same time. It seemed appropriate for him to be moving. He is *Homo viator*" (Cremeens 29).

2. "Which Way Existentialism" is an unpublished essay found in the Percy papers at UNC Chapel Hill. It is undated, but was probably written in 1957, because Percy directly mentions Camus's *The Fall* (1956) but makes no mention of Camus's death in 1960.

3. I am an appreciative reader of Henry Chadwick's translation of *Confessions*, as well as Maria Boulding's. Depending on their rendering of certain passages, I quote them each throughout.

4. In more than one essay, Lawson alludes to Percy's kinship with Augustine and especially Augustine's conviction that the created order has been redeemed and re-dignified by the Incarnation. In *Confessions*, says Lawson, "Augustine confesses that he had been a Platonist, that he had believed in the Truth represented in the Simile of the Cave. He too had been among the Mathematicians, had been a theater-goer, had been one who had satisfied his desire for the flesh. But in time, he had gained the faith to believe in Christ, had come to see the Light of the World was not a Transcendent Form, but the Logos, the Incarnation" (18).

5. In his appreciative and astute *Walker Percy: An American Search*, Coles comments that "Jamie's death at the end of the novel is an intense, powerfully rendered moment worthy of any nineteenth-century novelist" (186).

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Southern Hauntings: William Alexander Percy's Influence on Walker Percy

Rhonda Renée McDonnell

Walker Percy was not reticent about proclaiming the impact his adoptive father, William Alexander Percy, had upon him as a man. Nor did he shy away from indicating the profound impact that Will Percy had upon him as a writer. Even so, that influence typically has been ignored in terms of its impact upon Percy's writing. However, through the lens of Harold Bloom's theory (first elucidated in *The Anxiety of Influence*), the influence Will Percy had upon his adoptive son—along with Walker Percy's struggle and eventual triumph over that influence—finally can be realized.

Harold Bloom's Theory

In *The Anxiety of Influence,* Bloom developed a six-part system to evaluate writers' struggles with their literary precursors. Inherent in this system is Bloom's acknowledgment that every text has precursors and that all writers (whom he terms poets) are influenced by those who precede them, with the caveat that he limits his reading to the Western tradition. A strong writer will move fully through this system of stages, which Bloom terms "revisionary ratios," showing indebtedness to precursors in early work but eventually mastering those ghostly voices. However, weaker writers are defeated, unable to grasp that brass ring denoted by the praise of "an original voice." In short, weak writers are derivative, while strong writers are not.

To demonstrate this, Bloom adds an essay on Shakespeare's struggle against Marlowe's influence to the preface of the 1997 edition of *The Anxiety of Influence.* What is most revelatory about this analysis is how essential this defeat of Marlowe was to Shakespeare's development. The point at which Bloom demonstrates that Shakespeare has broken free of Marlowe's influence marks the demarcation between the early and the late Shakespeare (*Anxiety* xxi). Ultimately, Bloom's essay shows the transformation of Shakespeare from one of many Renaissance playwrights to Shakespeare as the definitive Renaissance playwright. Most importantly, this essay on Shakespeare best demonstrates the full term "anxiety of influence," by which Bloom means the anxiety shown in

the work of the later writer is the "fear that no proper work remains for him to perform" (*Anxiety* 148). Bloom effectively asserts that it is only through a defeat of the precursor that a writer can move confidently into the full expression of originality.

Bloom's theory, first expressed in a slim volume, makes for dense reading. To aid with the application of that theory herein, a summary of the six ratios may prove helpful:

> 1. *Clinamen* is a direct misprision (misreading) that is characterized by the use of irony as its main trope and by images of presence and absence. When operating in the ratio of *clinamen*, an author sees the precursor as having been "right" up to a certain point. The author then swerves by departing from the precursor, attempting to correct what is "wrong" in the precursor's work.
>
> 2. *Tessera* is completion through contrast, wherein an author reverses the precursor's work. Operation within this ratio relies upon synecdoche, and the images that pervade the author's work are drawn from that trope.
>
> 3. *Kenosis* is a regression. Rather than being the undoing of the precursor's work, it is an emptying out of both the self and the precursor. *Kenosis* is characterized by metonomy and images of fullness and emptiness, as those images reveal the humbling of the writer that is necessary for the "emptying out" that kenosis relies upon.
>
> 4. *Daemonization*, characterized by the dual tropes of hyperbole and litotes, is revision of the precursor done through a repression of the precursor's work. Revision is achieved when the author inflates the precursor's work as a way to forget it, often through hyperbolic "high" images undercut by litotes and "low" images. As Bloom puts it, it is "a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime" (*Anxiety* 15).
>
> 5. *Askesis* has metaphor as its trope, relying on a perspective of the inside against outside, which sublimates the precursor's work. The discipline required for effective employment of metaphor characterizes *askesis*, which demands a sort of literary asceticism.

> 6. *Apophrades*, or the return of the dead, is the final ratio. In this last phase, the author no longer seeks to avoid or swerve from the precursor. Instead, the author employs the precursor's voice to fulfill the author's own ends. Metalepsis is the trope engaged by the author to complete the revision. (*Anxiety* 14-16; *Map* 71-82)

The density of Bloom's theory is instantly manifest in the above summation, as is the particularly Modernist character of his thought. While summing up Bloom's system is a challenge, employing it is far less difficult and proves to be illuminating.

Establishing Will Percy's Influence

Will Percy had a rich artistic life prior to adopting his cousin's orphaned sons. He was both poet and memoirist in the fine old Modern sense, published by Alfred A. Knopf. In fact, Knopf published Walker Percy's first novel in part because of his connection with Will (King 90). According to Walker, when Knopf read *The Moviegoer,* he was disappointed that it did not resemble Will's memoir *Lanterns on the Levee* (Jones 176). I can only imagine that Knopf did not read the novel through to the end, for as I will later demonstrate, Will Percy's influence undercuts much of what Walker Percy intends in *The Moviegoer.* Or perhaps Knopf was disappointed that Walker's style was unlike Will's style, given Walker's penchant for pop culture references over classical ones. However, Walker Percy did not have to write poetry or memoir to be profoundly influenced by his adoptive father, nor did Walker need to utilize the dense web of classical allusions that Will utilizes. Bloom indicates that style and form are not the defining aspects of anxiety of influence: "Poets need not *look* like their fathers, and the anxiety of influence more frequently than not is quite distinct from the anxiety of style" (*Map* 20). Bloom also argues that the relationship between the precursor and the poet is one best understood in family terms—the precursor as parent and the poet as child: "Poetry (Romance) is Family Romance. Poetry is the enchantment of incest, disciplined by resistance to that enchantment" (*Anxiety* 95). That Will and Walker Percy had a literal father/son relationship means that Will's influence was not distilled through his poetry as much as through his very being. After Walker and his brothers moved into Will's home, Walker notes that "he [Will] didn't write much poetry" ("Introduction" ix). Instead, he shaped young men—Walker, his brothers Roy and Phin, Shelby Foote, and others.

Will Percy was a man who, despite his slight frame, was larger than life, and he was something of a living legend amongst his relations. When Walker and his brothers went to live with him, they were being taken in by someone they regarded as a hero. Walker writes in the introduction of Will Percy's memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*, "The curious fact is that my recollection of him, even now after meeting him, after living in his house for twelve years, and now thirty years after his death, is no less fabled than my earliest imaginings" (vii). One of the typical tragedies of growing up is that heroes become all too human, but that was not the case with Will Percy. In many ways, he never lost his shine.

Will Percy presented many opportunities for that admiration by spending time with his adoptive sons and their friends. Novelist and historian Shelby Foote was Walker's closest friend, and, as Jon Meacham later documented, "[T]he defining influence in Foote's youth—and thus in his life—came less from tales of Southern sentimentality and more from talk of literature, art, and philosophy in the house of William Alexander Percy." Walker explains the elder Percy's character by saying Will was "unique . . . and when I say unique I mean it in its most literal sense: he was one of a kind: I never met anyone remotely like him. It was to encounter a complete, articulated view of the world as tragic as it was noble. . . . I had a great teacher" ("Introduction" x-xi). Will taught the boys what beauty was in terms of music, art, and literature. Walker recalls, "He'd read aloud, say, Viola's speech to Olivia in *Twelfth Night* . . . You see? he'd as good as say, and what I'd begin to see, catch on to, was the great happy reach and play of the poet at the top of his form" ("Introduction" x-xi). In truth, it seems that Will Percy focused his attention toward teaching his three young cousins and turned his creative energy toward memoir, perhaps as a way of continuing to speak to his boys long after he was gone. The result, for Walker at least, was that he became the fixed point, the North Star. As Walker reflects, "[E]ven when I did not follow him, it was usually *in relation* to him . . . that I defined myself and my direction. Perhaps he would not have had it differently. Surely it is the highest tribute to the best people we know to use them as best as we can, to become, not their disciples, but ourselves" (xi). Without being aware of the fact, Walker describes the very process outlined by Bloom of the writer engaging with his precursor and ultimately overcoming the precursor's power over him to become a strong writer in his own right.

Granted, up to this point, no more than a father figure's impact upon vocation might have been proven. Yet, reading Will Percy's memoir in light of Walker Percy's body of work offers stronger evidence to the theory that Will Percy influenced Walker's writing in terms of subject matter and, most importantly, in terms of the younger Percy's central

question, which is the eternal human question. For all the solemnity of the words "eternal human question," what it really amounts to is how to survive an ordinary Wednesday afternoon. That is the question at the heart of Will's memoir chapter titled "For the Younger Generation." Here, Will Percy focuses on the great responsibility he felt he had to the boys to show them how to live well (in the sense of Marcus Aurelius) in a world that was descending into chaos. Some forty-five years after the publication of *Lanterns on the Levee*, Walker Percy writes "Novel-Writing in an Apocalyptic Time," wherein he discusses the great responsibility a novelist has to address how one might live well, might have an authentic life, despite (or because) of the world's descent into chaos.

In both cases, the writer confronts a twilight world where meaning is lost. Both address the devaluation of language, particularly the language of grace. Will Percy writes, "Philosophical conceptions—the Trinity, the atonement, the fall, the redemption—cannot save this generation, for they speak a beautiful dead language, when what we need is live words, tender with meaning and assurance" (*Lanterns* 315). In a similar fashion, Walker Percy writes, "The great poets and novelists always wrote about the nature of God and love, of man and woman. But how can even Dante write about the love of God, the love of a man for a woman, if he lives in a society in which God is the cheapest word of the media, as profaned by radio preachers as by swearing" ("Notes" 161). Revealed in both passages is the shared concern, passed down from one generation to the next, of humanity's alienation from both God and each other, of the loss of meaning, and of a language emptied of significance (and of signification). As for the structure Walker Percy inherits from Will Percy, that also is revealed in Will's chapter fourteen. Here Will suggests that his best recommendation for the boys might be that they read Marcus Aurelius and the Gospels. He read Aurelius's *Meditations* the way other people might read scripture, finding in the Stoic philosopher's words the prescription for how one might live a life of honor while society crumbles around him. When Aurelius is coupled with the Gospels, we understand that although Will gave up Catholicism as a young man, he did not relinquish God. Rather, he held two views in his mind, finding a way to reconcile them with each other, or perhaps finding in the words attributed to Christ similar stern demands that resonated with his sense of noblesse oblige. Walker likewise writes of being of two minds in the introduction to the posthumously published *Symbol and Existence:* "This book is the result of the collision of two worldviews in a single mind" (1). In Walker's case, the two worldviews being addressed are objective science and Existentialism, but it is the balancing of them that is noted.

Despite Walker Percy's willingness to acknowledge Will Percy's influence over his development as a man, he was loathe to admit that he belonged to Will Percy's South. In fact, at times Walker Percy denies that very orientation. James Atlas believes him, stating, "[His] allegiance to the South is tenuous," and citing Percy's own words as proof:

> The odd thing is that I [Percy] don't fit in here. One would think my own sense of dislocation would coincide with the historical predicament of the South. Because we had lost the Civil War, Southerners were citizens of a defeated country—according to the common wisdom—and thus entitled to our own alienation. But I never fitted in with those fellows . . . Faulkner and all the rest of them were always going on about this tragic sense of history, and we're supposed to sit on our porches talking about it all the time. I never did that. My south was always the New South. (185-86)

Clearly, in his above rejection of the Old South, Percy is shrugging off attempts to pigeonhole him as belonging to that Faulknerian crew. Indeed, to place him in such a group would be to ignore much of the philosophy expressed in his novels; however, to ignore the impact of his region on his philosophy is equally deficient. Consider the years of Percy's literary apprenticeship: Allen Tate was one of his mentors (Tolson 230; Samway 161-63), although Tate's wife, Caroline Gordon, whose criticism of his work was specific and instructive, likely had more of an effect upon him (Samway 162-63). In either case, both Tate and Gordon are Southerners who converted to Catholicism, like Walker Percy. He looked to them for that early tutelage because he was, as Tolson reveals, "close to [their] 'way of seeing'" the world (224), and also because they were "Will Percy's friends" (Wyatt-Brown 315). If this is not enough evidence that the South cannot be denied by Percy, his long residence in Covington, Louisiana, is additional proof that he and the South belonged to each other. Given the above, Walker Percy's assertion of alienation from his community may seem odd. Turning to Bloom provides some answers. Bloom notes: "Initial love for the precursor's poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife, without which individuation is not possible" (*Map* 10). It is not the region that Walker Percy is denying; instead, he is making a metonymic denial of Will Percy's worldview.

The foundation of Will Percy's worldview is the noblesse oblige of the planter class, which Walker Percy describes as being "the natural perfection of the Stoics" ("Stoicism" 85). He explains that the true Stoic was called "to duty, to honor, to generosity toward his fellow men and

above all to his inferiors—not because they were made in the image of God and were therefore lovable in themselves, but because to do them an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which was oneself" (85). Folded into this definition lies the alternate view that Percy seeks to espouse, one that is egalitarian rather than elite: humans are worthy of love because they are "made in the image of God" (85). In struggling against Will Percy's view, Walker Percy wrestles with a family code. His Percy forefathers were Stoics first and Christians second or not at all, with his guardian representing the culmination of that ethos. Walker Percy clarifies, "The whole idea of the Greek-Roman Stoic view, the classical view, was exemplified in him more than in any other person I ever knew" (qtd. in Carr 57). This philosophy may have been attractive, but it was also dangerous. That Stoic ethos made suicide the honorable choice for both Walker Percy's grandfather and his father when the strain of living honorably in their present age became too much. However, Walker Percy realized, for all the seductive pull of his forefather's Stoicism, "In the light of such a code, the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ wherein each of us is a member, one of another, and no one is inviolate in the precincts of his soul, must remain incomprehensible" ("Failure" 332). In Walker Percy's philosophy, to which Catholicism is central, that incomprehensibility is the sticking point.

Anxiety of influence is a stifling force upon a writer's originality, one that Walker Percy senses. He must show the old system of Stoicism as one that is defunct, a task he easily accomplishes in his 1956 essay "Stoicism in the South." After his years in Will Percy's house, Walker Percy writes with authority, neatly dispatching Will Percy's philosophy by using these words: "We in the South can no longer afford the luxury of maintaining the Stoa beside the Christian edifice" ("Stoicism" 86). However, throwing off Uncle Will's powerful influence was not the easy task that Walker Percy may have believed. When Walker turned to novels, Will Percy's fictional incarnations could not be so easily vanquished.

Applying the Revisionary Ratios

Walker Percy's novels were written to convey his philosophy, defined by him as "a radical anthropology, a science of man which will take account of all human realities, not merely space-time events" ("Culture" 224), to a broad audience. Beginning with *The Moviegoer*, "[t]he conflict is a hidden ideological conflict involving, on the one hand, what [Percy] call[s] Southern stoicism. . . . The other ideology is Christian Catholic" (qtd. in Abádi-Nagy 72). The same conflict takes center stage

in two of his next three novels, with *Love in the Ruins* as the exception. Percy explains this repetition of conflict: "A great deal of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* have to do with the differences between me and my uncle. The whole thing is a dialectic . . ." (qtd. in King 91). The argument is not settled until his fourth novel, *Lancelot*, in which he gives Will Percy's worldview free reign in the character of Lancelot Lamar, a character that he explains has the "Roman Stoic" behind him (qtd. in Mitgang 147). Finally, in *The Second Coming*, written in 1980, Percy fulfills the objective he identified in that 1956 essay by showing Stoicism as a dead philosophy unable to respond to the challenges of the late twentieth century.

In his first published novel, *The Moviegoer*, which is dedicated to Will Percy, the biographical connection between Will and the character of Emily Cutrer has been well-documented (e.g., Tolson 287). Following the death of Binx's father, she provides Binx's education, and she is put in the position of the Stoic. She memos a Marcus Aurelius quotation to Binx, the same one Walker Percy uses in several essays in *Signposts in a Strange Land*. This quotation is one which Will Percy most certainly read to Walker and his brothers repeatedly: "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" (67). In this dialectic with Will Percy, Aunt Emily is a manifestation of Will Percy's Stoicism. In the resolution of the novel, her philosophy should be shown as one that is bankrupt, thus vanquishing the influence that Will Percy's worldview has upon him. Instead, Will Percy's voice dominates the text in *The Moviegoer* for roughly two pages without interruption (194-96).

Particularly problematic is the location of this tear in the narrative fabric, which occurs near the novel's end, and the doubling of Stoic influence that his readers experience. In Aunt Emily's speech, Percy invokes not only his philosophic predecessor, but also his literary precursor, as Emily recalls when she and Binx spoke "of goodness and truth and beauty and nobility" (198), in words echoing Will Percy's own: "Honor and honesty, compassion and truth are good even if they kill you, for they alone give life its dignity and worth" (*Lanterns* 313). The echo of Will Percy's memoir need not have been intentional. Such language was the language of the Stoics, as demonstrated by McCaslin in William Faulkner's "The Bear," who speaks of "courage and honor and pride, and pity and love of justice and of liberty" (290). Faulkner also uses a similar string of virtues in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech: "courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice" (724). By recreating the list of Stoic virtues through Emily's words, Percy emphasizes the philosophy that he intends to defeat,

but he does so incompletely by citing values indistinguishable from his Christian ones. Binx immediately thereafter invokes the passage in Faulkner's Nobel speech where Faulkner claims, "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? (723). Binx's response to such Stoic pessimism is the assertion, "[W] hat people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall . . ." (*The Moviegoer* 200). In this intertextual interchange, Percy attempts to communicate that the twilight of civilization that the Stoics so feared has come and gone, leaving their fizzled expectations of apocalypse and their moribund philosophy in its wake. However, Percy proves the opposite of his intentions when Binx's next comments end with the sentiment, "Whenever I take leave of my aunt after one of her serious talks, I have to find a girl" (200). He has plunged Binx back into the Nobel speech, proving that at this particular point in the narrative, Binx's impetus is what Faulkner would describe as being "not of the heart but of the glands" (724). While Faulkner's speech provides a neat encapsulation of Stoic philosophy, it is far more likely that Stoicism was instilled in Walker Percy through Will Percy's teachings, not through Faulkner's speech (cf. Wyatt-Brown 301). Ultimately, rather than the Christian virtues of mercy and compassion ruling the day, Percy undercuts all such intentions with his ironic depiction of Binx's lust. Instead of Aunt Emily's rant being, as Wyatt-Brown describes it, inadequate because of "its disembodied barren intellectuality" (320), it is crackling with power and life. Rather than showing Stoicism and the paternalistic social system it engendered as a system that is outdated, Percy admits in 1979 that "many people . . . 'sure do like this book because [they] like the way Aunt Emily told him [Binx] off at the end. . . . [They say] she was absolutely right'" (qtd. in Kitchings 4). These people are like those fans of Will Percy's "who [come] bearing down at full charge, waving *Lanterns on the Levee* like a battle flag. 'He is right! The Old South was right!'" ("Introduction" xii). The difficulty Percy has with this scene is indirectly revealed by Lewis A. Lawson, who observes, "Offered with such obvious earnestness and eloquence as William Alexander Percy gave it, the Stoic attitude must have been vivid and enticing to his adoptive sons" (47). In a final accounting of the novel, Percy's own fascination with his uncle's credo outwrestles his better judgment.

In his second attempt to defeat Will Percy's Stoicism, he again falls short, this time intentionally. As Bloom explains, "To live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father" (*Map* 19). With Percy, though, it is more than metaphorical. In a real sense his life depends upon it. While Will Percy was able to live as a Stoic, Roy Percy died as one. Stoicism is too

much a philosophy of death, and Walker Percy knew his own vulnerability. Like his biological father and grandfather, he was subject to bouts of depression (Wyatt-Brown 307), and the voice of his adoptive father, amplified by the suicide of his biological father, was "always speaking in [him]" (Bloom, *Map* 19). To defy the suicidal urge within himself, as well as to enter his full power as a novelist, he must conquer that voice and break its hold over him. In *The Last Gentleman*, inability to fulfill his ultimate objective is foreshadowed in the opening description of Will Barrett:

> Over the years his family had turned ironical and lost its gift for action. It was an honorable and violent family, but gradually the violence had been deflected and turned inward. The great grandfather knew what was what and said so and acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought. He even wore a pistol in a holster like a Western hero and once met the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in a barbershop and invited him then and there to shoot it out in the street. . . . [T]he grandfather seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure. . . . He too would have shot it out with the Grand Wizard if only he could have made certain it was the thing to do. The father was a brave man too and he said he didn't care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and to be thought well of by other men. So living for him was a strain. . . . In the end he was killed by his own irony and sadness and by the strain of living out an ordinary day in a perfect dance of honor.
>
> As for the present young man, the last of the line, he did not know what to think. So he became a watcher. . . . (6)

The biographical ties to the above passage are easy to trace, although the disintegration of Percy's own family is more complex and, in some ways, far more compressed than the version presented in fiction. During the 1920's Klan revival, former Senator LeRoy Percy (Will Percy's father) waged a ferocious and successful oratory battle against the Klan. His major fears were the threat of northern migration by a black labor force and the anti-Papist stance of the Klan. A failed assassination plan against LeRoy Percy and the continued threats against his father's life prompted Will Percy to retaliate with a threat of his own (Wyatt-Brown 235): he told local Klan leader Ray Toombs, "I'm holding you responsible. If anything happens to my father, I'm going to kill you" (qtd. in Delaney 154; see also Will Percy, *Lanterns* 236). At this

same time, LeRoy Percy and Walker Percy's father Roy were particularly close "because he [LeRoy] saw in his nephew such great promise as a lawyer, and possible statesman too. The future of the family name would be Roy Percy's responsibility" (Wyatt-Brown 228). Tragically, Roy was not able to live up to the promise his uncle saw in him, and nothing more clearly reveals that than his inaction regarding the rise of the Klan in his home city, Birmingham (Tolson 35-36). In the end, Roy's depression and, perhaps, his perceived inability to live up to the example set by his uncle led to his suicide. Following the inescapable connections between the fictional passage and the Percy family history shows that Walker Percy was like Will Barrett, the last of the honorable line. What is missing in Barrett is the ability to make decisions and, thereby, to shake free of the old code.

While Percy has intellectually chosen a path that diverges from that of his fathers, he has not yet overcome the pull of their worldview. Perhaps that is the reason his character, Will Barrett, is unable to grasp the alternative to Stoicism that is provided to him, and Will is, therefore, unable to act upon that alternative in a meaningful fashion. As he stands outside his boyhood home, reflecting on the night of his father's suicide, his hand seeks out a remembered curiosity, an old hitching post that had been partially absorbed in the growth of an oak tree, and "his fingers explored the juncture of iron and bark" (*Last* 261). In a moment of near epiphany, he thinks, "*Wait*. He [the father] 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—he shook his head—that—" (261). The answer, present in the objective correlative of the bark enrobed hitching post, escapes Will. He cannot take the leap from the Stoic's love of death, represented by the steel of the post that is like the steel of the death-dealing gun, to the love of life, represented by the bark that subsumes death as Christ's resurrection to life does. Although the steel and the tree should have led Will to the cross, in the end, he stops short because Percy stops short, his metaphor failing, leading only to near epiphany.

As though he has learned from his failure in *The Moviegoer*, Percy does not attempt in *The Last Gentleman* to reach *apophrades*. Rather, he stops short in moving through Bloom's six revisionary ratios, ending this battle against Stoicism successfully with *askesis*, though he has yet to win the war. Bloom's use of tropes in relation to the ratios can be followed throughout Will's remembrance of his father's final night. The irony of *clinamen* is found in Ed's assertion that they have lost, although all obvious indicators are to the contrary, and his listening

to the Brahms Great Horn Theme, which, in its "victorious serenity . . . was false, oh fake, fake" (*Last* 260). Synecdoche, which is the trope of *tessera* (Bloom, *Map* 84), is in the father's heavy hand, which rests briefly upon Will's shoulder as Ed goes into the house, laying upon him the burden of history and the Stoic ideal. Then, through the metonymy created by the sound of the single death shot over the victorious music, Percy moves into the ratio of *kenosis*, with the emptying out of this phase amplified by Will "turn[ing] off the Philco" and silencing the music (*Last* 261). He then introduces a hyperbolic sequence: "I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place" (261), moving into the hyperbolic trope of *daemonization* by indicating that not just his father was wrong but all of the twentieth century. Finally, he ends with the metaphors of *askesis* when Will attempts to understand the meaning imparted by the bark and the iron before swerving away into silence. Percy is not ready to allow the Stoic voice to be heard within the ratio of *apophrades* after the power of that voice in *The Moviegoer*. However, he has successfully moved through the first five ratios, making progress in his struggle to control the influence of Will Percy's Stoicism.

Wyatt-Brown offers an explanation for Percy's hesitancy in his reaction to criticism of *The Last Gentleman*: "Frederick Crews in *Commentary* . . . wondered why the author seemed so reluctant 'to inspect Will Barrett's conflicts at close range or to understand them much more clearly than Barrett does himself.' That reticence, that fear of self-disclosure, was very much a part of the family culture" (324). Wyatt-Brown is right about the block caused by family culture although he is referencing the family's sense of privacy, not their Stoicism. While such manners may have had an impact upon Percy's decision, the hold that Stoicism retained on his imagination is much more likely to be the cause. Based upon the philosophical struggle expressed in his novels, it seems his mind is more convinced of the superiority of Catholicism than his heart is, which remains in thrall to Stoicism.

Perhaps to prepare himself for the battle to end the war, Percy takes a rest from his struggle with Stoicism in *Love in the Ruins* by focusing a satirical attack on "a free society in which Orwell and Huxley have carried the day. For this novel deals . . . with the increasing malaise and finally the falling apart of a society which remains, on the surface at least, democratic and pluralistic" (Percy, "Concerning" 248). When Percy reenters the war, he picks up where he left off in *The Last Gentleman*, devoting the entirety of *Lancelot* to *apophrades*. Just as Bloom's ratios of revision predict, the dominant trope of *Lancelot* is metalepsis, which according to Bloom is "a scheme, frequently allusive,

that refers the reader back to any previous figurative scheme. . . . [T]he present vanishes and the dead return, by a reversal, to be triumphed over by the living" (Bloom, *Map* 74). The very title of the novel announces the entrance into the ratio of *apophrades*. Metalepsis is further confirmed when that title is coupled with the doubled allusion of the title character's name, which is addressed a mere four pages into the narrative, when Lance recalls Percival's words: "'Lancelot Andrewes Lamar,' you used to say. 'You were named after the great Anglican divine, weren't you? Shouldn't it have been Lancelot du Lac, King Ban of Benwick's son?'" (4). In an interview, Percy adds a third layer to the allusion, saying, ". . . I had less in mind Sir Lancelot than Ulysses" (qtd. in Gretlund 209).

Lancelot marks Percy's true separation from the philosophy of his fathers, as it is the battlefield where the two ideologies that Will Percy had once handed to him are pitted against each other. Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes that this novel "deal[s] most directly with his ambivalent feelings regarding Will Percy and also the family as a whole" (329). Percy's intent is to exorcise demons. While Wyatt-Brown's reading concentrates on the banishment of internal demons, Stoicism has demonically plagued Percy's philosophy, and it, too, must be, if not fully banished, altered in such a way that it serves the purposes of Percy's Christian philosophy. But how can this objective be reached successfully? Earlier attempts were incomplete at best, failures at worst. The answer lies in Percy's decision to reveal the Stoic ethos in its fullest expression by writing the novel as "a dramatic monologue . . . which was the way it should be" (qtd. in Gretlund 210). When Lancelot commits murder, the Greco-Roman ethic is carried to its "logical conclusion" (209). To intensify the classical tradition, Percy slyly incorporates a sort of Greek chorus: the girl walking in the cemetery singing Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee." In the lyrics—"Freedom's just another word, Lord, for nothing left to lose / Freedom was all she left for me" (*Lancelot* 16)—is the central message regarding Stoicism: when pushed to its end point, when honor has been irreparably sullied, all that remains is the terrifying freedom of murder or suicide, "the freedom to act on [one's] conviction" (143). This freedom is particularly true in its representation in *Lancelot*, as Lance likely intends the explosion at Belle Isle to end his own life along with the lives of his wife Margot and her lover, Jacoby.

Leaving Stoicism unchecked allows Percy to finally confront the "dangerous seductiveness" this philosophy holds for him (Wyatt-Brown 331). This novel is also the one where he most directly confronts his ambivalence regarding Will Percy's sexuality. Lance has a homosexual son, which removes homosexuality from Lance by a generation and

allows Lance to articulate Percy's own confusion. Lance reflects, "My son is a homosexual now and I can understand why. He told me he was terrified of all the pussy after him" (*Lancelot* 163). Homosexuality becomes a retreat from overly aggressive women rather than a pursuit of other men. However, Lance's own language has a homoerotic element to it at times. For example, Lancelot equates his love of Percival to his love of Margot; both loves are "for equally curious reasons" (64-65). He describes Percival as having "something gracile and frail and feminine about [him]" despite his "saturninity, drinking, and horniness" (65). The height of this language occurs when Percy sets up a series of questions that lead toward seduction:

> Did it ever occur to you that after we went to college we never *touched* each other? Do you remember walking down Bourbon Street behind two Russian sailors who were holding hands? Do you remember sleeping in a motel bed in Jackson, Mississippi, with a whore between us? Why was it all right for us to simultaneously assault the poor whore between us but never once touch each other? Who is crazy, we or the Russians? (85)

However, when Percival's response to such talk is to touch Lance's shoulder, Lance's final question veers from the seduction. He asks, "Do you know that I am embarrassed?" (85). While such embarrassment may be the result of a sexual identity crisis in Lancelot, in regard to the development of Percy's philosophy, it has far more to do with Lance's surprise at Percival reacting literally to a metaphoric desire. Lancelot wants to draw him into a philosophical position, not a sexual one, by the juxtaposition of Eros and Thanatos. This technique is particularly effective, given that the Percival he speaks to has, in his absence from Lancelot, become Father John, a Catholic priest. The seductiveness of the language when presented to a priest who has vowed celibacy increases the metaphoric power. The priest, in choosing Christ, has chosen life, while the Stoic, in the end, chooses death.

To defeat his predecessor, Percy shows in fiction what he so long ago stated in an essay: Stoicism is an outdated philosophy. The narrative is a dramatic monologue throughout, and Lance periodically launches into diatribes; however, unlike the one Emily Cutrer delivers near the end of *The Moviegoer*, Lance's words show the inflexibility and violence of Stoicism to be anything but persuasive:

> There are only three ways to go. One is their way out there, the great whorehouse and fagdom of America. I won't have it. The second way is sweet Baptist Jesus and I won't have that. Christ,

> if heaven is full of Southern Baptists, I'd rather rot in hell with Saladin and Achilles. There is only one way and we could have had it if you Catholics hadn't blown it: the old Catholic way. . . .
>
> So you fucked it up good and we're going to have to pull it out for you. We? Who are we? You will find out soon enough. It is enough for you to know how it is going to be, for we are the new Reformation. (162-63)

While Emily's words took a higher, albeit elitist, ground that many readers found appealing, Lance's language is crass, and his rant does not rest upon any sort of moral ground. Aunt Emily's high moral ground might be outdated, but she inhabits it with zest. On the other hand, Lance sounds like the madman he is. The "we" has no reference within the novel, and the reader can only assume that Lance has no followers.

At last, Percy has succeeded in moving through the ratio of *apophrades*. The stoic voice is subjected to his will. Unlike Will Barrett, Lance gets eventually it. As the novel comes to a close, he is no longer willing to stay in that hell that is characterized by the persistent cold he feels (236). Instead, Percival's presence offers Lancelot a more attractive alternative rather than Lance providing that alternative for readers. Without saying a word, Percival has been the more accomplished at seduction. When Lance lays out his final argument "as a simple scholastic syllogism" (238), he claims he does this for Percival's benefit, but the language he uses, along with the form of his argument, shows the beginning of a shift in Lance's allegiance:

> 1. We are living in Sodom.
> 2. I do not propose to live in Sodom or to raise my son and daughters in Sodom.
> 3. Either your God exists or he does not.
> 4. If he exists, he will not tolerate Sodom much longer. . . .
> 5. If God does not exist, then it will be I not God who will not tolerate it. . . .
> 6. I'll wait and give your God time. (239)

The shift in Lance's language, from the crass profanity of his early diatribes to the restrained vocabulary employed in his Scholastic syllogism shows that his philosophy has changed. In his closing words, Lance shows that he is ready to abandon his Stoicism, having, as Percy explains, "[carried] Aunt Emily's ethic to its logical conclusion" (qtd. in Gretlund 209) and found that conclusion to be unsatisfying and in fact empty. He is not going to lay it down, however, unless he is given

a viable alternative. In Percyan fashion, that option is not articulated in the novel. However, when Lance's final question—"Is there anything you wish to tell me before I leave?"— is answered by Father John, who has shed his Percival persona, with the final word of the novel, a clear "Yes" (241), the Christian alternative of life over death is resounding though unspoken.

Conclusion

The application of Bloom's revisionary ratios reveals that later mentions of Stoicism, in *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983) and in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), relegate it to the past, where it belongs. For example, in "The Last Donahue Show" Col. John Pelham, C.S.A., denounces modern morality, or the lack thereof, but he indicates that the Stoicism he professes is a dead philosophy. His admiration of military prowess and romantic reminiscences of medieval history belong to another era, before "you [the North] won the war" (*Lost* 56). He removes himself from the fray by saying, "[I]f that's the way you want to act, that's your affair" (56). In this way, Percy asserts that Stoicism is an antebellum tradition lacking currency in the late twentieth century. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Stoicism has gone beyond the moth-eaten words of Pelham and taken on a more palpable aspect of evil. Stoicism is fodder for Bob Comeaux's adopted paternalism, and it is foundational to Comeaux and Van Dorn's social engineering project, in much the same way that the Roman and Holy Roman Empires were building blocks for Hitler's visions of domination. When Comeaux says to Tom, "I'm assuming . . . that we live by the same lights, share certain basic assumptions and goals" (*Thanatos* 206), the echo of Emily Cutrer's final speech to Binx is heard. Comeaux, however, is not chastising Tom for failing to fulfill familial expectations. Instead, he is trying to sell Tom on the covert sodium dose project. Comeaux claims that by stripping away personal sovereignty from those within the treatment area, particularly the African Americans within the scope of their unauthorized clinical trial, they are "restor[ing] the best of the Southern Way of Life" (214), complete with Stoicism and the old Greco-Roman hierarchy.

With the defeat of Will Percy's influence, *The Thanatos Syndrome* demonstrates what Walker asserted twenty-two years earlier: at its best, the old code was profoundly flawed. It depended upon each of those at the top of society "be[ing] magnanimous toward other men and especially toward the helpless" ("Mississippi" 46). Unfortunately, as the characters of Van Dorn and Comeaux exemplify, men are likely to be self-serving, self-satisfying, and, therefore, unjust. The comic

fates of both (Van Dorn hawks his adventures in gorilla love on talk television while Comeaux moves to New York, changes the spelling of his name to Como, and pivots to secular humanism) testify to the mastery Percy has gained over Stoicism. But, good Christian that he is, Percy also offers redemption to these characters rather than the stern punishments doled out by the Stoics, and for the reader, there is no mistaking his intentions or beliefs.

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Reading by the Numbers: The Peirce-Percy Semiotic in Walker Percy's Fiction

Karey Lea Perkins

Introduction

Walker Percy's avowed lifelong goal was to create an adequate explanatory theory of human beings, a radical anthropology. Percy spent the 1950s writing his now-posthumously published philosophical treatise, *Symbol & Existence: A Study in Meaning* (2019), which uses extensive existential and philosophical resources, including the semeiotic of American pragmaticist Charles Sanders Peirce, as a foundation for Percy's own semiotic and his radical anthropology.[1] Percy tried several times during that decade to publish the book, writing four different drafts of the manuscript, but was unsuccessful, managing to only publish isolated chapters in various academic journals. Upon his publication of *The Moviegoer* in 1961 and subsequent receipt of the National Book Award in 1962, he decided "his fortunes lay in fiction" and abandoned his attempt to publish the book or philosophy in general (*Symbol & Existence* vii).

However, Percy still felt semiotic and the unique human capacity for language were the key to his radical anthropology, to reconcile the prevailing scientific view of human beings with an overlooked existential view, so he never completely abandoned his language study. He worked with psychiatrist F. Gentry Harris of NIMH in the 1960s applying semiotic theory to schizophrenics and their family interactions. In the 1970s, he was asked to publish his philosophical essays, which then became *Message in the Bottle*, developing his radical anthropology based in his unique semiotic. However, these essays were somewhat haphazardly and perhaps halfheartedly thrown together from previous journal publications (with only three original essays written for the book) as a discouraged Percy by this time became convinced not many people really wanted to read his philosophy (*Symbol & Existence* viii; Samway, *Signposts* 420).

But perhaps this turned his attention back to philosophy; this is the point when his semiotic numbers begin to surface in his fiction. In fact, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill archives, his

Message in the Bottle notes were mixed in the same folder with his notes on his fourth novel, *Lancelot,* possibly given to UNC that way by the family. (They have since been organized and separated.)[2] Published within two years of each other (1975 and 1977), they were likely written at the same time. (Unlike some of his contemporaries, who could churn out a novel annually, Percy usually spent several years working on each novel.)

Semiotic is forefront on his mind as he writes *Lancelot*, which marks a shift in his literary fiction. While Percy's first three novels depict his social, psychological, and spiritual commentary through an existential lens, his last three, *Lancelot, The Second Coming,* and *The Thanatos Syndrome,* are infused with the Peirce-Percy Semiotic[3] symbolizing the human condition, particularly the numbers and shapes of two, three, and four. Instead of a non-fiction sequel, his latter fiction became the default messengers of his semiotic and his radical anthropology.

Ironically, early on, before he published *Message in the Bottle*, Percy denied that one would have to read philosophy to understand his novels. In 1971, he said in separate interviews: "God forbid if we have to read philosophy in order to read a novel" (Bunting 53), and later, "I don't believe in enigmas and acrostics. I've read novels that you have to have read some sort of handbook in order to understand. I think if this sort of novel—the philosophical novel or whatever it is, the sort of thing that the French pioneered—is any good, then the philosophy is part and parcel of the novel, and there's no illustrating of theses" (Carr 60-61). However, his latter three novels belie his words. A comprehension of his philosophy is necessary for an appreciation of the full impact of the Peirce-Percy Semiotic in these three novels.

The Search for a Radical Anthropology

Percy cites many times his desire to formulate a more accurate model of human beings to replace inadequate theory dominating anthropology and psychology today (Hobson 221-22). Percy writes, "Modern anthropology deals with man as a physical organism and with the products of man as a culture member, but NOT with man himself in his distinctive activity as a culture member. . . . Modern anthropology has been everything except an anthropology" (*Message* 239). Modern science—even social sciences such as anthropology—fails to describe humans because it usually relies solely on a behaviorist, stimulus-response view. For Percy, this purely physical explanation leaves out key traits of humankind, such as symbolic activity: language, art, religion, consciousness.

It is "scientism" Percy is rejecting. He differentiates *scientism*—a behaviorist worldview discounting a significant portion of reality, that is, any theory, phenomena, or view outside a material realm of stimulus-response ("dyadic") science—from the *scientific method*—the testing and evaluation of a hypothesis to determine if evidence supports it, a legitimate, effective, orderly tool to investigate any phenomena in the world (*Symbol & Existence* 31).[4] Although Percy felt traditional science WAS competent to explain human biological function, humans as organisms in an environment, it was wholly inadequate to explain humans as wayfarers through a world. He wanted his theory to embrace science's findings about humans, but to go beyond science:

> A radical anthropology must take account of ontological levels more radical than the scope of the functional method. . . . Anthropology must be willing to accept not only functional criteria: what social and biological purpose is served by this or that cultural element; or aesthetic criteria: whether or not a cultural element conforms to the prevailing cultural pattern and contributes to "cultural integration," but a normative criterion as well. It must not be afraid to deal with the fact that a man may flourish by one scale and languish by another—that he may be a good organism and an integrated culture member and at the same time live a trivial and anonymous life. (*Message* 240-41)

Yet current scientific and anthropological views of humans excluded any non-material reality. Something was missing.

Percy recognizes that science can explain certain characteristics of humans biologically—hunger, heart attacks, procreation—but completely fail to explain existential and symbolic characteristics. Yet while existentialism could identify science's deficiency, it *also* had something missing. Percy says, "I was having trouble with Kierkegaard's subjectivity and inwardness" and felt he erred in his "opposition to Hegel's system—objectivity" (Dewey 119). The scientist in Percy wanted an objective science involved in some way. A better explanatory theory was needed.

Language

Percy found his theory in language: "I have tried to bridge this huge gap between the scientist's view of man and the novelist-existentialist's view of man, both of which I thought were valid. And the only way to

do it—it came over me as a kind of revelation—was through language" (Smith 137). For Percy, language unites empiricism and existentialism and so becomes the empirical tool he sought (*Message* 280). This "semiotic approach to consciousness" (Gretlund 214), or "science of the psyche" was his attempt to understand the self scientifically (Gutledge 289), but not by "a conventional science of secondary causes" (Gretlund 214), but rather to look at a new way of thinking about "people and things and symbols" (Hobson 224). But just like science devolved into scientism needed a little tweaking, a course correction, so did modern-day semiotics, and for largely the same problem: it was "dyadic," reducing the language event to a stimulus-response, cause-effect event described by behavioristic theories. For these semioticians, symbol, "the prototype of all meaning structure [and] symbolic meaning, involving words and thoughts, is seen as a refinement of the causal order of signification" (*Symbol & Existence* 51).

Fundamental to Percy's semiotic philosophy is the distinction between *sign*, a "dyadic" interaction of stimulus-response, from *symbol*, a "triadic" interaction of relationship and meaning. He spends much time combating modern semioticians' conflating of "symbol" with "sign," reducing "naming" to a mere S-R reaction, transforming the seminal intersubjective meaning-event of naming to the equivalent of a dog salivating when it hears a buzzer (*Message* 280). However, for Percy, language and the naming event are not dyadic. Modern semiotics was still not quite the right answer.

The Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce

Percy found his answers in older philosophy, that of the Scholastic monks and particularly that of nineteenth-century philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Percy was aware of Peirce as early as the 1950s, perhaps even before when, in 1947, the recently married Walker and Bunt rented philosopher Julius Friend's New Orleans home with a vast literary and philosophical library, including the works of Peirce and Friend's own writings on Peirce (Tolson 201).

For Percy, a Peircean *triadic* "symbol" is a qualitatively different transaction than the behaviorist model for naming as *dyadic* "sign" (*Signposts* 283; *Message* 153; *Symbol & Existence* 41ff.). While dyads represent two physical objects interacting in a discontinuous cause-effect, stimulus-response manner; triads represent a continuity of relations, a web of relations creating a fabric of life, enabling humans to have symbolic capacity, including language, art, culture, religion, self-awareness, even uniquely human consciousness. Percy writes,

> CSP's Thirdness, triadicity, properly understood and properly applied, can go a long way in pointing some right directions in the current mess in which the social sciences find themselves. . . . The traditional paradigm (Cartesian and Newtonian), which has been so extraordinarily successful in the physical, chemical, and biological sciences, has proved quite as spectacularly unsuccessful in the so-called social sciences, i.e., the sciences of man *qua* man" (Samway, *Thief* 17-18).

Percy calls for a paradigm shift: "[We need] . . . a new way of looking at things. . . . Charles Peirce's triadic theory applies mainly to man's strange and apparently unique capacity to use symbols and in particular, to his gift of language (Samway, *Thief* 117).

Peirce's concepts of Firstness (or monads), Secondness (dyads), and Thirdness (triads) are the foundation for Percy's semiotic, his radical anthropology. However, Percy didn't have much use for Peirce's monads—whether he bought into them or not, they simply didn't serve the purposes of his anthropology project. He just ignored them. What he did pay attention to were dyads, triads, and the difference between them (*Signposts* 283).

Secondness

Secondness, represented by dyads, describes two material objects, separated by time and space, interacting with each other in a cause-effect manner. Peirce explains: "Second is that which is determined, terminated, ended, correlative, object, necessitated, reacting" (Houser and Kloesel 280). It is what we think of when we think of actual reality, the physical world, that which acts according to the laws of Newtonian physics. Secondness is what happens when physical, material qualities knock into each other; Secondness is undeniable. When two billiard balls or two cars hit each other, there is a cause-effect reaction that is consistent, orderly, and predictable: one billiard ball begins in one space at one point in time, then travels through space and time, hits another ball in another space and time, and causes a reaction. Peirce says the world of Secondness is the world that traditional science examines and describes:

> The second category of elements of a phenomena comprises the actual facts. . . . Facts also concern subjects which are material substances. We do not see them as we see qualities [Firstness], that is, they are not in the very potentiality and

> essence of sense. . . . But we feel facts resist our will. That is why facts are proverbially called brutal. Now mere qualities do not resist. It is matter that resists. Even in actual sensation there is a reaction. Now mere qualities, unmaterialized, cannot actually react. . . . In the idea of reality, Secondness is predominant; for the real is that which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as something other than the mind's creation. (Buchler 77, 79)

For Percy, Secondness could only attain a partial description of human beings because it could only describe physical events and cause-effect interactions, and while humans are indeed physical creatures, they are more than that. Science had no explanatory theory for the vast amount of symbolic activity unique to human behavior, such as "consciousness, language, poetry, other triadic activity, e.g., uttering a sentence" (Gutledge 289-90).

Thirdness

Thirdness, represented by triads, is about relation and relationships including laws governing such. Peirce explains: "Thirdness . . . is the medium, becoming, developing, bringing about" (Houser and Kloesel 280). While Secondness is discontinuous, objects separated by time and space, Thirdness is a continuity, a web of relations creating a connected and coherent fabric of life (Langer 78; Buchler 80; *Signposts* 18, 54, 145), resulting from symbolic capacity. When these material objects have cause-effect reactions (Secondness) that become repeated, regular, and predictable, we can create "laws" or general principles about results of these interactions, the realm of Thirdness. Newton's laws, hard sciences, and even social sciences rely on the principles of Secondness to make sense, but the laws themselves, the laws that material entities follow and exhibit, are examples of Thirdness. For example, one incident of the released ball that falls to the ground is Secondness, happening each time the ball is released. This repetition is predictable under the law of gravity (Thirdness). The consistent repeated events of Secondness create a pattern predicting regular relationships in the future. Note that Thirdness describes things that are real in the universe, but that are non-material. For example, the law of gravity is a reality in the universe, but it is not tangible. One cannot see or perceive the law of gravity with one's five senses, only the results of that law. The law of gravity cannot "bump into" anything and create a reaction, but it does describe and affect items in the world

(e.g.: if I release the ball I am holding, it will fall to the ground.) Other examples are concepts such as "freedom." "Freedom" is really found in the universe, and its presence makes a clear difference in the universe, but it is still non-tangible. Imaginary or immaterial entities, such as ghosts and bogeyman and Hamlet are also real in the universe, affecting actions and events in the world, but they, too, are non-tangible.

For Percy, the concept of Thirdness was the missing answer to his existential questions about why science fails to account for the human psyche and its symbolic capacity.

The Peirce-Percy Semiotic

As a "thief of Peirce" (Samway, *Thief* 130), Percy pillages from Peirce to create his own semiotic, a radical anthropology. Percy clarifies his goal, "I was trying to systematize it . . . having been brought up scientifically, I had a great respect for scientific rigor and precision of language" (Dewey 109). Peirce's semiotic provided the objectivity Percy sought for his own semiotic theory, his radical anthropology. Percy even names his system, writing in a 1971 letter to Shelby Foote:

> 100 years from now it could well be known as the *Peirce-Percy theory of meaning* [my italics] . . . this guy [Peirce] laid it out a hundred years ago, exactly what language is all about and what the behaviorists and professors have got all wrong ever since—laid it out, albeit in a very obscure idiosyncratic style. I propose to take his insight, put it in modern behavioral terms plus a few items of my own, and unhorse an entire generation of behaviorists and grammarians. (qtd. in Samway, *Thief* xvi-xvii)

In 1977, Percy reemphasized to Foote his interest in pursuing the "Peirce-Percy Semiotic" (Samway, *Thief* xviii). As time progressed, and especially in the last decade of his life, his philosophical focus on Peirce intensified. In 1984, Percy struck up a correspondence with Peirce expert Kenneth Laine Ketner (cf. *A Thief of Peirce*), saying,

> My own feeling is that what I could call Peirce's "triadic" theory is of seminal importance as a formal schema for making sense of that distinctive human behavior which involves the use of symbols (sentences, literature, art, etc.) and that it has not even begun to be explored—despite all the lip service to CSP

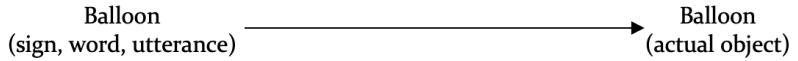
> by present-day semioticists—nor by literary theorists—nor by psychiatrists. (qtd. in Samway, *Thief* 14)

Ketner calls it the "Peirce-Percy Conjecture" as well as the "Peirce-Percy Principle" (Samway, *Thief* 266, 273, 282). Percy reiterates his desire to write a book, calling it variously *Son of Message in the Bottle, Message in the Bottle Returns* (Atlas 186), *Novum Organum* (Hobson 221), *Contra-Gentiles* (Samway, *Thief* 131), and *Thirdness*: "Suppose someone took Charles Sanders Peirce seriously and tried to create a triadic science?" (Gutledge 290; Samway, *Thief* 18). Percy says in 1988, two years before his death: "I think Charles Peirce, the American Philosopher, may be the best clue about it, which has not been pursued or developed . . . I would like to . . . become a recluse for the next four years and work on Charles Peirce's triadic theory of language" (McCombs 204).

His Peirce-Percy Semiotic was a classification system, with geometric shapes and their corresponding numbers as categorizing labels, which captured the relations and interactions of the world.

Dyads

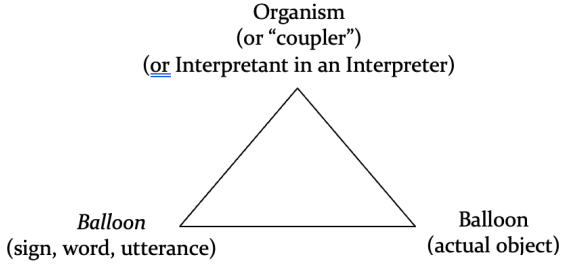
Peirce's differentiation between Secondness and Thirdness illuminates the naming event for Percy. For Percy, most modern semioticians describe the language event dyadically, like two billiard balls hitting each other:



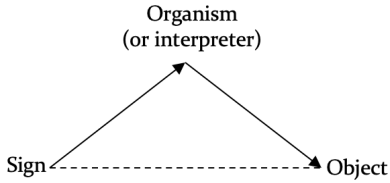
Percy calls this a dyadic "sign" as distinguished from a triadic "symbol" (*Message* 153). For Percy, a symbol is not a cause-effect, linear interaction contained solely within the physical world, nor is it up for investigation by science, nor separated by space and time.

Triads

To show the difference, Percy uses Peirce's triad, modifying it for his own purposes, creating a triangle with each point representing a crucial element in the symbolic process, not just word and object, but a third, necessary element: the organism, the human being doing the naming, by some capacity or power within. Percy often refers to this third element, this inner capacity, as "the coupler" or "interpretant" (*Message* 251, 325; *Symbol & Existence* 174):

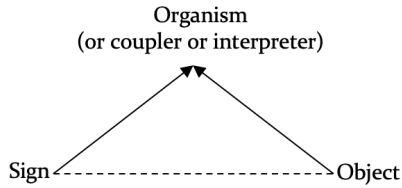


Percy goes on to clarify that just including an organism does not make a description of a triadic or true symbolic event. He draws an erroneous diagram (*Message* 36, 199, 252; *Symbol & Existence* 53, 61, 176):



This is NOT actually a triad, but rather, two dyads. The dotted line is an imputed relation; the solid lines represent a relation of cause. However, the second arrow is pointing in the wrong direction, illustrating a mere "passing through" the organism, which is still a dyadic, cause and effect, linear and energic event separated by space and time, just going through the organism as a human filter. In this mistaken view, sign and object are still separate, not united within the individual.

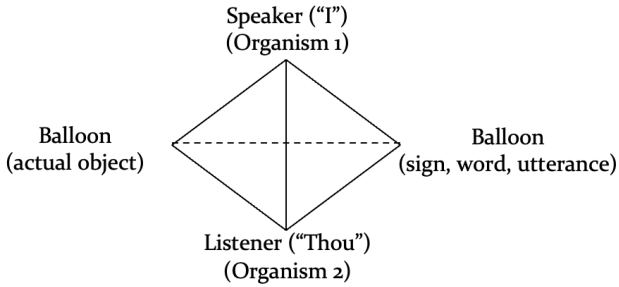
Symbol, however, is a pairing, a simultaneous identification in which the symbol actually *becomes* the object symbolized and vice versa. (See "The Symbolic Transformation" in *Symbol & Existence* pp. 74ff.) The corrected diagram has both arrows going directly to the organism, so that they are united within the individual *at once, simultaneously*. Symbol actually occurs *within* the "organism" (or individual or interpretant). Symbol does not *point to* anything, but it *becomes* the object in symbolization within the organism. So Percy reverses the second arrow (*Message* 37):



To a human being, the word *is* the object, united within the human ("*in alio esse,*" in another mode of existence) (*Message* 156), and the symbol exists *only* within human understanding. Triadic symbol is a qualitatively different transaction than dyadic sign, says Percy, for "symbol-mongering is conducted not for biological sustenance (for which 'sign' would suffice) but is existential" (*Message* 153). Percy realizes, like Peirce, that Thirdness is directly related to meaning. As Peirce says, "Every genuine triadic relation involves meaning, as meaning is obviously a triadic relation . . . a triadic relation is inexpressible by means of dyadic relations alone" (Buchler 91). Human capacity for symbol entails the human existential need for meaning and ontological knowing—meaning of the word, meaning of the event, meaning of life.

Tetrads

Percy adds his own symbol to Peirce's schema—the tetrad. Because language never occurs in isolation but is always someone talking *to* someone else, who each agree on the word's meaning, there are actually four elements in the communication event: the object, the symbol (or word), the first human speaking, and the second human who is receiving the message. According to Percy, "Every sentence is uttered in a community" (*Message* 172). Percy diagrams the tetrad (*Symbol & Existence* 63, 182; *Message* 259):



The tetrad is the human community necessary for communication and relationships to exist. Percy calls this "intersubjectivity."[5] The horizontal axis is still a relationship of quasi-identity (noted by dotted line), seeming to convey connection and identity between object and word, but it is actually not a direct connection. The identity is only possible through the presence of the other two—the speaker and listener, or rather, the Namer and Hearer of the name (*Symbol & Existence* 63-64). The vertical axis, indicated by the solid line, is the relationship of intersubjectivity between the two human beings, and has a real being in the world. Percy explains:

> *Symbolization is of its very essence an intersubjectivity.* If there were only one person in the world, symbolization could not occur (but signification could); for my discovery of water as something derives from your telling me so, that this is water for you too. The act of symbolization is an affirmation: Yes, this is water! My excitement derives from the discovery that it is there for you and me and that it is the same thing for you and me. Every act of symbolization thereafter, whether it be language, art, science, or even thought, must occur either in the presence of a real you or an ideal you for whom the symbol is intended as meaningful. *(Message* 281)

For Percy, twos or dyads represent the physical cause-effect world that science describes, omitting human consciousness and symbolic capacity. Threes or triads represent the world of laws and patterns, continuity, relationships, consciousness, spirituality, and meaning. Fours or tetrads represent the necessary human community in order to enable language, symbolic activity, or any triadic relation.

The Literary Shift

These semiotic numbers show up in Percy's last three novels. He uses a central number and its corresponding geometric shape that relates the theme of each novel back to his semiotic theory: In *Lancelot*, the symbols of inverted threes and triangles illustrate Lancelot's inverted search for spirituality in a world seemingly devoid of it. In *The Second Coming,* fours and diamonds and squares reveal authentic communication and the need for community in our modern world. In *The Thanatos Syndrome,* twos and sixes[5] represent the misguided postmodern search for materialist, dyadic solutions to triadic problems.

To illustrate Percy's use of these numbers, I will offer a brief examination of the first novel from each category: *The Moviegoer,* the first novel from the first half of his literary fiction, clearly more existentialist; and *Lancelot*, the first novel from the second half of his career, in which his semiotic numbers abound.

The Existential Moviegoer

Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer,* reflects the themes of the first half of Percy's fiction: the failure of psychology, scientism, and anthropology to describe humans, the better descriptor of which is existentialism. The existentialist Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* was so important to Percy that Kierkegaard's quote on despair was the epigraph for his first novel, *The Moviegoer.*

The Moviegoer is a classic existential journey of a young man, whose life is filled with the trappings and distractions of material success, searching for "more," trying to find his "self," purpose, and meaning in life. Kierkegaard's journey through the aesthetic stage and, eventually, the leap to the ethical and/or religious stage is Percy's primary theme in the first half of his novels. Percy says:

> I want to pay due homage to Kierkegaard. Insofar as one thinks in a philosophical frame of reference, when I was writing *The Moviegoer*, also *The Last Gentleman*, and maybe also *Love in the Ruins*, I was thinking in terms of the three spheres of existence [the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages]. It is a very convenient frame of reference, particularly when you are writing a novel of quest, pilgrimage, or search about a young man "on life's way," as Kierkegaard would say, to think of him going through the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and then the religious. (qtd. in Gretlund 203)

Percy's first three novels are about this movement from the aesthetic stage into Kierkegaard's higher stages; he has his protagonists enter into this ethical or religious stage at the novels' end by way of a Catholic sacrament or two, usually including commitment to community, especially marriage.

For Percy, science and psychology failed to answer the existential dilemma, but religion, specifically Catholicism, could answer questions that science could not. Science could not say anything about "the most important facet of the human creature—the joyous, suffering, and perverse self" (Tolson 199). Existential philosophy could; religion

could; art and the novel could. *The Moviegoer* demonstrates this belief. When Percy uses "threes" or triangles, they are not semiotic threes, but allusions primarily to the divine triad, the holy trinity, to literature, or only briefly to communication. When Percy draws characters that are driven materially and lack a spirituality that Binx, the protagonist, is seeking, he does not use overt references to twos or pairs or dyads. Even Binx's triadic character is drawn with many symbols and other rhetorical devices, but only a few threes or triangles present themselves in this, Percy's first novel, and these numbers are not semiotic here.

Protagonist Binx's landlady has three dogs (*Moviegoer* 76), but the three here represents Cerebus, the brutish three-headed dog guarding the gates of hell: Mrs. Schexnaydre's world, in which Binx lives, is hellish in its aloneness and division. This three is a literary reference; Percy is not using semiotic symbolism yet.

Percy uses an allusion to the semiotic triad only once, in the name of the fraternity: Delta Psi (*Moviegoer* 37). "Delta" is Percy's representation of his semiotic triad and for human communication (cf. "The Delta Factor" in *Message*), representing the triangle of the Greek Delta symbol. Here, the boys' Delta is actually ironic—the loss of symbol that might point to something transcendent, and instead, points only to this world. Percy juxtaposes two opposites, in his view: Delta and Psi. The second half of the fraternity name is "Psi"— short for psychology or psychiatry. Percy almost went into psychiatry, one seed of his anthropological interests. But most contemporary psychology, dyadic even as a social science, is inadequate to fully describe humans, especially their spiritual needs, which it often overlooks or even denies, instead offering chemical solutions to such conditions as existential despair. The name's first half, the Delta, is more significant as it represents human triadic behavior—symbol, language, art, culture, religion, the presence of the transcendent—the *real* answer.

But not for the frat boys. One Delta member says in admiration, "'But when it comes to describing the fellows here, the caliber of the men, the bond between us, the meaning of this little symbol'—he turned back his label to show the pin and I wondered if it was true that Deltas held their pins in their mouths when they took a shower—" (*Moviegoer* 37). When the fraternity members hold the Delta pin—a sign of the fraternity, no more than that, and not true fraternity— in their mouths, where language emits, Percy shows us that instead of searching for transcendence and meaning beyond themselves, these boys remain happy in the material world, keeping their spirituality and symbol-mongering locked away inside of them.

This Delta reference is Percy's only symbol that is even slightly semiotic in this first novel of his. In *The Moviegoer*, Percy is predominately

existential and Catholic, using Kierkegaardian theology heavily. While he uses symbol and sign and "clues" throughout this novel—as he does in all his novels—and is also well aware of the differences between dyadic and triadic concepts, his semiotic references, if they exist, are only minor incidents in this and his next two novels. In Percy's first novel, we occasionally have a few threes and triangles, but they are in no way dominant or different from any other symbol in the book; they are not a reference to the Peirce-Percy Semiotic. Not so for Percy's last three novels.

Lancelot: Semiotic Threes, Inverted

After Percy's first published collection of essays on language theory, *Message* (1975), he became immersed in semiotic study and worked on the language book's sequel continuously for the rest of his life simultaneously as he was writing each of his last three novels. Percy's latter fiction was immensely affected by his semiotic search. *Lancelot* (1977) is Percy's first novel to come out after *Message*. *Lancelot* no longer skirts around the issue of symbol and number. Forefront in Percy's mind is the most important concept of Thirdness; using number to convey his themes is now Percy's modus operandi.

Lancelot is a dramatic monologue by the lawyer protagonist, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, who has been incarcerated in a mental hospital for killing his wife, her lover, and their cohorts, Hollywood stars filming a movie at his house, by burning down his house with everyone in it. The whole book is Lancelot's therapeutic confession to the priest-psychiatrist, Percival, whose questions and replies we never hear—until the last page of the book, in which he replies in monosyllabic "yes'" and "no" answers. We literally see Lancelot's (and Percy's) Southern traditional stoicism confront Hollywood liberal self-indulgence and self-absorption—both of which fail to provide the triadic meaning so necessary for the human condition.

In *Lancelot,* threes, triads, triangles, and triangulation dominate. However, Lancelot's existential search is a distorted one, and so threes and triangles are distorted and inverted. Lancelot's attempted search for a new moral and social order is an upside-down search—he thinks he is on a righteous path, but he is not. He wants a "Third Revolution" of violence and death to solve the problem of immorality; his goal is opposite of the love and community of God—so Percy uses inverted threes. While Lancelot attempts to instill triadic meaning, triadic living, and triadic thinking in a dyadic world, his methods are wrong—

and so the triads and threes Percy draws in this novel are "unholy," perverse, and distorted.

Unlike the rest of Percy's protagonists, on a quest for meaning and purpose and something greater than self and the life they are presently living, Lancelot's quest is directed toward finding (and eradicating) evil, and he seeks to provide his own misguided answer, rather than a transcendent one. Just as Lance's search is an upside-down one, so are his triangles. The symbols Lancelot sees are therefore symbols of evil, not signs from God. While Lancelot rightly realizes this dyadic age had "got it wrong," and needs triadic meaning, he has only recognized the problem correctly, but not the solution. Lance's sought-after answer is not one of forgiveness and affirmation of the world, as we see in Percy's other novels, but in destruction of it and rejection, and in creation of a *third* society—one that echoes the Southern stoic tradition—an inadequate answer to the existential dilemma. Lancelot fails to see that humankind and even nature is fallen and can never create perfection without the intervention and involvement of the divine—the definition of symbol and sacrament.

Three, the sacred triad, instead of being a sign of the mystery of the presence of God, good, or the divinity within humanity that makes humans human and not animals, now represents a superficial earthly immorality—sexual perversion and moral misguidance—because Lancelot searches not for relationship with the divine, but for immorality (in an attempt to eradicate it)—mistaking morality with holiness, with the spirit of God. But holiness is not morality, and the goal of the Church is not to bring the supplicant to moral perfection, but to divine love. Triadic relationships with God and others are the real answer. While morality can be a sign of God, it is not God himself, and therefore morality is not the end goal. Morality is the physical action that results from the presence of God and God's love inside the human—and to mistake the action for the spirit is to make the mistake of materialism.

The novel opens with triangulation and "signs." Lancelot is in a mental institution, and out of his window he can see a sign, with three partial words: "Free &," "Ma," and "B." *(Lancelot* 4). These three elements of the sign become the cause for much speculation, as he tries to solve their mystery. Thirdness is about communication. What do they say? Somehow, he feels they have something to say to him. Another triangle is the location of the institution. Lancelot sees little outside his cell, but he can see a cemetery (death), and an adult movie theater (sex) next to it, and the blackboard of La Branche's Bar with its daily specials *(Lancelot* 22). Lance is triangulated between death, sex, and whiskey. The theater is the former old Majestic theater—implying, "We used see

movies like *The 49ers* . . . Now they're showing something called *The 69ers*..." *(Lancelot* 22). The movie is obviously named for a sex act, but 6 and 9, and 69 are all multiples of three (the first, 3 + 3, the second 3 x 3). The name is for a pornographic movie in which sex has become one of physical gratification—a dyadic experience purely—rather than its proper triadic: the union of two souls through the body, the third element of which is the presence of God, and which gives life and love to a physical act just as naming does. Lancelot, who seeks sin and death, not love and union, is caught in the midst of inverted and ironic threes.

But Percy gives clues from the beginning that there is hope for Lancelot's (and everyone's) redemption. For though Lancelot's view triangulates death, sex, and whiskey, it also offers another triangulation: "a patch of sky, a corner of Lafayette Cemetery, a slice of levee, and a short stretch of Annunciation Street" *(Lancelot* 3-4). Here we have the sky (God), the levee (water, baptism, or spiritual cleansing), and the Annunciation—a more hopeful vision for our lost Lancelot. His world is not completely replete with sin, but God's presence is always there to see, to experience, if he so chooses.

Another triangulation begins the plot of the novel, if not the story itself (as it is told in flashback). Lancelot triangulates to discover his wife's past infidelity. Percy's idea of the unity and relationship of all—his idea of the fabric of life—is reflected in this discovery. Life is not random, but rather a tightly interwoven dance, and one dot out of place affects the whole process of existence. Lancelot precedes his revelation to his priest-therapist Percival with an observation:

> Yes, sure enough, one dot, not even a bright dot, one of the lesser dots, is a bit out of place. You've seen the photos in the newspapers, random star dots and four arrows pointing to a single dot. . . . What of it, thinks the layman, one insignificant dot out of a billion dots slightly out of place? The astronomer knows better: the dot is one millisecond out of place, click click goes the computer, and from the most insignificant observation the astronomer calculates with absolute certainty and finality that a comet is on a collision course with the earth and will arrive in two and half months. *(Lancelot* 19)

Every dot has significance, has meaning, is a clue to the overall pattern (thirdness). The dot is of course his daughter's blood test. She is type "O" which, given his blood type and his wife's— three blood types—does not "triangulate" or lead to the conclusion that she is his. His triangulation of three leads not to the divine, but to immorality, to the discovery of deception and sin, that he has been cuckolded as his wife

had "carnal relations" with another man (*Lancelot* 15). More evidence, more triangulation, more inverted threes, further prove his point. Moore triangulates to make certain of the sin. He has the blood types, his daughter's birthday to calculate conception date, and the "third and indispensable item came from a shot in the dark. . . . Bastardy will be proved with Master Charge" *(Lancelot* 31-33). The credit card bill reveals where his wife was at conception (not at home). Threes lead to sin, and not salvation, with *Lancelot*'s inverted themes.

It is through triangulation that Lancelot can not only identify the problems and sickness of the world he lives in, but also how he will find his answers—and perhaps find healing. He tells Percival, his priest-confessor, "There is something I don't understand. You are both my leverage point and my companion" *(Lancelot* 108). From the single still point, a stable place, he can then find who he is, and make some sense of his life, past and present. Percival, Lancelot's priest confessor, can offer that to Lancelot, just as the church offers that to the world—the church being the third point in the triangle between individual and God.

Healing is also found in genuine love for a woman. Anna is his compatriot in mental illness; she occupies the room next to his in the mental institution. Anna doesn't speak due to a traumatic rape—though she is slowly coming out of her shell, as Lancelot exclaims happily: "The girl in the next room and I communicated yesterday! She has not spoken a word for months, not since her terrible experience, but we communicated!" *(Lancelot* 34). The joy at triadic communication is a clue to Lancelot as to where Lancelot should be looking for his answers, not in his Third Revolution that is obsessed with, and kills, sexual immorality and theorizing (Lance immediately after relates his "sexual theory of history") *(Lancelot* 35). Anna, however, is on the right track; she is far less obsessed with sexual immorality than Lancelot is, despite the rape and trauma that she experienced.

Anna's rape represents the ultimate dyadic manifestation of sex, yet it is also another perversion of the sacred "three": it is three men who gang raped her. Anna was an unwilling participant, but there are willing participants in other sexual perversions of the sacred three. Lancelot's detective work of filming his houseguests to uncover infidelity goes a bit awry. The film is a reddened blur as in a hellish *Brave New World* hatchery, but still clear enough to detect orgies of three: Merlin, Margot, and Jacoby in one room, with a parallel orgy of Raine, Dana, and Lucy in another room. Sex takes place in groups of threes in *Lancelot*. Percy actually *draws* triangles—three of them—connecting the three orgy participants. Two are triangles of Lancelot's wife's infidelity—Margot, Merlin and "I" (*Lancelot* 189), then Margot, Merlin, and Jacoby in the

orgy itself. The third is the swastikaed triangle of Raine, Dana, and Lucy (*Lancelot* 192). The Delta symbol of the transcendent is reduced to purely physical with these inverted triangles. Instead of people, the participants are all arms and legs and body parts (*Lancelot* 191), detaching, flying off, extending as pseudopods, as Percy dehumanizes their actions and makes them merely physical. Sometimes they deteriorate even further, not body parts or even cells, but merely "electrons" and "ectoplasm" (*Lancelot* 186, 192). Their humanity has vanished, and they have become all dyadic. Triangles abound, but they are distorted: they have nothing to do with the divine or the spiritual but with the purely material inverted search for community and connection.

"Lance is trying to interpret the signs of his life" (Samway, *Thief* xvi). He is engaged in human symbolic activity; he is interpreting the signs of his life, finding *meaning*, through triangulation. Only through the magic number of three can there be meaning and understanding, purely human capacities. Only through triadic understanding and triangulation can humans be fully human and not mere dyadic creatures. Lance, at least, is seeking when the Hollywooders are not, though the fact that he can't see or interpret the signs shows he is confused and lost in his search.

Lance's misguided Third Revolution finds its refutation and correction in Anna's utopian vision, one of threes as well, but not inverted as she is not inverted. At the end of the novel, she offers Lancelot an alternative to his dystopia: her place. "'When you get up there in Virginia,' she told me, 'you'll find a fallen-down house but a small solid two-hundred-year-old barn. One side is a corn crib and tack room with a loft. It would make a lovely cozy place in the winter and big enough for three'" *(Lancelot* 252). Lance wonders if this is just a repeat of Margot, who wished to shuttle him off, house him safely out of the way in the pigeonnier. But, he realizes to himself, ". . . she said *big enough for three*" (Percy's italics) *(Lancelot* 252). He has seen her redemptive vision. This three is not Lancelot's misguided three of division or separation or condemnation or killing, but is the three of intimate love, union, and commitment. Lancelot is now directed on the right path, a life of a sacramental community.

Like all Percy's novels, at the end, the redemptive path is found in a loving relationship of commitment to another and to a tetradic community. In the second half of Percy's career, he sees the synchronistic and interconnected fabric of life composing the universe as one enabled by human symbolic capacity, a capacity captured by Peirce's concept of relations that Percy modifies for his own unique theory, a radical anthropology based in the Peirce-Percy Semiotic.

Percy went on to write two more novels, and by this time, his semiotic numbers are prevalent in his fiction: *The Second Coming*, using fours, diamonds, and tetrads to represent communication and community, and *The Thanatos Syndrome,* using twos (and also sixes) to illustrate misguided dyadic solutions to triadic problems.[6] By his last novel, Percy is even referring to Peirce's semeiotic directly and overtly, saying in a reference to Thirdness: "The great American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, said that the most amazing thing about the universe is that apparently disconnected events are in fact, not, that one can connect them. Amazing!" (*Thanatos* 68).

Percy identifies modern semiotics' and science's inability to fully understand human beings and their symbolic capacity using a dyadic methodology, and he spent the rest of his life working on the solution, the Peirce-Percy Semiotic, which shows up in his fiction. He never published *Symbol & Existence* in his lifetime nor wrote his intended language sequel to *Message in the Bottle*, but he ultimately doubted such a work would gain significant readership, expressing that few might be interested in such a philosophical work, "except psycholinguists and transformational grammarians, and the latter won't like it" (*Message* 10). If, as Kierkegaard says in *The Moviegoer's* epigraph, our unawareness of despair makes our malaise worse, the very act of naming is part of our healing (*Message* 72). Percy's novels accomplish this naming; they name the existential problem and its semiotic solution. In the end, we have his message not in a confined philosophical bottle but in his more expansive fiction, perhaps more interesting, more accessible, and more widely read. Percy says:

> What it is like to be an individual, to be born, live, and die in the twentieth century. . . . [It] is, of course, the artist who finds himself in league with the individual, with his need to have himself confirmed in his predicament. 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. (*Signposts* 151)

As readers of Percy's fiction, we enter into his community, an intersubjective tetrad, and find ourselves named and namers of our lives and our world.

Notes

1. Most modern semioticians write "semiotics" as plural; Peirce differentiates his philosophy from William James's and others' by adding the "e": "semeiotic." (For the same reason, Peirce adds an "ic" to pragmatism to make "pragmaticism.") Percy usually refers to it as "semiotic," dropping both the "e" and the "s."

2. This was my personal observation during my research at the UNC-Chapel Hill Wilson Library special collection archives in the early 2000s and then a decade later.

3. Percy mulls over what to call his philosophy for decades; see p. 82 for a discussion.

4. See Kenneth Laine Ketner's essay in this issue of the *South Atlantic Review* for a thorough discussion of the difference between "scientism" and "the scientific method."

5. See *Message*, chapters 11 and 12 and *Symbol and Existence*, Part III. 1 & 2 for a thorough discussion of intersubjectivity.

6. In an unusual departure from his semiotic numbers, Percy includes sixes (along with semiotic twos) in his last novel. "Six" had biblical symbolism and had become current in pop culture (at the time). The number is used in the book of Revelations (13:17-18) to represent the anti-Christ, evil, or something against God. With the 1976 arrival of the popular movie *The Omen,* it was common knowledge that 666 was the "Mark of the Beast" (with "beasts" being a predominant theme in *Thanatos*).

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The Emergence of Walker Percy's Radical Anthropology

Kenneth Laine Ketner

In past years, while attempting to access everything Percy had published, I began to notice a nagging feeling that some important features of his general plan of research and writing were not yet mentioned in his publications. The factor appeared while reading across his novels, then intensified while assimilating his other works. All these writings were connected at some basic level, but what were these elusive unifying underlying features? A stroke of good fortune brought an opportunity to correspond[1] with him about our mutual interest in the research of Charles Peirce. Near the end of that process, the nagging feeling intensified as Percy began to mention a "book project" he was preparing, variously identified as *Contra Gentiles* or *Tertium Quid* or by way of a nameless conjunction of vague hints.

Then, recently, came an opportunity to participate with an editorial team to issue *Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature*, by Walker Percy (*SE*) (Mercer UP, 2019). Percy wrote this book in the 1950s, but it was refused by publishers, so it lay in waiting within Percy's *Nachlass* until finally appearing in 2019. Would that it had been published in 1960, for it contains the missing systematic interconnections and principles that unify the remainder of Percy's writings. (See the References section for a list of his works related to the unifying vista provided by *SE*.) Of Percy's output, *SE* is the most recent on the publication calendar, yet it is the first in terms of presuppositional order. Among these "new" systematic components in *SE*, one theme in particular is noteworthy. Therein Percy originated a general approach for the study of human nature that he designated "Radical Anthropology" (*RA*), radical in the sense of "well-rooted" or "well-founded," but not in the sense of "politically extreme" or "excessive."

A full summary here of that development is inappropriate because it is present within *SE*. Comments, however, on some features and their important relations to previous and current objective researchers, would be proper. Especially: What is different about *RA* that might be of interest, particularly for scholars of literature? Percy proposed that literary study could be objective, in the sense it could make observations, even develop experiments. This is in distinction to C. P. Snow's

(1959) famous lament about a chasm between the humanities and the sciences. If Percy's point be conceded as worthy of consideration, what factors constitute its defense?

Here, we are in the zone of methodology. From that perspective, a *Basic Scientific Method* requires (1) a community of *objective* persons who possess character traits rendering them capable of learning from experience about a common reality; (2) good communication practice therein that avoids ambiguities and promotes an agreed common terminology; (3) an openness to new sources for observational input; and (4) a willingness to look up from a familiar and comfortable project space to encounter the research of another objective colleague, perhaps even within another county on the disciplinary map of researchers—possession and use of interdisciplinary consciousness, in other words.

A pause for terminology clarification is in order. In *SE* Percy employs the word "objective" in at least two ways. First, it has a negative sense, meaning an overreliant and confining usage that eliminates the possibility of a *Basic Science* study of the Arts and Humanities. This sense is parallel with the discussion of Scientism[2] below. A second sense is just the meanings associated with *Basic Science* as described above. That method can be pursued for any phenomenon or datum that is found within the realities such a community examines. Thus, we can summarize with this chart:

Objective Method

|

Sense One	Sense Two
|	|
"Objective" in the sense of *Scientism*	"Objective" in the sense of *Basic Science*
Too restrictive in terms of realities (limits admissable phenomena to matter and causation)	Can study realities of any type, including relations

With this clarification we shall see that Percy's proposal for a Radical Anthropology amounts to a rejection of Scientism—"objective" sense one—and then an adoption of *Basic Science* ("objective" in sense two) plus an expanded account of reality to make possible *RA* within sense two.

Next is an extension of the foregoing, followed by examples that will illustrate some aspects of Percy's *RA* in use:

1. A Starting Point

Early in *SE,* Percy announced his hopes for *RA*.

> *A Radical Anthropology: The Objective* [sense two] *Science of Man as an Asserting Animal*. The critical area of reality that cries out for study, therefore, is not the subhuman level where the method [scientism] works so well, or the superorganic level of culture, the activities of man considered in themselves, where the method [scientism] issues in an antinomy[3]—but man himself, the asserting animal. A radical anthropology must treat as its primary datum, not man as a responding organism—though this treatment is a legitimate science—but man as the organism that makes assertions, who makes a society and a culture possible. What is needed is an anthropology that will embrace man in his most universal trait, not merely the totemist tribesman with his fetishes and magic but the scientist-observer as well with his hypotheses and verifications.
>
> The science that is presently called anthropology is really culturology, an objective nonradical science mounted within the same framework as any other objective [sense one] science. The hypothesis that the culturologist induces from his survey of cultures is not meant to apply to him, the scientist. (*SE* 30)

Using the wider resources of *SE*, the following discussions will fill out a better understanding of the principal types and interrelationships presupposed in the above comments about *RA*. Starting from Percy's beginnings in *SE* and later works, I aim to enhance and support his proposal for a paradigm shift in the scope that an objective science can encompass, a scope that also places arts and humanities within an objective, experimental science setting. The best strategy appears to be a comparative listing of components of the two candidates: (1) *Scientism* and (2) *Percy's Expanded Science* (within which *RA* is a com-

ponent). In Percy's writings, those two versions compete for an account of Science-in-any-proper-sense; and we shall find that scientism loses the race.

Scientism

a. By choice of researchers, the only real objects of study allowed are functional relations (dyadic relations), such as cause-effect or stimulus-response, plus application of those relations to existing material physical items in the context of instances within classes of items.
b. The totality of real items consists exclusively of functional relations and/or material existents.
c. Communication is understood as a functional (dyadic) activity.
d. Scientism employs (but is not equivalent to) the *Basic Scientific Method*—to wit, results obtained through convergence via public and repeatable tests within a community of persons capable of learning about reality from experiments—but only as that applies to dyadic relations and material existents.
e. This account of method and permissible objects of study is raised to the status of an all-encompassing worldview, with the following results.
f. Scientists stand apart from their data (that which is studied), an attitude when in its fully functioning form constitutes an ideal that seeks a god's eye view of reality.
g. Arts and Humanities (*Kulturwissenschaften*/Cultural Sciences) are emotional expressions or entertainment activities that offer no factual truths or insights based in reality—those activities cannot be studied by *Basic Science*.
h. Scientism has no resources for studying a human being as an individual—it only studies them as members of a class, as specimens.
i. *Thus,* there is no basis in scientism for a scientific study of Arts and Humanities; such activities are emotive or entertainment phenomena not accessible to study by a *Basic Science Method*. (Therefore, there is no *Basic Scientific* study of Arts and Humanities.)

a. Scientifically supportable results of research conducted with the resources of Scientism are acceptable, but do not encompass all phenomena and results that can be studied using *Basic Scientific Method*.
b. Functional relations and material existents are real, but do not exhaust the totality of reality. If, after additional examination, one concludes that reality is composed of those items that are independent of biased or arbitrary personal factors such as desires or wishes, then in addition to material existents (*Existent Reals*) there will be another subclass of realities (not recognized by Scientism) that could be designated as *NonExistent Reals*, that *can* be studied with *Basic Scientific Method*. Dyadic, triadic, quadradic (and so forth) relations are real and can be studied using *Basic Scientific Method.* A relation is a fact about some number of items. Thus, a monadic relation is a fact about one item (example, a property of an item such as a blue bird); a dyadic relation is a fact about two items (example, Della hates chocolate); a triadic relation is a fact about three items (example, George agreed to the physician's right to release medical information). Here "fact" means "a real (nonarbitrary) result of a proper test."
c. Communication is not a dyadic process—instead, it is composed of various series (semeioses) of triadic relations, each involving an Object, a Representamen, and an Interpretant—basically the science of Semeiotic of Charles Peirce or of Semiotic as developed by Percy.[4]
d. Arts and Humanities as well as the Natural Sciences are constituted by a series of semeioses or other relational realities. That means that both areas *can* be studied with the *Basic Scientific Method* when a full account of reality is included along with a logic of relations incorporating dyadic *and* triadic relations plus an account of interpretation provided by the science of Semeiotic.
e. *Basic Science* is not an all-encompassing worldview. It is a fallible and self-correcting process that can develop wider and well-grounded understandings of realities of all types, including relational realities.
f. Practitioners of *Basic Science* are not isolated or independent from their studies, and as such *their* activities and predilections can be studied with *Basic Scientific Method*. That method cannot attain a god's eye understanding; it can only proceed with one

predesignated research question at a time through a self-correcting cumulative yet fallible process.

g. After adjustment of the understanding of reality types to include both *existent* and *nonexistent reals* as found in *Kulturwissenschaften*, that area is also open to study by the *Basic Scientific Method*. Furthermore, opportunities for interdisciplinary science are now supported in an *Expanded Science*, in that Snow's Humanities/Science chasm is no more. Expanded Science make possible *Basic Science* research in *both Kulturwissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences). (These Germanic terms are particularly appropriate because the word "Wissenschaften" basically describes *Basic Science*/*Expanded Science* as applicable to any form of reality.)
h. There are realities pertinent to individual human beings that can be studied through an *Expanded Science*.
i. *Thus*, there is a solid basis for *RA* as the *Basic Scientific* study of mankind as enabled through the features of *Expanded Science* (namely, basic science dealing with both existent reals and nonexistent reals).

There remains one other pressing issue resting within Percy's description of *RA:* What are the details of the "asserting" concept? We find his understanding of it in his personal annotated copy of volume five of Peirce's *Collected Papers* (*CP*), wherein he heavily marked the following passage:

> What is the nature of assertion? We have no magnifying glass that can enlarge its features, and render them more discernible; but in default of such an instrument we can select for examination a very formal assertion, the features of which have been rendered very prominent, in order to emphasize its solemnity. If a man desires to assert anything very solemnly, he takes such steps as will enable him to go before a magistrate or notary and take a binding oath to it. Taking an oath is not mainly an event of a setting forth, *Vorstellung*, or representing. The law, I believe, calls it an "act." At any rate, it would be followed by very real effects, in case the substance of what is asserted should be proved untrue. This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion. For clearly, every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted, to which end a reason for believing it must be furnished. But if a lie would not endanger the esteem

> in which the utterer was held, nor otherwise be apt to entail such real effects as he would avoid, the interpreter would have no reason for believing the assertion. Nobody takes any positive stock in those conventional utterances, such as "I am perfectly delighted to see you," upon whose falsehood no punishment at all is visited. At this point the reader should call to mind, or, if he does not know it, should make the observations requisite to convince himself, that even in solitary meditation every judgment is an effort to press home, on the self of the immediate future, and of the general future, some truth. It is a genuine assertion, just as the vernacular phrase represents it; and solitary dialectic is still of the nature of dialogue. Consequently it must be equally true that here too there is contained an element of assuming responsibilities, of "taking the consequences."
>
> . . . To this an eager adversary of pragmaticism might make answer to the effect that if there be an assumption of responsibility in a judgment, it can only be in a ripe judgment.... But the reply will be that the answer quite mistakes the aim of the argument. For it is no pragmaticistic doctrine that responsibility attaches to a concept; but the argument is that the predication of a concept is capable of becoming the subject of responsibility, since it actually does become so in the act of asserting that predication.
>
> Thereupon it follows that the concept has a capability of having a bearing upon conduct; and this fact will lend it intellectual purport. For it cannot be denied that one, at least, of the functions of intelligence is to adapt conduct to circumstances, so as to subserve desire. If the argument is correct, this applies to any conduct whatsoever, unless there be a concept that cannot be predicated. (*CP* 5.546 f. circa 1903)

It is important to note that an assertion is an act of an agent within a community of commonly shared interpretations. An assertion is not a material object, and since interpretation is involved, it is not a process involving only dyadic relations such as cause/effect or stimulus/response. Reality, other than only material reality, is also involved, because assertions have consequences and apply to the future: "Did Bob really assert *that*? Because if he did, he will go to jail."

2. Some Experiments in Radical Anthropology

On the basis of the foregoing overview, through the expanded resources featured in Percy's contra-Scientism, *RA* has access to *Basic Science Method*. Experimentation is a prime feature of *Basic Science*, so if that function can be realized in *RA*, we should find confirming instances of successful use of *RA* in the Cultural Sciences. Percy does find such realities and experimentation within Cultural Science via *RA*.

Case One: Helen Keller

One of his favorite examples, the "Helen Keller Phenomenon," will be taken as a relevant case study. Here is his description from *SE*.

> When Miss Sullivan [Keller's instructor] . . . tried to teach her pupil words by spelling them into her hand, she encountered a characteristic difficulty. Helen "learned" the ["word"] d-o-l-l quickly enough, but as a trick to show off to her mother—"I didn't know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed [were real]". . . But the great moment did at last come. As . . . water flowed over one hand Miss Sullivan spelled w-a-t-e-r into the other, first slowly, then rapidly. "I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'water' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, . . . set it free!" (55)

The phenomenon that deeply interested Percy here is constituted by transition from Helen's initial state as contrasted with her later condition when she became aware of the *meaning* of w-a-t-e-r. Helen *learned* the meaning of w-a-t-e-r—not through conditioning—either through Pavlov's classical form or B. F. Skinner's operant form—but by gaining understanding, which was a change initiated within Helen, an individual.

We note that prior to the "phenomenon" event, Helen was a creature of stimulus and response in the manner of Pavlov/Skinner. If she was provided a particular stimulus, then she would perform a particular action to which she had been conditioned, an action not backed up with any understanding, not a free self-initiated action. Percy compared this point in her life to the actions of Pavlov's dog that would—at the end of the experiment—salivate when stimulated by the sound

of a bell. Initially, as Helen first experienced the finger-tappings that Miss Sullivan began to perform in her hand, they served as a stimulus that eventually could produce some definite fixed response from her. At that stage, Keller was functioning as a creature behaving according to dyadic relations, or functional relations, as Percy designated in *SE*. (Or he would comment that Helen was in an *environment* instead of a *world*.) Percy's scrutiny then focused on this question: What changed for her between the early stimulus/response (nonsymbolic) modality and the later triadic meaning-events or semeioses?

To grasp her discovery of another aspect of reality, we need additional terminological efforts. A Symbolic Semeiosis (or Symbol) is one in which there is a triadic relation linking an Object, a Representamen, and an Interpretant, the latter being constituted by some habitual relation[5] between the Object and Representamen. To clarify these terms, a Semeiosis is a process wherein an Object is Represented to an interpreting function (Interpretant). The Object is what the semeiosis is "about." Some aspect of the Object is represented by the Representamen to the Interpretant, which is a habit whereby the Representamen explains the Object. If one employs only the terminology of "signs," one risks confusion between two important different senses: "sign" as the representing aspect only, and "sign" as a name for the semeiosis. Object/Representamen/Interpretant triadic relation. To avoid that ambiguity, we employ "Representamen" for the representing sense of "sign" as a corelate within a triadic semeiosis relation, and "Semeiosis" for the relational process sense of "sign" wherein a semeiosis is a triadic relation between three corelates: Object, Representamen, and Interpretant. In effect, the "theory of signs" is better understood as semeiotic—the theory of semeioses[6] instead of as the theory of representations (Representamens). The principal reason for this preference is that a Theory of Representamens tends to leave out the role of a logic of relations that is an essential component of a viable semeiotic, the study of triadic semeioses. There are four realities in a semeiosis: an Object, a Representamen, an Interpretant, and the triadic relation bringing those three into a single relational unit that requires a Logic of Relations for its study. So there are four real components in any semeiosis.

For example, in the United States, if a licensed driver comes to an intersection with a blinking red traffic light, by previously established community habit the driver *understands*/*interprets* that the meaning of the light is "stop, then proceed with caution." The Object is "stop at this blinking red light," the Representamen is "blinking red traffic light at this intersection," and the Interpretant is *understanding* that there is a cultural habit such that the Representamen *means* the Object. The Object/Representamen/Interpretant process is a tripartite relation

which, according to the Logic of Relations, is not reducible to subsets consisting exclusively of dyadic relations.[7] The result that a genuine triadic relation cannot be composed (compounded, constructed) exclusively from only dyadic relational resources has come to be known as the "Peirce-Percy Principle" or Peirce's NonReductionTheorem (NRT).

In this episode, Helen transitioned from state (I), consciousness composed of stimulus/response dyadic temporal sequences, to state (II), a consciousness that also included acquisition of the triadic Symbol with its important community-shared Interpretant habit. While in state (I), she perceived hand-tapping for w-a-t-e-r, and over a period of time, she experienced water flowing over her other hand. They are just two temporally related but otherwise distinct experiences. *Somehow*, with Miss Sullivan's assistance, she moved from state (I) to state (II) wherein she gained an understanding, by way of comprehending the habit that a particular finger-tapping means (symbolizes) the flowing water. Thus, she transitioned from a *stimulus/response* environment into a world of *semeioses*. After her initial understanding of a symbolic semeiosis, she quickly became capable of comprehending additional semeiosis types such as Indexes and Icons, plus various other types not mentioned here. In an Iconic Semeiosis, the Representamen (sign, narrow sense) is related to the Object by means of a shared Interpretant habit consisting of similarity or analogy. Within an Indexical Semeiosis, the Representamen (narrow sense of "sign") is related to the Object by understanding of a shared governing Interpretant habit consisting of a generalized cause and effect relation. Other semeiosis types are possible, but not mentioned here. Percy described Helen's insight under the heading of *naming:* finger-tapping w-a-t-e-r names actual water. But readers of *SE* will quickly observe that Percy regarded *naming* as an important subtype of *Symbolical Semeiosis Processes*.

As a side note, I suspect one reason Percy was impressed by these events is that Keller's account reveals a change within an *individual's* understanding through interpretation rather than a controlled causation of a class of beings, one of which is this particular individual. One could describe external causal control as a loss of sovereignty, whereas in this event Helen acquired (or perhaps re-activated) sovereignty through triadic semeiosis that includes interpreting. Oppose this to Pavlov's recently conditioned dog that, after conditioning, can now be *controlled* in a new way *by Pavlov* (not by the dog). If Pavlov wants the dog to salivate, he sounds the bell. Other equivalently conditioned dogs, as good specimens of the class, can similarly be controlled. So, Pavlov would have had means to establish a "Dog Saliva Factory," by obtaining a herd of dogs conditioned to salivate into a communal collection trough when a big bell was sounded. The dog, like Helen in

state (I), understands nothing more in the post-conditioning state; indeed, dogs or children, after conditioning, can be more readily controlled by others. Conditioning *is not learning*, for the individual being conditioned, and the processes of Helen's state (II) are *not control* (not conditioning) but constitute *learning*. Indeed, by reviewing such an "experiment," Percy made a point!

Students of Percy's writing will acknowledge that he was an opponent of *Nominalism* who argued for *Realism*. Helen's transition to symbols provides additional means for grasping that important distinction. As a stimulus/response creature in stage (I) Helen was only remembering *past* occasions of finger-tapping and flowing water. Such is nominalism: one remembers the limited list of past events of that sort, but that is the end of it. It is in the past. When stage (II) arrived, and the Interpretant habit shared with Sullivan enabled "water *means* w-a-t-e-r" was somehow acquired, the past was still as remembered, but the future became available, because (as Peirce had demonstrated) the Symbol Interpretant habit is *general*—that is, it will govern as yet unrealized future identical finger-tappings among persons who share in common the appropriate Symbolic Interpretant habit. Thereby, with this symbol acquisition, Helen's future actions and *expectations* concerning water became predictable and communicable. Anticipation and planning—and eventually self control—also became possible for her. Now Helen could assert, to another human being in need of water, that water is available at a particular place. Moreover, she guessed (performed an Abduction inference, as Peirce analyzed it) that there might be other symbols. That guessing operation quickly produced a hypothesis that she and Miss Sullivan soon confirmed by getting many other symbols. And, for a bonus, Helen also learned that the two of them *together*, or even with other persons or other agencies, in the *future*, could *expect* water, *ask* for water, *swim* in water, *drink* water, *get* water for the dog, *give* another person a drink of water, *irrigate* water for drying crops, *learn* about water as H_2O, and so on. Thus did Helen transition from being controlled within a stimulus/response closed *environment* to self-control in an open *world* of interrelated semeioses. In state (I) Helen was probably close to philosophical solipsism, which is a condition of entrapment within a closed pseudoself, whereas in stage (II) she entered a world of dialogue between responsible, sovereign persons. In *SE* Percy liked to describe that condition as *co-celebration*.

Perhaps we now have sufficient tools to begin to unpack the "*Somehow*" of Helen's transition as mentioned above. Her recent memories of Sullivan's efforts lead to a questioning moment within her consciousness. She guessed (performed an Abductive inference) that w-a-t-e-r applied to *both past* experiences of the fluid *as well as* to pos-

sible similar *future* fluid experiences. So, her hypothesis would be that the finger-tappings also apply to the future experiences of fluid water. Because of the experience of tappings with such a fluid, along with continuity of experience, a quick experiment occurred that confirmed that hypothesis. This confirmation created the new Interpretant habit that covers the past as well as the future, both for her and the shared co-interpreter. With that Interpretant comes a new understanding/learning about w-a-t-e-r and meaning. Helen has *learned* within her individual consciousness, an event that concomitantly yields expectation/understanding/control of self/communication. Here individuals as such are involved, but in a wider social/communicative context. The fact that *RA* takes note of individuals does not eliminate interpersonal or social factors. Semeiosis (genuine communication) essentially incorporates both social and individual components.

This business about the Interpretant aspect of Symbolical Semeioses being a cultural or conventional habit is a superbly excellent item. A newborn child has few of them, but possesses a strong ability to learn [millions of] them. Within this setting, we could reflect on enculturation, socialization, schooling, indoctrination, or similar processes.

I suspect one reason Percy was impressed by these events is that Keller's account reads like a laboratory report about a successful experiment in Radical Anthropology wherein one can understand Helen's transition into a new world that is not at all comprehendible with the tools and techniques of Scientism.

If *RA* is a more comprehensive anthropology, it should include ways of understanding the nature and processes of novel-writing, poeticizing, essay composition—in short, literature. Percy proposed, in *SE*, to show that his Radical Anthropology would indeed be able to study literature by means of *Basic Science* (science considered broadly, along the lines of an objective *Kulturwissenschaft*[8]) that admits and can deal with expanded realities.

Case Two: Novel Writing

What are the details of a Radical Anthropological research project on literature? To that purpose, consider a dialogue between two persons (***Percy*** and ***Reader***) along the following lines (remembering Percy's novel, *The Second Coming*, is the context underlying this minidrama).

> ***Percy*****:** I have been imagining a person (*Will*) so trapped within himself that he has poor social relations and a troubled life. (Many other imagined details about *Will* are elaborated by ***Percy***). Also, I imagine another person (*Allie*) who, by some

> inappropriate medical procedures, has been almost reduced to the condition of being a nonperson, but who (like a little child) still has the courage and capacity to learn (recover) a full personhood, and has resolved to do so. Then I have considered, within my imagination, what would happen if such rather polar opposites were to meet, converse, interact.
> ***Reader*:** I am attracted to the possibility. How would they get along? It is a tantalizing issue. Could you describe your imagination for me? Writing it out would give me access.
> ***Percy*:** Very well. I will do that and send you a copy.
> *[time passes...]*
> ***Reader*:** I read your account. While doing so, I recognized that similarities within the imagined actions of your characters correspond (analogically) to some previous factors that have concerned me about my situation in life. The recognition was a helpful life-changing experience for me. As an individual—not as a specimen—I learned from that.

Here some broadly scientific aspects (in the frame of Radical Anthropology) of novel-writing and novel-reading are displayed. ***Percy*** is manufacturing some imaginary "habits" as Interpretants to create symbols for cooperative readers. ***Reader*** is receptively accepting, for the moment, those Interpretants/habits/symbols and working through ***Percy's*** imaginings and eventually comparing them analogically (structurally) with ***Reader's*** own prior set of cultural and personal Interpretants/habits/symbols. From that process, ***Reader*** discerns a component missing (or inappropriately present) in ***Reader's*** personal *system* (world) of habits, but it is present (or inappropriately absent) in what ***Percy*** described of his imagination. ***Reader*** then considers how adapting the analogous element from ***Percy's*** imaginings to ***Reader's*** personhood might function—would it produce a personal improvement or the opposite?

Reader's exploration of the analogies between ***Percy's*** imagined world and ***Reader's*** own world is a fine example of Iconic Semeiosis. The Interpretant of an Icon is an understood general relation of analogy or similarity between Object and Representamen. This kind of thought experiment suggests that Percy's hypothesis can indeed show that literature is objectively encompassed within a science of Radical Anthropology as a subset of *Basic Science*. (Isn't this to propose that for a properly receptive and thoughtful individual reader, a proper kind of literature can operate as a component of a virtual lapsometer as in his third novel *Love in the Ruins*?)

So maybe Percy's novels are experiments in Radical Anthropology. Yet there is a big *HOWEVER*—Percy is not experimenting *on* the reader, as Pavlov experimented *on* gaining control of his unwitting dog or as Helen's family might have experimented *on* her, prior to her breakthrough, the better to control her "difficult" activities. (Prior to Miss Sullivan's arrival, some members of the family thought Helen would not be capable of rising above the level of a pet dog.)

No, a novel *sets* the experiment. The experimenter *is the reader*—an individual—who explores the semeioses between the world of the novel and the prior world of the reader. This factor might explain why it is often said that a work is genuine literature if, after seriously reading it, the reader—that *particular* person—becomes a different person.

Note also this important difference between (a) classical and/or operant conditioning versus (b) understanding within the context of novels. Conditioning produces, from the standpoint of a controller, a predictable same response for any specimen within the class of individuals that have been conditioned in a particular manner. After a proper reading of a novel, the content of a reader's improved personal self-understanding may differ from that of another such reader; however, the processes each navigated will be similar or analogous from a methodological perspective, and those real processes can be objectively comprehended using *Basic Science*. One consequence of the additional triadic feature of interpretation being involved (as compared to the case of dyadic conditioning) is that there is no specific outcome for any given genuine reader of a novel. There can be differences or similarities in reader "outcome" because each individual as an interpreter may not have the exact same resources for interpretation as another reader. No such differences are seen in conditioning. As we know, readers may engage in further fruitful dialogue about their interpretations, a process that often leads to additional individual interpretations. Within the bounds of scientism, interpretation in the triadic sense is not possible, simply because practitioners have *chosen* to avoid it; within that worldview an interpretation is something like a personal preference. Here one remembers the proverbial expression that "Hammers see only nails, so for such, a loaf of bread would be a terrible nail."

Yet we clearly note that in an expanded science, interpretation in a semeiosis within a *Basic Science* context can indeed lead to grasping communal nonarbitrary realities.

I venture that in *SE*—and his other writings—Percy, aided by the tools provided by Peirce's semeiotic, the objective study of semeioses, with help from the logic of relations, is finger-tapping *our* hands hoping that we will realize the fruitful potentialities of an expanded, more fundamental, yet still *Basically Scientific* Radical Anthropology.

Notes

1. This correspondence is published in *A Thief of Peirce*.

2. See also, Ketner, "Rescuing Science from Scientism."

3. "Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method" in *The Message in The Bottle*

4. See Savan, *Peirce's Semiotic;* also *Interdisciplinary Seminar on Peirce* (*ISP*) "Biology of Mind."

5. On the useful concept of "habit," see *ISP*, "Biology of Mind," pp. 17-57. Smolin, *Time Reborn* (at 147) shows the usefulness of habit terminology in physics.

6. "Peirce's General Theory of Signs," in Fisch, *Peirce, Semeiotic, and Pragmatism*.

7. See *Thief of Peirce* and *SE*. Note also *ISP*, "Peirce's NonReduction and Relational Completeness Claims."

8. Bisanz, "Peirce's Semeiotic." See also Cassirer, *Logic*. It is interesting that the original title of this volume was *Zur Logik Der Kulturwissenschaften: fünf Studien*. Krois, *Cassirer* provides a fine overview.

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While Radical Anthropology as a working hypothesis for a basic scientific study of human nature, indeed, is Percy's creation in *SE*, there are, to be sure, earlier relatives of the new birth. Some of those works are listed here, marked with " * " with a few comments to indicate relationships that provide context for the development of Radical Anthropology.

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*Other Percy works related to *RA*. Various essays that followed *SE* were evolved from it, and these are further elaboration of details of *RA*:

The Message in the Bottle. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975. [especially: "The Delta Factor," "The Mystery of Language," "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning," "The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process," "Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method," "A Theory of Language"]

Lost in the Cosmos. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983. [The center section on semiotic further evolves *RA*.]

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About the Author

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Walker Percy's Diagnosis and Prescriptions for the Twenty-First Century

L. Lamar Nisly

Walker Percy—author, physician, diagnostician—still speaks to a twenty-first century audience as his novels and essays point out the importance of a searching posture rather than insisting on the correctness of our positions. In a time when we seem to be living out Henry David Thoreau's assertion that if I know your party affiliation, I know your position, Percy's personal beliefs and especially his early novels open space for questioning and complications, as they resist easy categorization. Amidst all the certainty we hear in social media posts and pronouncements that seem to contradict observed events, it is worth considering Percy's comments in his essays that our language and even our anticipated experiences often become worn out. Acknowledging with humility our own uncertainties creates space to search before making commitments.

Percy wrote in a particular time and place, responding to the issues of his day. Yet his satirical approach, with an eye toward building a better world, connects with our current context as we can identify how his critiques apply to our situation and see his nudges toward a healthier path. First, Percy shows the dangers of societal polarization and suggests a way forward through his own resistance to easy categorization and the nuanced, hinting approach he takes in his writing, opening up space for our own responses. Second, given the societal malaise that seems to be gripping the nation, Percy's analysis of humans' tendency to get stuck in everydayness rings true; in response, his novels urge an embrace of the search and an acknowledgement that an ability to live comfortably with some unhappiness helps us to embrace our journey with others. Finally, our isolation, worn-out words, and inability to communicate finds some resolution through relations with others, ordinary work, and new communities. Permeating all of these concerns and solutions is Percy's undergirding premise that life only can make sense with an eye toward eternity, that the mystery of divine grace ultimately provides hope in our lives.

A Nation Divided

While it may be possible to overstate the uniqueness of our current polarized political climate—our country did suffer through a civil war—the degree of separation among elements of the country are troubling. Ezra Klein in *Why We're Polarized* helpfully identifies the structural forces that lead to having increasingly ideologically extreme candidates winning office. On a much more visceral level, the ongoing display of Trump signs in lawns throughout conservative regions, long after the 2020 election has concluded, reminds us that a broad swath of the population no longer trusts the basic structures of our democracy. In *Love in the Ruins*, published in 1971, Percy was responding to a different social upheaval that he observed in the 1960s. Yet the novel's analysis seems strikingly on point, with the country splintering: "our beloved old U.S.A. is in a bad way. Americans have turned against each other; race against race, right against left, believer against heathen, San Francisco against Los Angeles, Chicago against Cicero" (15). The old Republican Party is now the "Knothead Party," while the Democrats are the "Left Party." Brian Smith notes, "In More's America, people view one another not as actual men and women but rather through labels and categories" (192). As the narrator Tom More tells us bluntly, "The center did not hold" (16), calling to mind the sobering lines from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming":

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity. (2-7)

The novel reveals a nation losing its shared understanding of what can draw us together.

More notices the perceived differences around him but also pushes back against the categories—and the underlying rage that drives these separations. As a physician, Dr. More is interested in the physical manifestations of these divisions: "Conservatives have begun to fall victim to unseasonable rages, delusions of conspiracies, high blood pressure, and large-bowel complaints. Liberals are more apt to contract sexual impotence, morning terror, and a feeling of abstraction of the self from itself" (17). Through these physical manifestations, More (and Percy) are showing the connections between emotional and physical distress. More reflects again on this undergirding anger in *The Thanatos*

Syndrome when he describes the arguments between inmates while he was in prison: "I was more interested in the rage than the arguments. After two years no one had convinced anyone else. Each side made the same points, the same rebuttals. Neither party listened to the other" (34). More's focus on the divisions and the rage seem remarkably resonant with our own situation, as people rail against each other on television or social media. Little listening seems to occur. And, of course, this rage boiled over into violent action with the insurrection on January 6. Yet as is common in Percy's novels, More also points out that he sees more commonality than difference in the warring factions. At one point in *Love in the Ruins* he notes that scientists and businessmen "make much of their differences," but "I do not notice a great deal of difference between the two. Both sorts are generally good fellows, good fathers and husbands who work hard all day, come home at five-thirty to their pretty homes, kiss their wives, toss their rosy babes in the air, light up their charcoal briquets, or perhaps mount their tiny tractor mowers" (13). Though he notices the groups drawing apart, More has little use for these various categories since he sees their common humanness as providing opportunity for connection rather than separation.

While the futuristic satire of *Love in the Ruins* most directly takes on these divides, other Percy novels also critique the certainties he observes people settling into. In *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling is living a seemingly easy middle-class life. But the novel reveals his growing dissatisfaction with the set course of his and others' lives. Binx admits that he does not know if he even wants to acknowledge that he may be searching for God:

> I hesitate to answer, 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—and therefore raising a question in which no one has the slightest interest. Who wants to be dead last among one hundred and eighty million Americans? 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. (14)

In his detached, ironic manner, Binx is pointing out the dangers of certainty, of having settled positions without acknowledging, with humility, that we may not have all the firm answers.

The searing rage of the protagonist in *Lancelot* is a shocking change in Percy's narrative voice, but in many ways Lancelot is approaching

the same questions from an opposite direction. For he also begins to search, shocked into action by the realization that his daughter is not actually biologically related to him. Unlike the more common Percy protagonist, for whom this searching posture opens up possibilities and learning, Lancelot struggles to be certain about what has happened. In response to learning about his wife's infidelity, Lance murders her and her lover and burns down his ancestral home. The novel's present takes place in a Center for Aberrant Behavior, where Lancelot is confined; he tells his story to his childhood friend Percival through a dramatic monologue. This singular voice, until Percival speaks at the novel's very end, allows Lance to spout his terrifying new certainties about the Third Revolution he is planning. His rage spills out as he attacks what he sees in the present: "Which is a better world, this cocksucking cuntlapping assholelicking fornicating Happyland U.S.A., or a Roman legion under Marcus Aurelius Antoninus?" (158). In this fascist state he is imagining, "Killings will not be necessary. . . . I've discovered that even in this madhouse if you tell someone something, face to face, in perfect seriousness, without emotion, gazing directly at him, he will believe you. One need only speak with authority" (159). While this moral clarity may sound reasonable on some level, Percy shows just how despicable Lance's position is when he makes clear his view of sexuality: "The great secret of the ages is that man has evolved, is born, lives, and dies for one end and one end only: to commit a sexual assault on another human or to submit to such an assault" (222). Ultimately, the novel reveals the stark danger of Lance's certainty, of his denunciations of evil without any presence of love. While *The Moviegoer* and other novels show the need to open oneself to the search, *Lancelot* reveals the deep danger of entrenched positions and certainty of being right.

Through his own life and the open-endedness of many of his novels, Percy suggests a better way forward than being locked into our groups and certainties. In his own life, Percy modeled the possibility of crossing boundaries. Often, Percy is presented as a conservative, given his critiques of some effects of the Second Vatican Council and his opposition to abortion. Yet his positions are considerably more nuanced, as he links views that span the liberal-conservative divide. For instance, he tells of "One small bomb threat from the Klan and one interesting night in the attic with my family and a shotgun" as a reaction to his work on racial justice (Abádi-Nagy, *More Conversations* 152). He criticizes conservatives who make abortion opposition a litmus test "but have absolutely no interest in preserving the sanctity of life in such areas as the prevention of war, capital punishment and helping women—the young, poor women—who get pregnant. I notice that a

lot of people who are extremely opposed to abortion don't want to do anything to preserve life in other areas. I'm proud that the Catholic Church is on the side of life and not death—in all areas" (Hays 120). On the flip side, he says,

> If I had anything to say to the liberals, in the usual sense of that word, it is that I agree with them on almost everything: their political and social causes, and the ACLU, God knows, the rights to freedom of speech, to help the homeless, the poor, the minorities, God knows the blacks, the third world—their hearts are in the right place. It's actually a mystery, a bafflement to me, how they cannot see the paradox of being in favor of these good things and yet not batting an eyelash when it comes to destroying unborn life. (Walter 230)

Percy's linking of views across the political spectrum serves a model and an antidote to the entrenchment commonly seen today and satirized in his novels. Rather than holding a position because it is espoused by a particular group or party, Percy models the possibility of finding connections across political divides, of subverting established positions. When we can find common ground on some issues with people in disparate political spheres, it becomes much more difficult to demonize them about other positions.

In a broader sense, Percy's diagnostic approach in his novels, of pointing out a problem while generally only hinting at a resolution, models the sort of humble responses needed in our context. The novelist, says Percy, "is like the canary that coal miners used to take down into the shaft to test the air. When the canary gets unhappy, utters plaintive cries, and collapses, it may be time for the miners to surface and think things over" (*Message* 101). Percy's approach to novel writing is to identify the problem or issues that he finds significant, to be the canary in the mine, but his novels allow considerable space for the reader to figure out how to respond. He says, "Nothing is worse than a novel which seeks to edify the reader" (Carr 64), so at the moment a character is ready to make a commitment, "you have to get out" (Forkner and Kennedy 235). This model, too, provides a suggestion of a way beyond our dug-in positions. Certainly, Percy has deeply held views, and those inform his writing. Yet he recognizes that readers need time to wrestle with the questions, to find their own way. This model of writing or speaking from a clear perspective while also acknowledging that others are on their own journey would be a welcome stance in our context of entrenched positions. Novelist Tim Gautreaux's reflection about a fiction writing seminar he took with Percy is instructive:

> What was interesting to Percy is not that people did things but why people did things. That carried over to his teaching of fiction. He would lead us in class to think not how we wrote, but why we wrote. There was always this moral foundation to whatever he wrote. And he was never didactic or preachy. He was always asking us, his readers, to think about why we did things. And when he taught me . . . he was not very opinionated as to what we should write about, but he was very adamant in letting us know that we're all on some kind of quest. (Hebert-Leiter 111-12)

While critics disagree about how open-ended Percy's novels are, especially his later ones, they typically contain some element of uncertainty. For instance, at the end of *The Moviegoer*, Binx and Kate get married, and Binx has found some clarity for his professional life. Yet in the Epilogue, he refuses to provide a clear answer about the outcome of his search, noting that "it is not open to me even to be edifying," and since "Reticence, therefore, hardly having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time as any to make an end" (237). Percy's model of offering hints and nudges rather than a final certainty provides a potential way out of entrenched positions. Acknowledging our shared quest for something more provides an opportunity to find commonality as people on a similar journey.

Everydayness at 4:00

Various markers point to ongoing societal unrest in our current context, with certainly the pandemic playing a significant role in these disruptions. Even when economic indicators were suggesting strong growth throughout the country, people were clearly feeling on edge. The Great Resignation shows that many people are rethinking their career options and moving to new possibilities, feeling dissatisfied with where they have been. The January 6 insurrection underscores that a sizable portion of the population feels disconnected from the broader political system. Large numbers of college students are suffering from mental health issues, indicating their stresses. In significant ways, these particular indicators point toward a broader sense of dislocation, of people's struggles in finding their way and purpose in their lives.

While the specific challenges may vary, Percy's novels provide a connection to our current situation, as he presents characters who feel alienated, stuck in their lives, barely knowing who they are. In *The*

Moviegoer, Binx fills his life with reading *Consumer Reports*—"as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant" (7)—going to the movies, and having trysts with his secretaries. He has latched onto these small methods to fill his days. In *Lancelot*, Lance finds himself also in a rut, though a more overtly dangerous one than Binx's: "So what was my discovery? that for the last few years I had done nothing but fiddle at law, fiddle at history, keep up with the news (why?), watch Mary Tyler Moore, and drink myself into unconsciousness every night" (60). Both Lancelot and Will Barret, the protagonist in *The Second Coming*, have moments when they see themselves in a mirror and do not recognize themselves, a tangible sign that the characters have lost a sense of internal connection.

Percy's particular analysis of humans' getting stuck is his description of "everydayness," a kind of mundane existence that leads us to fill our lives with meaningless activities just to get through the day. Living in such a way is a form of despair, Percy believes, because rather than face our situation directly, we mask our unhappiness by staying busy. *The Moviegoer*'s Binx Bolling is self-aware about his situation, reflecting to the reader: "What is the malaise? you ask. The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost" (120). As the novel's title suggests, Binx spends his evenings going to movies because they "provide a way for Binx to experience the emotions he has removed from his own life, but without the related anxiety" (Osborne 118). Perhaps Percy's most famous description of everydayness, despair, and the possibility of a search as a response comes in *The Moviegoer*. Binx says, "The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. . . . To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (13). This theme of our human tendency to experience everydayness and our propensity to fill our lives to avoid confronting it is common throughout Percy's oeuvre.

In *Lancelot* and *The Second Coming*, everydayness is expressed quite differently from Binx's musings. As Lance is recounting to Percival what has happened in his life, he acknowledges that he has not known what to do with his days, saying, "The mystery is: What is one to do with oneself? As you get older you begin to realize the trick time is playing, and that unless you do something about it, the passage of time is nothing but the encroachment of the horrible banality of the past on the pure future" (106). Or as he says more starkly another time, "Then I realized why I drank and smoked. It was a way of dealing with time"

(123). Lance has sunken into a form of everydayness, just filling his days without much meaning or purpose. In *The Second Coming*, everydayness is expressed more concretely by Allie, the woman who has escaped from a mental institution, who has "made straight A's [in school] and flunked ordinary living" (93). Allie has found it difficult to locate her place in society, but she stumbles into an old greenhouse that she fixes up, finding focus through the hard work. Yet for her, the late afternoons are her nemesis, her time when she slips into malaise: "Time became separated into good times and bad times. The nights and mornings were good times. Then along comes later afternoon—four o'clock? five o'clock? she didn't know because she had no clock and lived by forest time—but a time which she thought of as yellow spent time because if time is to be filled or spent by working, sleeping, eating, what do you do when you finish and there is time left over? . . . Only in later afternoons did she miss people" (237-38). Indeed, Percy notes throughout his writing that this everydayness can be so severe that people surreptitiously look forward to disasters as a way of breaking free. Lancelot says, for instance, "I knew a married couple once who were bored with life, disliked each other, hated their own lives, and were generally miserable—except during hurricanes. Then they sat in their house at Pass Christian, put a bottle of whiskey between them, felt a surge of happiness, were able to speak frankly and cheerfully to each other, laugh and joke, drink, even make love" (164). At a low point in Binx's life, he says, "the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people fear is not that the bomb will fall but that bomb will not fall" (228). Throughout his writing, Percy identifies clearly the everydayness that many people can slip into, a fog of going through the motions with little reflection and a tendency to fill our lives with mostly meaningless activities just to get through the day.

As hinted by the famous quotation in *The Moviegoer*, Percy suggests the search as a way to break this cycle, to use our dissatisfaction as an opportunity for substantive reflection. Elizabeth Amato helpfully explains that Percy's focus on the search "means recognizing unhappiness as a fortunate starting point for self-reflective inquiry. . . . Foremost, Percy argues that our unhappiness points us toward talking, sharing, and searching with other persons" (64). Rather than trying to mask our unhappiness with things and activities, Percy points to the need to accept those dissatisfactions as a starting point for deeper reflection. At least initially, this stance may be uncomfortable. Binx laments, "The search has spoiled the pleasure of my tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly" (191). And yet it is just this search that provides the opportunity to make real connections with others and find a deeper purpose in our lives. Later, when Binx has carried through with his search,

committing to marriage, he notes almost in passing that he has a much clearer sense of his purpose: "There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons. It only remains to decide whether this vocation is best pursued in a service station [or medical school]" (233). He has learned that whatever specific career path he pursues, he has a calling to connect deeply with others and both draw from and support them. He even uses the religiously inflected term "vocation" to describe this purpose that he embraces.

Though it is couched in different terms, Allie and Will in *The Second Coming* also find their shared purpose as they commit to each other, finding in their life together a way to break from the everydayness they have experienced. Allie asks Will, "Is it possible that there is such a life?" "As what?" Will asks. In her fresh mode of speech, relearned after many sessions of electro-shock therapy, Allie says, "As a life of smiling ease with someone else and the sweetness for you deep in me and play and frolic and dear sweet love the livelong day, even at four o'clock in the afternoon turning the old yellow green-glade lonesomeness into a being with you at ease not a being with you at unease?" Will responds, "Yes, it's possible" (328-29). With this commitment, Will and Allie find a tangible end to their searches and a meaningful way to fill the lonely times. As shown in these two examples, Percy suggests that our response to the ongoing malaise we experience is to embrace the dissatisfaction as a beginning of a meaningful search for a deeper purpose in life, often a life with someone else. Instead of a narrowly defined, materialistic pursuit of happiness, the search in Percy's novels is best filled with finding other fellow searchers on the path (Amato 66).

Isolating, Worn-out Language

One element of our cultural separation is our seeming inability to communicate, to agree on basic ideas or even words. As the Covid vaccine debate has shown, wide swaths of the population no longer accept established scientific data as solid fact. Politicians declare accurate reporting of what happened as "fake news." A national election, cleared by the president's own attorney general as having been unblemished with fraud, continues to be denounced by many people as illegitimate. At a basic level, Americans seem unable or unwilling to agree on a shared understanding, a basis of ideas or words from which to move forward.

Writing many years before our current context, Percy notes some of these same phenomena at work, particularly concerning the ways that words no longer communicate. In an essay, he laments the challenges for the novelist since "Words are polluted. Plots are polluted," so it is "no wonder that the posture the novelist often finds natural is that of derision, mockery, subversion, and assault" (*Signposts* 161). Much of Percy's writing does take a satirical bent, as he tries to approach topics and ideas from an unexpected direction. Given the centrality of Christian belief for Percy, he particularly points out the "language of religion, the very words themselves, are almost bankrupt. If you are writing a technical article on philosophy you can use the correct word for the correct meaning. But writing a novel is something different. In my view you have to be wary of using words like 'religion,' 'God,' 'sin,' 'salvation,' baptism,' because the words are almost worn out" (Abádi-Nagy, *Conversations* 79). In response, notes Percy, the novelist "must use every ounce of skill, cunning, humor, even irony, to deliver religion from the merely edifying" (*Signposts* 306). Percy's critique can be expanded to take on the broader range of terms and ideas that have tended to unite our country. When basic concepts like democracy and freedom are understood in vastly different ways, the very words themselves do indeed seem bankrupt. Lancelot's proposed Third Revolution shows the dangers of devalued terms, as he speaks of working from "a conviction and a freedom" (156), while proposing a fascist regime.

Percy's essay, "The Loss of the Creature," collected in *The Message in the Bottle,* explores how even our experiences can become devalued and worn out as we measure, for instance, how a visit to the Grand Canyon "*conforms to the preformed complex*" of our expectations (47). Rather than engaging the splendor of this amazing scene, we often are measuring what we see against an image in our minds—perhaps from a postcard or others' descriptions—rather than "the sovereign discovery of the thing before" us, Percy argues (47). In the essay, Percy explores several ways to restore this direct experience of the Grand Canyon, such as avoiding the established pathways or experiencing a disaster that removes any mental space for expectations. In these moments, the person may be surprised by a glance of the canyon's splendor when not expecting it. Using a different example, Percy notes that our structures around learning can also lead students not to encounter the "thing," given all the learning apparatus we have set up. Percy's response: "I propose that English poetry and biology should be taught as usual, but that at irregular intervals, poetry students should find dogfishes on their desks and biology students should find Shakespeare sonnets on their dissecting boards" (61). Percy is urging us to find ways to move

beyond worn-out words and experiences, to approach ideas and places from a different angle, to find a way out of ruts.

Though the parallels are not exact, Percy's analysis of devalued language and experiences has connections to our own context. Our obsessions with recording events for future viewing or sharing online seems potentially to separate us from experiencing the event itself. We have all seen people viewing their vacation or their child's band concert through a video camera lens or, now, through a phone. Percy would suggest, I believe, that these mediated approaches may keep us from directly experiencing the real. More dangerously, our social media networks tend to provide us with an echo chamber of ideas, so that we hear a narrow band of thoughts that conform with our own. One of the ways that words and ideas get worn out is through a lack of richness in their use. Hearing a range of approaches, of alternative ways of thinking, helps to broaden and work against terms becoming narrowed and thinned out. Percy's novelist approach is to use satire and irony to undercut an established, worn-out sense of language. Perhaps a parallel approach for those of us who are not novelists is to engage a broader array of voices that provide more angles to approach ideas.

As usual, *Lancelot* provides the cautionary tale of what can go terribly wrong when, even within a marriage, no real communication happens. Lance describes being obsessed with his wife Margot, but he admits, "Love her? I'm not sure what words mean any more, but I loved her if loving her is wanting her all the time, wanting even the sight of her" (118). He acknowledges, "Later we lived by sexual delights and the triumphs of architectural restoration" (119), though eventually I "crawled into a bottle" (120). While Lance is obsessed with discovering the "truth" of Margot's infidelity, he never actually works on renewing his relationship with her. Peter Lecouras helpfully explains, "Lance confuses scientific certainty with the wisdom of interpretation" (75). When he begins his quest to find this truth, "Lance awakens; he showers; he quits drinking; he takes a look at himself in the mirror. But he never communicates with Margot" (Lecouras 80). Given his approach, it does not seem coincidental that Margot is planning to take on the role of Nora in *The Doll's House* since Lance and she never seem to have a full relationship. Just before she dies when the house explodes, Margot makes this point to Lance, though only in a halting, unfinished sentence: "With you I had to be either—or—but never a—uh—woman" (245). Through this terrifying novel, Percy reveals the terrible costs of worn-out words, of the lack of real relationships.

The possible respons shown in Percy's novels to these isolating situations are both mundane and profound: fully developed relationships, meaningful ordinary work, strong communities. As noted earlier, Binx

in *The Moviegoer* finds purpose at the end of the novel through committing to marriage with Kate. Though he has been drifting through life, settling for his little way, he finds the profound joy that comes from sharing a life with another person, and Kate similarly needs his solidity in her life. Kate tells him, "I am frightened when I am alone and I am frightened when I am with people. The only time I'm not frightened is when I'm with you. You'll have to be with me a great deal." In an affirmation that seems an echo of a wedding vow, Binx says, "I will" (234). As a further sealing of their commitment, Binx describes what happens: "She has been plucking at her thumb in earnest, tearing away little shreds of flesh. I take her hand and kiss the blood" (234). Binx, the cool, unaffected man, has promised to entwine his life with another. Amato accurately says, "Binx realizes the joy of being needed and being needed by the very person whom he can help" (7). This model that Percy shows in his first novel serves as the core response to the isolating, non-communicative lives in which people can exist. Making commitments to each other, in the midst of our limitations and fears, serves as a central response throughout Percy's novels.

The Second Coming and *Lancelot* both reveal a second element that pushes against isolation, the embrace of ordinary work. Throughout the novel, Will has been struggling against the allure of death, as he hears in his mind his father's despairing philosophy. While he is on a bus to Georgia, presumably to commit suicide, he happens to sit next to a loan associate who speaks with appreciation of his ordinary work:

> But as he listened to the Associate talk about his work—talk with pleasure! he enjoyed his work! he enjoyed walking twenty blocks down West Peachtree, sitting behind his desk for ten hours, making loans, good loans! good for the lender and lendee, doing isometrics between his appointments, he was no loan shark!—his eye traveled along the ridge and came to a notch where in the darkness of the pine and spruce there grew a single gold poplar which caught in the sun like a yellow-haired girl coming out of the dark forest. (297)

This glimpse of yellow light reminds Will of Allie, with whom he can imagine sharing his life, but it is also the context of ordinary good work that helps Will decide he can reject the possibility of suicide and declare, "I'm not going back to Georgia" (297). Hearing the Associate describe a life made meaningful by commonplace work helps Will find a way to keep on living. Richard Reinsch describes this approach as "The sacrament of the ordinary, of delight in labor, home, and in his wife and children" (173). Carrying forward this sacramental imagery,

in *Lancelot*, Percival, the mostly silent listener, has been revealed throughout the novel to have earlier been a priest but who has left the priesthood. Yet as he hears Lancelot's angry rantings, his own sense of the importance of his priestly work has been renewed. Lance intends his comment to be a snide indictment, but the novel clearly reveals Percival's commitment to his basic calling to be right and good: "So you plan to take a little church in Alabama, Father, preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives?" (256). Though the priesthood is a lofty calling, Lance also accurately describes the mundane quality of ministering to ordinary people, of caring for people amidst their dailyness. The possibility of solid but commonplace work is shown by Percy to be a way to find purpose amidst the seeming fluidity of meaning and commitments.

Finally, in *The Second Coming*, Percy shows Will and Allie committing to each other, but he adds in another important component, the development of a new broader community. John Desmond points out that Percy's writings explore "the ground of genuine community and possible ways to recover it, without which we remain locked in ourselves" (3). Throughout the novel, a subplot is the ongoing conflict between two roommates in a retirement community. Mr. Arnold used to build log cabins, and Mr. Ryan was a contractor, using gypsy labor. Each has life skills, but they are shunted aside with little more purpose than bickering over watching television. As Will finds new purpose through his life with Allie, he also embraces a broader community by engaging Mr. Arnold and Mr. Ryan to lay aside their surface disputes to join together to build affordable housing. Will explains to them, "I want well-built log cabins, enough land for privacy, and gardens, and at a price young couples, singles, and retired couples can afford. Not two hundred and fifty dollars maybe but less than twenty-five thousand. . . . What I want is for Mr. Arnold to work with Mr. Ryan's crew and teach them how to notch up a cabin . . . . What do you say?" (346). Eventually they agree. These two men are drawn back into community through their ordinary work, and Will and Allie will have a community to join. As Will is leaving the retirement home, Percy provides a wonderful scene that underscores the surprising ways that human kindness and genuine interaction enrich all of our lives. An old woman is being taken to the hospital, and she announces loudly how scared she is. Will watches the orderlies reassure her, calming her down, and he muses about these ordinary but grace-filled moments of human interaction:

> Then how does it add up in the economy of giving and getting, he wondered, that the two orderlies cared nothing (or

> did they?) for the old woman, that even in the very act of their offhand reassurances to her they were probably cooking up something between themselves, that they, the orderlies, who had no reason to give her anything at all, gave it because it was so little to give and so much for her to get? 2¢=$5? How?
>
> Does goodness come tricked out so as fakery and fondness and carrying on and God himself as sly? (349)

In his typically understated way, Percy reveals in this profound passage the possibility of divine love being embodied in kind human interactions. Providing an almost sacramental image of grace being offered and received, Percy reveals the profound possibilities in being present for each other, of forming new communities instead of isolating echo chambers.

Though his writing career began more than a half century ago, Percy's critiques and possibilities still resonate as we seek to find our way through the ongoing challenges of the twenty-first century. His novels and essays push us beyond our settled certainties, encourage us to search rather than reside in our everydayness, and nudge us toward the concreteness of relationships. Yet even more, his writings and interviews make clear the centrality for him of faith, of a deep commitment to God. Percy's focus on God's grace in his own life points out that his diagnoses and treatments for Americans' lives are not as clear cut as prescribing an antibiotic for an infection. His novels provide considerable space for mystery, for an acknowledgement that more can happen in our encounters with others and with the divine than can be fully documented or explained. In one of the loveliest passages in literature, Binx is watching a Black man on Ash Wednesday exit a church with ashes on his forehead. Binx's response to the man reveals his ongoing recognition that we all have mixed motivations while also acknowledging a new openness to the possibility of something more divinely mysterious at work: "It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus? It is impossible to say" (235).

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Coming in from the Porch: Walker Percy and the English Department

Farrell O'Gorman

In his 1956 essay "Stoicism and the South," Walker Percy claimed that the "Southern gentleman" had long refused to fully enter the "Christian edifice" that he had inherited: he "will neither go inside nor put it entirely behind him but stands forever grumbling on the porch" (*Signposts* 84). There is a sense in which Percy deliberately did the same with the Humanities Building, or at least with the English Department. Having majored in chemistry as an undergraduate and completed medical school at Columbia University, Percy occasionally suggested that he felt more comfortable associating with scientists than with other writers, and he often spoke of himself as a "diagnostician" rather than as an artist. Among humanists, those scholars and teachers most deeply engaged with Percy's work have generally proven to be as interested in philosophy, semiotics, theology, and political thought as they are in literary study per se; they have been as apt to place him alongside Kierkegaard, Augustine, or Tocqueville as any novelist. Nonetheless, Percy's work has of course appeared in literature classrooms over the last five decades, most frequently in courses on Southern literature or on Christianity and twentieth-century literature—so that he might be paired with William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams on the one hand, Graham Greene and C.S. Lewis on the other, Flannery O'Connor and Wendell Berry on both. This pattern, in my experience, seems to have been dominant in the SAMLA region for the past three decades. It is understandable but finally reductive.

There are other avenues of entrance into the English Department for Percy and his work. His nonfiction has received appropriate recognition as a valuable component in first year writing classes, with his essay "The Loss of the Creature" proven enduringly effective in this regard.[1] And while Percy's fiction might readily be integrated into interdisciplinary courses involving philosophy, medical humanities, or film, it can also be placed in a wider range of literature courses than has typically been the case. I hope to demonstrate this by concisely pairing his work with that of three very different major authors—Jonathan Swift, Kate Chopin, and Don DeLillo—with brief reference to others. In doing so, I will necessarily attend somewhat to Percy's identity as a

Catholic writer (more so than as a Southern writer), but with the goal of placing him in broader contexts in English and American literature rather than in a hermetically sealed "Christian Authors" class.

Lost in the Cosmos and *Gulliver's Travels*: Castaways, Christian Satire, and the Enlightenment

Percy has long been recognized as having a strong satirical bent. In certain vital respects, his voice and vision link him to that great age of English satire, the eighteenth century. The period produced many "literary pieces" which can seem to undergraduates to be too "inextricably bound to the era in which they were written, with too many references to things, people, and events that today are far from familiar" (a charge leveled at Percy today for his references to twentieth-century film and television). Accordingly, undergraduates might be best introduced to "eighteenth-century studies through a writing course focused on satire" that includes not only classic texts of the period but also more contemporary examples (Casler 58). Percy is an apt choice who invites particular comparison with Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift—friends and correspondents of one another whose mutual Christian convictions provided the essential foundation for their satires.

Percy's often gentle wit and bemused view of the human condition has much in common with that of Pope (an English Catholic in an era when it was very difficult to be one). The opening of Epistle II of Pope's *An Essay on Man* presents what Percy deems the comic predicament of "man" as wayfarer, not quite fit for heaven yet never quite at home on earth:

> Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
> With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
> In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
> In doubt his mind or body to prefer,
> Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
> Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
> Whether he thinks too little, or too much. (II. 3-12)

Like Pope, Percy saw the postlapsarian human tendency to be dissatisfied with our "middle state" (between god and beast, transcending mind and earth-bound body) as particularly exacerbated by modern

habits of thought. In Percy's view, Descartes was most responsible for this exacerbation, for the modern individual's tendency to figure disembodied thought as the essence of being: *cogito, ergo sum*. Accordingly, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* begins with the suggestion that the reader has become to some degree a "Ghost which Haunts the Cosmos," habitually hovering over the material world—seeking to manipulate it, but not to dwell in it—and therefore lacking a properly grounded selfhood (1). Pope essentially agrees in *An Epistle on Man*. He briefly panders to his modern Western readers, to our pride in our ability to in effect launch ourselves into space via telescopes and other technology, before suddenly humbling us at the end:

> Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,
> Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
> Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,
> Correct old time, and regulate the sun....
> Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—
> Then drop into thyself, and be a fool! (II.19-22, 29-30)

This passage directly highlights Pope's concern with the dizzying and potentially dehumanizing shifts in perspective occasioned by the ascendance of the natural sciences. That concern is shared profoundly not only by Percy but also by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*—most obviously when Gulliver literally finds his visual perspective reversed among diminutive Lilliputians and titanic Brobdingnagians, but also, more complexly, in the second half of the novel.

Percy shares this concern in all his fiction, to some degree. His most distinctive expression of it may well be *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. This 1983 sui generis text is not a novel, yet it resembles Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in surprising ways: both are parodies of popular literary genres of their day (the self-help book and travel narrative, respectively), and both culminate with surprising dystopian visions of purely "rational" societies.[2] While parody is of course distinct from satire, parody of a popular genre can in effect satirize the culture that produces and consumes it—and that is certainly the case in these two texts. The cultures under consideration here are distinct from one another and yet are both fundamentally modern and Anglophone: Swift was an Anglican clergyman publishing in 1726, when an expanding imperial Britain laid claim to seemingly strange new lands, Percy a Catholic convert and layman living in one of those lands some 250 years later. Both had in common conservative temperaments and a commitment to satire not only as a means of exposing and ridiculing vice, but also—to different degrees—as proposing a corrective to such vice. Both

attacked the West's ascendant worship of technology and concomitant rise of a narrow scientism that might ultimately undermine notions of innate human dignity; Swift largely assumed Christian charity as its obvious implicit corrective, while Percy more explicitly proposed it.

Percy and Swift alike were fixated on Daniel Defoe's character Robinson Crusoe. Lost at sea, if not in the cosmos, Crusoe served as an intermittent reference point for Percy throughout his career, from *The Moviegoer* to the final pages of *Lost in the Cosmos*, in which "Space Odyssey II" asks earthlings to consider "what do you do if there really is no man Friday out there and we really are alone?" (225). Swift was a contemporary of Defoe, and his Robinson Crusoe is widely recognized as a partial model for Swift's narrator, Gulliver. When *Gulliver's Travels* was published in early-eighteenth-century England, Defoe's novel and various nonfiction travel narratives—which generally served colonial agendas—enjoyed astounding popularity. Among other things, *Gulliver's Travels* parodies those texts and satirizes their generally self-congratulatory narrators as well as the reading public that lionized them.[3]

Percy's targeted genre in *Lost in the Cosmos* was not the British colonial travel narrative but the American self-help book, which emerged as a dominant popular genre in the late twentieth century but had roots in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* could easily have the subtitle "how to win friends and influence people" or "how to become rich or more assertive or more creative or make love better," all of which *Lost in the Cosmos* pointedly admits it will not help readers to do (2). Percy explicitly identifies Thomas Jefferson as launching Americans on the path toward becoming lost selves, futilely pursuing happiness in a world in which their uncompromising insistence on freedom ultimately results in "a curious and paradoxical bondage" (12). Yet Franklin arguably did even more in this regard. His *Autobiography* might well be read as a manual for becoming an autonomous self, complete with charts and graphs. Franklin's name does appear in *Lost in the Cosmos*, at an opportune moment during the "Last Donahue Show." There, a celebrity therapist attempts to present a pregnant teenager named Penny as evidence of "the crying need for sex education in our schools," to which Penny responds, "Oh, I had all that stuff at Ben Franklin" (49).

Swift and Percy, then, satirize their cultures in part by parodying these respective popular genres. Such differences in narrative form must be kept in mind even as fundamental thematic similarities between the texts are considered. Both texts initially present the middle class and potentially autonomous self—represented by Swift's Gulliver and enacted by Percy's reader—with dizzying shifts in perspective mir-

roring those occasioned by the optical devices associated with the rise of the modern sciences. In Percy's text, those shifts are simultaneously cosmological and existential from the outset; in Swift's, they begin in comparatively mundane fashion, presenting first the Lilliputians and then the Brobdingnagians—little people and big people, respectively.

In Gulliver's third voyage, Swift moves closer to Percy territory as he directly attacks the ascendant worship of technology in the modern West. Gulliver not only has a conversation with the shade of Descartes during this voyage, but also encounters an entire nation of Cartesian philosopher-kings who inhabit the flying island of Laputa. These men are so abstracted that when engaging in conversation, they have to be accompanied by servants called "flappers" who intermittently swat them with inflated bladders: the minds of the Laputan leaders "are so taken up with intense speculation that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others, without being roused by some external taction upon the organs of speech and hearing" (Swift 128). The typical Laputan husband fails to notice his wife's blatant—and perhaps justified—infidelity even if she is seduced in front of him: "the mistress and lover may proceed to the greatest familiarities before his face, if he be but provided with paper and implements, and without his flapper at his side" (133).The Laputan leaders, then, rarely fall prey to what Percy in *Lost in the Cosmos* deems the "demoniac spirit of the erotic," which would involve attempting to reassert embodied selfhood via sexual activity (189). They do, however, figuratively exemplify the "demoniac spirit of the violent": their island floats in a kind of geosynchronous orbit above their subject lands and—should the subjects refuse to pay tribute—simply, slowly, drops on them. Among the Laputan realms is to be found an Academy of Projectors whose faith in scientific progress leads them to spend decades working on visionary projects that range from the grossly utilitarian—including a scheme "to reduce human excrement to its original food"—to the utterly absurd, such as a scheme to abolish all words, "since words are only names for things, [and] it would be more convenient for all men to carry about with them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on" (Swift 146, 150). They have also designed a proto-computer designed to generate sentences at random and thereby eventually "give the world a complete body of all arts and sciences," avoiding the "usual laborious method" of attaining knowledge in these areas (148-50).

Swift's subtle and generally ironic meditation on the nature of language and our inability to fully understand what it is—also a central concern for Percy—continues into Part IV. This concluding section merits comparison with *Lost in the Cosmos* in other respects as

well. Swift's book and Percy's alike culminate with "odysseys" to settings at once utopian and dystopian, settings that raise deeply troubling questions regarding human nature. Gulliver travels to the land of the Houyhnhnms, supremely intelligent talking horses whose island is infested with savage and disturbingly humanoid Yahoos. Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master, who takes him in as a curiosity, listens to Gulliver's description of human behavior and concludes that humans are essentially advanced Yahoos:

> a sort of animal to whose share, by what accident he could not conjecture, some small pittance of reason had fallen, whereof we made no other use than by its assistance to aggravate our natural corruptions, and to acquire new ones which Nature had not given us. That we disarmed ourselves of the few abilities she had bestowed, had been very successful in multiplying our original wants, and seemed to spend our whole lives in vain endeavours to supply them by our own inventions. (209)

The Houyhnhnms "have no word in their language to express anything that is evil, except what they borrow from the deformities or ill qualities of the Yahoos" (222). In fact, the Houyhnhnms avoid excess words generally, favoring conversations "where nothing passed but what was useful, expressed in the fewest and most significant words" (224); elsewhere, Gulliver notes that "their language doth not abound in variety of words, because their wants and passions are fewer than among us" (195). This is doubtlessly connected to the fact that the Houyhnhnms "have not words in their language to express lying or falsehood": when they suspect Gulliver of lying, they can only observe that he has said "the thing which was not" (190). In this last regard, the Houyhnhnms bear a curious resemblance to the inhabitants of "planet PC3" who emerge near the end of *Lost in the Cosmos*. Faced with the prospect of allowing earthlings to land on their planet, the inhabitants of PC3 fear that these aliens have a deeply problematic "C2 consciousness," which is to say: the earthling self—the human self—is prone to "being that which it is not, saying that which is not, doing that which is not, and making others what they are not" (210). In effect, the leaders of PC3 correctly diagnose the earthlings and say to them: we don't want you Yahoos on our planet.

In other respects, the Houyhnhnms present parallels to Percy's "New Ionians," a group of humans who under the leader Aristarchus Jones aspire to build a utopian society based on "reason and science" (246). The most important parallel between the New Ionians and the Houyhnhnms is their common tendency to endorse eugenic or

downright genocidal proposals regarding undesirable humans. When Aristarchus Jones plans to leave an apparently doomed Earth for the planet of New Ionia, he proclaims that he is ready to propagate "space children," but not any who have been affected by radiation on Earth: "it would make no sense to perpetuate genetic defects" (247). Swift's Houyhnhnms, who initially appear as entrancingly beautiful and admirable, become much less so when it is revealed that they are considering wiping Yahoos from the face of the earth. Gulliver himself is seduced by their apparent superiority and soon takes to wearing shoes made of Yahoo leather and, later, making a canoe covered with the hides of Yahoos and a sail "composed of the skins of the same animal . . . I made use of the youngest I could get, the older being too tough and thick" (227).

As Gulliver unhappily makes his way home to England—forcibly exiled by the Houyhnhnms—Swift subtly emphasizes what Gulliver fails to see: the potential goodness of humanity, manifested in a Portuguese sea captain who appears as an archetypal Good Samaritan figure, giving him food, clothing, mercy, and good counsel (231-33). Despite this charity, Gulliver views the human world he returns to only as utterly vile and unredeemable, much as Aristarchus Jones would view Percy's alternative to New Ionia: a small settlement on the post-apocalyptic Earth, in Lost Cove, Tennessee. Here, unlike in Jones's space utopia, Christianity is tolerated and endures, albeit with seemingly only tenuous promise for the future. There are indeed figurative "Yahoos" in Lost Cove: Percy's Captain Marcus Aurelius Schuyler realizes this immediately when a group of "mountain men from Carolina" arrive and propose forming an "American" coalition against non-whites and "foreign potentates." Schuyler, noting that "there is no America," can only laugh and reply, "Here we go again" (260-61). Percy's space odyssey nonetheless ultimately endorses living a life of troubled hope among Yahoos in Lost Cove, Tennessee rather than a life of rational despair with Aristarchus Jones in New Ionia. The question of whether the Houyhnhnms correspond more closely to the subtly chilling New Ionians or the seemingly sensible inhabitants of PC3 is perhaps an open one, but it is worth noting again that the Houyhnhnms are both preeminently rational and incipiently genocidal in their view of the Yahoos—who represent the worst aspects of fallen humanity. Both Swift and Percy endorse the orthodox Christian view of Original Sin and are accordingly skeptical of utopian projects, though Percy's text is the more hopeful, more prescriptive, and less misanthropic of the two. (He is finally more a Horatian satirist, like Pope, than a Juvenalian, like Swift.) And insofar as both these works of Christian satire correctly diagnose the human condition, they do so—paradoxically—by saying

the thing which is not. Both, that is, are not necessarily novels but are works of fiction—certainly Percy's "Space Odyssey" is—and strive to approach the truth through fiction, a fiction laden thickly with irony. Whether the Houyhnhnms and the inhabitants of PC3 would recognize it or not, irony is essential not only to satire but to truth-telling generally in a world inhabited by C2 consciousness, the fallen world in which we find ourselves. Swift and Percy, to be sure, both see it that way.

"The American Mystery Deepens": *The Moviegoer*, Catholicism, and American Literature

Percy once wrote that the "strange paradox about writing novels" is "simply this: there's no occupation in the universe that is lonelier and that at the same time depends more radically on a community, a commonwealth of other writers" (*Signposts* 199). This, he noted, was a simple way to acknowledge what literary critics might more grandly refer to as "intertextuality." But the question remains: what "commonwealth of writers" did Percy see himself participating in? The invited lecture in which he made this claim was an appreciation of Herman Melville and his relationship to a New England literary community profoundly shaped by Calvinism. Melville was not merely a "regional" writer, of course, but a founder of a distinctive national literary tradition. Given that Percy wrote this essay and others such as "How to Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic," he was clearly quite interested in entering into dialogue with the broader American tradition.

Accordingly, I hope to suggest some new ways in which Percy might be integrated into American Literature courses. But I also want to keep in mind his own criteria. The single clearest indication of the sorts of writers Percy most valued comes in his essay "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World." Here, Percy most values those he deems "religious" writers, defining the term broadly enough to include not only Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and O'Connor but also Camus, Sartre, and Faulkner. In each case, the writer asks ultimate questions and "betrays a passionate conviction about man's nature, the world, and man's obligation in the world." These novelists tend to be Russian or French but can be American (though America, Percy notes, also tends to produce bad facsimiles who exhibit mere "philosophical megalomania"). Most English novels are not "religious" in this sense, Percy states: Jane Austen and Samuel Richardson wrote novels that "take place in a society as everyone sees it and takes it for granted. If there are vicars and

churches prominent in the society, there will be vicars and churches in the novel. If not, not. So much for vicars and churches" (103).

Other American authors Percy professed admiration for include his contemporaries Saul Bellow and John Updike, who might well be placed under the broadly religious rubric just outlined. What I want to consider here is his place in a spectrum of writers both broader in terms of chronology and somewhat more specific in terms of religion. I will focus on his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, in relation to the work of two authors from different time periods who did not actively profess the Catholic faith in which they had been raised, but who might perhaps be read as "religious" writers in Percy's broad sense. Regardless, they and Percy can certainly be read as part of what Paul Giles has called an "antiromantic 'Catholic' tradition" in American literature, one often overlooked and misunderstood because of its "alien" place in the Protestant-*cum*-Emersonian mainstream of that literature (25). Those two writers are Kate Chopin and Don DeLillo.

Waking Up in Louisiana: The Awakening *and* The Moviegoer

Percy and Chopin's best-known works have essential thematic and geographical parallels. I will focus on *The Moviegoer*, though when I read Chopin's *The Awakening* for the first time some twenty-five years ago, it was Percy's 1977 novel *Lancelot* that first sprang to mind as a point of comparison. Specifically, I wondered if Percy had read Chopin's 1899 novel when it was in effect rediscovered around 1970. I was surprised to find very little scholarship linking the two authors, a state of affairs that persists to this day.[4] Disappointed, I decided to email Percy's longtime friend Nikki Barranger in Louisiana. He told me that Percy "knew Chopin's work well" and that he recalled Percy discussing the novel at length with his wife in the 1970s. Milly Barranger, now Distinguished Professor Emerita of Dramatic Art at UNC-Chapel Hill, later emailed me that there is "no doubt" that Percy read *The Awakening* in this period and that he "spoke highly of it and encouraged his friends and neighbors to read it."

The question remains: how did Percy read and value Chopin's novel? He had no use for what he called "protest" fiction and would not have read it as such.[5] He had only slightly more interest in "regional" fiction *qua* regional, though he would have appreciated *The Awakening*'s concern with ethnic identities in Louisiana. Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier is, after all, identified from the outset as an "American" woman—in a milieu where "American" means Anglo-Protestant—and

set down in a Creole Catholic south Louisiana where she increasingly feels like a detached alien (Chopin 884). Much could be said about the relationship between alienation and ethnicity in *The Moviegoer*, from the early suggestion that Uncles Jules's Creole Catholicism makes him a bit too much at home in the City of Man to the moment in Chicago when the narrator Binx looks at Kate and she suddenly seems Celt, then Jew, then Creole—which distinguishes her from uber-WASP Aunt Emily and the "rosy-cheeked Anglo-Saxon lovelies" that Binx usually prefers (30-1; 206; 65).[6] Reading *The Moviegoer* primarily along these lines, however, would wrongly make it out to be too much of a local color novel or perhaps even an Austenesque novel of manners for Percy's taste—ethnicities being something like vicars and churches.

More crucial are the ways in which Edna as proto-existential seeker might seem to resemble Binx and—more so—Kate. One moment in *The Awakening* to which Percy would be particularly attuned comes when Edna and her potential adulterous lover Robert have left their vacation homes on Grand Isle for the neighboring island, even more remote. Overcome by drowsiness during Mass, Edna unexpectedly leaves the beaten track and finds herself resting in a nearby Cajun woman's house. Once alone, "She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh." She dozes and wakes, "very hungry," to find "a crusty brown loaf and a bottle of wine beside the plate. Edna bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong white teeth. She poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down" (917-18). Eucharistic imagery aside, this is a Percyesque moment in which a castaway protagonist awakens—not rendered null by everydayness, for once—and is somehow refreshed by experiencing the strangeness of embodiment.

Binx remembers experiencing this sort of sensation while wounded in Korea; but Kate's memory of the hours after the death of her first fiancé is even more relevant. The "happiest moment of her life" came shortly after that "fine fellow" Lyell was killed in a car accident, from which she walked away in relief, alone—a sort of castaway. She wandered onto a bus, found a hotel, "took a bath and ordered a big breakfast, ate every crumb," and that night slept "like a log"—in a way that she normally is unable to (58-59). Both women are thrilled with their incipient freedom in large part because they are so thoroughly bored by the idea or the reality of marriage as typically practiced in their society.[7] Appropriately so, as Kate's second fiancé, Walter Wade, has taken a "proprietary interest" in the Cutrer place ever since their engagement, while Edna's husband—a thoroughly assimilated Creole who has

become a near caricature of the American-as-capitalist—clearly views her as property throughout Chopin's novel (38).

Percy might also see an admirable similarity between Edna and Kate in that they are more poignantly aware of their radical incompleteness as individual human beings, whereas Binx is all too apt to assume the God-like posture of the "unmoved mover" (197). What all three are "onto," Percy would say, is that most people around them seem dead, speaking like automatons: trapped amidst mystery-denying business-people, romantic aesthetes, and high-minded moralists, they long for a truer language. Chopin's tendencies in this regard have been identified as a function of her interest in avant-garde French fiction of her day, resulting in the fact that *The Awakening*—which ends with Edna's suicide—is finally less akin to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* than to Camus's *The Stranger*. It anticipates not Anglo-American but rather European modernism of the sort that Percy so clearly appreciated (Bonner 108). In this regard the novel also reflects the distance between Edna and Chopin herself, who was bilingual and schooled by the sisters of France's Society of the Sacred Heart—and whose work finally "transcends national or dominant Anglo-American cultural narratives" in such a way as to complicate the recurrent "American dream" that mere "personal self-satisfaction is what is necessary to constitute a good life" (Papke 82).[8]

Percy would finally see not Chopin but Edna as a romantic trapped in what she ultimately takes to be a harshly naturalistic world: somewhat like Emma Bovary in that regard, but a step closer to self-consciousness. She is trapped between what Binx in *The Moviegoer* calls "English romanticism" and "1930s science," or at least Anglo-American romanticism and 1890s science (88). The same intellectual legacy that kills Binx's father and fuels the angelism-bestialism of the late modern world is in part what drives Edna to suicide: she gradually comes to feel trapped not just by a patriarchal society but by what she sees as a grim Darwinian Nature that allows no room for either a liberating eros or agape—a Nature she initially wishes to embrace, but by which she finally feels entrapped. She can only hopelessly desire to "revolt" against it (995).[9] Of all the people in the world, she thinks as she drowns herself, perhaps only her doctor could have understood her (1000). Perhaps Dr. Percy did.

Both novels are also concerned with Louisiana as a site of extensive role-playing, a theme with broader American implications: America has been seen as a site of self-invention since the colonial era, and Catholicism as a faith that radical Protestant reformers deemed excessively theatrical (and therefore inauthentic). Percy would mine these oddly parallel veins most fully in *Lancelot*, but they are implicit in

The Moviegoer as well. Here Hollywood and Mardi Gras alike render American identities unstable, uncertain; even when Binx indirectly professes faith in Lonnie's bodily resurrection and appears to be a good husband in the epilogue, he might be read as merely playing a role. Given that such questions regarding authenticity are framed in a post-1945 era dominated by screen-projected simulacra, however, Percy seems less readily compared to Chopin than to DeLillo in this regard.

Death on Screen: The Moviegoer *and* White Noise

Don DeLillo grew up in an Italian Catholic immigrant household in the Bronx and graduated from the local Jesuit university, Fordham, in 1958. He has credited his pre-Vatican II childhood faith with shaping his abiding concern with "last things" (qtd. in Passaro). He once corrected Norman Mailer's praise of James Joyce as "Dr. Joyce," stating to a Catholic interviewer: "You and I know that he's a priest"—i.e., Father Joyce ("American Strangeness" 128). Accordingly, when I first read DeLillo's 2003 essay "That Day in Rome," I hoped for some sort of reflection on his religious roots, or—more likely—a cool, comic analysis of Vatican tourism. What I found instead was DeLillo's account of walking a fashionable Roman street in the early 1980s and encountering a famous actress walking toward him. Remembering this moment and trying to remember the name of the actress, DeLillo in turn remembers reading *The Moviegoer*—which won the National Book Award a year after DeLillo published his first short story. Specifically, in remembering his vision of the actress walking down the Via Condotti near the Spanish Steps, DeLillo remembers Binx seeing William Holden walking through the French Quarter near Pirate's Alley, the actor carrying with him an "aura of heightened reality" in contrast to the diminished reality of those around him ("That Day" 76; *Moviegoer* 16).

DeLillo finally remembers the actress: Ursula Andress (perhaps best known for playing the very first Bond girl in *Dr. No*), but it is remembering *The Moviegoer* that has engaged him most. It is perhaps pleasantly surprising that a New Yorker can learn something about moviegoing from a Southerner. But what does it say that a lapsed Italian Catholic from the Bronx finds his experience of Rome shaped by a Southern Catholic convert's account of Hollywood's impact on New Orleans? DeLillo might answer: "The American mystery deepens"—a sentence that comes from his 1985 novel *White Noise*, but also recalls the sentence "The mystery deepens" from *The Moviegoer* (DeLillo 60; Percy 18).[10] This simple sentence sets the tone for much of Percy's novel. It comes as Binx observes lunch hour on Canal Street, a week before Mardi Gras, a beautiful day with a warm wind out of the south:

but "a fog of uneasiness, a thin gas of malaise" has settled on the street (18). The celebrity Holden has just passed, and Binx longs for him to return. Instead he is stuck with an acquaintance named Eddie Lovell, whose eye scans Canal Street like a security camera and sees "No mystery here!" while he holds Binx prisoner in a conversation about financial transfers and flipping houses—a conversation that includes and then quickly glosses over a customer's death (18-21).

This is precisely the kind of conversation that runs throughout *White Noise*, a 1985 novel DeLillo once described thus: "It's about fear, death, and technology. A comedy, of course" (qtd. in Gardner). We could add television, ads, and celebrity to this list of what *White Noise* is "about." DeLillo almost entitled this novel *The American Book of the Dead*, a title that would fit much of *The Moviegoer* quite well. *White Noise* draws directly on cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1973 book *The Denial of Death*, which itself drew heavily on Kierkegaard in its analysis of the way cultures confront—or fail to confront—mortality. Becker had a particular interest in the Nazis; DeLillo's narrator—protagonist in *White Noise*—is accordingly a professor of Hitler Studies, lost watching TV with his family in a 1980s United States that seems very much the "desert of theory and consumption" that Percy warned America was becoming (*Signposts* 314). Accordingly, it has been suggested that DeLillo and Percy together join O'Connor as "rigorous moralists" who bring the tradition of the Desert Fathers of early Christianity to bear on the wasteland of a late modern American culture that is characterized by radical displacement, anxious consumption, and a secret love of death (Giannone 2-3).

Given its setting in the 1980s and its ultimate concern with the proliferation of a drug designed to prevent the fear of death, *White Noise* is perhaps more readily comparable with *The Thanatos Syndrome* than with any other Percy novel (see Desmond, "Technology and the Other"). But re-reading *The Moviegoer* with *White Noise* in mind can reveal how not just "death" generally but Nazism specifically lurks strangely behind the scenes, perhaps most bizarrely when Binx describes his initial behavior in the office with Sharon: he is as "aloof and correct as a Nazi officer in occupied Paris" (67). The fact that Aunt Emily and Binx's father were together in Germany at the time of Hitler's putsch in Munich is mentioned in relation to a photo of the latter (49). Kate compares the dying Lonnie to a Holocaust victim, "one of those wrecks lying on a flatcar at Dachau" (238). Perhaps most intriguing with regard to DeLillo is Binx's strangely evocative connection of media, consumerism, and war in relation to a product developed by a pharmacist in Germany circa 1900:

> Last week, for example, I experienced an accidental repetition. I picked up a German-language periodical in the library. In it I noticed an advertisement for Nivea Creme, showing a woman with a grainy face turned up to the sun. Then I remembered that twenty years ago I saw the same advertisement in a magazine on my father's desk, the same woman, the same grainy face, the same Nivea Creme. The events of the intervening twenty years were neutralized, the thirty million deaths, the countless torturings, uprootings, wanderings to and fro. Nothing of consequence could have happened because Nivea Creme was exactly as it was before. There remained only time itself, like a yard of smooth peanut brittle. (80)

DeLillo would read such a passage with an eye to its emphasis on both the image and the German language itself. In *White Noise*, German features as the language not only of death but also of first feeling, of fundamental experience (i.e., for English speakers, the root of words uttered in visceral pain or joy rather than abstracted meditation). DeLillo might be distinguished from Percy in that, as an Italian cradle Catholic, he seems more attuned to the ways in which contemporary media seem to mirror or echo traditional devotional practices—e.g., images of celebrities on screen replace images of saints on icons or prayer cards; repetitious advertising jingles create a faux-liturgical wall of sound that becomes a source of comfort in itself. But while his approach is different in some respects, DeLillo is finally just as interested as Percy in the essential question, "What is language?" And he frames that question in relation to his Catholic heritage.[11]

In one sense, language appears in *White Noise* as simply the most fundamental strategy that humanity has developed for evading the fear of death. Near the novel's conclusion, the unbelieving narrator Jack Gladney has exhausted a number of such strategies, including common practices of theorizing and consumption but also more radical ones such as committing violence and—alternately—practicing charity toward the wounded. In Gladney's hands, however, even the latter remains merely a strategy: charity is valued simply for the sake of evading the fear of death. This fact is driven home to him by a nun who is also a nurse and who tells him that even she does not believe in God or any afterlife; rather, she says, she appears to do so for the sake of a larger world which, though increasingly secular, would nonetheless collapse from utter despair without the presence of religious believers (316-20). In DeLillo's novel, then, even the apparently purest act of agape seems finally mere play-acting.

One sign of the richness of *The Moviegoer* is that it can in fact be fruitfully compared to *The Awakening* and *White Noise*, two novels that seem as different from one another as can be. But what finally differentiates Percy from Chopin and DeLillo? For one thing, his enduring belief in the efficacy of the sacraments, including the Eucharist, which in the early Church was also simply called agape—the name for a love that is self-giving. DeLillo's novel ends with the suggestion that in contemporary America such love cannot be practiced readily, transparently, or without a hampering self-consciousness. A post-Freudian eros is more evident than any agape, but all love seems overshadowed by death. Thanatos seems to rule the day in a society at once necrophobic and necrophiliac, and the woman who serves as the sole representative of Catholicism in DeLillo's novel gives at best only the most shadowy and dubious of hopes that things could ever be otherwise. Chopin's narrative is perhaps just as grim. After Edna's *eros* is set in motion by her quasi-Eucharistic meal on the island, it leads only to her final request of "fish for dinner"—a meal she will never eat—immediately before she drowns herself (999). Edna, too, finally embraces thanatos, and has no inkling of the real possibility of agape in her world. As Elaine Showalter has noted, she remains utterly oblivious toward those over whom she herself holds power, the lower class "mulatto and black women" who make "her narcissistic existence possible" (qtd. in Delbanco 126). And so Edna ends "in despair at not having found a third way between the alternatives of submission and emulation," the only alternatives that are apparent to her in a world dominated by men "who regard power as the ground of all human relations" (Delbanco 132).

Binx, unlike Edna, finally begins to intuit his own relation to those who traditionally made a "narcissistic" life available to his family: in the novel's final chapter he observes an African-American man enter a Catholic church on Ash Wednesday, a church in which the man perhaps recognizes that "God himself is present" (235). The possibility that the man is merely acting out a role is held before us—though never so blatantly as with DeLillo's nun, and even the possibility that he is acting seems more tantalizing than despair-inducing to Binx. And in *The Moviegoer* as throughout his oeuvre Percy differs from DeLillo in his subtly recurrent emphasis on the Eucharist, which is in turn fundamentally bound up with his view of human beings as ensouled creatures who have received the gift of speech.[12]

The manner in which Percy's active engagement with Catholic theology distinguishes him from Chopin and DeLillo is a huge topic in and of itself. Yet differences among these three authors are finally reflected in terms of genre as well. To quibble with DeLillo: *The Moviegoer* is the only one of these three novels that can properly be called a comedy,

as reflected in its closing emphasis on marriage and resurrection. It undeniably shares some of the darker and broadly existential aspects of the other two novels, showing its acknowledged debt to Camus's *The Stranger* and Sartre's *Nausea*. But as Thomas Merton once wrote, Percy is "one of the most hopeful existentialists I know of," and *The Moviegoer*, accordingly, is finally about "a merry kind of nausea"—and one of the few enduring comedies in an American literature that could arguably use more of them (282).

Conclusion: Many Avenues of Entrance from the Porch

I have suggested how Percy's work might be taught in a course on satire alongside major eighteenth-century authors, or in a broad American literature syllabus that attends in part to questions of religious identity and perhaps to theories of the postsecular. Within the past decade, other scholars have laid invaluable foundations for new readings of Percy in relation to a wide variety of authors from the nineteenth century (and earlier) to the present day. These include established scholars who take Percy's religious commitments seriously, such as Gary Ciuba, Thomas Haddox, Christina Bieber Lake, and John Sykes. Easier to overlook are scholars who have either established vital paradigms for reconsidering Percy's formative era—such as Mark Greif in *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (2016)—or those who have reconsidered Percy himself in relation to his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. These include Vincent Cheng in *Amnesia and the Nation: History, Forgetting, and James Joyce* (2018) and Robert Chodat in *The Matter of High Words: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Postwar Sage* (2017). Together, these three works present innovative readings of literary responses to the social sciences in Percy's mid-century milieu as well as a framework for reconsidering him in relation to Ralph Ellison in particular—and to conceptualizations of race in American culture more generally. Surely, these are vital topics for contemporary courses. As we grow more distant from Percy in time, his avenues of entrance into the English Department only multiply, such that it becomes easier to bring him in from the porch.

Notes

1. See Koupf, and Newkirk.

2. Hoogheem argues that *Lost in the Cosmos* is best understood not as a work of "nonfiction prose," but as a "narrative" shaped by both Percy's Catholic convictions and "the sensibility many recent critics have described as postsecular" (91-92).

3. On the indeterminate genre of *Gulliver's Travels*—which is arguably not a novel and is only in part a parody of travel books such as *Robinson Crusoe*—see, for example Rawson 875, 877.

4. The MLA database currently lists two books, three unpublished dissertations, and no articles treating Percy and Chopin together. One of those books is my *Catholicism and American Borders in the Gothic Literary Imagination*: I have suggested there and elsewhere how Percy, Chopin, Tocqueville, and Edgar Allan Poe can be placed into conversation with one another regarding American individualism, with particular attention to Percy's *Lancelot*.

5. On Percy's reservations regarding "protest" literature see, for example, *Signposts* 171-72. Chopin essentially agreed. Reviewing her contemporary Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols*, she questioned his call for a progressive literature narrowly concerned with contemporary "social environments" and "social problems." In contrast to Garland, she asserted that "Human impulses do not change." This is "why Aeschylus is true, and Shakespeare is true to-day, and why Ibsen will not be true in some remote to-morrow, however forcible and representative he may be for the hour, because he takes for his themes social problems which are by their very nature mutable" (693).

6. New Orleans and its Creole Catholics are far more thoroughly Americanized in Binx's 1950s than in Edna's 1890s. Percy was nonetheless well aware of lingering bias against a Catholicism that seemed too "ethnic" (*Signposts* 307).

7. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" depicts a woman who finds her husband's apparent death to be exhilaratingly liberating, a scenario that Percy in *Lost in the Cosmos* considers altogether understandable: "Frankly, thirty years of Ralph is enough" (61-2).

8. Papke suggests that Chopin saw the limits of just the sort of individualistic romanticism that Giles deems typical of the "Protestant" mainstream of American literature. Edna's reading of Emerson puts her "to sleep as if to indicate that such self-reliance as Emerson trumpets is not for her, his vision of nature and man without a clear meaning for a woman" (82-83).

9. For more on Percy and "angelism-bestialism," see my *Peculiar Crossroads* chapter 3. Lewis P. Simpson, whom Percy admired, praised Chopin's novel in 1975: "The ironic drama of the post-Christian apprehension of the loss of the sense of religious transcendence—and of the compensating search for the Absolute in art . . . entered into Kate Chopin's vision through her reading in various modern writers," including Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer; she confronts Nietzschean insights more fully than did Mark Twain (7-8). On Chopin's critical engagement with Darwin, see Bender and Killeen.

10. DeLillo's pivotal sentence "The American mystery deepens" concludes a short chapter involving an elderly couple lost in "a vast shopping center out by the interstate" (60). The following chapter, which introduces discussion of a drug designed to remove the fear of death, features academic theorists who discuss Elvis Presley, James Dean, and other celebrities. Here the narrator poses a very Percy-like query: "Why is it . . . that decent, well-meaning, and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?" (65).

11. See Hungerford's chapter "The Latin Mass of Language: Vatican II, Media, Don DeLillo" (52-75). Also see Mutter 500-501, which suggests that Percy's notion of language as cooperative "yes-saying," as "intersubjective affirmation," is ultimately shared by DeLillo.

12. See Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, especially pages 11 and 253.

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Symbol, Existence, and the Whole Nine Yards

Stacey E. Ake

I first discovered Walker Percy when I was in grad school. I remember the moment exactly—I was standing in the one aisle of Svoboda's bookstore in State College. It was around two o'clock. The title *Lost in the Cosmos* had caught my eye, and, as I stood there perusing the book, I knew I had found the link between CS Peirce and Søren Kierkegaard that I had been looking for. Callooh! Callay! I had had no idea how to bridge the triadicity and apparent objectivity of Peirce with the subjectivity and call to individuality of Kierkegaard. Even though *Cosmos* is ostensibly a self-help book, it had a lovely digression into semiotics and the revelation of language to Helen Keller. I understood the axis of intersubjectivity immediately. After years of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, the idea of Fourthness—that semiosis occurred between two subjects considering and naming an object—made so much sense: I devoured everything by Percy I could find.

However, unlike Kierkegaard and much like Peirce, Percy's thought was only available in essay format, ranging from discussions on bourbon and what it means to be a Catholic in the South to in-depth looks at Existentialism and Hermeneutics. Just as many Peirce scholars wish fervently that the man had written one large tome instead of a series of essays and monographs—of course, such a tome would be Kantian or Hegelian in volume—Percy scholars wished much the same thing. In *Symbol & Existence: A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature* (2019, Mercer University Press, 271pp.), we find our wish has been fulfilled. The product of the research of Karey Perkins, *Symbol and Existence* is taken from four different manuscripts found in the archives of UNC-Chapel Hill. While the manuscripts seem in the most part to be copies of each other and thus very similar, SE2 (Symbol & Existence 2) was used as the basis for the current book given the completeness of that text.

As a text, *Symbol & Existence* is an overview of Percy's philosophical project, dating originally from the 1950s. However, with his inability to get his philosophical work published (except as stand-alone journal articles) and with the success of his 1960 novel *The Moviegoer*, Percy turned his focus from straight philosophy to fiction. This, of course, is

not an unusual step for an existentialist. Existentialism is a philosophy of and about living one's life, and novels are ways of showing how some people (should) live out their lives. We see such sallies into fiction in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre and, to a certain extent, in Kierkegaard. As anyone who is familiar with the novels knows, Percy's essential question about the nature of the human being as a uniquely languaged and despairing creature haunts all his fictional works.

In *Symbol & Existence* we have an organized explanation of Percy's work. Instead of having to draw inferences from a sentence here, a phrase there, a desultory article, we can read a linear presentation of Percy's thought. Although some of what is being presented in *Symbol & Existence* has been published elsewhere, especially in *The Message in the Bottle*, much of what is in the book is formerly unpublished work. Furthermore, as with any philosopher, previously published work profits from being put into context within the philosopher's own thought.

One thing that is surprising about the book is the relatively few references to Peirce and Kierkegaard. I most associate Percy with these two thinkers. However, what we find in *Symbol & Existence* is the deep and broad intellectual foundation that Percy had for his work. We think of the axis of intersubjectivity as somehow a development of the work of Peirce. In fact, it is taken from Martin Buber's concept of the *I-Thou*.

What is also surprising—but perhaps it should not be? —is how prescient and how relevant Percy's work is for today. Nothing he writes about comes across as dated. I found this oddly comforting. While some of the thinkers he cites are no longer on the tips of our tongues, the ideas Percy developed from them still seem fresh and remain pointed. For instance, Percy was deeply influenced by Susanne Langer's 1951 book *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. In fact, the last part of Percy's Introduction is called "The New Key" wherein he thanks Langer for giving him "the clue." The clue is that there is a literal factual truth (perhaps best explicated by the scientific method) and a symbolic mythical truth. The understanding of this distinction and the fact that this pushes Percy to see the reason behind the failure of scientism as a worldview articulates for him an intuition that he already had. Although she might have planted a seed in Percy's thought, it does not fully germinate until he uses Langer's notion of the denotational aspect of words (the naming of objects) to understand the episode of Helen Keller in the wellhouse and her understanding of the naming of water.

While we perhaps see Heidegger's influence on Percy most saliently in the 1980 novel *The Second Coming*, we find that Heidegger artic-

ulates what Percy feels about the nature of human nature. There is Being, and there are beings. When man loses contact with Being, he will try to find himself in beings, and he will be unsatisfied. We tend to associate Kierkegaard in Percy's work as the source of the emptiness in man, but this idea came to him through Gabriel Marcel, who was another source for Percy's notion of the intersubjective.

With his fluid and peaceful style, it is easy to forget how erudite Percy really is. In order to undertake this work, *Symbol & Existence*, as well as his fiction writing, Percy had to have knowledge of anthropology (Levy-Brühl, Malinowski, and Mead), psychology—whether good or bad (Freud and Skinner, of course), linguistics (Korzybski and Sapir), and philosophy—one is impressed by his use and rejection of Husserl and Cassirer. Of course, there is also his knowledge of science, given his background as a physician, and the depth of his understanding of theology, arising from his well-researched personal beliefs.

What we also see in *Symbol & Existence* is Percy's intent to find a way to "prove" empirically the nature of man by means of his own understanding of semiotics. Unlike his later work, in which he doesn't seem to need to "prove" his ideas about the nature of humanity, here he seems to want to do so. I suspect this is a response to the behaviorists who were riding high in the 1950s. In his later work, he instead leaves his readers with questions. His goal is to leave the reader with an aporia, an aporia that might give rise to doubt about the efficacy of the twentieth- century scientific worldview.

As with much, if not all, of Percy's work, this is a readable and well-documented overview of his philosophy. It is not overly technical, so those people interested in Percy's thought, not just Percy scholars, will enjoy and learn from *Symbol & Existence*. From my perspective, it is a shame this wasn't published sooner. I would have loved to hear a debate between Percy and Noam Chomsky.

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