

Components of Transformation: Exploring Memory, Humility, and Sacrament
To Find Resolution in the Novels of Walker Percy

by

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the nature of protagonistic transformation in the six novels of Walker Percy. Because Percy's works of fiction are so notably open-ended, and because the final spiritual, emotional, and existential condition of the main character so often eludes easy categorization, the task is a tall one, and this perhaps explains why Percy scholars who touch on the subject tend to do so peripherally as a component of a broader analysis. But Percy's writings, both fiction and non-fiction, pointedly confront "the fate of the individual," and thus a closer examination of the topic is overdue. Moreover, by exploring the transformations of Percy's protagonists, we cultivate a greater understanding of these novels' enigmatic endings and a deeper sense of their meanings as a whole.

During my research, it became evident that temporal and thematic frameworks guide each of Percy's main characters in their transformations. The temporal contains three distinct phases for the protagonist. The first is a kind of oblivious existence in which he merely goes through the motions of his life unaware of the possibility of finding import beyond the superficial or material. Next, after being unexpectedly jolted out of his existential languor, the protagonist confronts an unsustainable but critical period of seeking or wandering, a search for meaning which results in the collection of knowledge and experience. The final phase marks the transition into a new life of spiritual awareness, and even if this change is inchoate and hardly perceptible by the final page, it completes the transformation of the character within the confines of the text.

The thematic framework is tripartite as well—although the components occur in no particular sequence in the novels. One component is *memory*: the protagonist must confront a troubling or even previously unknown element of his past in order to move beyond its limitations

into a new life absent the crippling burden of his personal history. Another is *humility*, namely in the sense that he must learn to put others or God before himself; he must abandon the solipsistic outlook that has characterized his existence heretofore. The final element is *sacrament*, which performs its greatest role at the end of the novel, serving to seal the transformation of the protagonist into a new understanding of his life and the world around him. In the chapters that follow, I apply the temporal and thematic frameworks to each of Percy's novels chronologically, proceeding in this order: *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).

What we ultimately discover about Binx Bolling, Will Barrett, Tom More, and Lancelot Lamar is that they are more dynamic characters than is often presumed and, further, that these novels are more resolved than they are generally given credit for being. (Percy's two sequels account for there being only four total protagonists.) Of course, endings are only beginnings in Percy's fiction, but while we leave these characters at a point of uncertainty at the end of each text, they are undoubtedly better equipped to lead fulfilling, purposeful, *spiritual* lives, as will be shown. Transformation occurs in these novels, even if ambiguously on the surface, and this capacity for change renders the prevailing sentiment of the books undeniably optimistic, at least in this reader's eyes. And if we look closely enough, we may at least approach the mystery at the heart of Percy's fiction that, as his characters also discover, remains necessarily just beyond our reach.

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It's a long way away, even from Chattanooga, in the middle of woods, on top of a bastion of mountains crenelated with blue coves. It is so beautiful that people who have once been there always, one way or another, come back. For such as can detect apple green in an evening sky, it is Arcadia—not the one that never used to be, but the one that many people always live in; only this one can be shared.

William Alexander Percy
"Sewanee," *Lanterns on the Levee*

For my parents, Andy and Tippy

Introduction

At the end of Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*, Will Barrett asks Sutter Vaught about the scene they have just witnessed, one in which Sutter's brother, Jamie, received the rites of baptism at the hospital in Santa Fe just moments before his death. For Will, the event is shrouded in mystery. The gruesome physicality of Jamie's premature end combined with the elusively metaphysical nature of the boy's religious conversion leaves Will contemplating the meaning behind the experience. Once outside the hospital, he chases down Sutter's car in the dusty street and asks simply, "What happened back there?"

More than a few readers of Percy have likely asked that same question upon completing one of his novels. Nothing if not dynamic, Percy's works of fiction are dense, complex, and notably open-ended, as engagingly thought provoking as they can be frustrating to those not familiar with his style and techniques. The conclusions of his novels, in particular, carry the power both to astound and confound, sometimes leaving the reader, like Will Barrett, to wonder what *has* happened back there. And although articulating a precise explanation may prove difficult, the answer also is, undoubtedly, that *something* has happened.

Percy was something of a polymath, and, consequently, the scholarship surrounding his work often takes many forms. As a medical doctor turned novelist, he possessed wide-ranging professional interests, but he also read broadly in his free time and maintained a respectable interest in current events. Besides his six novels, he penned essays on a variety of topics—from bourbon to semiotics—and published a final non-fiction work, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, about humankind's existential predicament. Thus, some critics have devoted themselves primarily to Percy's theory of language, others to his existentialist philosophical musings, and still others to his Catholicism—not to mention those interested in Percy as an

authority on Southern life and culture. But then there are those who study him first as a novelist, and—to borrow a phrasing from Walker’s second cousin and adoptive father, William Alexander Percy, in his Foreward to *Lanterns on the Levee*—“of them am I.” The aforementioned critical categories are not meant to be exhaustive or even exclusive; overlap is inevitable, as this document will illustrate. But I make the distinction to indicate that the primary interest of this project, while drawing on many aspects of the man’s work and interests, will be Walker Percy as a writer of fiction.

Critical studies of Percy’s novelistic oeuvre are similarly diverse, focusing on such elements as the role of his female characters and his use of sacramental imagery. Among the most comprehensive examinations, John Edward Hardy’s *The Fiction of Walker Percy* takes a detailed look at the books as “fictivist fiction,” analyzing the plot and characters without a specialized critical framework such as Marxist theory (10). Gary Ciuba’s *Walker Percy: Books of Revelation* considers the significance of “personal apocalypse” in the lives of the protagonists. And John Desmond, in *Walker Percy’s Search for Community*, builds on ideas from Percy’s non-fiction to explore the role that community-seeking and community-building assumed not just in the author’s novels but in his own life as well. These works proved remarkably useful to me in forming my own understanding of Percy’s fictional landscape.

But one underexamined feature of Percy’s fiction has to be the nature of protagonistic transformation. Critics have certainly considered and written intelligently on the topic, but most often they approach it peripherally as a component of a larger study. A comprehensive exploration of how Percy’s protagonists achieve transformation by novel’s end feels overdue; in fact, one might wonder why one has taken so long to appear given the author’s interest in the fate of the individual in his fiction and non-fiction writings. If the reader cannot make sense of what

has happened to the protagonist by the end of one of Percy's novels, can he really make much sense of what has happened in the work as a whole?

This project began as an attempt to discover, like Will Barrett, *what happened back there* in Percy's six books of fiction, and particularly to discover meaning in Percy's notably indeterminate endings. About these, Hardy has written that they "all...are to some extent 'open-ended,'" even calling them "characteristically enigmatic" (175, 269). Others have referred to them as ambiguous, ambivalent, tenuous, puzzling. I also wanted to know what the future might look like for Percy's characters after their on-page existences had concluded, undeterred by Hardy's assertion that "strictly speaking, fictional characters have no future" (97). Will (*would*) these men and women live happy, successful lives, or will they continue to suffer many of the problems that they face in the novels proper? It is difficult, I think, to read Percy's fiction without sensing at least *some degree* of optimism for the hypothetical future existence of the major characters, even if their happiness might be temporary or short-lived. Of course, the presence of two sequels in Percy's body of work reveals the need to say more about these characters' experiences, and the reader learns that life has not always been perfect or easy for Will Barrett and Tom More. In an e-mail exchange, Percy biographer Jay Tolson—who formerly taught at the independent school where I presently teach in Bethesda, Maryland—quipped that such a future would probably just entail "a lot of new apps being used by the same old screwed-up creatures." Perhaps he is onto something.

At some point in the process of researching, however, it became clear to me that the key to understanding the endings of Percy's fiction rested in discerning what ultimately happens to his protagonists. Percy's main characters are all dynamic in the sense that they undergo some important change during the course of the novel, and exploring the nature of that

transformation—by what means is it attained, is there a typical process involved, what is the ultimate result?—felt essential to finding meaning in each work as a whole. While these transformations occur gradually and incrementally in most cases, they are all spiritual in character—at least vaguely, if not explicitly, so. Of course, if interviewed about it, each of Percy's protagonists would likely deny this claim, and several of them, in fact, profess to being unsure of what they believe at the novel's close. Yet a deeper look indicates the start of something, the pulling of a thread, indicative of an inchoate spiritual awakening. I propose to do what Percy's characters themselves are so wont to do: poke around the neighborhood a bit, search for signs and clues—now that I have seen the footprint on the beach.

The Percyan spiritual transformation occurs in three phases, which can be summarized by Lance Lamar's words to Father John in *Lancelot*: “there are three worlds, the old dead past world, the hopeless screwed-up now world, and the unknown world of the future” (63). This might also be said to be the structure of most novels of transformation, but Percy's has a distinctive flavor. The old world, usually one of oblivious existence for the protagonist, is one in which he merely goes through the motions of life without attaching deeper meaning or significance to it. Unsatisfying relationships with women are a hallmark, either in the form of failed marriages or spiritless womanizing. Suddenly and by chance, a memory from the past or an unexpected occurrence jolts the protagonist out of his existential languor and allows him to notice the physical world around him, even the minute items he frequently takes for granted, like the objects on Binx Bolling's bureau. Then follows a period of unsustainable wandering, a search or quest for understanding, in which the hero collects the knowledge and experience he will need to advance to the final stage of his transformation; it is liminal because the protagonist exists at the threshold of discovery. The final phase is always just underway at the conclusion of

the novel, and although it completes the transformation of the character within the confines of the text, the end is generally just a beginning in Percy's fiction, hence the temptation to say more.

That the protagonists' new lives, their transformed selves, are necessarily incipient makes for much of the interest in their hypothetical future existence, which is of course unknowable. They inhabit different places along what we might call the spectrum of stability, which is to say that some characters possess a more favorable chance of finding lasting fulfillment in their lives. Will Barrett, although not yet married to Allie Huger at the end of *The Second Coming*, appears poised to live long and prosper in his new relationship of love and mutual dependence. Conversely, a character such as Lancelot Lamar, lighting out for the Shenandoah Valley to start his new world order—possibly but not definitely with Anna and his daughter Siobhan—and not any more identifiably sane than at the beginning of the novel, seems destined to fail under most circumstances. Only intervention by Father John—which is presented as a real possibility at novel's end—can likely save him. But even despite these variations in the characters' conditions at the end of their respective stories, three elements play a crucial role in helping them achieve their transformations. These requisites, the three components of Percyan transformation, are memory, humility, and sacrament.

Instances of significant loss and recovery of memory pervade Percy's fiction and could comprise a separate large-scale study of the author's work. This project's interest in the subject mostly relates to it in the context of characters' remembrances of the past, particularly in their need to confront and overcome a troubling moment, to step out of the shadows of the past or overcome the burden of it, so to speak. The character must return to an apparently troubling personal memory in order to know it fully and learn from it. On a few occasions, however, the

role of memory is relational. For instance, the stories of the past that Binx Bolling hears from his mother at the family fishing camp—about his father’s life and eventual death during World War II in “the wine dark sea” off of Crete—are her memories, but they provide Binx the knowledge he needs to make important future choices about his own life. Further, in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, it is Father Smith, not Tom More, who must confront—“confess,” in this case—the past, but as with Binx, the story gives Tom access to the knowledge he needs to proceed in his spiritual journey. (This is not to mention the seeming conflation of consciences that takes place between Tom and the priest.) In any case, re-experiencing the past in order to transcend its influence is a necessary action in achieving the Percyan transformation.

Humility registers as another important component of change in Percy’s fiction because it opposes the protagonists’ natural tendency toward solipsism. This virtue surfaces occasionally as the hero’s learning to put others before himself, such as Binx Bolling in his decision to marry Kate and go to medical school at the end of *The Moviegoer*, but it most frequently involves a newfound openness to receiving help from others. Characters like Tom More and Will Barrett serve as notable practitioners of this form of humility because they must recognize that they cannot solve all of life’s problems on their own and that they cannot always control the world around them. Lance Lamar, vain and out of touch with the world, would seem to lack this particular trait, and for much of *Lancelot* he does, but his experience with Father John in the book’s final pages leaves open the possibility that he will listen to the priest and heed his words. And, if nothing else, Father John models the example of humility in his returning to work and service at the small parish in Alabama. Perhaps unsurprisingly, select priests—often the most unexpected of the clergy—demonstrate a lack of pride most supremely; for example, Val Vaught and Father Smith, highly conscious of their own flawed natures, are able to ask others to pray for

them, acknowledging their imperfect ways and inability to improve themselves by their own efforts alone. As their actions illustrate, and as Percy's other characters learn, transformation requires the help of others and a willingness to reject tempting notions of self-absorption.

Signs of the seven Catholic sacraments permeate Percy's fiction, so much to the extent that Allen Prigden penned *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes: The Search in the Desert* about their influence in the Will Barrett and Tom More novels. Of these seven sacraments—which include baptism, Eucharist, penance and reconciliation (an aspect of which includes the practice of confession), confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and anointing the sick—some appear more frequently than others, but the only one I have not found present at least to some degree in the author's fiction is confirmation. As Desmond notes, Percy, in following the Catholic church's teachings, believed that sacraments are a sign of God's divine presence in the human world, “the signs of spirit-in-matter, Word-in-flesh, since the mysterious action of grace is signified through material objects” (85). The mention or practice of sacrament may take place at any point in the novel, but most important for this study is their role at the book's conclusion, when the protagonist reaches the third phase of his spiritual journey and achieves transformation. The presence of sacrament secures and affirms this transformation as a kind of final rite in the process. Percy utilizes marriage most frequently, as this sacrament either occurs, promises to occur, or is reaffirmed at the end of four of his six novels: *The Moviegoer*, *Love in the Ruins*, *The Second Coming*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. I do not include *The Last Gentleman* in this grouping because, as will be explained, Will's relationship with Kitty does *not* seem likely to result in marriage after he returns from Santa Fe, and, further, because the sacrament that seals Will's transformation is the baptism he witnesses in Jamie's hospital room. Nor do I include *Lancelot* because Lance's relationship with Anna—though possibly one to include marriage

eventually—does not seem likely to reach that end. (Even if she does accompany him to the Shenandoah Valley, the Christian notion of marriage is not of stated interest to him.) In Percy's fiction, marriage represents more than an achievement of social harmony, as it might if Percy were writing solely with the traditional comedic genre in mind. It also represents a union in which, as the evangelist Matthew writes, the individuals involved "are no more twain, but one flesh" (King James Version, Matt. 19.6)—that is to say, the marriage is sanctified, holy. When Binx and Kate marry at the end of *The Moviegoer*, their wedding is not merely the logical culmination of a mid-twentieth century American relationship. It is more profound, a sign of God's presence in their lives, and thus not as easy to dismiss as some critics would have it. Given the significance of the sacraments in Percy's Catholic faith, it should be no surprise that they serve a culminating role in the major characters' transformations in his novels.

By understanding how these three components of transformation effect change in the lives of the protagonists, the reader will see more clearly that transformation has, indeed, occurred by novel's close, and that perhaps Percy's indeterminate and enigmatic endings are more resolved than they are often supposed to be. Of course, in looking at transformation in the context of each novel as a whole, I do not focus exclusively on these elements, but they nevertheless form a basis for understanding the change that occurs within the three-phased framework. This project is necessarily something of a close reading of Percy's novels, and if I offer tangential analysis in places, I hope the reader will not find it gratuitous. Because the endings of Percy's novels are actually beginnings in the lives of his protagonists, it would be impossible to attain closure in the strict sense of the word upon completing one of his works. But in recognizing and comprehending something of an answer to Will's question to Sutter,

“What happened back there?” we move ever-closer to tapping the mystery that lies at the heart of Percy’s fiction.

The Moviegoer

To describe Percy's first published novel as great or even extraordinary might border on understatement. After all, not many such works of fiction have won for their authors a National Book Award, as *The Moviegoer* did for Percy in 1962. True, he had written two novels previously that failed to find publishers—*The Charterhouse* and *The Gramercy Winner*—but Percy's first offering to reach the national public launched him into literary prominence and jumpstarted a career as a novelist and public figure that would span almost three more decades. Twenty-five years after its initial publication, scholar and critic Harold Bloom called *The Moviegoer* "a permanent American book" (3), thus grouping it with other celebrated works in the national literary canon. Evidently, Percy's story of a young stockbroker living in New Orleans has resonated with more than a few of its readers.

John Bickerson "Binx" Bolling leads a comfortable life in a clean, middle-class suburb of New Orleans called Gentilly. Although he has family in the Garden District—Aunt Emily (really his deceased father's aunt); her husband, Uncle Jules; and Binx's step-cousin, Kate—he chooses what he calls his "exile in Gentilly" (18) to unburden himself of responsibilities to family and his memory of the past. He essentially lives in timeless obscurity, free to enjoy whatever pleasures he desires—most preferably, it would seem, attending movies and dallying with his secretaries. But while Binx remains friendly and affable enough, a decent citizen, neighbor, and employee, it becomes clear that he not only lacks purpose in his life but is also dangerously self-absorbed. Subconsciously aware of the deeper dissatisfaction caused by his shortcomings, Binx embarks on a search for meaning that eventually allows him to learn from his past through a trip to his family's fishing camp on the Gulf of Mexico and to put his selfishness aside in order to help others, notably Kate, who suffers from anxiety and exhibits

possible suicidal tendencies. Their eventual marriage, revealed in the novel's epilogue, secures Binx's transformation as a spiritual one; it simultaneously adds purpose to his life and combats his solipsism. That he decides to commit fully to Kate on Ash Wednesday, even though he does not attend church to receive the ashes himself, symbolically underscores his movement from one phase of life into another, as he leaves the frivolity of the Carnival season behind to enter a time of Lenten penance which eventually leads to renewal and reconciliation. Although Binx claims to be suspicious of the word "religion" by the novel's close, he has clearly discovered something personally significant through his search—even if he cannot or will not name it—that has effected nothing less than a spiritual transformation and a restoration of his life's purpose through faith.

While Percy and his editors separated the book into six major "parts" (five sections plus an epilogue), many critics have noted the tripartite temporal structure of *The Moviegoer's* plot. Prior to Ciuba's recognition of revelations and apocalyptic moments that usher Binx into each new stage, Martin Luschei utilized a framework of three phases in his analysis: the "*thesis* antedating the book's action...the *antithesis* [which includes]...his present exile in Gentilly...[and the] *synthesis* phase, scarcely under way at the novel's end" (66). His focus on the novel's Kierkegaardian influences links him with Lewis Lawson, whose essay "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" also explores the book's debt to the Danish philosopher. While the two arrive at different conclusions about Binx's final place in Kierkegaard's model of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of existence, they recognize similar moments of transition for the protagonist. Plenty of others also weigh in on this structure in their examinations of the novel.

Thus, recognition of Percy's tripartite structure is hardly new, especially in *The Moviegoer*. Yet, a closer look at the first two phases of Binx's development will allow us to perceive more clearly just how Binx reaches the third and achieves transformation. As noted in this project's Introduction, a chance event or chance occurrence inevitably marks the end of the first phase and beginning of the second for Percy's protagonists. In Binx's case, he simply awakens on the Wednesday of the novel's opening with a newfound awareness of the world around him. He tells the reader in his first-person narration, "But things have suddenly changed. My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search" (10). Some may call Binx's heightened consciousness a product of grace, and perhaps it is on a certain level, but on the aesthetic plane, it registers as a chance event that moves the novel forward immediately and propels Binx into a new stage of his development. As he begins to collect his belongings from his bureau that morning, he thinks, "[the items] looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues....What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them"—they were no longer "as invisible as [my] own hand" (11). The randomness of this sudden awareness emphasizes the tenuous nature of the transition between the protagonist's stages of growth, but Binx's description of the event also gives insight into nature of his predicament before he embarks on his present search.

Years before, in 1951, Binx had experienced a similar moment of heightened awareness as he lay wounded underneath a chindolea bush while fighting in the Korean War. In the same way that the items on his bureau become real to him on this Wednesday morning—or at least *visible* to him, capable of being noticed and not unconsciously passed over in the everyday routine of life—he could also focus clearly upon his immediate surroundings in the aftermath of his injury in Korea. Just after taking a bullet to the shoulder, Binx noticed a dung beetle poking

through the leaves and “vowed that if [he] ever got out of this fix, [he] would pursue the search” (11), a quest for meaning which he describes as “what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life” (13). Yet once he returned home from the war, he admits, “I forgot all about it” (11).

Significantly, the search can only occur under such conditions of heightened awareness, when one can escape being “sunk in the everydayness of his own life.” That the idea of it only returns to Binx again on this Wednesday morning years later means that the everydayness is his regular default setting, just as it is for the other characters in the novel who do not pursue the search themselves. Further, his use of the word “sunk” implies being mired or stuck, not being willing or able to advance oneself to a position of higher ground (or, as Binx has begun to intuit, toward greater spiritual understanding). Like the dung beetle scratching under leaves, those sunk in the everydayness may not register problems with their existence and surroundings, they may even feel content with their lives, but they remain oblivious to higher calling and possibility. The reader sees manifestations of this type most clearly in characters like Uncle Jules, a pleasant and generous individual who resides fully in “the City of Man” (31) by having achieved great worldly successes, as well as Nell Lovell, who explains to Binx at one point that she and her husband, Eddie, “have re-examined our values and found them pretty darn enduring. We discovered that we both have the same life goal....To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off” (101). Before Nell tells him this, Binx had recalled that “all the friendly and likable people seem dead to me” (100), and as he departs from this particular encounter with Nell, he wonders at her affable contentment, explaining, “We part laughing and dead” (102). Jules and Nell enjoy constructive lives as good citizens, lives that

seem objectively “good,” but they ultimately lack a quality that Binx sees as essential to a fulfilled human experience.

While the connection between the dung beetle and the deathlike quality of the everydayness may at first seem abstruse, Binx later clarifies the affiliation in one of his more impressive rants, asserting on his thirtieth birthday—which occurs on Ash Wednesday and exactly a week after his initial epiphany—that he lives in “the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead” (228). If one’s existence under the conditions of everydayness, however pleasant, can be reduced to the unconscious and unthinking actions of a dung beetle—an organism that behaves as it does simply in order to satisfy survival requirements and is unconscious of its doing so—then Binx’s need to move beyond this state toward greater human awareness suddenly becomes explicit and urgent. The significance of the novel’s Kierkegaardian epigraph comes into clearer focus as well. It reads, “...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.” Binx’s search gives him the opportunity to move beyond spiritual torpor towards the possibility of metaphysical awareness and enlightenment that is patently human in its opportunity.

To some extent, then, it is a coup for Binx that he accepts Wednesday’s newfound awareness, which is a gift of chance, and runs with it. Its very tenuousness implies a need for receptivity on the part of the character in question, a condition which relies on a certain degree of chance as well. In Percy’s novels, the reader generally encounters the protagonists at the precise moment of receptivity or willingness to advance in his spiritual development, but the character’s

arrival at this intersection is, of course, a necessity. (Quite obviously, *The Moviegoer* would not be a very interesting book if Binx forgot about his search on Thursday and returned to an oblivious existence of seeing movies and selling stocks and bonds for the duration of the story. In fact, it would not be a book at all.) But Percy also emphasizes from the beginning the difficulty not just of initiating the search but of finding lasting meaning in the process, using Binx's moviegoing as a means of illustrating the idea.

Within the first few pages of the novel, Binx mentions a movie he saw recently in which a man suffers from, presumably, a head injury, and then develops amnesia. The man forgets about his life before the accident—his family, his friends—and must make a “fresh start....[Yet] in no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian” (4-5). Several pages later, Binx returns to the movie's premise and relates it to his current search:

The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place—but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead. (13)

Binx has already described that search as “what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life” (13). Accordingly, the danger that this example illustrates is that a seeker may—and often will—quite easily return to the regularity of his former life once his circumstances become more or less normal again. Perhaps this notion explains in part why Percy wrote two sequels: to explore what might happen in such a case. But for the time, he has

established the pre- and post-transformation obstacles Binx may eventually face now that he has become aware of the possibility of the search.

Interestingly, this particular cinematic anecdote helps explain one likely reason for the so-called “open-ended” conclusions to Percy’s novels: most neatly-packaged Hollywood movie endings simply aren’t realistic. But because movies offer a chance for the *extra*-ordinary to occur, Percy uses them to illustrate Binx’s defective thinking during the initial part of his search, such as when he makes eye contact with a woman on the bus and thinks, “If [this] were a movie....The bus would get lost or the city would be bombed and she and I would tend to the wounded” (13). Of course, this hypothetical situation serves physical desire rather than desire for spiritual understanding, and therefore Binx’s judgment shows serious flaws. But Binx’s defective thinking aside, moviegoing also represents an escape from the tedium of everyday reality for Binx, with his own role-playing—his assuming the affect of the screen personas of actors such as William Holden, Rory Calhoun, and others—depriving him of a wholly authentic existence, a persona all his own, until the very end of the novel. Binx’s declaration that “the movies are onto the search, but they screw it up” provides a clue into the nature of his search. The type of movie ending Binx has in mind reeks of Hollywood cliché and mass appeal to sentimentality, which, as many of Percy’s non-fiction writings attest to, the author had little time for. Just like role-playing in the movies (and Binx’s appropriation of certain characters’ roles), Binx’s wished-for ending with the girl on the bus is archetypal, clichéd by definition, and thus something Percy eagerly wished to avoid.

The second stage of development that Binx enters into is, indeed, an “urgent” one, as Ciuba notes (64), and one of liminality, marked by transition towards his ultimate transformation. It is an unsustainable period during which the protagonist’s fate remains to some

degree in doubt, and it lasts for seven days in Binx's case. Yet rather than requiring chance alone, as the movement from first to second phase did, Binx's progression into the final stage requires an additional receptiveness and decisiveness that are made possible by the earlier chance events. Binx must be willing to accept the type of information Percy, in *The Message in the Bottle*, calls "news"—as distinguished from "knowledge." In the context of Percy's argument, "news" is defined as "synthetic [information] expressing a contingent and nonrecurring event or state of affairs...which is particularly relevant to the concrete predicament of the hearer of the news." Knowledge, on the other hand, refers to that "which can be arrived at by anyone and at any time" (125-126). The former is personalized for the receiver while the latter is impersonal and accessible to all. Desmond elaborates on this concept in explaining that "news can take the form of knowledge of the world or knowledge of the transcendent" (34), both varieties of which Binx must remain attuned to in order to successfully carry out his search.

For instance, during Binx's attempt to seduce his secretary, Sharon, he experiences an opportunity in which he must be willing to act receptively to the news being offered, even if it arrives unexpectedly. Binx and Sharon have taken a trip to the Gulf Coast in Binx's red MG convertible, a vehicle which, as Binx tells us, has "not a single virtue save one: it is immune to the malaise" (122). For Percy's protagonist, the malaise is "the pain of loss" (120), the combined feeling of despair, loneliness, and awkwardness that he could avoid were he able to operate at all times like a movie character who says and does the right things at just the right moments. Yet, on a deeper level, the malaise is a human emotion, more like an existential awareness or perhaps even the beginnings of a spiritual awakening (though Binx wrongly associates it with a lack of manly, movie-star-esque suaveness), and to do away with it entirely would be akin to living like the unconscious dung beetle. (No wonder, then, that Binx describes

the malaise-free MG as a “bright little beetle” (122).) The malaise may be a feeling of dread, but Binx must combat it with something other than the physically-stimulating diversions his secretaries and the movies offer.

After an enjoyable day of swimming, Binx takes Sharon to his mother’s fishing camp at nearby Bayou des Allemands. Quite clearly, his intent is amatory, and Sharon herself acts affectionately towards Binx as they approach, nuzzling her head into his neck. The reader perceives that Binx has used this strategy before. But once they arrive, chance intervenes; Binx finds his mother and the rest of the Smiths (Binx’s younger step-brothers and -sisters through his mother’s remarriage after Binx’s father’s death), which quashes the possibility of a sexual encounter. Because succumbing to desire represents for Binx a reversion back into his former self at the first stage of his development, the Smiths’ presence is actually fortunate. Yet the peril hasn’t subsided; in order for Binx to gain from this event and avoid spiritual regression, he must be receptive to the possibility of news (worldly or transcendent), which crucially arrives in the form of his paraplegic half-brother, Lonnie.

Although Lonnie languishes from a terminal neurological disorder (most likely cerebral palsy), he enjoys the kind of robust spiritual life that Binx subconsciously longs for. As Ciuba writes, “[Lonnie] suffers from a malady but not from the malaise” (76). Both Ciuba and Desmond effectively establish Lonnie’s transcendent influence on Binx (the former stresses his leading Binx towards apocalyptic enlightenment while the latter sees him as helping Binx join a spiritual community), but the evidence to support this position can be distilled into one singular proof—through a very telling sign Percy leaves for the reader. I refer here to a particular observation of Binx’s, and while both scholars cite this passage, it is more compelling than either seems to make it. One of Percy’s greatest concerns, which he addresses more pointedly in later

novels like *The Second Coming*, was the “devaluation of language,” particularly in “the old words of grace [which] are worn smooth as poker chips” (*The Message in the Bottle* 116). In speaking with Lonnie, however, Binx discerns that “his words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall” (162). Because Lonnie is immune to the clichés and failures of language through the sincerity and urgency his words command, he speaks an extraordinary kind of truth, a form that Binx, even if he is unwilling to admit it, knows to be spiritually profound. The boy’s exclamations of love and his humbleness in offering his communion for Binx provide the older step-brother a model for how he might live his own life. Lonnie’s words count as “news,” the Good News, which Percy spoke of and differentiated from impersonal “knowledge.” By acknowledging the freshness of Lonnie’s message, Binx implicitly accepts it in a way that he cannot accept the “dead” language of characters like Nell Lovell, with its hackneyed phrases and unthinking acceptance of mass cultural values. The Smiths’ chance presence at the fishing camp saves Binx from regressing towards an existence of purely physical desires, a seeming inevitability had they, and especially Lonnie, not made the trip to Bayou des Allemands.

Another transformative moment in the interlude at the fishing camp occurs on Sunday morning during a conversation between Binx and his mother. As they talk alone on a dock that juts out into the marsh, their conversation eventually turns to Binx’s father, who had died when his plane crashed into the Mediterranean Sea in the early stages of World War II. Apparently, the elder Bolling had experienced disenchantment with life not dissimilar to what Binx himself undergoes. The son clearly yearns to know more, having mused earlier in the novel, “Any doings of my father, even his signature, is in the nature of a clue in my search” (71). Yet if he learns anything about his father during this episode, it is of their differences more than their similarities. Binx’s wry, ironic outlook contrasts with his father’s Stoic view of life, which was

at once romantic and self-destructing. The elder Bolling could not stand the everydayness of life because ordinary acts, like eating a meal, “[were] not—*important* enough,” as Binx’s mother relates. “You see, with your father, everything, every second had to be—.....I don’t know. Something” (153). The father’s solution to his problem was to withdraw from the world and make an exit in the old-fashioned honorable way, “carry[ing] off the grandest coup of all: to die.” He joined the Canadian Royal Air Force before America committed to entering World War II and got shot down over Crete “in the wine dark sea” with a copy of Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* in his pocket (157). Binx, of course, is looking for solutions to his own difficulties, and although he at first believes that learning about his father’s life might provide viable options for him to pursue, he soon recognizes that their differences preclude his following in the old man’s footsteps. After all, his father’s death wish in entering the war was never something for which Binx himself has yearned. Although Binx hasn’t discovered what he hopes his search will eventually reveal by the time he leaves the fishing camp to return to New Orleans, he does know that his father’s example does not provide the answer for him—and that, if anything, it is Lonnie’s life that might most accurately offer what he is looking for.

When Binx arrives back in New Orleans, he finds Aunt Emily making plans for Kate to see a renowned psychiatrist in New York. According to Emily, Kate, who suffers from attacks of anxiety and likely depression, endangered her life the evening prior by intentionally overdosing on her medication—though it’s worth noting that Kate denies that she wished to harm herself. Regardless, she has been a source of worry for Emily recently, and the aunt informs Binx that she is entrusting him to transport Kate to see this acclaimed doctor. Rather than following through with these plans, however, Binx is convinced by Kate to travel to Chicago together instead, taking the train to Binx’s business convention that same evening

without informing Aunt Emily. While Binx disappoints and outrages Aunt Emily through his self-absorbed absentmindedness in dismissing her plans for Kate, he does gain an important insight: he begins to see how a relationship with Kate can be a solution to life's difficulties for the both of them.

Although Binx's step-cousin has her troubles, she is the only female character in the book—besides Aunt Emily—who can contend with Binx on an intellectual level. The secretaries of whom he is so fond cannot or would not understand his existential philosophizing, and, further, his relationships with them are based on his own role-playing—that is, Binx's channeling of the on-screen personas of famous male actors like Marlon Brando to woo and win the girls over. But with Kate, he does not need to role-play; he can be Binx Bolling. Further, she can be straightforward with him and can criticize his solipsistic nature. At one point on the train, she identifies his greatest flaw, calling him, "the most self-centered person alive" (197). Some readers have described the couple's eventual marriage as an act of one-sided charity on Binx's part, claiming that he still plays a role—this time, the role of parent—by telling her what to do and when to do it, with Kate obediently following his instructions. And while it is true that part of their relationship is based on these types of interactions, Kate ultimately needs help from someone who genuinely cares, and Binx finds a sense of purpose in helping her. But a one-sided depiction of their relationship reflects a limited understanding of what she offers him. For one, that Binx, who has been helplessly self-absorbed for the entire novel, willingly puts another person's interests before his own serves as the necessary act of humility that will allow him to achieve his spiritual transformation. His eventual marriage to her forces him, more than any union with one of his secretaries could, to commit to caring for someone who needs his assistance, but she also provides an intellectual stimulation and a humbling candor that

apparently no other woman in New Orleans can offer. Issues concerning Percy's well-chronicled dearth of strong female characters aside, I find it impossible to discount Kate's unique contributions to their relationship.

During their time on the train to Chicago, Binx and Kate begin to view marriage as a real possibility—not just something they haphazardly propose as a possibility for the future. Kate parses out the logistics of their everyday living, telling Binx, “I don't know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me. Now if I marry you, will you tell me: Kate, this morning do such and such, and if we have to go to a party, will you tell me: Kate, stand right there and have three drinks and talk to so and so? Will you?” (197). As noted previously, this plan—though on the surface helplessly unsustainable and impractical—could actually work because it offers each party something of significant import. Kate does not venture to explain the transaction's benefits for Binx, but they both seem to understand the advantages it offers to this previously aimless, purposeless young man who has recently embarked on a quest for meaning in his life.

Nevertheless, their relationship has room to grow, as the nearly unsuccessful attempt to make love in the train's roomette illustrates. Kate views their tryst as a ploy to overcome her returning anxiety, sex as the solution to her problem, while Binx later wishes he could have acted in one of two ways: either virtuously tucking her in to bed and retiring to another room or performing the deed ably and vigorously, as he imagines the hero of a novel would do it. Instead, Binx explains, “No, Rory, I did neither. We did neither. We did very badly and almost did not do at all” (200). Binx is still stuck in the realm of role-playing, explaining his misgivings about the situation in an apostrophe to the actor Rory Calhoun, but he does seem to recognize the limits of sex as a salvific agent—it is not the be-all, end-all that he Kate seem to think it might be

for them. And that Binx frames his explanation as a confession—even if to a movie star—is both telling and hopeful, showing humility by laying himself low while invoking the associated sacrament of penance and reconciliation. He even hints at the Christian theology that will attend their eventual marriage when he confesses, “The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, *neither hallowed by sacrament* nor despised by spirit...quails and fails” [emphasis mine] (200). Although both Kate and Binx must learn and grow from the experience, their mutual recognition that sex cannot be “the last and only hope”—that something greater remains—is a promising discovery for their future prospects together.

The two return to New Orleans late on Tuesday night, long after the final parades of Mardi Gras have ended, but the next morning is an even more significant occasion: it is Binx’s thirtieth birthday—the day upon which he is scheduled to meet with Aunt Emily to announce a plan for his future—as well as Ash Wednesday, which ushers in the season of Lent in the Christian liturgical calendar. Predictably, when Binx and Emily convene, she reproves him searingly in her oft-cited Stoic diatribe, accusing him of taking advantage of Kate and abusing the family’s trust. She has much to say, but most importantly, her “dressing down” serves as another humbling experience for Binx and another opportunity to address the problem of his self-centeredness. And although he leaves the encounter with Emily in despair and certain that Kate plans to break their engagement, he will, in fact, soon be rescued by Kate before he can relapse into his old ways.

Departing from Emily’s house, Binx nearly falls back into the womanizing behavior of his past, thinking immediately, “I have to find a girl” (228). He attempts to call Sharon, but when her roommate, Joyce, picks up the phone and informs him that Sharon is now engaged to be married, he shifts his interest towards the roommate, speaking in the voice of “old

Confederate Marlon Brando” (230) and even making tentative plans with her for Saturday night. Yet as Binx nears temptation, chance—perhaps even grace this time—intervenes: “A watery sunlight breaks through the smoke of the Chef and turns the sky yellow....[and] at last I spy Kate” (231). Her arrival at the very depths of his despair not only saves their relationship but also preserves the spiritual progress he has made thus far, preventing him from once again regressing to his former state of comfortable and lustful—but ultimately hopeless—oblivion. A few minutes later, when the two spy a black man emerging from the nearby church, likely having received the imposition of ashes, Binx’s thoughts about the man’s situation might as well refer to his own circumstances. Of course, the sacramental imagery evident in the invocation of Ash Wednesday ritual—symbolic of penance and humility because it reminds man of his mortality, that he is derived from and will return to dust and ashes—underscores Binx’s acceptance of a newfound humility. But it also achieves more. Initially, when he wonders if the man attended the church service in this mostly white, middle-class suburb of New Orleans because “it is part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world[.] Or...because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants.” But he soon provides a third option by asking himself, “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?” (230). The same might be asked of Binx and Kate’s curious presence, sitting not only at an intersection of streets but also the intersection of their own two lives, soon to be united in marriage. To echo Binx’s words, “it is impossible to say,” but knowing that Percy took matters of sacrament and grace seriously, it seems difficult to deny the possibility that God’s importunate bonus may be what the author had in mind.

In the novel's epilogue, Binx and Kate have married, fulfilling their promises from the train to commit to what, as I have described, is a much stronger relationship than many critics give it credit for being. Although Binx "sh[ies] away from the subject of religion," he announces that he is "a member of [his] mother's family after all," which aligns him with their Catholic faith (237). Given the apparent depth of his theological understandings—illustrated in his earlier conversations with Lonnie—as well as his reference on the train to flesh's ability to become hallowed through the sacrament of matrimony, it is difficult to imagine Binx not viewing his marriage to Kate through the traditional Catholic lens of two souls uniting into one, their union serving as a sign of God's divine presence in the world. Perhaps the seriousness with which he views his commitment—if we can assume him to have held the idea of marriage in such high regard in the months and years prior to this point—explains why he could not settle down with one of his secretaries or another woman in New Orleans. No one, besides Kate, fulfilled his criteria for such an important decision.

The epilogue also reveals Lonnie's death in the year following Kate and Binx's marriage. Although it is certainly tragic, the event also creates a parallel plot structure that illustrates a change in Binx and emphasizes the kind of future that awaits him. The reader learned in the novel's second paragraph that Binx's older brother, Scott, died when Binx was eight years old, and Scott bears obvious similarities to Lonnie. Besides being a close male relative, he also died at a young age of pneumonia, an illness Lonnie had contracted twice in the year leading up to Binx's stopover at the fishing camp. When Scott died, Aunt Emily told Binx, "Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you're going to *act* like a soldier" [emphasis mine] (4). Emily's somber Stoicism is thus equated to the role-playing impulse of Binx's earlier existence when he felt compelled to *act* like something or someone he wasn't. Now let us

compare her words to what Binx—who, at Lonnie’s death, must impart the news to the boy’s brothers and sisters—relays to the Smith children in the final scene: “...[Lonnie] wouldn’t want you to be sad. He told me to give you a kiss and tell you that he loved you” (239). Without explicitly stating it, Binx has adopted the Christian position on death, a hopeful, forward-looking one (the departed, after all, “see...God face to face,” as Binx reminds Lonnie at the family fishing camp (163)), and discarded his aunt’s approach to the subject which made Scott’s death a burden that a child (Binx) was required to bear. Although Binx follows Emily’s advice in deciding to attend medical school, the decision has more to do with his newfound commitment to putting others before himself, abandoning his lucrative job as a stockbroker to “make a difference,” as his aunt would (rightly) say. Ultimately, he rejects her Stoicism, but her inclination to properly humble Binx has played an integral role in the latter’s transformation.

Although his spiritual model Lonnie is gone, Binx’s marriage to Kate, along with its accompanying prospect of children, allows hope to triumph over despair in the end. The everydayness will, of course, return, but Binx appears equipped to overcome it, along with its cousin, the malaise, now that he has discovered a purpose to his life. The end of *The Moviegoer* is only the beginning for Binx and Kate, but by adopting the virtues of humility and love into their relationship and life together, their blessings are myriad and their strength greater than many readers are able to recognize.

The Last Gentleman

Percy's second published novel, *The Last Gentleman* (1966), also features a young male protagonist searching for a viable means of navigating his life's journey. Like Binx in *The Moviegoer*, Will Barrett at first assumes a specious, role-playing identity that prevents him from becoming an authentic version of himself, for he is always trying to be someone else. Will's adopted personas are more varied and whimsical than the on-screen, movie star ones Binx channels, but they rely on his play-acting nonetheless. Whether an heroic defender of justice in the vein of his ancestors or simply an integrated and accepted face in a group of friendly Ohioans on a ski trip, the identities that Will takes up reveal him as a passive wanderer in the changed social environment of 1960s America, unable to reconcile his past and present and lacking the *will* to determine his future.

Will is the descendant of gentlemen, the scion of a prominent Southern family. He claims adherence to his ancestors' code of honor and chivalry, but the world around him rejects these notions of virtue, preferring instead the ease of country club living and the comforts of material culture. Having left home to work in New York City as a humidification engineer at Macy's, Will is hopelessly adrift until he falls in love with the young Kitty Vaught, which jolts him out of his torpor and initiates the second phase of his spiritual development. He accompanies her family back to his familial South, presumably to merge the gentleman's code of his past with the social and career opportunities of the present—"to marry him a wife and live him a life" (69)—and the strange situations he encounters along the way underscore his own confusion about how life should be lived while allowing Percy a chance to satirize aspects of contemporary American life. Plans evolve, of course, and when Will travels west to reunite with Kitty's brothers, the dying Jamie and the lapsed physician Sutter, the experience of Jamie's

baptism and death propels him into the final stage of the Percyan protagonist's spiritual development. Compared to that of Binx, Will's transformation at the novel's end is more incipient, less developed—in fact, it is hardly underway—and he himself does not fully comprehend the significance of what has happened to him. But through another ambiguous closing, Percy deftly impels the reader to think as Will does—we know *something* has happened to him; the question is *what*? The mystery of the ending thus reflects the mystery of the Christian sacrament which Will experiences in Jamie's hospital room, and despite the ambiguity, Will's transformation allows him to save not only his own life in a metaphysical sense, but also the literal life of another.

Will falls in love with Kitty and begins his journey of transformation through an unusual sequence of events. After undergoing years of psychoanalysis to treat spells of fugues and déjà vu, during which time Will was able to play “the good patient” successfully despite not reaching an ultimate understanding of what ailed him psychologically, Will feels he has learned all that he can from the treatment and decides to abandon his therapy sessions in order to find a new approach to his problems. Interested in the objectivity of science and scientific tools, he wipes out his bank account to buy an expensive telescope, with which he hopes to spy something of import. While using the telescope to search for and photograph a peregrine falcon in Central Park, an accidental swing of the instrument's lens changes Will's focus, and what Ciuba calls “the revelation of Kitty” (99) occurs.

Though it brings him to Kitty, the use of the telescope underscores Will's tendency to observe rather than take action in his life. In this sense, it bears similarities to the moviegoing conceit in Percy's first novel, as several critics have noted. However, it also allows him to see—that is, to really notice—elements of the physical world in a way he hasn't before, which is often

a requirement of the Percyan spiritual quest's beginning. For example, Will notices the bricks of a building across the park in close detail, and the bricks "became available" (23) to him just like the items on Binx's bureau the morning he awoke with an awareness of his search. Of course, Will does not see them with his naked eye: "special measures were needed to recover them," which underscores his dilemma. But he is onto something. When he spies the peregrine falcon from the park, he witnesses his own plight without knowing it, as Binx does when he faces the dung beetle. The peregrine, whose very name recalls the act of wandering or living abroad, has also left its natural habitat to reside in the city, but its keen vision hints at Will's potential to see in the figurative sense—an auspicious sign that Will may be able to gain special insight from events that occur around him. Such a talent bodes well for the ultimate success of Will's spiritual journeying.

When Will sees Kitty in the park and is immediately smitten with amorous feelings, he considers it a sign that he must act decisively, and the reader begins to pick up on part of Percy's wordplay in naming his protagonist: Will must *will* his future into action. Though his quest is less explicitly described than Binx's, it is a "search" nonetheless—one that, on the surface, seems destined to result in the unification of Will and Kitty's lonely, kindred spirits. A cursory reading of one of the novel's epigraphs, from Romano Guardini's *The End of the Modern World*, would also seem predict their ultimate coupling, as it reads, in part, "...the more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another." For much of the action, in fact, the reader is tempted to believe that Will and Kitty are the epigraph's intended referents, but by the end, it becomes clear that this is not the case.

That Kitty does not represent the best future for Will may be foreshadowed by the company she keeps. Before spying Kitty with the telescope in Central Park, Will first noticed

her former sister-in-law, Rita, who was once married to Kitty's older brother, Sutter. The two young women live together in a charming cottage in Greenwich Village, and Kitty serves a sort of intellectual apprenticeship under Rita. Though handsome, Rita is described as "dark as a gypsy" (2), and she intervenes frequently in the novel to keep Will and Kitty apart. For all of her ostensibly selfless efforts—Rita performed philanthropic work with the Zuni Indians and devotes herself to various causes—her ethical humanism comes across as thinly veiled self-righteousness. Ciuba goes so far as to say that "her lay sanctity actually conceals the love of self that is the spirit of the Antichrist" (120). Besides controlling Kitty's future, she also wishes to oversee the dying Jamie's final days while serving her own self-interest. If it were up to Rita, Jamie would remain in New York to take an experimental drug being offered by a doctor friend of hers and then would depart on an adventure in the Trav-L-Aire camper with Will, which, as Sutter notes in his casebook, will "get Barrett out of the way" so she can continue to instruct Kitty without his interference (275). Rita does not seem to care about Jamie on a personal level at all. Despite feigning anguish over his terminal illness, she finds a way to downplay his inevitable death in a conversation with Will while sanctimoniously invoking her own secular piety and crusade for social justice: "'So it's not such a big thing,' she said softly. 'One small adolescent as against the thirty thousand Japanese children we polished off [at Hiroshima and Nagasaki]'" (72). Perhaps the best that can be said of Rita is that her machinations prevent Will from becoming inescapably involved with Kitty and allow him to forge the friendship with Jamie that proves essential in his later transformation.

With no help from Rita, Will eventually joins the Vaught family on their return to the South. Along the way, he makes new acquaintances and finds himself in unusual predicaments of a picaresque style. Percy's satire of the American social landscape during these episodes

merits the critical attention it has received, but our attention will be better spent by examining Will's return to his native region and his eventual journey westward. Once he arrives at the Vaught estate, we begin to see more clearly the conventional and spiritually impoverished existence he can expect to lead with Kitty, along with a few extreme alternatives.

After being separated for much of the return home, Will and Kitty become closer upon reaching Alabama and can realistically begin to contemplate their future together. The couple and Jamie enroll in classes at the state university and engage in the social scene as well. The future looks bright for their union; Kitty has already picked out a house for them, which she will purchase with the one hundred thousand dollars she received from her father on her twenty-first birthday, and Will can get a job from Mr. Vaught at his "Confederate Chevrolet agency" (206). Yet this pleasant life in the modernizing South unsettles Will, who feels the "Episcopal ivy...twining itself around his ankles" and imagines himself "feeding the chickadees for the next forty years" (225). Kitty has also settled quickly into sorority life at the university (dangerous territory for a spiritual quest), and harbors concerns about Will's plan for them to go to New Mexico with Jamie at the dying youth's request because it would mean missing the big football game versus Tennessee. At twenty-one, Kitty is just getting a taste of the promises of life as a coed and Southern dame, and it feels difficult to blame her for her youth. It has also become apparent, however, that Will and Kitty have diverging interests and that their differences could interfere with the future they have already begun to plan for themselves.

While living at the Vaught house, Will meets Kitty and Jamie's eccentric older siblings, Sutter and Val, who will each play a role in his final development and whose life and career paths show him extreme alternatives to the conventional future he sees for himself with Kitty. Sutter, a once-promising doctor whose career has been compromised because of inappropriate

sexual activity in the workplace, interests Will as an intellectual authority and medical guru, as someone who might shed light on Will's psychological irregularities. Will perceives Sutter's own troubled nature in their conversations at the Vaughns', but he does not learn the extent of it until reading Sutter's casebook later. As Will discovers, Sutter—although brilliant—has lost contact with much of the world around him and believes that “no avenue of reentry remains save genital” (271), seeing himself as “an old-fashioned Alabama pornographer” (276). If Sutter's ex-wife Rita embodies the humanistic impulse, then Sutter represents a purely sexual one. He has adopted an almost religious notion of sex-as-salvation, whereby fornication becomes a reason for staying alive in a post-Christian world. The only alternative as he sees it is suicide—which he attempted once but only wounded himself in the cheek—and his threat to try again hangs over Will at the end of the novel. Will reads in Sutter's casebook that the doctor “won't miss next time” (294), and Sutter even tells Will that “If I do outlive Jamie...it will not be by more than two hours” (306). Yet despite his spiritually hopeless outlook, Sutter has exhibited an interest in God in his back-and-forth with Val in his casebook; their dialectic and Val's imploration to Will before Jamie's death are pivotal in understanding the transformation that occurs in the novel's final scene.

Much like Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*, Val plays a vital role in the protagonist's movement into the final phase of spiritual development. She was once an academic, working on her master's at Columbia, until a chance encounter with a nun changed her direction in life. This encounter inspired her to receive instruction and take vows as a nun herself. After an unusual sequence of events, she now works with poor African American children at her order's mission in rural Alabama. These children were brought up in silence and, until they work with Val, cannot recognize the most ordinary of words. Val, however, helps them “break into the world of

language,” and when that breakthrough occurs, “they are like Adam on the first day” (237). Like Lonnie’s words, Val’s message has freshness to it because it has not yet been adulterated or corrupted in their community—the children have not understood spoken language before working with her, and therefore words have not been able to grow stagnant. And, significantly, when the children do learn to speak, their words will be similarly fresh if Val’s apocalyptic vision holds true. Sutter later explains Val’s thoughts to Will in New Mexico: “...she would not mind if Christendom should be done for....She believes that then, if we go the route and run out of Christendom, that the air would be cleared and even then God might give us a sign....[She and the children could] start all over again” (297). For her—and her apocalyptic vision appears to be Percy’s as well—the end of times is near if not occurring already. Therefore, belief in God, as opposed to Sutter’s warped reliance on sex as the ultimate solution to life’s absurdity, provides the only means of transcendence, temporal or otherwise, available in this day and age.

Val is bent on Jamie’s baptism, and she charges Will—since “it may well happen that it will be you...who will be with Jamie during the last days of his life and even at his death”—to ensure it happens (163). She even tells Will that Jamie’s salvation may be up to him. Will recognizes this as a preposterous burden to impose upon a virtual stranger, but Val is persistent. She seems to have picked up on something in Will’s nature that will oblige him to comply, and her perception is astute. Will’s adherence to a kind of gentlemanly code, one that requires him to take the earnest appeals of others, especially women, seriously, compels him to at least make the circumstances for Jamie’s baptism possible at the end. He listens to Val and respects the urgency of her charge precisely because he is a gentleman, which then allows for him to witness the mystery of the event in Jamie’s hospital room and gain insight from it. Perhaps Will is moved by her urgency, sensing subconsciously that a moment of great importance—like the one

his great grandfather faced in confronting the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan—may await him. Despite appearing only a handful of times in the novel, Val serves as the propelling force behind Will's transformation; without her, it simply does not happen.

When he learns that Sutter has left town and has taken Jamie with him, Will makes plans to travel west to find them, leaving Kitty behind in Alabama. Will attempts to persuade her to join him, insisting that they can be married in Louisiana during the journey, but as further evidence of their diverging interests, she decides to stay home to maintain her studies and life at the university. Rita interferes as well, but Will almost does not seem to mind; reuniting with Jamie has become his priority. He even accidentally deserts Kitty on campus when he is knocked out at the Confederate monument during apparent race riots. He regains consciousness in the Trav-L-Aire, his wayfaring abode, and can think of no other option but to drive, following the lines someone has drawn for him on a map left in the camper, and reading the information found in a medical casebook—also found in the camper—when he stops. Will had taken these two items from Sutter's apartment earlier in the day, but upon regaining consciousness, he forgets their origin, taking off in another one of his fugues toward whatever destination the dotted lines have in store for him.

Sutter has almost certainly left the map and casebook behind intentionally for Will to discover, and together the objects serve a few significant purposes. First, the map takes him to Tyree County, where he witnesses Val's mission firsthand and learns about her work, and then it leads him through the Mississippi Delta on his way to Santa Fe to find the two Vaught brothers. The trip through the Delta is important for Will because it takes him into the town of his boyhood, Ithaca. Throughout the novel—and for many years before, we learn—Will has suffered from fugues and *déjà vu*, which appear to be connected to an event in his past involving

his father. He also experiences flashbacks to this event, spells during which he replays the last conversation he had with his father before the man's death. Significantly, Will neglects at any point in the novel to acknowledge that his father's death was a suicide—perhaps he was unable to—until he finds himself standing alone in front of his boyhood home in the anonymous darkness of night. He has walked there from the levee after being separated from the Trav-L-Aire, and just hours before, he reflected “that he didn't live anywhere and had no address” (246-47). At this moment, Will is a wayfarer in the truest sense.

The past haunts Will, and he finally confronts it in a way that years of psychotherapy cannot match while standing in front of his childhood home. His forefathers had been “gentlemen” who fought for justice and despised iniquity, yet through each successive generation, attitudes toward virtue and honor changed to such an extent that the gentleman's ethos eventually became obsolete. Will's father recognized the shift, and he enacted his own form of protest against a new world by exiting it. But standing in the yard surrounded by ancient water oaks, Will nearly hits on the kind of sublime discovery that has eluded him before and is always just out of reach for Percy's characters. It is an unnamable truth—what Binx pursues in his search, and presumably what he cannot speak about in the novel's Epilogue. In Ithaca, Will touches the bark of a tree and grabs onto an iron hitching post in the shape of a horsehead. Over time, the oak has grown around the metal of the post, enveloping it—leaving it stuck in time like the memory of his father. Will's mind races:

Wait. While his fingers explored the juncture of iron and bark, his eyes narrowed as if he caught a glimmer of light on the cold iron skull. *Wait.* 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. It wasn't even his fault

because that was the way he was and the way the times were, and there was no other place a man could look. It was the worst of times, a time of fake beauty and fake victory. *Wait*. He had missed it! It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in solitariness and not in the old sad poetry but—he wrung out his ear—but here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraneousness of the iron and the bark that—he shook his head—that— (261)

On the brink of discovery, the sound of the TV coming from inside the house interrupts his thought, and revelation escapes Will. But he does take away something important from the experience, similar to what Binx learns while discussing his own father's past with his mother at the Smiths' fishing camp: namely, that his father's solution to the question of how to exist (or how not to exist) in contemporary times will not work for him. Will himself never entertains the idea of suicide, but what he gains from confronting his father's death in Ithaca allows him finally to *act*, to be *willful*, in a new way when Sutter tells him of his own suicidal intentions in New Mexico. It allows him to find higher calling and purpose in a world that previously seemed chaotic and ultimately inconsequential. Although Will hasn't recognized it yet, the alert reader knows that this confrontation of the past is significant in the engineer's transformation because it brings him in contact with the mystery of divine presence in the human world.

Sutter's casebook clues Will into Sutter and Val's ongoing dialectic while also informing him of Sutter's desperate outlook on life as an "Alabama pornographer." The two siblings argue about how (and why) one might choose to exist in the mid-twentieth century, the purpose of the church, the meaning of Western values. Although Sutter seems to have chosen fornication as his religion or credo, he admits to agreeing with Val on several theological issues, and—even if unwilling to state it plainly—leaves open the possibility of his belief in God under certain

conditions. His impatience with religion precludes belief at this point, however. Sutter concedes to Val's apocalyptic position when he writes, "We have no hope of recovering Christ until Christ leaves us" (293). If that were to occur, he tells Will in New Mexico, "...the air would be cleared and...God might give us a sign....But yes, I agree with her. Absolutely! It's just that nothing ever came of it....Don't you see? Nothing happened. She got all dressed up for the bridegroom and the bridegroom didn't come....I do not wait for a sign because there is no sign" (297-98). While Val believes that Christianity must be destroyed or defeated in order to start meaningfully anew, Sutter apparently believes the hour is too late for such a plan to transpire.

It is unclear why Sutter has given up on a possible sign. Perhaps he is jaded from waiting, but tellingly he does lament Val's willingness to work with groups that he despises: scientists, Baptists, Methodists, Ku Klux Klanners—seeing her openness as part of the problem. Val, he says, became hopeful and "sold out" (298). She has a different outlook on her situation, however. She knows she must work with others, even if she despises them as he does, because her faith in God trumps her hatred. When Will visits her mission, she wonders aloud if God will forgive her and even asks Will to "pray for [her] to receive sufficient grace not to hate the guts of some people, however much they deserve it" (238). While Sutter doesn't understand how she reconciles her personal spitefulness with her daily theological practice, Val simply trusts in God to help her overcome her patently human foibles.

The final pages of the book take place in Jamie's hospital room and in the street outside the building, and it is in these moments when Will moves into the final stage of his spiritual development. Just prior to Jamie's death, Will has spoken on the phone with Val, who reiterated the immediacy of Jamie's need for baptism, telling Will multiple times, "I charge you" to make arrangements for it to be available as an option (310). At this point, Will is exasperated by both

Val and Sutter, but because he is the last gentleman, he will follow her request out of a sense of duty and obligation. It might even be said that Val lights a fire beneath him because his conversations with the nurses, the medical resident, and Father Boomer exhibit a sense of purpose that he has previously lacked. To Will's astonishment, even Sutter—despite his penchant for disappearing—has shown up for Jamie's final moments. But Will shouldn't be surprised. He learned in the casebook that Sutter believes Jamie must be aware of his own death, must be conscious of his dying, rather than simply "eased out in an oxygen tent, tranquilized and with no sweat to anyone and not even know what he was doing" (293)—which would have occurred if Rita had her way or if Jamie remained in Alabama. Presumably, Sutter wants Jamie sentient for *something*, and, in fact, Sutter himself seems to be waiting for something to occur in the hospital room beyond Jamie's inevitable death. In this way, he has facilitated the possibility of Jamie's baptism, even if he would likely deny having done so. And besides being astonished by Sutter, Will himself takes a more active role in what occurs than he could have anticipated.

The physicality of Jamie's death—the smell in particular—startles Will and jolts him into an awareness of his witnessing something out of the ordinary, something *extraordinary*. Despite Jamie's drifting in and out of consciousness and the strangeness of the ordeal, Father Boomer administers the rites of baptism, and Will's presence proves essential. He serves as mediator and interpreter, with Jamie glancing wild-eyed at him for reassurance or clarification, and Will almost telepathically communicating Jamie's thoughts and questions to the priest. Significantly, Will seems not just to speak for Jamie but for the both of them in a few of his responses. This occurs, for example, when the priest asks Jamie if he accepts the love of God and that God sent His only Son to die so that those who believe may enter heaven:

“Is that true?” said Jamie clearly, opening his eyes and goggling. To the engineer’s dismay, the youth turned to him.

The engineer cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something when, fortunately for him, Jamie’s bruised eyes went weaving around to the priest. He said something to the priest which the latter did not understand.

The priest looked up to the engineer.

“He wants to know, ah, why,” said the engineer.

“Why what?”

“Why should he believe that.”

The priest leaned hard on his fists. “It is true because God Himself revealed it as the truth.”

Again the youth’s lips moved and again the priest turned to the interpreter.

“He asked how, meaning how does he know that?” (318)

After Jamie is baptized, Will interprets another of Jamie’s inaudible utterances, telling the priest that Jamie wishes that the priest not relinquish his hand as he nears death, a significant manual joining that Desmond connects to Will’s near epiphany in touching the iron horsehead in his front yard in Ithaca (115). Since meeting, Will and Jamie have made many plans together, such as taking classes and traveling, and it appears that in this moment they have both experienced a religious conversion, even if, as Ciuba explains, “in the hospital room [Will] does not embrace salvation with any of the conventional signs” (129). Indeed, Will does not seem to grasp the magnitude or the potential impact of what he has just witnessed and experienced, though he does perceive that something remarkable has occurred.

After Jamie's death, Sutter abandons Will in the hospital room, presumably to commit suicide, as he previously informed Will he would do. Will senses his intention and follows to prevent him from returning to his home at the ranch where the act would occur, once again showing the ability to act decisively as he did in making the preparations for Jamie's baptism. But this time he moves by personal accord rather than at the request of another. When Sutter told Will earlier that if he outlived Jamie it would be by no more than two hours, Will discovered something about himself that resulted from his confronting his father's suicide in Ithaca: that he could act decisively and purposefully in the fashion of his forefathers when a worthy cause presented itself. For Will, "This moment more than any other...marked the beginning...of what is called a normal life. From that time forward it was possible to meet him and after a few minutes form a clear notion of what sort of fellow he was and how he would spend the rest of his life" (307). Because he has rejected his father's solution of suicide, Will resolves not to let Sutter follow the same route either. But also, after years of trying to be someone else, he finally seems prepared to reject his other personas and be Will Barrett, at last comfortable with himself in time and space. He has attempted for so long to engineer his own life, yet now he finally admits that he cannot go it alone and is able to request help from another human being, telling Sutter, "Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett...need you and want you to come back" (322-323). The two men both have something to offer the other, and their actions indicate a willingness to show newfound humility in accepting this assistance.

Many critics have written about the novel's final lines, pointing out that Will, who has been in search of a father figure, finds one in Sutter because "The Edsel waited for him" when he called out to the doctor (323)—unlike Will's own father, who did not "wait" when the son made that same request on the evening that the elder Barrett killed himself. And although Will seems

highly skeptical of Sutter's words when Sutter tells him that he's simply going back to the ranch to have a drink, I do not believe that suicide is Sutter's purpose. It is worth noting that Sutter does figure into *The Second Coming*, this novel's sequel, but as Hardy points out, "The two novels are separate texts, each demanding a separate analysis of its internal order" (282n6), rendering his later presence or non-presence immaterial to our current purposes. (The same can be said of Kitty and Will's relationship not working out in the later work: interesting, but ultimately not relevant.) More importantly, the scene in the hospital clearly affected Sutter—and perhaps Jamie's baptism served as the sign from God which he had been waiting for and had all but abandoned. When Will catches up to Sutter and asks, "What happened back there?," Sutter's irritated response of "In the hospital room? You were there" implies his awareness of some mysterious and formidable occurrence. As Desmond observes, baptism and other "true sacraments, in Percy's Catholic belief, are real signs created by Christ as gifts of spiritual life (grace) to believers. Sacraments are the signs of spirit-in-matter, Word-in-flesh, since the mysterious action of grace is signified through material objects" (85). If Sutter believes he has just received a sign from God, then—knowing his temperament—it stands to reason that he is simply pissed off that Val was right. Of course, the baptism would not have been possible without Will's actions, his demonstration of will, meaning that without Barrett's efforts, there is no reason to believe Sutter would have veered from the plan he outlined to Will earlier. Without Will, Sutter's suicide becomes an imminent likelihood, and, thus, it is reasonable to credit Will with saving Sutter's life.

But there is more to be said about the ending. Although the novel ends in ambiguity, many critics believe that Will's experience changes him in a way that makes marriage to Kitty essentially impossible—or, at least, spiritually devastating. On the surface, the couple appears

much less combustible than Binx and Kate, who in my reading can work through their issues because of what they offer one another. But concerning Will and Kitty, I agree that Will's transformation would seem to preclude such a coupling, and their drifting apart before Will travels to New Mexico foreshadows what seems to be an inevitable separation. Kitty's virtual non-presence in the final third of the novel relegates her to the status of "fallen conceit" in Percy, like moviegoing in the author's first book and the telescope in this one. She essentially disappears, and it would seem that—providentially speaking—her purpose in Will's life was mostly to help him get to New Mexico to effect and witness Jamie's baptism. When one considers the relationship Will achieves with Allie Huger—Kitty's daughter, interestingly enough—in *The Second Coming*, Will and Kitty's incompatibility becomes even more pronounced. Both seem mostly interested in the idea of one another, in the concept of marrying someone attractive from a successful Southern family, but their interests are, of course, superficial. Will and Allie's relationship, which is one marked by mutual dependence and assistance—a willingness to help the other and to accept the other's help—serves as the model for Percyan relationships, and when juxtaposed next to Will and Kitty's, one can easily see how the latter pales in comparison.

Strangely, as several others have noted, Percy's own perspective on the end of the novel is at odds with most scholarly interpretation. In an interview with John Carr in 1971, Percy offers that Will "*misses* it"—presumably meaning that Will does not come out of the experience changed or transformed because he could not grasp whatever insight awaited him (Lawson and Kramer 67). He also says in later interviews that the most likely future scenario for Will is that he returned to Alabama to marry Kitty and live the life he had planned prior to traveling to New Mexico (Hardy 282n6). Hardy is quick to point out that Percy, in offering such an interpretation,

is merely speaking as the “ex-author” whose ideas are subject to the same scrutiny as anyone else’s, and he notes several instances when Percy made mistaken chronological references about *The Last Gentleman* or possibly even forgot about an event his readers might regard as “crucial” (102). Percy’s remarks are puzzling, but if he does believe that Will “misses it,” it should not surprise anyone that he also expects a final union between Will and Kitty. After all, Will hasn’t gained any special insight under such an assumption. But with Kitty’s virtual disappearance and Will’s awareness of something important taking place in Jamie’s hospital room, it is nearly impossible for this reader to concede that Will “misses it” and returns to Alabama with plans to marry Kitty.

Perhaps I might suggest one helpful way to think of Will’s transformation at the end of the novel: as the death of his former self into a new life of fresh spiritual possibilities. In the hospital room just moments before his death, Jamie miraculously climbs out of bed and starts to head across the room, finding strength seemingly out of nowhere. Will is perplexed but eventually receives an explanation: “Later Sutter told the engineer that, contrary to popular notions, dying men often carry out complex actions in the last moments of life” (316). The word “later” is important because, for one thing, it would seem to confirm that Sutter does not commit suicide. But it also explains the phenomenon of unbounded strength before death that Will himself might be said to experience—though, once again, I refer to the death of a state of being—in the novel’s final lines. Like Emily Dickinson’s “wounded deer [that] leaps the highest” in “the ecstasy of death” (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 87), Will displays unparalleled, if hyperbolic, strength in the novel’s penultimate line: “Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds” (323). With his new life begun, Will leaps forward to catch Sutter, another lonely individual imparted with newfound

understanding. If we once believed that the Guardini epigraph referred to the love Will shared with Kitty, it is now clear that characters like Sutter and Val are likelier recipients than their younger sister. And although Will doesn't yet have all the answers, he has at last discovered an approach to living life that involves being himself rather than trying to be someone else.

Love in the Ruins

In Percy's 1971 futuristic satire, *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Tom More lives in a fragmented world. Society is polarized along many lines—political, racial, religious, generational—and vines sprout from the earth to create modern ruins in still-extant communities. The “beloved old U.S.A. is in a bad way,” Tom narrates in first person, echoing Yeats by explaining that, despite the country's once-thought potential to become a new Eden, “The center did not hold” (17-18). But oddly, Tom seems to be the only one noticing, and for all the country's problems, “Gross National Product continues to rise” (18).

In fact, Tom himself once enjoyed an Edenic existence with his wife, Doris, and daughter, Samantha. Living in the aptly named Louisiana town of Paradise Estates, he attended Catholic mass regularly with Samantha and found particular nourishment in the Eucharist. After his daughter's sickness and grisly death, however, he and Doris drifted apart until she left him (and later died, herself). Samantha's passing, as Lewis Lawson says, became “the occasion of [his] fall from Paradise (Estates)” (*Following Percy* 169). Tom stopped attending church and discovered a new altar of worship: that of women, wine, and song. When we first meet him in the novel, he has shored himself up at an abandoned Howard Johnson's with three women and fifteen cases of Early Times bourbon to wait out what he believes to be the end of the world. Unlike Percy's earlier protagonists, he does not pretend to be someone besides himself. He is deeply flawed, but he is fully Tom More, and his problems are easily identifiable if nearly crippling. Yet despite his issues, Tom at times sees himself as the new Christ come to save America. A self-proclaimed genius (Tom also suffers from excessive intellectual pride), he has invented a device that can diagnose the problems of modern man, a “stethoscope of the spirit” (62). With this device, which he calls his lapsometer, Tom can measure the extent of the mind-

body rift man has suffered since Descartes made his famous distinction between the two several centuries prior. Things won't be so simple, however. Despite his kinship to Saint Thomas More, Tom's path to salvation is a rough one. He must undergo multiple trials, confront a troubling element of Samantha's death, and finally be laid low in presence of God in order to transcend his sinful ways. His Percyan transformation is once again sealed by sacrament, this time a trio of them, and although he still leads an imperfect life at novel's end, he has discovered a new Eden outside of Paradise Estates from which he can endure the Old Testament dictum to watch and wait for the coming of the true Christ.

Love in the Ruins, subtitled *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, begins on July Fourth of an unspecified year (several critics posit 1983, but a few inconsistencies contradict that dating). Tom opens his story by voicing concern about a coming crisis, which, as we soon learn, is nothing short of the Apocalypse: "Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last?" (3). In case the portentous hour weren't enough, the invocation of Dante informs us that Tom is undertaking a journey for the fate of his very soul. Further, and however infelicitous a comparison for contemporary political correctness, one cannot help but associate Tom's three women at the nearby Howard Johnson's with the three beasts of the *Inferno*, calling to mind a tripartite body of sin that for Tom would most likely include pride, drunkenness, and lasciviousness. Interestingly, Percy departs from the more linear plot structure of his earlier novels, choosing to begin with Tom in the early evening of July Fourth only to have him return to the events from a few days prior that led up to the holiday. Because of this shift in approach, the reader must wait nearly sixty pages to learn how Tom arrived in his predicament—to see

what moment constitutes the “coming to himself” that initiates the second phase of his Percyan spiritual journey. This design contrasts considerably with the immediacy of Binx’s noticing the items on his bureau in *The Moviegoer* and Will’s spying Kitty from afar with his telescope in *The Last Gentleman*.

Compared to that of his fictional forebears, the moment of Tom’s awakening is much more serious. While Tom sits at his breakfast table on the morning of July First, a sniper takes three shots in his direction, causing him to duck for cover. The event snaps him out of his obliviousness, as it would anyone. From that moment forward, he is aware of a change in the world around him and vaguely cognizant of an impending crisis. His awareness is less metaphysical compared to Binx’s and Will’s, for his relates more directly to external conditions than to an internal realization. But this awareness initiates his journey and will eventually lead to his July Fourth vigil in the pine grove as he awaits the end of the world.

Like Binx after being wounded in Korea, Tom has experienced similar moments of “coming to” that proved fleeting. After suffering an embarrassing allergic reaction on the previous Christmas Eve while drunkenly fooling around in a golf bunker with Lola Rhoades (one of the girls who winds up with Tom at the Howard Johnson’s) Tom find himself on the next morning—Christmas morning—with his wrists cut and bleeding in his home, self-inflicted lacerations. But the experience of real physical danger spurs a newfound appreciation of existence in Tom: “Seeing the blood, I came to myself, saw myself as itself and the world for what it is, and began to love life” (97). His friend and colleague Max Gottlieb sews up his wrists at home, and in the following hours Tom commits himself to the federal hospital. That night, he has a major insight—though, it should be noted, the insight occurs after a night nurse rejects Tom’s amorous advances: “Later, lust gave way to sorrow and I prayed...tears streaming down

my face. Dear God, I can see it now, why can't I see it other times, that it is you I love in the beauty of the world and in all the lovely girls and dear good friends, and it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels" (109). But like Binx's vow to pursue his search upon returning from the war, Tom's revelation is ephemeral. While he maintains his commitment to love life, the objects of his desire—women, drink, worldly success—are purely physical and thus misdirected targets. He has, of course, experienced a breakthrough that allows him to continue living, even happily; he is Percy's "ex-suicide," who, in light of the very real alternative, now "opens his front door, sits down on the steps, and laughs. Since he has the option of being dead, he has nothing to lose by being alive. It is good to be alive" (*Lost in the Cosmos* 79). Tom can suddenly appreciate the blessing of existence, but his spiritual insight proves fleeting, and in short time he is back to his old ways, approaching them with vigor afresh. It takes the sniper's threat to cut his life short for Tom to begin his spiritual transformation in earnest.

Tom's enjoyment of life's physical pleasures highlights his extreme position on one side the mind-body relationship put forth by Descartes in the early-seventeenth century. Desmond unites Percy's artistic and philosophical ideas to point out that the "Cartesian malady" is responsible for much of modern man's troubles, for Cartesian dualism, in asserting that mind and body are separate and composed of different essences, birthed a warped theory of man into existence (13). Given Descartes's arrangement, man loses sight of his true self and can devolve into one of two corrupted states of being, which Tom has come to identify in the novel as "angelism" and "bestialism," or sometimes a grotesque combination of the two in full. In the case of the former, the self may become too reliant on the mind or one's spiritual life. Tom describes angelism as "excessive abstraction of the self from the self" and even "spiritual

apogee” (37, 35), with anxiety being one of the major symptoms. On the other hand, bestialism refers to the condition of being too grounded in one’s physical existence; excessive and haphazardly-directed feelings of lust are potential symptoms of this ailment. One of the greatest troubles Tom identifies in contemporary Western society, however, is that while “angelism-bestialism” would naturally seem measurable on a spectrum, modern man is capable of suffering from both excesses at the same time, and this is the real ignominy underlying Descartes’s notion of the duality of man. Tom will name these ailments of the afflicted self More’s syndrome later in the novel, but this “gross disorder of consciousness” is part of Percy’s own diagnosis of modern man’s ills. In his essay, “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” Percy wrote that “It is this monstrous bifurcation of man into angelic and bestial components....[which creates] the need of recovering oneself as neither angel nor organism but as a wayfaring creature somewhere in between” (*The Message in the Bottle* 113). As we will see, Tom himself—despite recognizing the condition—has difficulty finding the proper balance of self as a result of Descartes’s categorizations.

The Tom whom the reader knows for most of the novel experiences superfluous physical desire, but at one point, years before, he had loved too much with the spirit. If Tom’s existence while Samantha was still alive can be described as Edenic, then it shouldn’t come as a surprise that his default emotional setting was one of angelism—though Tom seems not to have coined his specific terminology at that point. Significantly, as John Desmond notes, he was able to combat this extreme through attending mass and participating in the Eucharist, which, as a sacrament, serves as a sign of God’s presence and grace in the world (85). Although Doris also suffered from what Tom eventually comes to call angelism as well, Tom explains that “what she didn’t understand, she being spiritual and seeing religion as spirit, was that it took religion to

save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels, that it took nothing less than...eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her in the morning” (254). Tom was able to manage his excessive spiritual love, but after Samantha’s death, he turned from angel to beast, as Lawson says: “having too easily believed in the spirit, [he] becomes entirely occupied with the flesh” (*Following Percy* 169). His kinsman Thomas More may be a saint, but the Tom of this novel, no proponent of moderation, is overly susceptible to the temptation of *more*. After falling from the innocence of his Edenic life following the death of an innocent (Samantha), Tom must find a new way to reach equilibrium in his life.

Accordingly, Tom has invented a device to address the Cartesian split: his lapsometer, officially called The More Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer, or MOQUOL for short. As its name suggests, it is meant to measure man’s lapsed spiritual condition, though Tom prefers not to advertise the rather conspicuous religious implications. Like Will Barrett’s telescope, it is, as Martin Luschei describes, a “focusing device” (178), but rather than allowing him to discover something new in the world around him, it is intended to remedy a problem that Tom already recognizes: the rift between body and spirit. Originally, the lapsometer could only diagnose and could not treat man’s fallen nature, but with help from the mysterious Art Immelmann, Tom comes to possess what he believes to be the perfect device for healing a post-lapsarian society and treating what will come to be known as More’s syndrome. He entertains high hopes for his invention: Tom foresees a landmark article in the journal *Brain* and possibly even a Nobel Prize. He remains optimistic that the director of the Fedville medical and research complex will deliver “triumphant news about my lapsometer, the first caliper of the soul and the first hope of bridging the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since the

famous philosopher Descartes ripped body loose from mind and turned the very soul into a ghost that haunts its own house” (191). Unfortunately, Tom’s director and his colleagues will not take him seriously because their behaviorist outlook naturally trivializes a device that concerns itself with the soul. The major issue, however, is that for all of Tom’s good intentions, his hopes for his invention speak more to his own vanity and his desire to play God than anything else.

Tom has, indeed, hit on a major discovery, but the intellectual pride that accompanies his breakthrough threatens to wreck his path to salvation. Dr. More readily describes himself as a “genius” (11) and predicts that his lapsometer “will undoubtedly be recognized as one of the three greatest scientific breakthroughs of the Christian era”—on the same plane as the work of Newton and Einstein—and “perhaps even the greatest of all because my discovery alone gives promise of bridging the dread chasm between body and mind that has sundered the soul of Western man” (90). It is a powerful tool, but Tom, in his rush for glory, has not taken the proper safeguards to prevent potential catastrophe: although the lapsometer could “save the U.S.A.” (20), it could also cause the destruction of mankind if it winds up in the wrong hands—those of a man like Art Immelmann, for instance.

The lapsometer, then, is emblematic of Tom’s excessive pride, a vice inclusive not only of his belief in personal intellectual superiority but also the notion that he can circumvent God or even *act* as God by saving the world from its present-day ills. In fact, Tom sees himself as Christ figure, if somewhat ironically. When Tom looks into a darkened mirror at his friend Leroy Ledbetter’s bar and recognizes not himself but an icon portraying Christ as pocked and hollowed-eyed, he reflects that because “the old Christ died for our sins and it didn’t work....The new Christ shall reconcile man with his sins. The new Christ lies drunk in a ditch” (153). Tom then imagines himself lying inebriated in a ditch while two friends—one black, one white—hoist

him out, forgetting their differences and transcending America's history of racial strife in order to laugh while "pick[ing] up the new Christ." Truth is, Tom is too easily tempted to view himself as possessing this kind of superhuman, divine clout; the simple formula he utilizes of admitting his faults (in this case, drunkenness) and recognizing his own likability (he is friendly to all and treats patients with dignity regardless of race, politics, economic class), does not a new Christ make. Ciuba and Desmond note parallels between Tom's deluded vision of himself and the Antichrist (if not calling him that directly), and Tom certainly invites the comparison. Lucifer, after all, fell from heaven into the depths of hell for trying to be God. But perhaps the better comparison is once again to Adam and Eve, who desired to attain the knowledge of God and were expelled from the garden for their efforts. As one of the seven deadly sins, pride is an enormously serious obstacle for Tom to overcome, and even though he recognizes his own vanity at times, he does not begin to confront what is arguably his gravest flaw until the very end of the novel.

Nowhere is Tom more tempted by his pride than in his interactions with the mysterious "funding man" from Washington, Art Immelmann. Art first shows up at Tom's office during an electrical storm while Tom listens to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*—significantly, at the moment of Giovanni's descent into hell. As Art approaches Tom's desk, lightning flashes through the windows and Immelmann seems to advance toward him by intervals of teleportation. Uncannily, he knows all about Tom's lapsometer and even offers to help develop it if Tom will sign over the patent rights. Understandably if vainly, Tom, presuming that news of his breakthrough has leaked from the Director or from his *Brain* article—how else would Art know about it?—happily accepts Art's praise but not his offer. He doesn't care about the money, Tom explains, but the reader can surmise that he *does* care about getting proper credit from his director and colleagues.

Suddenly, the out-of-towner Art disappears through a little known shortcut in the building, confusing Tom even more, but not before he has promised to return over the next few days to check on the doctor.

Art Immelmann is regularly described in sinister terms by Percy scholars, most often with appellations such as Mephistopheles, Tom's menacing alter ego, and the devil himself. Lawson recognizes Percy's likely wordplay by pointing out that Immelmann resembles "himmel-mann" (German for "heaven man"), and thus Art Immelmann becomes Artificial (i.e., false) Heavenman, or false angel (173). And Art does indeed tempt Tom with the scientist's equivalent of all the kingdoms of the world. For all his perceptiveness, Tom is too absorbed in his own vanity to recognize the demon in Art: when Tom, shocked that Immelmann would try to buy him out of the lapsometer's patent rights, says, "Yeah, but...*goddamn*, Art—!," the stranger turns white and steps away, and Tom mistakenly believes that "Art must be a Holy Name man or a hard-shell Baptist" [emphasis mine] (169-170). Ciuba notes Immelmann's three-part temptation of Tom is a parody of Christ's trials in the desert (142), but Tom—proving definitively that he is not the new Christ—finally capitulates to Art's seductions at his darkest hour.

When Tom learns that the Director will not approve of his article submission to *Brain* or of his funding request to the National Institute of Mental Health—and even more embarrassingly, that the Director believed that Tom's purpose in a recent visit was merely for a check-in as part of his "patient-staff status" when Tom expected congratulations on his work—he falls into despair. Although he is set for an entertaining "showdown" in The Pit with nemesis Buddy Brown that afternoon—"showdown" referring to a rowdy clinical competition put on by doctors for medical students at the end of the year—Tom steps inside the men's room to have a

drink, and Art appears instantaneously. In their darkly comical encounter, Art explains that by using one of Tom's discoveries from years ago, the lapsometer can be equipped finally to *treat* patients rather than just diagnose their ills. By outfitting the MOQUOL with an ionizer, Art shows Tom how it can safely heal certain personality disorders, and even gives him a dose to treat his anxiety. Suddenly, Tom's discomfort is eased, and a feeling of euphoria washes over him. Art, looking from Tom's perspective "like the sort of fellow who used to service condom vendors in the old Auto Age," nevertheless promises that the lapsometer will create a new kind of love on earth—a love with "its counterpart in scientific knowledge: it is neutral morally, abstractive and godlike....In the sense of being like a god in one's freedom and omniscience" (214-215). With the assurance that his device will change the world, Tom signs over his patent rights to Art, and the two pass a bottle of Early Times between them, engaging in a perverse communion to celebrate the transcendence of science and technology in a world that renders God unnecessary. Tom is too blinded by glory and the effects of alcohol to realize that the treatment his lapsometer offers only addresses the two sides of Cartesian dualism separately and does nothing to unite mind and body in healthy balance, but he heads off towards his appointment with Buddy in The Pit beaming with the confidence of Faust after his pact with Mephistopheles.

Tom's journey into The Pit, so named for its sunken performing area with surrounding amphitheater, marks his spiritual nadir despite his inevitable triumph over Buddy Brown, his professional rival and fellow suitor of Moira Schaffner. But despite it being a low point for Tom, it might be said to have a silver lining. The two doctors debate over the future of Mr. Ives, a retiree from Sherwood, Tennessee, who now resides at Fedville in "Gerry (Geriatric) Rehab." Mr. Ives has begun acting indecently of late and now refuses to speak to anyone, a cause of concern among his physicians, whose approach to his issues has involved unsuccessful attempts

at social conditioning in a Skinner box. In a neat bit of Percyan irony, Tom performs a great deed for Mr. Ives while becoming unknowingly responsible for the catastrophe that follows, for although Tom and Buddy's shenanigans in *The Pit* amuse onlookers, Mr. Ives's very life is at stake. Luschei writes that, in Tom and Buddy's debate, "a tacit behaviorist assumption emerges that Mr. Ives is guilty of terminal failure to respond successfully to conditioning and that unless Tom, upon whom the burden of proof rests, can somehow exonerate him, Mr. Ives is necessarily to be shipped off to a painless termination" (216), essentially forced euthanasia. Like Sutter in his concern for Jamie in *The Last Gentleman*, Tom feels that, if Mr. Ives is to die, he needs to at least be aware of his end, and in Mr. Ives's case, he also "has the right to know who his executioner is" (224). That the old man could be euthanized in the interest of his "quality of life" takes place because in contemporary times, the meaning of language has slipped—which was one of Percy's great concerns (and which Desmond wonderfully illuminates). In the novel's cultural climate, Buddy the behaviorist is free to talk about "the quality of life" (197) while intending to send Mr. Ives to his death in the Happy Isles of Georgia because Mr. Ives's antisocial behavior and lack of response to social conditioning mean that he can't properly acclimate to life in Gerry Rehab—therefore, he'd be better off dead. But if this moment represents a silver lining for Tom, it is a thin one. Tom does show vague concern for Ives as a person—he has administered treatment to him on a few occasions in the past year—but Tom's primary interest lies in defeating Buddy because of the glory and spoils that will accompany his victory. He never admits fear for his patient's future, but he does secretly fear something: "namely, getting beat by Buddy Brown in front of Moira" (220). Nevertheless, saving Mr. Ives with ulterior motives is certainly better than not saving him at all.

But to understand why Tom's time in The Pit marks his spiritual nadir, we must return to his dismantling of his professional and romantic rival, Dr. Brown. With Tom's newfound Faustian intellect and expanded understanding of his lapsometer, the match is no contest, and Tom eventually reduces Buddy to a babbling, vulgar bumpkin. Yet real danger results from what may seem merely farce in The Pit. Besides what Hardy notes is Tom's ethically questionable use of his invention (121), the arrangement that he has with Art implies Tom's acceptance of a world in which men can strive for and achieve the "godlike" knowledge described by Immelmann in the men's room. Further, and more immediately problematic, some part of their dealings evidently allowed Art access to Tom's crate of production model lapsometers, which he hands out recklessly to students and other onlookers in The Pit under the guise of running a pilot. Unaware of how to use the powerful device, students haphazardly administer doses of Heavy Sodium and Chloride to one another. Chaos ensues, and Tom is horrified. Despite the "mass hysteria" that Art's distribution creates, however, Tom realizes how fortunate the community is that the initial effect of receiving a dose from the machine is "mainly erotic" and not political or violent (241). But the outcome could shift rapidly if Tom cannot collect all of the distributed lapsometers, and he knows that he's in for a struggle to prevent potential disaster. Tom's reaction—even if motivated in part by concern for his invention's future—is promising, and like his good deed for Mr. Ives, shows that perhaps a bright spot exists underneath the stain of his transgression. Yet Tom must make an arduous ascent to find salvation after his time in The Pit.

Fortunately for Tom, he can only improve his spiritual condition at this point, but before that can happen he needs to resolve his dilemma with the three women at the Howard Johnson's. Of all the quandaries Percy's protagonists face in the middle phases of their transformation,

Tom's, in which he plays amorous host to Lola Rhoades, Moira Shaffner, and Ellen Oglethorpe at a dilapidated, abandoned motel, is surely the most unsustainable. Something's going to go wrong, and soon. As the womanizer Tom ought to know, by courting three women simultaneously, he is most likely to end up with none of them at all. That he brought them to the Howard Johnson's ostensibly for their safety gives Tom some moral credit, but as the situation develops, his arrogance allows him to think that he will be able maintain a revolving system of romantic and erotic encounters for an extended period of time; because the end of the world is near, Tom will serve as the three women's protector and possibly the father of a new generation when they can safely emerge from the fallout. His plan turns out to be vastly unrealistic for multiple reasons, of course, but he should count himself fortunate that one of them decides to remain with him when the *figurative* fallout clears.

Of the three women, Ellen emerges as Tom's only viable option for an extended romantic relationship despite the prospect of marriage to Lola surfacing several times in the novel. Moira, with whom Tom had originally arranged the motel rendezvous for the Fourth of July weekend, is a childish romantic, and, as Ciuba says, "her love lacks the patient endurance that would enable it to survive daily toil and testing" (152). Further, Desmond connects Tom's relationship with Moira to a potentially perverse form of love, a subtle pedophilia, because the language Tom uses to describe her echoes the language he used with his daughter, Samantha, before her death (130-131). In any case, Moira, whose name suggests fate or doom (and, in fitting with Desmond's analysis, a feminine version or perhaps offspring of *More*), is wrong for Tom—and that she ends up marrying Buddy Brown testifies to her and Tom's cosmic incompatibility. Lola, the brilliant and beautiful cellist, may seem like a suitable fit for Tom at first. Her father and Tom's signs-of-the-Zodiac-consulting mother endorse their union, but living with her at the plantation house,

Tara, a *Gone with the Wind*-style Old South recreation, represents simply what Ciuba refers to as a “theatrical repetition of the southern past” (153). Such an existence invites comparison not just to life in the historical past but in Tom’s personal past—his idyllic, Edenic life when Samantha was still alive. But when Lola, along with Moira, “fl[ies] the coop” (364), Tom is left with Ellen, his Presbyterian nurse with maternal instincts, the only one of the three who has taken care of Tom when he most needed help.

Although Ellen herself “doesn’t have much use for God,” she does “believe in doing right and does it” (384). She checks Tom’s reckless behavior, unlike Lola, for instance, who fed him gin fizzes at the motel despite being aware of his allergic reaction to the beverage, and she very well may turn out responsible for keeping Tom alive long enough to experience his spiritual transformation. As we learn in the epilogue, set five years after that eventful Fourth of July holiday, Ellen and Tom end up marrying and raising two children together, but Tom almost lost her before that weekend was over. With the world coming to an end in Tom’s calculation, he runs into Ellen and Art, who help him up from the ground where he has fallen near the burning bunkers of the golf course. The mischievous Art attempts to convince Tom to join him in Denmark, but Ellen—omniscient when it comes to knowing how to save her future husband—intervenes and does not allow Tom to follow this demon incarnate. Curiously (she is less omniscient in discerning her own needs), Ellen then decides that *she* should accompany Art to Denmark because he offers her a job and she believes Tom no longer requires her as his nurse in the office. Yet besides wanting to stymie Art’s duplicitous plan, Tom recognizes that he *does* need Ellen, and this recognition—a humbling of himself and an implicit acknowledgment that he cannot do everything on his own—allows him to take a step out of the spiritual morass towards enlightenment. Going an increment further in his acknowledgment of need, he then—finally—

invokes his saintly ancestor to banish Art Immelmann once and for all: “Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence” (376). This request for help, an actual prayer spoken by the lapsed Catholic Tom, shows More reliant on something greater than himself and accepting of the help or even grace he receives in return. Art vanishes in the smoke beyond the bunker, and Ellen—once again showing her care for Tom—smoothes his eyebrows before taking him home.

If humbling himself in order to request and accept help from others is a step in the right direction for Tom, what happened just before he expelled Art was equally important. Like Will Barrett, Tom also needed to confront an unsettling part of his past before groping towards salvation. Although he has been haunted by Samantha’s death for years, turning to alcohol and women to cope with his troubles, his actions—besides being unhealthy—don’t seem out of the ordinary for a man who has lost a young daughter to an appalling illness. But the reader does not learn until the end of the book of a special guilt that Tom harbors within himself: he did not take her to the pilgrimage site, Lourdes, to pray for a miracle recovery because, as Tom explains, “suppose you ask God for a miracle and God says yes, very well. How do you live the rest of your life?” (374). Tom also reveals that he has, to some degree, relished her death because of the excuse it gave him to drink and to behave poorly. But when Tom finally confronts this aspect of her illness through flashback, he recalls the question of hers about whether or not he has lost his faith. Even as she is sick and dying, she tells Tom, “Just promise me one thing, Papa....Don’t forget the one sin for which there is no forgiveness....The sin against grace. If God gives you the grace to believe in him and love him and you refuse, the sin will not be forgiven you” (373-74). At the end of the scene, Tom prays for forgiveness from Samantha and even admits, *confesses*, his wrongfulness, showing his remorse and contrition even if he only acknowledges

these things privately to himself. Once he does this, Tom emerges from his flashback to see Art and Ellen, and it is the act of confronting Samantha's death and recognizing his resulting problems that make him capable of fending off the devil and humbling himself once more. By returning to his daughter's helplessness and death, Tom finally realizes that he cannot do everything on his own in life; he must rely on others and on his faith in order to emerge from the ordeals he must face physically and spiritually intact.

Tom's banishing of the devil Art Immelmann essentially achieves his transformation from the middle, unsustainable phase of his spiritual journey into the third and final realm, but once he reaches this new domain, he remains far from perfect and must continue to work to improve his spiritual condition. The novel's epilogue returns to Tom on Christmas Eve five years later: his prediction that the world would end did not unfold. But he is married to Ellen and they have two young children; further, they live outside of Paradise Estates in former slave quarters because the Bantus—not through revolution but by newfound wealth—now hold economic power and have expelled the whites from the community. This change does not seem to bother Tom, however, and his life is generally good. He even attends mass regularly. Yet it becomes evident that he has only taken small steps towards spiritual advancement over the intervening half-decade. For instance, the confession he participates in on Christmas Eve is his first in eleven years. But this particular act, along with his participation in two other sacraments, help establish Tom's commitment to change even if he is far from perfect.

With Tom's pride having played such a major role in his former transgressions (against himself, others, and God), attending confession serves as a vital act in confirming his commitment to a new, transformed existence. As John Edward Hardy explains, Tom must be "brought low" (136) in order to prevail in the long run—he once again must rebel against his

own vainglory by humbling himself. But when he finally confesses his sins to Father Smith, Tom is hardly repentant; he confesses—or *acknowledges*, really—his many sins, which include “drunkenness, lusts, envies, fornication, delight in the misfortunes of others, and loving myself better than God and other men” (397). But he also admits to not being sorry about them, which seems a major obstacle to his continued spiritual elevation. We must remember Tom’s imperfect nature, however, and realize that he, like the rest of us, is always in the process of *becoming*. He is not a finished product, nor will he ever be. Therefore, Tom’s subsequent apology to Father Smith “for not being sorry” and his later admission to being ashamed after he is “scalded” by the priest’s objective take on his current longings must suffice for now. Tom’s participation in what Ciuba calls the “sacrament of dialogue” (168), along with his relatively recent commitment to the sacrament of marriage and recommitment to the Eucharist, affirms the spiritual transformation he has experienced; because the sacraments represent signs of God’s presence in the physical world, Tom’s actions testify to his intentions to remain on his current path towards salvation.

By the novel’s end, Tom—while far from perfect—has learned that he must humble himself in order to uphold his state of transformation. He must be willing to ask for help from others and from God, which seems to be a prerequisite of piety in Percy’s fiction. (Consider Val in *The Last Gentleman* and Father Smith in this novel: both are comfortable asking for help and prayers from others, and Tom seems to be following the latter’s lead in his new life with Ellen.) Because Tom is willing to humble himself in making such requests for assistance, he is now what Hardy calls “susceptible of grace” (138). His transformation is, like those of Percy’s former protagonists, sealed by sacrament—this time a trio of them—and while the world around him has not come to an end, he has experienced what Ciuba calls a “personal apocalypse” (136).

Tom refuses to cease work on his lapsometer, but he has abandoned Art's treatment methods and, significantly, no longer seeks the Nobel Prize. He presumably recognized that Art's treatment could only address angelism or bestialism separately but could not unite the two components to form the unique being that is man. Until he can hit on a new treatment process—an unlikely prospect, and one that reeks faintly of intellectual pride, even if Tom claims he is just curious “to figure out what I've hit on” (383)—Tom will continue to diagnose patients in hopes of helping them along their way. As Percy notes in his essay, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise” (and which, as Lawson explains, Tom has figured out as well) sometimes giving a name to a patient's malady is good enough in the present age, and Tom seems content with the device's present use (*SSL* 206; *Following Percy* 175). Although the lapsometer does not disappear entirely (like moviegoing in Percy's first novel, for instance), it has clearly slipped into the background of Tom's new life and no longer represents his inordinate intellectual pride as it did previously.

Five years earlier on Christmas Eve, Tom fell drunkenly into a golf course bunker with a woman he hardly knew, suffered an embarrassing allergic reaction, and the next day attempted to end his life. On Christmas Eve at novel's close, Tom has a new family and attends mass to say confession and eat the Eucharist, a changed man. He remains flawed—although he had previously stopped drinking, he takes six drinks of Early Times in six minutes before going to find Ellen in the final scene—but he has learned to humble himself and ask for help on occasion. When he picks up Ellen and carries her toward her Christmas gift, an expensive king-sized bed that he has spent the year saving up for, to become “twined about each other as the ivy twineth” (403), one thinks of Adam and Eve in their bower in the garden. Tom no longer embraces unfamiliar women in bunkers or on floors, but now clings to his wife, with whom he has been

united in sacrament, “at home in bed where all good folk belong.” We leave Tom and Ellen in their bower to make love in the ruins, their postlapsarian Eden, where no one is perfect but salvation comes for those who watch and wait.

Lancelot

Percy's fourth novel, *Lancelot* (1977), confronts a relatively unexplored topic in the author's fiction to this point: the nature of sin and evil in the everyday world. As biographer Jay Tolson notes, the book is "Percy's darkest, most infernal" work (362), and both Tolson and second biographer Patrick Samway point to personal troubles that Percy experienced either as an inspiration for or as a result of writing *Lancelot*. As far as the fiction itself is concerned, this work does not register as the typical Percyan search for meaning that characterizes his earlier novels, despite similarities in what we might call Percy's formula or narrative technique. Whereas Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, for instance, pursued an unspecified but metaphysically edifying understanding of his existence, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar seeks nothing less than sin itself in what he calls his quest for the Unholy Grail. But while Lancelot is the unquestioned protagonist of his tale, it is the presence of another character, who remains silent except for thirteen monosyllables in the final pages of the novel, that provides the ultimate key to understanding Lance's account—a confession in many ways—of adultery, murder, and revenge that take place at Belle Isle plantation. Although Lance doesn't recognize it, his search for the Unholy Grail accomplishes its exact purpose—he seeks evil, and he finds it—as clearly seen through Lance's actions and the response his story provokes from the laconic Father John. Because he seeks sin explicitly rather than the mystery of grace, Lancelot's spiritual journey is inverted and his transformation is then sealed by a mock sacrament of unholy communion. His quest ends not with spiritual clarity but its opposite or negative: numbness, confusion, and insanity. Yet despite the bleak outlook for Lance, his "confession" in telling his story leads to a more significant transformation in the figure of Father John, who—with newfound purpose as a

result of Lance's account of sin and evil—can actively combat wickedness by proclaiming the Good News of the Logos in the world around him.

The novel unfolds as a series of “conversations” taking place over five days, talks during which, to use Hardy's words, the “mad monologist” Lance relays to the silent Father John the events from a year prior that landed him in his current cell at the Center for Aberrant Behavior (141). Because most of the action occurs as recollection rather than in the present tense, the structure of the novel is closer to that of *Love in the Ruins*, but the plot once again adheres to the traditional Percyan formula of three phases of development for the protagonist. Lance knowingly explains these phases, which he describes in terms of “lives” and “worlds,” while talking to Father John: “I began a new life over a year ago....Now I believe there will be a third new life, just as there are three worlds, the old dead past world, the hopeless screwed-up now world, and the unknown world of the future” (63). Interestingly, Percy's setup allows for the interactions between Lancelot and the “priest-psychiatrist” (4) Father John to serve as a second plotline in which the latter will play the hero. This second narrative will be explored in greater depth later, but for now, let us examine the story of Lancelot Andrewes Lamar.

Lance is the scion of an old Louisiana family who has inherited its once-proud plantation estate, Belle Isle. Lance is obsessed with ancestral honor and aristocratic manners, but it becomes clear that his family—or, at least, his parents—clandestinely abandoned such creeds years before. In his youth, Lance discovered \$10,000 of stolen money or kickbacks in his father's sock drawer, and he has reason to believe that his mother engaged in an affair with a distant cousin of hers, a man known to Lance as Uncle Harry, while married to Lance's father. Before meeting his second wife, Margot, Lance had wed the now-deceased Lucy Cobb, with whom he had two children, a daughter (also Lucy) and a son whose name Lance never reveals.

Before their marriage, Lucy maintained her virginity, and it is clear that Lance held (and *still* holds) her in high regard as a kind of idealized female figure. Margot, on the other hand, attracts Lance with her sexuality from the start and uses intercourse during their first meeting to acquire his favor. The two wives embody Lance's dualistic notion of women, not dissimilar to Tom More's Cartesian dilemma in *Love in the Ruins*, in what Desmond calls his "madonna-prostitute" complex (157). Lance explains that "Lucy was a virgin! and I did not want her otherwise. What I wanted was to dance with her on a summer night, hold her lightly and look into her eyes. I wanted Margot's sweet Texas ass and I wanted Lucy's opaque Georgia eyes" (85). Because, as Hardy notes, sex and ancestral honor comprise Lance's two greatest troubles (149), it is no wonder that an event involving both—his learning of Margot's infidelity through the discovery that their daughter Siobhan's blood type precludes his paternity—changes his world entirely.

Prior to learning of his second wife's infidelity, Lance had experienced an extreme case of "the everydayness" described by Binx Bolling. A gifted student-athlete in college with much to contribute to society, Lance gradually slipped into a numbing daily routine of eating, drinking, napping, and watching the news. He tells Father John, "Do you know what happened to me during the past twenty years? A gradual, ever so gradual, slipping away of my life into a kind of dream state in which finally I could not be sure that anything was happening at all. Perhaps nothing happened" (57). Even sex with Margot, which had previously been "joyous and instant," became a struggle; for the past year, he had been unable to make love to her. His impotence and the "secret wound" (67) he harbored liken him to the Fisher King of Grail legend, particularly in the sense used by Eliot in "The Waste Land" that invokes society's corresponding moral bankruptcy and sterility, which are incidentally some of Lance's favorite targets of scorn. When he discovers Margot's infidelity merely by chance—he spots Siobhan's blood type on a form

Margot had filled out and instantly recognizes a discrepancy—he snaps out of his listlessness, noting that at 5:01 p.m. everything had changed. Even his habitual need for drink had disappeared. The next morning at breakfast, Lance—like Binx noticing the items on his bureau—watches a fly step from the band of his watch onto his wrist, in the process moving a hair and sending a message to his brain which creates a tickling sensation. It is telling that Lance does not experience what he calls “the usual emotions... shock, anger, shame” (41) upon his discovery and rather experiences most directly “a prickling at the base of the spine, a turning of the worm of interest” (21). This “worm of interest” refers to some degree to general intrigue and even intuition, but as Lawson acknowledges, it also refers to his penis (201). If this is indeed the case and Lance finally recovers his capacity for an erection at this moment, the hint becomes that much clearer that Lance suffers more acutely from *spiritual* impotence than the physical kind.

With the revelation of Siobhan’s blood type as well as knowledge that she must have been conceived while Margot was attending Robert Merlin’s acting workshop in Texas, Lance possesses substantial proof of his wife’s infidelity, but somehow the information is not enough for him. He requires further proof, partly because he doesn’t want to believe the insurmountable evidence but also because of “the curious sense of expectancy, a secret sweetness” that accompanies the dread of bad news’ revelation (41). For these reasons, Lance enlists the help of Elgin Buell, an intelligent young African American whose parents had served as retainers to the Lamars, in what becomes a game of spying and voyeurism. The very man with whom Lance suspects Margot has had the affair, Merlin, is in town filming a movie with a company of actors, including Troy Dana and Raine Robinette, and a co-director, Janos Jacoby. Because Margot is acting in the film herself, she often accompanies the crew to a nearby Holiday Inn until very late in the evening, where they review the day’s raw footage. Daughter Lucy, star struck and

impressionable, has been joining them as well. After discovering the infidelity, Lance convinces Elgin to stay up all night at the motel and keep a log of the comings and goings of each person previously mentioned under the guise of concern that his daughter might be getting mixed up with drugs by spending too much time around the other actors. When Elgin returns from his vigil, the results implicate both Lamar women with a collection of individuals. During the night, Margot ventured to Merlin's room well after midnight but then removed to Jacoby's room forty minutes later while, unexpectedly, Lucy spent several hours in a room with Raine and Troy Dana. Once again, Lance responds to further suggestion of his wife's straying (and also of something questionable about his daughter) without rage but only "interest." He then tells Elgin of their next project: "a new kind of cinema vérité" for which the youth can help resolve a few technical problems (128). In fact, Lance plans to install hidden cameras into the bedrooms at Belle Isle—where the crew will be forced to stay once Lance's cousin, who owns the Holiday Inn and owes Lance a favor, closes down the motel for a few days at Lance's request—and catch Margot in the very act that so intrigues him. It is also at this point that Lance seems to shift his sights to a grander scale. Rather than simply confirming what he knows already about his wife's infidelity, he becomes more obsessed—at least in his telling it to Father John—with proving the existence of sin through his search for the Unholy Grail. By the time his quest is over, Lance will have unknowingly discovered sin and slipped into the state of madness which represents the opposite of mental and spiritual clarity.

As Desmond writes, "that Lance tries to take evil seriously is important" (159). In his monologue to Father John, he rails against the forces of moral decay and indifference that he insists characterize the current age. Predictably, Lance takes greatest issue with contemporary sexual practices—and particularly with the sexual autonomy of women. Although sometimes

disparaging of his son's homosexuality, Lance says he understands why the boy prefers men over women, what with the "voracious" nature of female desire: "[My son] told me he was terrified of all the pussy after him. All the girls want to fuck and it scared him....Well...he was too scared. He found it easier, the scared little prick, to be with other scared little pricks" (177). Lance vows to reject what he considers the amoral practices currently in vogue, which in principle is commendable, but he refuses to recognize his own participation in them. He married Margot out of lust—or, if nothing else, he seems to be confusing married love with physical desire in his relationship with her—and didn't take issue with the arrangement until, as several readers have noted, he could no longer possess her singularly. Further, the arousal of his "worm of interest" as opposed to feelings of sadness or a longing for reconciliation after discovering her unfaithfulness further confirms his participation in what he describes as the debased sexuality of the age. His troubles seem to stem from the "modonna-prostitute" duality he cannot abandon, a construction in which a female is either a lady or a whore and nothing in between. But like the Cartesian dilemma faced by Tom More, such a stark rift between categories denies the uniqueness of the human experience. Even in her dying words, Margot recognizes Tom's basic conflict: "That's what you never knew," she says. "With you I had to be either—or—but never a—uh—woman" (245).

When speaking of his vision of a new order to Father John, Lance insists (*pretends*, rather) that women will have perfect freedom in his system: "[they] will be free to be a lady or a whore," but if they do not prefer their two options, "The hell with them. They won't have anything to say about it" (179). It is obvious that Lance wishes to return to an outdated code of living that denies female agency and equality. This is because, from Lance's perspective, sex is not a mutual exchange of love or emotion but a violation that man enacts upon woman. The

“great secret of the ages” is that humans are born and die to either “commit a sexual assault on another human or to submit to such an assault” (222). Much of his theorizing relates to the Gnostic vision which Brooks, Lawson, and others have chronicled. Lance believes that because human have evolved to this point in history, where the understanding is that one sex assaults while the other is assaulted, revolution must occur to usher in his new order. Further, since he believes that God committed Original Sin against man and not vice-versa, he clearly views God as the Gnostic Demiurge (Lawson 205). But Lance’s insistence upon dualities and either-or solutions betrays his own need for a simplicity that doesn’t exist in a postlapsarian world. If sex must be either sanctified or sinful but not both, Lance denies human responsibility of choice along with free will. Not only does Lance’s proposed society marginalize and objectify women, but it also reduces human thinking and decision making to a kind of animalistic, sub-human condition.

Lance communicates his plan to use the hidden cameras nonchalantly and immediately following Elgin’s return from the Holiday Inn with his log of nighttime locomotion. Evidently Lance had been preparing for this next step for quite a while because no time was lost in transition. But although this new plan—while obsessive, voyeuristic, masochistic, et al.—does not seem entirely out of character for Lance, it nonetheless serves as a gateway to the murderous and deviant acts that later follow. Part of Lance’s intrigue as a character is the chilling calmness with which he descends into sin and evil. His sudden sociopathy makes for fascinating reading. And because the later, final phase of his downward progression is enacted with the same ghostly nonchalance as his announcement of the hidden camera machination, it is important to mark this moment of transition as a movement away from the clarity of God’s love towards confusion and spiritual chaos. By doing so, we can more clearly perceive the gradual nature of Lance’s

descent, which may in fact be the means by which most evil in the world occurs. While it seems obvious to acknowledge that Lance has likely slipped into madness by the time he lights the match that blasts Belle Isle to pieces later in the evening, his insanity is not necessarily obvious at this moment. But the point to be made is not that sin coincides with insanity. Sin can occur from what might be called a lack of clear thinking, but the greater message is that the transition to the kind of unclear thinking that produces sin often occurs gradually and unnoticed, which is reason to be alert.

One underexplored issue in these episodes is that Lance, despite his professed goodwill towards the boy, coldly exploits Elgin and exposes him to adult sexual misconduct. In his paternalistic style, Lance believes Elgin to be properly shielded from the movie crew's vices because his servant-like allegiance to the Lamar family will somehow prevent him from *really* interpreting what he sees on the film. Besides, Lance thinks, Elgin will be too absorbed in solving the technical problems Lance has posed to think much further about the videotapes. But Elgin is intelligent and clearly perceives the film's meaning. Lance briefly considers this possibility, but even then, his only concerns are selfish. Rather than expressing regret for putting Elgin in such a compromising situation, Lance feels alternately angry about the betrayal of trust (if the youth intentionally looked at the film's contents) and shamed that now Elgin knows the secret of his cuckoldry. Lance does eventually reward Elgin with \$75,000 to finish his studies at M.I.T. and to buy a house with the woman he wishes to marry, but the wrong he has committed against Elgin cannot be atoned for with cash. Oblivious again, Lance misses the warning signs of his descent into sin as he creeps closer toward the Unholy Grail.

After Margot's infidelity is confirmed again through the videotape—the inverted and confused nature of Lance's quest for evil perfectly mirrored by the unintended “negative effect”

of the visuals and the unintelligible language of the audio—Lance transitions seamlessly into the next and final phase of his plan. He discards the video equipment and then, with Hurricane Marie bearing down on Louisiana, goes shopping for emergency items. But his shopping list includes additional materials: a wrench, plastic pipes, duct tape, kerosene lamps, and other unusual supplies. These purchases indicate that he has set his new plan in motion, a plan to blow up Belle Isle and kill everyone inside the house, though Lance neglects to state his full intentions to Father John when he recalls his grocery list. Although Lance has the proof he needs on camera, he nonetheless harbors the obsession to *see* his wife’s infidelity. His claim that he wants to prove sin does seem believable as a motivating force for further action, but he is also fascinated by the sexual misdeed itself, as his “worm of interest” confirms. In the former matter—his search for sin—Lance is, of course, misguided. The very nature of faith (along with the terms that accompany it: salvation, damnation, charity, sin) requires precisely that it *cannot* be proved, and thus, Lance’s search for “proof” is futile (even if he does succeed in locating or even embodying himself what Christians understand to be sin). Significantly, by the end of the night’s episodes at Belle Isle, Lance, the consummate hypocrite, will have eclipsed the actions of those he trespasses against by committing more grievous wrongs than they themselves ever committed.

Just before viewing the videotapes, Lance seeks out Margot to make an odd proposal. He suggests that they leave Louisiana before the hurricane arrives and drive to North Carolina, just south of Lance’s eventual Promised Land, Virginia (named after the Virgin Queen, it might be noted). The proposition is strange because Lance surely knows what he will find in the videotapes, and he—as we have seen—is already making plans to blow up Belle Isle. This overture presumably means he is willing to forgive Margot and give their marriage another

chance if she will leave with him; it is possible, even, that he would forego watching the section of the footage involving her and merely focus on his alternative targets, Raine and Troy Dana, who Lance believes are guilty of corrupting Lucy. Predictably, however—and Lance seems to know the answer before asking the question—Margot rejects his offer because she has other plans: she is scheduled to act in a production of *A Doll's House* directed by her new lover, Janos Jacoby, in England. When she relays this news, Lance finally summons the courage to ask about the nature of her relationship with Jacoby. Margot unconvincingly deflects the question at first only to eventually tell Lance, “I don’t mess with anybody and you know it. Believe it or not, I’ve found something more important than the almighty penis” (174). Lance knows Margot is lying about Jacoby, but her words exceed even his worst fears about her sexuality; not only is “the almighty penis” (not just his, but *anyone’s*) something that, as she implies, can be enjoyable to her as a female, but she has also moved beyond the sexual into some other mode of transcendence (in this case, “art”), thereby further cheapening the very sexuality Lance so highly values. Lance attempts one final time to exert his control over her—not by requesting that she leave with him, but on this occasion by making a sexual pass—and when she rejects him once more, he retires to his pigeonier to watch what he calls his “dirty movie”—to enjoy Margot vicariously since he cannot have her otherwise.

Besides his interactions with Margot, Lance’s dealings with Merlin before the hurricane are also unusual. Why would he allow the director to escape Belle Isle given that it was Merlin who first cuckolded Lance (at least first in his story to Father John, though it is certainly possible there were others before Merlin) and likely fathered Siobhan as well? Given our understanding of Lance, however, it really shouldn’t surprise us. During their interactions, Lance reacts not with rage but rather courtesy and interest towards the director. By contrast, while he does not

necessarily rage against Jacoby and the others, Lance cannot hide his contempt for the crew, whom he will murder in cold blood. Further, the two men are clearly intellectual equals and kindred spirits; besides their desire to see a “turning back of the goddamn advancing Sahara” represented by Jacoby et al. (204), they share a sense of manners that is lacking in the others. Importantly, Lance has just viewed the videotape in which Margot leaves Merlin for Jacoby. Merlin may even have the Lance’s sympathy at this point: aging and also impotent in his relations with Margot, Merlin is seeing the moment of his sexual and professional greatness flicker in Jacoby’s ascendance, just as Lance has been displaced by other men in the battle for his wife’s favor. Lance’s concern has always been more about Margot’s actions than the actions of the men she has accepted into her bed, but in this case, Merlin no longer poses a threat to the sexual possession that Lance so clearly craves. Yet even in his sparing Merlin, Lance proceeds somewhat arbitrarily. At first, he feels shocked to discover that he actually wants Merlin to escape the coming horror, but moments later he essentially recants by telling the director whether he leaves or not is “all the same to me” while silently thinking “*It was*” [italics mine] (202). Lance’s indifference is, of course, heartless given the stakes, and that his death tally arbitrarily falls by one when Merlin departs testifies to his distorted state of mind. But the full extent of Lance’s warped mentality and devolution into sin and death will not be revealed until later in the evening, coinciding with the arrival of Hurricane Marie, when he blows Belle Isle to pieces.

In preparation for the hurricane, and while Lance makes his own final arrangements, Raine Robinette spearheads a bacchanalia to celebrate the coming storm—a revelry that will indeed be marked by pagan sexuality and intoxicated debauchery. Lance passes her en route to his pigeonnier, and in lieu of drink, she hands him two pills, telling him they will make him his “true self” (206). Lance takes the pills, and while his later actions inside Belle Isle as his “true

self” are telling, so are his words to Margot when he passes her one final time after leaving Raine. He asks her again to leave with him, this time for Virginia, and although she is as unlikely to accept as she is to have her virginity restored if she somehow did join him, Lance seems earnestly to desire reconciliation with his wife. When she rejects him, he pleads that any other location will suffice just as well as Virginia, but her decision is final—and her fate is thus sealed. Lance finally reaches his pigeonier and experiences the strange encounter with Our Lady of the Camellias, which seems a product of Lance’s slipping sanity as well as a possible hallucinatory side-effect of the pills he has just ingested. The mysterious woman, who at times changes her appearance to resemble Lance’s mother, supposedly gives Lance “the sword”—his Bowie knife—but such a transfer is, of course, impossible. Lance had previously stuck the knife into the cypress wall of the pigeonier as a test of his own strength but afterwards could not remove it; now, master of his crumbling domain, he summons the vitality to extract it before proceeding with his unholy quest.

Suffice it to say that Lance completes his transformation, moving from unsustainable second phase into third and final phase, through the events that occur in Belle Isle that evening. The culminating occurrence is, of course, the explosion of the house itself, a symbolic destruction not only of the Lamar heritage that so troubles him but also of his life with Margot (though the pigeonier, his *locus scientiae*, still stands). But before Lance lights the match in the house he has flooded with methane, creating that “flower[ing]” of “light and air and color and movement...[that] for the first time in thirty years...moved [me] off the center of my life” (246), he partakes in a perverse mock communion grotesquely appropriate to his search for evil. If authentic sacrament confirms the spiritual transformation of Percy’s earlier protagonists, a distorted, ghastly version of it will establish Lance’s admission into his chaos of occlusion and

insanity. In Percy's Catholic Eucharist, the bread and wine of the sacrament become the literal body and blood of Christ through transubstantiation, but Lance experiences the body and blood, respectively, when he sodomizes Raine Robinette and slits the throat of Janos Jacoby. Worse still, Lance may have gone a step further in his dealings with Jacoby. The reader learns only that Lance cuts the latter's throat with his Bowie knife, but Lance tells Father John that one of the sensationalist headlines to appear following the murders read, "DIRECTOR MURDERED AND MUTILATED!" (105). At least one critic has suggested that Lance castrates Jacoby, but if we are willing to consider that option, I don't believe it outside the realm of possibility to propose cannibalization, either—an appalling act resembling an inverted version of communion even more nearly. After all, by the time Lance kills Jacoby, he has finally witnessed in person the evil he so desired to see. Upon first entering the master bedroom, Lance finds Margot and Jacoby making love in the intricately designed bed (which he compares to a cathedral); Lance sees them as Othello's beast with two backs, the beast "striving against itself, holding discourse with itself in prayers and curses" (239). Rather than try to destroy the beast, however, Lance is fascinated by it, wishes to become one with it. He squeezes Margot and Jacoby together, which commences the sequence of events that leads to the "murder and mutilation" of Jacoby, and finally Lance lights the consequential match. When Belle Isle explodes, he is sent "wheeling slowly up into the night like Lucifer blown out of hell," murderer of four and unholy hypocrite who has sinned more grievously than those whose transgressions he intended to avenge.

So concluded Lance's quest for evil, or at least his telling it to Father John. As many readers have noted, Lance's story, spanning five days, has been a religious confession even if he himself denies it. And although Lance might not feel contrite, his story has affected the priest in obvious ways, especially given that the two men—as we learn in Chapter Two—know each

other from their youth. On the second day that Father John visits the Center for Aberrant Behavior, Lance acknowledges that he recognizes him: he recalls that they were childhood friends and college roommates. Lance begins evoking the nicknames they had for one another; he called his friend Harry Hotspur, for instance, because the priest's family's residence was a River Road estate known as Northumberland. But more significantly, he also called him Percival, playing off Hotspur's surname, Percy. As Lance notes, in Arthurian legend, Percival "found the Grail and brought life to a dead land" (10)—and was only joined in seeing the Grail by Lancelot du Lac. This particular recollection makes it even more clear that Lance's claim to have failed in his quest to find the Unholy Grail, to experience sin and evil, is inaccurate. In truth, both Lance and Father John (Percival) have beheld the object of Lance's quest through his telling of the events at Belle Isle (with Lance having lived it as well), though Percival is the only one to recognize their discovery. Incredibly, Lance is still oblivious to what he has found within himself. If, as Kierkegaard defined it, despair is a sickness of the soul—"the sickness unto death"—and "sin is the intensification of despair" (77) that can be manifested in many forms, including ignorance of one's sin, Lance becomes the embodiment of Percy's Kierkegaardian epigraph in *The Moviegoer*, which reads, "The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Lance's sickness of the soul and his obliviousness to it is particularly dangerous because of the violence it has borne others, and at times he personifies Kierkegaard's "highest intensity of despair," which results from an offensive and active rejection of Christianity and its principles (125). Fortunately for Lance, his monologue to Father John gives some indication that he does not fully profess Christianity to be an "untruth"—his seeming openness to Father John's *modus vivendi* being the way of salvation in the final pages is an example—and

with the opposite of sin being faith in Kierkegaard's understanding of it, hope still exists for his escape from despair.

Despite the lengthy consideration of Lance's transformation in this essay, it is ultimately Father John's that becomes the novel's most important change and results in his becoming the second hero—the true hero—of Percy's darkest work of fiction. The reader learns that John has been performing some sort of mission work in Africa for twenty years, but Lance's early observations indicate that he may have lost his calling or even his faith. For one, John first visits the cell wearing “phony casuals” (5) rather than priestly garb. Further, on the second day of their visits, Lance—having watched from his cell window—recalls seeing Father John shake his head after being stopped by a woman in a cemetery, evidently refusing her request for prayer for a dead relative. This denial seems especially significant given the date is November 2nd, All Souls' Day, when prayers for the departed are a featured ritual. As a priest, he would be expected to accommodate requests for prayers on most occasions, but especially on this one. On the third day, Father John's tired appearance suggests sleeplessness, perhaps his having wrestled over ideas or some important question for much of the night, and on the fourth day he has at last donned priestly attire. Finally, on the fifth day, Lance recalls having seen the priest praying alone in the cemetery before visiting the cell and also reveals that he knows John “plan[s] to take a little church in Alabama” (256). Lance even acknowledges a difference in the man, telling him, “You know, something has changed in you” (254). Although cursory, Lance has provided a portrait of Father John's transformation through his own observations.

Of course, the priest's sudden decision to speak after days of silence in his interactions with Lancelot is another clear sign of change. In the novel's final pages, he utters thirteen monosyllables—twelve yesses and one no, all in response to questions from Lance. The sudden

impulse to talk is likely a product of combined forces: the priest's own changed nature, of course, but also Lance's announcement that he will be leaving the Center for Aberrant Behavior that very day. Lance reveals that he intends to start his new order, the Third Revolution, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, taking his children with him along with, he hopes, a woman named Anna, the rape victim whose cell at the Center shares a wall with Lance's. Like Father John, Anna also refused to speak for some time, but Lance learned to communicate with her through coded taps on the wall between them. Knowing that Anna has suffered sexual violation at the hands of her assailants and survived the disaster, Lance sees her as capable of redemption; she might even "be a prototype of the New Woman" his order will need because she has overcome catastrophe (35). For a while, Anna even plans to join him in Virginia. But eventually she rebukes Lance, balking at his notion that she could be violated by a man, and says she will not join him, though apparently the decision might not be final. Although Lance does not fully admit to being wrong or at least patriarchal after their encounter, he does seem put in his place by Anna's censure, leaving open the possibility of eventual reconciliation and even redemption.

Yet at this point, Lance is essentially unchanged—psychologically, spiritually, emotionally—despite the fact that he is leaving the Center. He maintains that his quest to find the Unholy Grail has failed, oblivious to what Lawson calls "the nothing in his own heart of evil" (191). It seems troubling that Lance, who is still sick, still unremorseful of his actions, can simply leave his cell and return to the world, perhaps to commit further depravities. Hardy, for one, has suggested that Lance's release should be considered a satire of the justice system and mental health profession, with their trained "experts" that allow offenders like Lance to roam free (143-144). But ultimately, the implications behind Lance's departure may not be the item worth the reader's pursuing—akin on some level to inquiring about what happens to Kitty at the

end of *The Last Gentleman*—because something more important derives from it. A master when it comes to smoke and mirrors, Percy has subtly created a second, more worthy hero in the figure of Father John, whose transformation is evident and who has gained real insight from Lance's narrative. The change effected within him proves that Lance's quest was, indeed, a successful one, for to have a positive there must be a negative. John's decision to recommit to his faith and take up a small parish in Alabama, it seems, would not have been possible without Lance's story of sin. True to Arthurian legend, Lancelot and Percival/Father John both see the Grail in Percy's modern romance, but Percival—once again, the more pure of heart—is the only one to recognize and understand what has transpired.

If there is hope for Lance, it will undoubtedly come through the assistance of others. He does show moments of openness to new ideas in the novel's final pages—in his response to Anna's rebuke, for instance, or when he tells Father John, "It will be your way or it will be my way....All we can agree on is that it will not be their way. Out there" (257), and the priest assents—but he will ultimately need others in his life to achieve spiritual advancement. Despite Anna's initial rejection of Lance's proposal to travel to Virginia, Father John tells him that (as far as he knows) she *will*, in fact, join him in the Shenandoah Valley to begin a new life and help raise Siobhan. And as others readers have noted, the woman's name means "grace," a fitting companion for his endeavor. The meaning of Anna's name also gives one explanation for Father John's acknowledgment to Lance that he knows Anna well. The priest, having experienced it in his transformation over the past five days, *does* know grace quite well—and knows that Lance will need grace as much as anything if he is to recover his former self and find redemption in Virginia. But perhaps most importantly, the priest appears willing to help Lance personally, answering "Yes" when Lance asks if he has anything left to tell him before they part company.

Lance has acknowledged John's former influence in his life, lamenting his friend's absence in the preceding years by telling him, "Maybe I needed you worse than the Biafrans. If you'd been around all those years..." before trailing off (62). Indeed, Lance himself had been unwilling to tell his story to anyone until Father John appeared in his cell five days prior, so the priest's very presence allows him to confront his past—and in this case, make a confession—in a way that is often vital for the Percyan protagonist's spiritual transformation. Perhaps a second transformation is in store for Lance. In any case, after a twenty year absence, Father John now stands before Lance prepared to tell him something of significance, indicated by the hopeful response, "Yes."

That the novel ends with Father John's affirmation of Yes is a positive sign, not just for Lance but for the reader. The Yes prevails over Lance's tale of sin and death, his quest for the Unholy Grail. In another parallel to Grail lore, Lancelot and Father John/Percival's conversation in the cell might be seen to have taken place in the Perilous Chapel, a place, according to Jessie Weston, "fraught with extreme peril to life," where "evil...forces are engaged" (165). In the perilous cell-chapel, Father John confronts the evil of his friend's story and overcomes it, vowing to return to his life as a priest in reaction to what he has heard. Rather than bringing rain to the surrounding lands, however, Father John's gift is Logos, the word of God, promised by his final "yes." Unlike Lance's words, marked by superfluity, John's language is fresh, potent, and meaningful because of its very economy. After days of listening and waiting, Father John finally invokes Logos as a means of combating Lance's tale of sin and evil, making him the true hero of Percy's *Lancelot*.

The Second Coming

The Second Coming (1980) marks the return of Will Barrett, whom Percy readers last encountered chasing after Sutter Vaught's Edsel in the streets of Santa Fe at the end of *The Last Gentleman*. Moments prior to that scene, Will had experienced something significant, a transformation that presumably set him on a path towards spiritual enlightenment, after witnessing Jamie Vaught's deathbed baptism and conversion in a nearby hospital. And while Hardy makes an important point regarding *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* being "two separate texts" (282), Will Barrett the character cannot be likewise sundered. That Will finds himself in Percy's sequel in need of additional grace or spiritual progress indicates that he, like the rest of us, is a perpetual wayfarer always in the process of *becoming*. That is to say, as a young man at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, his salvation was not ensured merely because he was on the path towards it. (Percy's final novel, also a sequel, would seem to confirm this point as well as signal the author's interest in the topic.) Somewhere between the New Mexico desert and Barrett's adult home of Linwood, North Carolina, Will strayed from the course and now finds himself in need of repeated redemption.

Like many of Percy's dynamic characters—including the younger Will Barrett, in certain ways—middle-aged Will eventually achieves his three-phased spiritual renewal in *The Second Coming* through a series of critical actions, but they are initiated by chance or even grace. To start, Will's mysterious "falling over" on the golf course allows him to regain and eventually confront painful memories from his past, and the falling itself becomes a motif underscoring Will's (and mankind's) *felix culpa*. Further, Will learns to revalue the meaning of words that had become hollow as a result of cultural overuse through his interactions with Allison Huger, the daughter of Will's former girlfriend, Kitty Vaught. The word "love," in particular, assumes a

new meaning for the widower Will as he comes to recognize its significance in the context of his new relationship with Allie. But most importantly, both Will and Allie find themselves coming together in a mutual partnership of caring that equally emphasizes responsibility and dependence. While the spiritual aspect of their journey is hardly underway at novel's end, evidenced only by Will's declaration of intent to Father Weatherbee to marry in the church, their devotion to one another bodes well for an eventual devotion to God. In this way, Will and Allie—Percy's most rounded female character—experience an inextricably linked transformation that emphasizes their intended union through the sacrament of marriage.

Like his twenty-five year-old self who noticed, for the first time, the detail of a building's bricks while he searched for a peregrine falcon with his telescope in Central Park, the older Will—aged twenty years thence—abandons his former life of ennui when he inexplicably falls in a golf course bunker and begins to observe the physical world around him perfectly clearly. He can discern no particular reason for his tumble, yet it affords him a new perspective:

Lying there, cheek pressed against the earth, he noticed that things looked different from this unaccustomed position. A strange bird flew past. A cumulus cloud went towering thousands of feet into the air. Ordinarily he would not have given the cloud a second glance. But as he gazed at it from the bunker, it seemed to turn purple and gold at the bottom while the top went boiling up higher and higher like the cloud of Hiroshima. (3)

By virtue of his newfound powers of perception, the second phase of his Percyan spiritual journey has begun, and quickly, in the novel's fourth paragraph.

Up to this point, Will has lived a comfortable life of worldly successes: a prominent lawyer in a Wall Street firm, he married into money, retired early, entered into philanthropic

leadership, and became an excellent golfer, much admired by his upper-middle class peers at the country club. Yet despite his respectable ways and charitable intentions, and despite living “in the most Christian nation in the world...in the most Christian part of that nation...in the most Christian state in the South...in the most Christian town in North Carolina” (12), Will has apparently not made progress in a religious sense in the intervening years since Jamie’s baptism and death. The likely culprit behind his spiritual stagnation is an inability to love others, especially those closest to him, genuinely. When speaking of his late wife in response to a backhanded consolatory compliment from Kitty, he has a very difficult time articulating his reasons for marrying her, even admitting that “No. Marion was not lovely, even before she got ‘heavy’” (142). Nor does he seem to care particularly deeply for his daughter, Leslie; the two lack shared interests, and Will even unthinkingly absents himself from her wedding day when he decides to carry out his absurd plan to prove or disprove God’s existence by hiding out in Lost Cove cave. If it were not clear enough from the awkward and forced nature of Will’s romantic involvements with Kitty in *The Last Gentleman*, intimacy does not come easily for him; he requires not only a connection through shared interests but, even more importantly, the kind of selfless devotion that is possible only through symbiotic partnership.

Of course, achieving the type of selfless “love” that Will seeks (perhaps unconsciously, at first) proves difficult given his understanding that the language of love has been devalued by the prevailing culture’s debasement of its terms. In similar fashion to the complaints leveled by Binx Bolling and other characters in Percy’s fiction about the cheapening of religious language, Will issues his own charges against the word “love” in the ranting postscript of his letter to Sutter before he heads into Lost Cove cave:

...I've always been suspicious of the word 'love,' what with its gross abuse and overuse. There is no cheaper word. I can't say [to] tell [Leslie] I 'love' her, because I don't really know what 'love' means except as it applies to one's feelings for children—and then it may only mean one's sense of responsibility for their terrible vulnerability, which they never asked for....Is that love?...Now when [Leslie] finishes a Pentecostal service, she loves everybody with a swooning melting tearful smiling love which scares [the] hell out of me. Is that love? Count me out. (178-179)

Exhausted and frustrated by his attempts to understand this all-important word, Will seems prepared to abandon it altogether, which would be disastrous for him. Indeed, Will frequently considers following his father's footsteps by killing himself, and when not concerned with actual suicide, he speculates on the nature of "death-in-life," a condition perhaps more intolerable than actually killing oneself because at least the latter provides an escape from life's troubles. Fortunately, the appearance of Allie, who must essentially begin anew with language to relearn the meaning of words as a result of memory loss caused by her electroconvulsive therapy, offers Will the opportunity to experience and define the word "love" in new terms free of hackneyed expression.

Will first meets Allie after he uncharacteristically slices his golf ball out-of-bounds during a round with the golf pro, Lewis Peckham, and a few others, including his daughter's future parents-in-law. Like his recent tendency to fall down, his errant golf shots indicate a change or possibly a disorder in Will, but they also play a role in effecting his transformation. Stepping through a barbed wire fence to search for his ball, he hears a sound that allows him to recover an apparently long-suppressed memory of an event from his past: "It was the most

important event in his life, yet he had managed until that moment to forget it” (3). Recalling this memory—of a hunting trip with his father when both Barretts were wounded by his father’s shotgun through curious circumstances—commences a series of flashbacks for Will that force him to confront the difficult truth of what happened, which he must understand and move beyond in order to experience his future unfettered from the past. After he avoids the barbed wire fence and walks further into the woods, he comes across the greenhouse where Allie is staying, and she startles him by appearing with his two lost golf balls. Their interaction teems with confusion and misunderstanding. Allie’s habitation at an abandoned property and unusual speech causes Will to believe she is “on something” and Allie fails to comprehend most of what is being said. According to Will, “She sounded like a wolf child who had learned to speak from old Victrola records” (69). Despite their misunderstandings, however, Will recognizes something familiar in her eyes that reminds him of being in Alabama twenty years prior. Although he cannot identify the resemblance, his former girlfriend’s daughter has made an impression on him, and he returns to the golf game with a beat in his step and a newfound knowledge of “what was what and what he intended to do” (71). Having wearied of the conventionality of his everyday existence, Will’s foray “out-of-bounds” grants him a new outlook on life as well as an understanding of his future’s direction through a renewed memory of his past.

Conversely, Allie faces great uncertainty about her future after Will leaves, in part because her electroconvulsive therapy has erased much of her memory up to this point. Foreshadowing their eventual union of shared dependence and assistance, Percy juxtaposes Will and Allie’s current states of being in sentences that end one section of the novel and begin the next: “He remembered everything” (72) is immediately followed by “She remembered nothing” (73). They enter one another’s life through a strange, chance encounter, yet it is clear that their

futures are intertwined through this and other hints from the author, such as Percy's decision in Part I of the novel to alternate perspectives in each of its seven sections, beginning with Will's point-of-view in Section I (and the remaining odd numbered section) before moving to Allie's in Section II (and each succeeding even-numbered section). Allie realizes that recovering her memory will play a vital role in her future, thinking at one point, "I have to know enough of where I've been to know which way I'm going" (85).

Allie's own transformation, which will become linked to Will's, began when she made a discovery between rounds of treatment at Valleyhead Sanatorium, where she has been residing for two or three years. Allie's life to that point had been focused on pleasing others: making good grades for her parents, performing acceptably in bed for her first boyfriend Sarge, et cetera. Her revelation, however, allows her to realize that she "was free to act" (36), that she did not necessarily have to please anyone besides herself. Wanting to escape the painful electroconvulsive therapy and sessions with the insufferable psychiatrist Dr. Duk, she decides to *act* after all, breaking out of the sanatorium immediately following a scheduled electro therapy session because the timing would be least expected. Following directions from a note she had left for herself, Allison heads into town with \$326.76 and plans to find her way to the estate her Aunt Sally fortuitously left for her upon the aunt's recent death. The operation proves difficult, given Allie's need to interact with others despite her inability to process abstract language, but she eventually finds her way to the estate, which contains the greenhouse where she later meets Will. Interestingly, the electroconvulsive therapy that erases Allie's memory serves a kind of ironic sacrament; Dr. Duk describes ECT (the therapy) as an "expiation for guilt" (95), thus likening the process to a religious confession. Although Allie has not committed any grievous crime as far as the reader knows, that her process of transformation begins with an imitation of

the sacrament that wipes away guilt and leaves the confessor strengthened and renewed spiritually underscores both her and Will's need to escape the burdens of the past. But Allie essentially speaks for the both of them when she realizes that at least an *understanding* of the past is necessary for a successful future.

Will and Allie's next meeting also foreshadows the trust, dependence, and acceptance of the other's assistance that will come to characterize their relationship. When Will arrives unannounced at the greenhouse carrying avocados and olive oil for her, Allie is grateful for his gift but rejects his offer to help her with other things, such as moving the stove. She calculates a value to each gesture, and she even has difficulty accepting the items he has brought for fear that she will be obligated to him in a certain way. Will, seeing her distress, strikes a delicate balance to avoid offending her while also making it clear that she could freely accept his gift: "The avocados are yours. You don't owe me any thanks. But if you did thank me, it wouldn't take anything away from the avocados" (102). Because he is simply being kind and does not expect anything in return, she can accept his gift and decide whether or not to thank him on her own. Will has made it clear that she has agency. Later, the reader sees what kind of help she can offer Will when he falls down on a subsequent approach to the greenhouse. His falling concerns her, and when he admits that he has tended to fall down recently, she says, "...I tend to pick things up. I'm a hoister" (104), implying that she will help pick him up when he falls. Like Will's, her offer is also one of genuine assistance that would not require compensation, and she feels comfortable making it because he was willing to help her similarly without conditions or expectations. The ability to accept and even request help from another is a hallmark of Percy's most spiritually mature characters; for instance, Val in *The Second Coming* and Father Smith in *Love in the Ruins* both freely and humbly request that the younger Will Barrett and Dr. Tom

More say prayers for them. Although Allie and Will have not reached those characters' level of comfort in requesting help just yet, and the type of assistance being given is material rather than spiritual, their growing ability to accept the other's humble offerings indicates an openness to the idea of advancing towards it.

Before Will and Allie can fully realize their affections for one another, however, Will devises what the narrator calls an "outlandish scheme" (165), his "experiment" to prove or disprove the existence of God by climbing into Lost Cove cave and remaining there until he receives a sign of the divinity. If he receives no such sign, he intends to die in the cave. Will relates his plan in a letter to Sutter Vaught, informing him that he (Sutter) will be the beneficiary of Will's life insurance policy if Will should die, and that his death cannot be ruled suicide by the insurance company because Will ultimately desires to escape the situation alive. He will either receive a sign in Lost Cove cave and return to the world (with the intention of helping others who struggle with faith as he does) or he will not receive a sign and die; if God exists but chooses not to reveal Himself, Will believes that such inaction "comes to the same thing as far as we are concerned" (176). It is telling that Will refers to his scheme as a "science experiment," especially given Percy's frequent lambasting of "science's" claim to a supremacy of knowledge in understanding how human beings and the world around them work. Will's plan reveals, at best, the desperation of a man grappling with some of life's most difficult questions or, at worst, a man suffering from potentially incorrigible hubris. The spiritual pride he exhibits in believing that God will necessarily manifest Himself at Will's beckoning contrasts mightily with the humility he must show in order to live in a relationship of mutual assistance and dependence with Allie—though, it should be noted, Will believes he has matters of greater existential

significance on his mind at this moment. It will require a literal “laying low” of Will for him to recognize the extent of his pride and to accept the grace that comes to him in the form of Allie.

Will enters the cave as a fog descends upon Linwood, mirroring his own mental cloudiness as his plan begins to unfold. Even the narrator proclaims, “So it was that Will Barrett went mad” (179). Inside the cave, he locates his intended resting place—a shelf of rock upon which a saber-toothed tiger had crawled to die thirty-two thousand years prior and whose bones remain in the cave—and counts the insomnia pills he brought to help him sleep through pangs of boredom and hunger. Will has everything accounted for, and he finds himself able to relax, haughtily pleased by the neatness of his scheme. Unfortunately for Will, his brilliant design fails after several days in the cave as a result of mortal physical sensation: a blinding toothache leaves him nauseated and unable to contemplate the existential questions he intended to ponder. He decides he must abandon his plan and leave the cave, but in his drugged and disoriented state and completely in the dark once he loses his flashlight, Will falls multiple times down steep inclines, nearly killing himself in the process. The falling motif once again echoes Will’s need to be cast down and humbled after enacting such an hubristic scheme, but it will come to signify something more *uplifting* shortly. Soon, Will finds himself even more disoriented, however, having started up the wrong slide in his attempt to leave the cave. Lost, confused, and fearful, Will feels himself yawn, and, without even intending to do so, he falls asleep once again.

When he wakes, Will notices that his toothache is gone, and he is able to scrutinize his surroundings with greater acuity than before. As he searches for an exit to the cave, he continues climbing the slide, imitating the Platonic rough ascent as he leaves behind the shadowy figures of disillusionment that enchanted him previously. He soon feels a breeze of air and smells the flora of the woods surrounding Linwood. As he climbs further, Will sees a collection of vines

illuminated by the outside world behind them, and although the sudden appearance of a wooden frame beyond the vines confuses him, he presses forward. Before he can realize what is happening, however, Will's weight on the rotten frame causes him to once again fall, and not delicately: "...this was a fall through air not vines or bushes, through air and color... a free-fall headfirst with enough time to wonder if he might not be dead after all...[until] he hit the table, then concrete, but not too hard, with one shoulder mostly but with the back of his head some. He shut down, turned off like a light" (205-206). Yet although this fall is painful and even knocks him unconscious, it is his fortunate fall, his own literal version of the *felix culpa*, because his plunge lands him directly in Allie's greenhouse, which had originally been connected to the cave to take advantage of its constant moderate temperature—60 degrees year-round—and enable plants to grow in all seasons. The selfless care that she shows for Will during his hour of helplessness will ultimately allow him to choose her love over the death he so frequently considers in his moments of despair.

If the location of his chance landing, beyond mere coincidence, does not spark at least a consideration of divine grace in Will's mind, it is hard to know what would. Percy underscores the significance of his surroundings, conveying the greenhouse and the items therein in religious terms. When Will returns to consciousness, for example, he sees Allie's window of stained-glass above him and thinks, "I'm in church" (206). Further, the cook stove with which Allie heats water to bathe Will has previously been described as "a cathedral of a stove" (185), a fitting symbolic image because the water from the stove strengthens and renews him. Finally, while caring for the unconscious Will, Allie is reminded of "some paintings of the body of Christ taken down from the crucifix" (214), emphasizing Will's helpless but perhaps sanctified condition. Clearly, the scene in the greenhouse hints at a spiritual dimension to their growing relationship.

Allie's handling of Will during his unconsciousness also validates her claim to be an expert hoister; she lifted him to a table with her block-and-tackle and gave him a bath with the warm water drawn from the stove she herself moved into place in the greenhouse. These actions fulfill her earlier promise to lift him when he falls, and she finds herself able to give assistance freely without concern for repayment because he has given similarly to her (to speak nothing of her growing tenderness for him). Will's plunge into Allie's greenhouse, while not the last time he falls in the novel, nevertheless serves as the culminating instance of the motif because it delivers him into Allie's care at his most vulnerable moment—when, after relying on his own talents and charms to get by in life for so long, he must accept the assistance of another and trust fully in her selfless intentions.

Naturally, the skeptical Will declines to view the toothache that rescued him from the cave as a definitive sign of anything. The narrator muses, "Whether it was God's doing or ordinary mortal frailty, one cannot be sure" (194). Like Percy's Lancelot searching for sin, Will is, of course, misguided in his quest; he necessarily cannot prove or disprove God through his "science experiment," for doing so—were it somehow possible—would alter the very meaning of God's requirement of human *faith* (the alternative being human certainty). Many critics abstain from weighing in on the meaning of Will's toothache, but Ciuba's assessment seems apt: "If Will receives any sign, it is an aching comic comeuppance" (217). Will does seem to gain insight after some recuperation from the experience, however. In speaking with Allie, he affirms the mystery that surrounds faith, declaring that a yes-or-no answer to the question of God's existence was surely inherent in the related events, but he doesn't know which it was. He has also had a revelation about the nature of their growing relationship of mutual assistance and dependence, telling Allie (while thanking her for attending to him),

...you've done a great deal for me....I don't mind being in your debt. You won't mind my saying that I would do the same for you, and take pleasure in it, and furthermore can easily see our positions reversed. What I wish to tell you is that I accept what you've done for me and that I have other things to ask of you. I don't mind asking you. There are things that need to be done and only you can do them. (220-221)

In making these acknowledgements, Will readily surrenders his pride in order to begin planning practically for a future with Allie.

Not everything is solved for Will and Allie at this point, however. Will comes and goes from the greenhouse intermittently while taking care of personal business, and although Allie experiences important revelations herself about love and sex—“[Two people] become one but not in the sappy way....one plus one equals one” (238)—the reader could not be blamed at times for doubting their eventual union. The reason for the unresolved nature of their relationship is not a lack of commitment to one another, however. Rather, it appears to stem most prevalently from Will's not having adequately or fully confronted the troubling memory of the hunting trip from his childhood. He will need to definitively confront and overcome this element of his past if he is to have a chance at enjoying, or even reaching, the future life that awaits him with Allie.

The memory of the hunting trip with his father haunts him throughout the novel, and although he arrives at what he believes to be an understanding of the incident on multiple occasions, he never fails to return to it again later with renewed interest. His obsession with the event almost leads to ultimate despair in the book's latter pages. After a series of events, Will finds himself displaced—kicked out of his house by his daughter, who has made her own plans for him—and while driving later that evening, he ends up disoriented and runs his car off the

road into a ridge in such a way that his car becomes lodged in a tree. He decides to sleep in his car while still in the tree, thinking of the two guns in the vehicle's trunk—the Greener and the Luger, both his father's—as he drifts out of consciousness. When he awakens the next day, he meanders to a local bus station and strangely becomes convinced by a garrulous stranger to catch a ride to Georgia. Once the trip starts, he apparently resolves to shoot himself in the precise location of the troubling event from his childhood. Yet something unexpected happens. While he is on the bus, he looks out the window only to be reminded of Allie: "...in the darkness of the pine and spruce there grew a single gold poplar which caught the sun like a yellow-haired girl coming out of a dark forest. Once again his heart was flooded with sweetness...a sharp sweet urgency, a need to act, to run and catch. He was losing something" (269). Startled, Will demands to be let off the bus, and once again falls—this time violently onto the pavement below—as he exits the vehicle.

His love for Allie saves him on this occasion, but he soon finds himself tempted once again by a voice from his past while in the Holiday Inn with Allie. This voice promises "the one quick sure exit of grace and violence and beauty...the ultimate come" (306), and Will finds himself heading towards the trunk of his car to retrieve the Greener and the Luger. Like his younger self before standing in front of his childhood home in *The Last Gentleman*, the middle-aged Will has recently reflected that he has no address, that he lives nowhere. Yet also like his experience twenty years before, when he became attuned to the spiritual mystery in the "extraneous" of the iron horsehead, this latter reflection is accompanied by a revelation of sorts. Instead of harming himself, Will rejects the voice from his past and tosses both guns over the boundary of a nearby overpass, dispensing himself of their temptation and choosing instead the mystery and gift of the love he shares with Allie. When he returns to their room at the Holiday

Inn, they finally make love, but the experience is more than just sex. The couple unites sexually in the way Allie contemplated earlier, but they also connect spiritually and emotionally, rejecting the extremes of Cartesian dualism like true Percyan heroes. By confronting this suppressed memory while also considering his life to come with Allie, past and future converge to offer a way of living peaceably in the present.

Will's decision to choose love over self-violence was symbolically foreshadowed before the couple arrived at the Holiday Inn. When he walks to the greenhouse to find Allie before taking her to the motel, he encounters the barbed wire fence that had first reminded him of the hunting trip, "the most important event in his life" despite his having spent years avoiding it (3). On this occasion, however, Will performs a rite of passage to his future as he moves beyond the decaying boundary: "The near post was rotten. It broke and swayed toward him. He kicked it down and walked over the fence" (297). Figuratively liberated from the burden of his past, he can now state plainly how his new relationship will function and prosper. Will tells Allie,

We need each other for different things....I fall down from time to time and you are very good at hoisting. It would be pleasant to have you around to give me a hand....By the same token, I remember everything and you forget most things. I'll be your memory. Then too, your language is somewhat unusual. But I understand it. In fact, it means more than most people's. Thus, I could both remember for you and interpret for you. (300)

Their willingness and special ability to help one another result in a mutually beneficial arrangement of assistance both given and accepted freely out of what might be called love. And even though they both believe they *might* be "in love," Allie wisely says, "Let us not speak of love yet, I'm not sure of the word" (299). Her use of "yet" is significant, as it leaves open the

possibility that they will later be able to say the word “love” to one another after stripping it of cliché and defining it anew for themselves.

It is also, of course, significant that Will acknowledges that Allie’s strange way of speaking and using language holds more meaning or value than the average person’s. After her electroconvulsive therapy sessions, Allie had to relearn language, affording her a fresh approach to the meaning of words, but she also does not believe in the idea of talking just for the sake of talking, as evidenced by her sessions with Dr. Duk when she would occasionally cease participating in the conversation simply because there was nothing to say. Near the very end of the novel, after Will and Allie have consummated their feelings for one another physically, they seem to have arrived at a new definition for the all-important word “love” that captures its significance without devaluing it. Multiple types of love—physical, emotional, spiritual—exist within and are encompassed by the overarching idea of the word. Will explains it in terms of truths and subtruths: “The single truth is I love you. The several subtruths are: I love your dearest heart. I also love your dear ass, which is the loveliest in all of Carolina....I also love to see you by firelight....I love to sit by you and watch your eyes, which see everything exactly as it is....These are separate truths but are also subtruths of the single truth, I love you” (323). With this understanding in mind, Will is able to visit Father Weatherbee and state his and Allie’s intention to be married. Further, he reflects that, as they have done with the word “love,” Will and Allie “might not only survive [marriage] but revive it” also (312).

Will’s decision to have Father Weatherbee marry him and Allie is an important one, and he will not allow the priest to reject his request or refer him to the more likely candidate for the job, Jack Curl. Will noticed something in Father Weatherbee’s eyes the first time they met, and he believes that the priest may have important information to relay to him—surely something

regarding God, though Will never explicitly states it. Unlike Curl, who talks too much and relaxes his church's theological positions for mass appeal, Weatherbee speaks softly in fits and starts and is unwavering in his theology—namely, his belief in Apostolic Succession, an esoteric notion in Curl's thinking which allows the latter to dismiss him as somewhat of an eccentric. Further, Weatherbee spent fifty years working in the Philippines, where the language barrier was surely an obstacle, if not constantly then at least in part. For these reasons, Will intuitively feels that when Weatherbee speaks, he would be well-served to listen, and that his speech—like Allie's—*means more* than the words spoken by most others. Perhaps the best equivalent in Percy's fiction is Lonnie Smith of *The Moviegoer*, whose “words are not worn out” (162) because of the labor of and urgency behind them. But in at least one sense, Father Weatherbee is also like Sutter Vaught, whom Will chased after at the end of *The Last Gentleman* as an “authority” who might give him insight into Jamie's death particularly and life's meaning generally. Sutter is invoked on several occasions in *The Second Coming*, but the reader does not hear about him beyond the anecdotes and musings of others—most notably in Will's letter before entering Lost Cove cave—and we never hear directly from him. Now twenty years later, Will appears to be making a sounder choice of advisors as he completes his transformation—this time not a solo one, but one in tandem with Allie.

In the novel's final lines, Will emphasizes his desire for another convergence—not just that of his life and Allie's in the sacrament of marriage, but a convergence of worldly and spiritual love. Many critics have observed that Will and Allie show a favorable disposition to eventually come to faith, but Will makes it perfectly clear, through a minor sleight of hand by Percy, that his intention is to serve God. As Will peers into the eyes of Father Weatherbee, he is reminded of Allie, and he thinks to himself, “What is it I want from her and him...not only want

but must have?” with the “him” referring to Weatherbee. But a few sentences later, the subtle shift in pronominal capitalization speaks volumes: “Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and *Him*? No, not want, must have. And will have” [emphasis mine] (328). Beyond recognizing his need for help from Allie, he recognizes a need for something additional to complement the discovery of love he has made with her. After almost abandoning the prospect of love—worldly or spiritual—altogether at the beginning of the novel, Will now finds that he can request, *demand* even, this new and important truth with its variations of subtruths. And after Will’s and Allie’s lives have converged, after they have experienced their inextricably linked transformations, soon to be sealed by the sacrament of marriage, physical and spiritual love will converge to form that uniquely human synthesis of the body and soul—a rejection of the extremes of Cartesian dualism. For Will, Allie is “a gift and therefore a sign of a giver” (328), and these two entities—the gift and the giver—cannot exist independently of one another. Will is right to say “I believe I am on the track of something” (326). And after accepting grace in the form of Allie, we can expect he will find it this time in his Second Coming.

The Thanatos Syndrome

In Percy's final novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), Dr. Tom More returns to Percy's fictional landscape as a slightly older version of the compassionate yet flawed psychiatrist readers encountered in *Love in the Ruins*. Both Tom and the world around him have changed in the years since we last saw him. No longer believing the end of days to be imminent, he has abandoned the lofty ambitions he once held for himself and for his lapsometer of saving the world from disaster. Vines have ceased their former practice of springing up insidiously from cracks in the pavement. And the good old-fashioned rage exhibited by many of Tom's fellow Americans has cooled to a marked docility. If Tom and his Feliciana Parish environs seem more placid in this latter-day setting, it is surely a good thing—or so one would think. Having returned from a two-year stint in the Fort Pelham penitentiary for illegally selling prescription drugs that helped truck drivers stay awake, Tom sees a change in the people around him that is at once curious and alarming. His efforts to identify the culprit of a seeming death-in-life syndrome in this “age of thanatos” (86) will test his conscience as he once again does battle with the “progressive” Qualitarians at Fedville and elsewhere.

While this novel addresses the fate of the Feliciana Parish community at large more directly than it seems to concern itself with a change in Tom's spiritual disposition, his transformation can still be seen *in relation* to its impact on that community. Tom is still a flawed man—particularly in his penchant for selfishness—but gone is the kind of pride we saw in parts of *Love in the Ruins* that allowed him to openly refer to himself as the new Christ come to redeem the world. And while Percy's usual forces are at work again in Tom's transformation—a significant confrontation of the past occurs, Tom learns to ask for and receive help from others, the presence of Catholic sacrament secures and affirms his spiritual progression—it is his

relationship with Father Smith that will have the most lasting impact this time around. The priest's all-important revelation, that the ultimate choice facing human beings is one between life and death, will guide Tom in the difficult decisions he must make and will eventually allow him to help others make their own choice between these two alternatives—with “death” not only representing a literal cessation of being but also (and most often) a death-in-life embodied by the thanatos syndrome that Tom comes to diagnose. By novel's end, Dr. More has successfully rescued the community of Feliciana Parish from ontological peril and finds himself able to concentrate on his own decision of choosing life over death through the support and wisdom of Father Smith.

Unlike the protagonists of Percy's earlier novels, including the younger Dr. More in *Love in the Ruins*, Tom has already experienced the awakening that propels him into his quest towards eventual transformation at the book's outset—and the awakening was gradual rather than instantaneous this time. Whereas the younger Tom was startled into a heightened state of consciousness when bullets from a sniper crashed through the glass pane of his enclosed patio, Dr. More of the sequel comes to newfound awareness in a manner befitting his more relaxed temperament, calmly stating in the novel's opening line, “For some time now I have noticed that something strange is occurring in our region” (3). Good diagnostician that he is, Tom has made tenuous connections between oddities that occurred in several separate interactions with his patients and even ordinary individuals in the community, and his knack for noticing minor details has apparently allowed him to make a discovery of sorts. Yet although his keen powers of observation led him to this point, he acknowledges that an element of chance was also involved, as it always is in this stage of the process for Percy's protagonists. He explains, “...if I am right, I have stumbled onto something” (4), and he later calls his idea “a piece of luck” (8).

After some time, however, it also becomes clear that Tom's time in prison may have given him an unexpected advantage in his ability to perceive social changes, even minor ones. The two years he spent at Fort Pelham was enough time to afford him a fresh view of the world around him without the danger of forgetting customs and social practices that might have accompanied a longer sentence. Reflecting on his situation, Tom asks, "Why does it take two years of prison for a man to be able to sit still, listen, [and] notice...?" (43), and although the immediate context of this remark involves finding an appreciation of his own children, his words are clearly applicable to making general observations as well. Having noticed something vaguely strange occurring in his community of Feliciana Parish at the novel's start, Tom can now set out to make more definitive and meaningful observations through his case studies and interactions with others who exhibit the strange symptoms he has come to recognize.

The symptoms Tom notices, which will eventually constitute his syndrome, are not only physical but apparently metaphysical. As Tom tells his friend and colleague Max Gottlieb, besides "a loss of cortical inhibitions....There's something else, a loss of—self—" (33). He means that those he has observed seem to have surrendered elements of themselves that make them patently human as opposed to being merely scientifically observable organisms of the animal kingdom. His patient Mickey LaFaye, for instance, who previously suffered from anxiety and would describe her fearful dreams in vivid detail, now acts tranquilly and responds to Tom's questions in mostly simple monosyllables, having lost the capacity for more complex communication. Tom purposefully begins to ask unusual questions out of context—"What date will Easter fall on next year?" (8)—and she answers not only without requiring an explanation for the strange question but also with computer-like accuracy, exhibiting vaguely sexual body language in the process. She plays a childlike version of the language game, essentially one of

question-answer or stimulus-response, not unlike, Tom reflects later, “the chimp Lana, who would happily answer any question with a sign or two to get her banana” (22)—but also with savant-like powers of recollection. The Mickey that Tom knew two years ago has been replaced by a new version, simultaneously primitive and robotic.

In the case of another patient, Donna Stubbs, Tom observes similarly unusual patterns of speech but also something more. Like Mickey, Donna speaks simplistically, answering Tom’s out-of-context questions perfunctorily with the same uncanny accuracy. She notes, for instance, that the town of Cut Off, Louisiana, is located exactly sixty-one miles southwest of New Orleans while moving her eyes above Tom’s head to consult an imaginary map. Yet while a few of Mickey’s responses and body movements contained sexual undertones, Donna performs an action that is much more overt. When Tom stands up from his desk to reach for a sausage-shaped pre-Columbian figurine that Donna has asked for, she also gets up from her chair and silently backs into him, pressing the figurine in his hand against her body. Her actions remind Tom of something bestial: “She is engaging me, so to speak. To describe her backward embrace, I can only use the word primatologists use, *presenting*. She was presenting rearward” (20). The experience is enough to convince Tom to have a drink once she leaves, his first in two years and also a violation of his parole conditions. But it also causes him to realize that he has discovered something that begs further investigation.

After some time, Tom is able to summarize the primary symptoms of the disorder he has observed. He lists them as follows:

Change of personality: From the familiar anxieties, terrors, panics, phobias I used to treat to a curious flatness of tone....

Change in sexuality: Sexual feelings more openly, yet more casually, expressed. Less monogamous? More promiscuous?...Plus, certain clues to changes in sexual behavior in women: less missionary positioning, front to front, and more front to rear, six to nine, Donna backing into me. Also a hint of estrus-like behavior in Mickey LaFaye....

Language behavior: Change from ordinary talk in more or less complete sentences...to two- or three-word fragments...reminiscent of the early fragmentary telepathic sentences of a three-year-old, or perhaps the two-word chimp utterances described by primatologists....

Context loss: They respond to any learned stimulus like any other creature but not like an encultured creature, that is, any human in any culture. Example: Ask them out of the blue, Where is Schenectady? and if they know, they'll tell you—without asking you why you want to know.

Idiot-savant response: They're not idiots but they're savants in the narrow sense of being able to recall any information they have ever received—unlike you and me, whose memory is subject to all manner of lapses, repressions, errors, but, rather, like a computer ordered to scan its memory banks. (68-69)

Significantly, these symptoms point to a loss of features that make someone uniquely human, as opposed to bestial or machine-like. Although they do not cause the literal death of the individuals involved, they do represent an essential loss of one's humanity, so to speak, which is a kind of death-in-life. When Father Smith later tells Tom about making the choice between life and death, he means the latter kind—the loss of one's humanity—just as much as, if not more than, the former. And while Tom has been able to play objective scientist for the most part,

collecting information in an emotionally detached manner, the syndrome hits home, too, with his wife Ellen's exhibition of the symptoms and later with the endangerment of his children at Belle Ame Academy, both at the hands of Scientist/Bridge-Champion/School-Master/Soccer-Coach John Van Dorn, who will be examined later in this essay.

Since Tom's return home from prison, he and Ellen have been out-of-touch, if not estranged. The stately Sears Best king-sized bed that was Tom's Christmas gift to her in *Love in the Ruins* is now in the housekeeper Chandra's room, and he and Ellen sleep in small, separate single beds in a room across the hall from their children. Ellen travels frequently and has become an excellent bridge player since Tom has been gone, winning tournaments with her internationally-recognized partner, Van Dorn. According to Van Dorn and others, Ellen seems to know the location of each card in the deck as if she were a computer calculating probabilities, which alerts Tom to the possibility that she might also be suffering from his suspected syndrome. Another indication of this possibility is her sexual behavior with Tom. When he finally convinces her to make love to him, only after she gets drunk at a Belle Ame awards banquet (presumably because she was upset to learn that Van Dorn will not accompany her to an upcoming bridge tournament in Fresno), she is more enterprising than he remembers. Not only does she request that the lights be on, but she also "presents rearward" in similar fashion to Donna Stubbs—just without the barrier of clothing this time. Tom readily accepts the new arrangement, but he does admit that it is "surprising, because we have never made love so. Her head is turned and I miss seeing her face" (52). Afterwards, she talks in her sleep about bridge terms, and when Tom tries talking back to her, repeating one of her words, "azalea," she smiles and—still sleeping—turns around so that her head is at his waist and vice versa, commencing a second new sexual positioning for them. Once finished, Tom continues talking to her, and

before he falls asleep himself, he hears her sleep-calculate the distance between Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Fresno, California, in response to his suggestion that they take a road trip. Tom recognizes not only her symptoms but also the strain in their relationship, and although he seems to some degree to be in denial about their troubles, information from his distant cousin, Dr. Lucy Lipscomb, makes him reconsider his marriage while also helping him see the widespread nature of the syndrome whose symptoms he has come to identify.

Lucy is a distant relative and divorcée who lives at an old family estate called Pantherburn. From her first appearance in the novel, it is clear that she has concerns about Tom's relationship with Ellen—several times hinting vaguely at a secret problem she will not divulge—while also situating herself to benefit from his attention should their relationship deteriorate. Although she nearly ruins Tom's marriage, she nevertheless helps him invaluablely by providing crucial information about his syndrome that will allow him to pursue Van Dorn and Dr. Bob Comeaux for potential acts of wrongdoing. As an epidemiologist, Lucy can access public health records across several major agencies, and her roomful of complex equipment at Pantherburn gives Tom the means of connecting the symptoms of his relatively small sample size to the population at large. Through a hunch, he begins checking for the presence of heavy sodium and chloride in the patients whom he suspects of being affected, and most of the results come back positive. This confirms his suspicions about the strange behavior but it also puzzles him because no accidents have occurred at the nearby sodium reactor that would account for such readings. When Lucy runs the results of an environmental impact study that should show a graphical distribution of all cases of heavy sodium in Feliciana Parish, the computer screen lights up over the region like clouds of twinkling stars, revealing enough positive tests to confirm the existence of Tom's syndrome. Tom and Lucy will not learn until later that the water supply for

parts of the area has been contaminated by heavy-sodium ions through the foul play of Dr. Comeaux and Van Dorn in their Blue Boy project, but for now the two are pleased by their progress.

Unfortunately for Tom, however, Lucy also has less pleasing information to relay to him, and she insists on doing so before bedtime, even though the hour is late. Because of her position as epidemiologist, Lucy has learned that Ellen recently (i.e., after Tom had been in prison for some time) tested positive for Herpes IV antibodies. This is Lucy's quite blunt way of informing Tom that Ellen was apparently cuckolding Tom during his time at Fort Pelham. Although Tom becomes upset, Lucy nevertheless offers him two pills of Alanone, meant to provide immunity against at least one simplex of Herpes, and informs him that she has taken two pills herself, an unsubtle hint of her openness to a sexual encounter. (Confusingly but interestingly, the reader is told earlier in the novel that Alanone provides some immunity for simplex II, not IV, but it remains to be seen whether this was a mistake on Percy's part, Lucy's part (in which case, there is surely more to be said about their likely contraction of the virus since Tom has already been intimate with Ellen), or if this reader—not a medical expert—has missed some other point altogether.) After learning the news about his wife, Tom resorts to drinking heavily, and, later in the evening, Lucy does enter his bedroom. Percy's language is vague, but it would appear that they do end up engaging in sexual activity, with Lucy atop the inebriated Tom. The next day, Tom has Lucy run the heavy-sodium results for Ellen, who tests positive, and Van Dorn, who tests negative. Tom is again puzzled, but soon he sets off on a skiff on the Mississippi River with Lucy's uncle, Hugh Bob, and the intelligent and helpful Vergil Bon to try to learn more about the heavy-sodium presence in the drinking water. Shortly thereafter, the trio is arrested on dubious charges by two local deputies, and Tom must face his parole officer, Bob Comeaux, who

reveals to him a few details of the Blue Boy project. Having divulged information about this secret project, Bob puts Tom in a difficult professional situation that leaves him to decide between following his conscience and going back to jail.

In his conversation with Bob Comeaux, the death-in-life nature of Tom's syndrome becomes more apparent. It turns out that Comeaux is working on the Blue Boy project and wants Tom to join the team, offering him a decent salary plus additional kickbacks from the Qualitarian Center provided that Tom's probation issue is resolved—a matter directly in Comeaux's hands. Tom becomes wary when Comeaux admits to involvement in the heavy-sodium infiltration of the drinking water, but the doctor does his best to allay his colleague's concerns. On the surface, the benefits of the program are highly appealing and difficult to ignore. Comeaux rattles off a few statistics from the Blue Boy pilot program, which used parts of New Orleans and Baton Rouge as its testing grounds: the program has “reduce[d] crime in the streets by eighty-five percent....child abuse by eighty-seven percent....teenage suicide by ninety-five percent....wife battering by seventy-three percent...teenage pregnancy by eighty-five percent....hospital admissions for depression, chemical dependence, [and] anxiety reduced by seventy-nine percent....AIDS by seventy-six percent” (191). Tom has to admit that these reductions are not socially undesirable—these are incredible improvements, of course—but he is nevertheless skeptical. For one, the Blue Boy team is adding the heavy-sodium without the consent of those in the pilot's testing zone. Tom tells Comeaux, “Well, there's the technicality of civil rights. You're assaulting the cortex of an individual without the knowledge or consent of the assaultee” (193). This response does not discourage Comeaux, who invokes the debate surrounding the fluoridation of drinking water from earlier in the century. Tom also asks, provokingly, “Are you still disposing of infants and old people in your Qualitarian Centers?” (199), but Comeaux shifts

the frame of the debate, explaining that he's following the laws of the Supreme Court as relates to "pedeuthanasia" and "gereuthanasia" and that, ultimately, these Qualitarian policies have the decency of the patients involved because they prevent suffering and abuse. While not entirely foolproof, his arguments can be defended on certain grounds, but one particular statement reveals Comeaux's patently anti-human stance in an alarming way.

If it were up to Bob Comeaux, humans would be reduced to an animalistic state that deprives them of their unique human-ness. He explains his hypothesis to Tom, telling him, "...at least a segment of the neocortex and of consciousness itself is not only an aberration of evolution but is also the scourge and curse of life on this earth" (195). Without consciousness, he explains, there would be no "wars, insanities, perversions—in short, those very pathologies which are peculiar to *Homo sapiens*." Tom doesn't reply, which signals Comeaux to continue talking, but his thoughts are also the thoughts of the reader. Ending wars, insanities, perversions, and so forth is a noble goal, but Comeaux's program would also destroy things like human appreciation of art and beauty, as well as meaningful communication between individuals. Tom asks him, "How about language?...You know, reading and writing. Like reading a book. Like writing a sentence..." to which Comeaux replies, "We're in a different age of communication—out of McGuffey Readers and writing on a theme on 'what I did last summer.' Tom, [school age] kids are way past comic books and *Star Wars*. They're into graphic and binary communication—which after all is a lot more accurate than once upon a time there lived a wicked queen" (197). Comeaux is right about the accuracy of such communication, but he misses the point that it diminishes human interaction to a strange hybrid of child- and computer-like exchanges. Tom's silence underscores the dilemma he faces. As his parole officer, Comeaux is directly in charge of Tom's future and can presumably send him back to jail if he wishes. Their relationship

throughout the book has been strained, so Tom knows he must act cautiously around Comeaux to avoid upsetting him. And Comeaux recognizes the power he wields over Tom. The job offer is more about keeping Tom on his side because Comeaux knows that Tom is dangerous to the project otherwise, given his opposition to so many Qualitarian measures. Tom now faces the decision of joining Comeaux et al. in their work on Project Blue Boy or likely going back to jail. Although Lucy and Max Gottlieb believe he has no choice but to take the job, information Tom receives shortly after his talk with Comeaux about another consequence of the project will make him reconsider his options even further.

After departing from the conversation with Comeaux, Tom learns distressing news about the goings-on at Belle Ame Academy, the school where his children, Meg and Tom, are enrolled. Once again, his powers of perception and his ability to make small connections serve him well, as he is able to act on a hunch to confirm certain suspicions. Having heard the deputies from earlier discuss a case of child molestation by a Mr. and Mrs. Brunette that was thrown out for lack of evidence, Tom decides to check to see if the couple is now working at Belle Ame. It turns out they are working at the school, so Tom—who was already en route to Belle Ame to pick up his children—expedites his journey. While Tom talks to Van Dorn outside the main building, he has Lucy go inside to examine some of the children in a medical capacity. What she discovers is alarming: several children have suffered genital lesions, but they also act strangely, lining up to be examined as if they were accustomed to the procedure and making emotionless, matter-of-fact sexual advances upon Lucy. Tom and Lucy knew something at Belle Ame was wrong, but the situation at the school is worse than they could have imagined.

Tom's conversation with Van Dorn also yields important information. Van Dorn is part of the Blue Boy operation, helping to distribute the heavy sodium into the water supply, but he

has a grander scheme in mind than even Dr. Comeaux, whom he refers to pejoratively as a social engineer. Van Dorn actually sides with Tom in believing that Comeaux's plan strips away an individual's essential humanity, telling him, "Tom, we have to leave the patient human enough to achieve the ultimate goals of being human" (219). For Van Dorn, the "ultimate goal" is excellence somehow achieved through the sexual liberation of Western civilization. Tom has also recently learned from Lucy that Project Blue Boy was not sanctioned by any particular agency. It appears to have been organized by a dissident coalition, which makes it more dangerous because a rogue actor like Van Dorn is capable of using the heavy sodium for his own purposes even more easily. Fully aware of the dangers of the project now, Tom will find it even more difficult to accept Comeaux's offer and stage a fight to change the system from within, as Lucy and Max Gottlieb strongly suggest. But a mysterious encounter with Father Smith atop the fire tower where the priest has taken residence will aid him most directly in making his choice.

Father Smith, who heard Tom's confession and gave him advice for how to live a life in closer connection with God at the end of *Love in the Ruins*, has been acting strangely of late. He formerly ran St. Margaret's Hospice, but that operation was shut down after the government refused to provide Medicare funds for hospice stays. (Qualitarian Centers are still eligible, of course.) The priest has taken refuge in the fire tower, with only six square feet of space, and when he saw Tom for the first time in years, earlier in the novel, he insisted on telling him how "words don't signify....the words have been deprived of their meaning" (118). Using language opposite to that of Will Barrett in *The Second Coming*, who proclaimed that the gift of Allie implied a giver, Father Smith maintains that if words have been deprived of their meaning, there must be a depriver—or, sometimes, an evacuator, who has evacuated meaning from the words—meaning Satan and the evil in this world. Because the use and meaning of language is such an

important topic in Percy's work, the reader knows that Father Smith has important information to relay to Tom, but most other characters—and, occasionally, Tom himself—believe that the priest is either depressed or losing his mind. When Father Smith speaks of signifying, he is, of course, referring to triadic interactions, which John Desmond helpfully explains in *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, and which Percy considered to be a uniquely human trait—as opposed to dyadic interactions, which other organisms use and can be characterized as “stimulus-response” interactions. By way of explaining signification to Tom, the priest mentions the triangulation technique he uses to call in the location of fires he spots from the tower—an appropriate pastime for a man as concerned with the Apocalypse as the Father Smith evidently is. Since using language (a triadic rather than dyadic interaction) is a uniquely human activity, the “evacuation” of meaning from words represents individuals' reduction to a simpler organismic state, one of dyadic rather than triadic interactions, which in Percy's writings means a loss of human “selfness” and a kind of death-in-life or self-less existence.

When Tom reaches the fire tower this time, he learns from Father Smith's assistant that the priest “had a spell yesterday and hasn't moved since” (231). Tom decides to give him a quick physical exam and, through the priest's reactions, discovers that he is *choosing* not to talk or eat rather than suffering from true apoplexy. Tom is able to snap Father Smith out of his unresponsive state by a simple but important act of humility: he asks the priest for his help. This seemingly small request demonstrates the progress Tom has made in overcoming his pride since *Love in the Ruins*; it is difficult to imagine the Dr. More of a few years prior putting aside his own ego (or accepting that others may have advice that he himself hadn't yet considered) to request such assistance. The plan works, but Tom is not able to ask the question he had intended to ask because the priest immediately informs him, “I'm afraid I'm going to have to tell you

something....Something happened to me in Germany. I have never told anyone” (238). Tom attempts to leave before the story starts, but the priest—like Coleridge’s mariner—will not allow it, and Tom is soon drawn into the story, which Percy sets apart in the text as “Father Smith’s Confession.”

This confession achieves several purposes in the context of Percyan transformation, and although the message is Father Smith’s, Tom’s presence allows him to benefit from the experience. In fact, Father Smith’s and Tom’s consciences appear to be linked in an uncanny way at times. Besides this moment, Tom—after hearing Father Smith make an out-of-context remark about Germany earlier in the day—dreams vividly about an experience in the country during his fateful night at Pantherburn. When Tom awakens, he reflects that he’s never been to Germany, so the “recollection” must have been spurred by Father Smith’s comment. In any case, this “confession” of course holds sacramental importance and it also allows Father Smith to confront a troubling element of his past—two common requisites for spiritual transformation in Percy’s fiction. The priest recalls visiting distant cousins, the Jägers, in Germany in the 1930s, in a university town where the father, Hans, was a professor of psychiatry. Dr. Jäger and his friends—including distinguished psychiatrists visiting for the summer—were cultivated, charming, and pleasant. Father Smith notes that Dr. Jäger “had nothing to do with the Nazis” (239). The priest recalls enjoying the company of these men, but he was most drawn to Hans’s son, Helmut, who was eighteen years old and training to become part of the Wehrmacht through his service in the Schutzstaffel. The teenaged Smith found himself captivated by Helmut’s devotion to his country, his willingness to die for a cause, and the sense of honor that accompanied his calling to service. Before Smith departed Helmut’s company, his cousin took him aside in a powerful mock ritual, handing him a bayonet with the inscription *Blut und Ehre*

and saying, “I wish you well. I think I know you. We are comrades” (248). After relaying this information, Father Smith tells Tom,

This is my confession. If I had been German not American, I would have joined him. I would not have joined the distinguished Weimar professors....I would have gone to the Junkerschule, sworn the solemn oath of the Teutonic knights at Marienberg, and joined the Schutzstaffel. Listen. Do you hear me? *I would have joined him.* (248-249)

Father Smith’s point is that he was so enthralled by the energy of the German movement that he could have easily been absorbed into it like his cousin who joined the SS, and thus would have been at least complicit—if not more—in the atrocities of the Holocaust that occurred in the following years. But when he asks Tom, “What do you think?” (252), Tom is not horrified or even terribly moved—he simply explains the vividness of Father Smith’s recollection in medical terms and then insists he must be leaving. This reaction prompts Father Smith to deliver his “footnote,” in which he explains his role in the liberation efforts at the end of World War II as an infantry lieutenant in the 3rd Division of the Seventh Army. Upon liberating a well-known hospital outside of Munich where Dr. Jäger had been working during the war, Smith learns that his relative had been part of a “special department” at the hospital, one that euthanized children with mental illnesses. The priest tells Tom that he was not outraged or even very much affected at the time upon learning this troubling information, but “only later was I horrified. We’ve got it all wrong about horror. It doesn’t come naturally but takes some effort” (254). The connection ought to be clear to Tom—before his footnote, Father Smith called Tom’s colleagues “The Louisiana Weimar psychiatrists” (252)—but it is difficult to say how much of the lesson Tom understands. The priest’s final words to him, however, provide Tom the advice he needs at this

crossroad in his life. In response to Tom's question about why he became a priest, Father Smith shrugs and says, "What else?...In the end one must choose—given the chance....Life or death. What else?" (257). Almost spoken as an afterthought, these words, this choice, will guide Tom in his future actions and allow him to help others in the community make the important choice of life over death.

The novel wraps up if not quickly then at least somewhat predictably following Tom's conversation with Father Smith. Tom receives more pressure from Bob Comeaux to join his team, including a direct threat to send him back to Fort Pelham if he refuses the job offer. Tom, Uncle Hugh Bob, and Vergil Bon use the river to return to Belle Ame and, in a scene only comic on the surface, they catch the pedophiles and turn them over to the sheriff. Tom emerges triumphantly, saving Comeaux's son, Ricky, from Belle Ame through his efforts, and eventually it is Comeaux who finds himself in trouble for defrauding the federal government through his secret plans for Project Blue Boy. Tom and Max Gottlieb propose a gentleman's agreement that would allow Comeaux to leave town quietly if he shuts down the heavy-sodium shunt and diverts next year's funds for the Qualitarian Center to St. Margaret's Hospice so that it can reopen under Father Smith's guidance. Tom and Ellen reunite, and life is good again.

Percy's satirical intent also becomes fully clear in the book's final chapters. Surely it is an indictment of the popular and political culture that, following being sentenced to ten years at Angola, the maximum security prison, upon recovering sufficiently from his time with Eve the gorilla to receive a proper trial, Van Dorn pens a best-selling memoir—*My Life and Love with Eve*—that wins him popular acclaim and a pardon from the state governor, followed by lucrative television deals and a spot on the national talk-show circuit. But more significantly, Percy could not be more direct about the dangers of programs like Project Blue Boy. To speak of Comeaux's

involvement, his social planning agenda leads to a dehumanized existence, at once bestial and robotic, a death-in-life experience because one's essential humanness is forfeited. When Comeaux proudly shows Tom—from an elevated deck—a view of hundreds of sodium-dosed black men and women picking cotton in the fields at Angola, singing, “Swing low, sweet chariot” (266), the reader is reminded not only of the disparity in incarceration rates between blacks and whites, but also that the social engineer's “improvement program” results in nothing but a slavery of the self. Percy would likely agree with Comeaux's assessment of the decaying social fabric of America, but he warns us that broadly applied theoretical solutions and a widespread reliance on substances are not the answer to society's ills.

The other side of Project Blue Boy, Van Dorn's goal to sexually liberate Western civilization, fails similarly. Besides resulting in the epidemic-like spread of sexually transmitted diseases (his name is John V.D., after all), his design—according to Percy, it would seem—naturally tends toward unquestionably perverse acts like the abuse and molestation of children at Belle Ame. That the perpetrators regress to performing ape-like actions when fed a heavy-sodium cocktail themselves shows, once again, the subhuman quality of life not only on heavy sodium but also under Van Dorn's proposed sexual liberation. Through some combination of heavy sodium and perverse sexual preferences, Van Dorn even ends up performing the act with Eve, his gorilla mate, in the months following the Belle Ame raid, a fitting outcome. All of these elements—from the *real* deaths occurring in the pedeuthanasia and gereuthanasia programs at the Qualitarian Center to the death-in-life nature of existence under heavy sodium—comprise Tom's thanatos syndrome. That he is responsible for ending Project Blue Boy and running off various offenders from Feliciana Parish reveals the choice he made in Father Smith's life-or-

death dichotomy as well as his commitment to helping others in the community around him choose similarly.

Although Tom's relationship with Ellen was in doubt, their reconciliation—an affirmation of the sacrament of marriage—plays a role in his spiritual transformation, certifying and sanctifying it as sacraments are wont to do in Percy's fiction. Tom himself admits that a relationship with Lucy would not have worked out, but Percy also implies that the union of marriage is too significant and important to discard lightly. It helps that the matter of their infidelity essentially becomes negligible. Ellen, who has unknowingly received heavy-sodium doses, is a victim of Van Dorn; she is just as blameless as the abused children at Belle Ame Academy. Tom's situation is murkier, but he appears to be a victim of predation as well. Lucy intended to seduce him from the start, and she entered his bed uninvited that fateful evening—assuming a dominant position while at it—when Tom was heavily intoxicated and at his most vulnerable, having just learned of Ellen's positive test for Herpes IV antibodies. Tom and Ellen's reconciliation does not mean that their relationship is perfect—far from it. But their willingness to work on it—or rather, Tom's willingness, since he is the only one with experience in the Catholic tradition—implies a serious commitment to marriage as a sacrament of God, which is a hallmark of the Percyan transformation.

Yet despite his renewed commitment to Ellen, it seems once again to be his friendship with Father Smith that makes Tom's final transformation possible. Their relationship is one of *caritas*, charity in the Christian sense, and both men share the ability to ask for and rely upon help from the other, which is of course a mark of humility. Romano Guardini's epigraph from *The Last Gentleman*, invoking the "love which flows from one lonely person to another," seems more appropriate in this context than it perhaps ever did in describing the young Will Barrett's

relationship with Sutter Vaught, Val, or Kitty. Tom occasionally helps Father Smith perform Mass at the hospice, and although Tom claims to no longer know what he believes in a religious sense, the priest tells him, “It is only necessary to wait and be good of heart” (363) and “You are on the right track. I have watched you. Carry on. Keep a good heart” (366). Further, Tom—by virtue in part of *not* having made any such claim this time around—is in some ways the new Christ he wanted to be in *Love in the Ruins* because of his commitment to helping others choose life over death in the world around him.

The novel closes with Mickey LaFaye back on the couch in Tom’s office after recovering from heavy-sodium intoxication. Her vivid dreams have returned, and in them she sees a stranger, not terrifying but nevertheless unknown to her, a secret part of herself perhaps. It is January 5th, the eve of Epiphany in the church’s calendar, and Tom is scheduled to help Father Smith perform Mass the next day. Something prophetic looms in Mickey’s message, and Tom urges her to speak further about the stranger in her dreams. As she opens her mouth to respond, the narrator interrupts with the novel’s—and, in his fiction, Percy’s—final line: “Well well well” (372). We are left, like Tom More, on the brink of *something* ourselves, perhaps even an epiphany.

Conclusion

If this study has achieved anything, hopefully it has added a new ray to the accumulated light, cracked open the door a trace further, when it comes to our understanding of the fiction of Walker Percy. The task is a collective one, for only by approaching his work many times and from a variety of angles can we begin to form a coherent picture. My project offers an examination of the transformations accomplished by Percy's protagonists, with the bigger aim that such an investigation will lead to even greater insights. Although these transformations occur by various means and some feel more resolved than others at the novels' closings, they are all spiritual in nature—which is to say that the characters, even if a few of them might deny religious conviction, consider at least to some degree the purpose of their lives in a metaphysical sense. Further, each novel adheres to what might be called the Percyan formula of transformation, an understanding of which will allow us to see more clearly how the protagonistic change occurs.

This three-staged process begins with the character noticing the physical world around him in a new way, “coming to consciousness” to see details of his environment that he would normally overlook. Binx Bolling, for instance, considers the items on his bureau one Wednesday morning in *The Moviegoer*, and Will Barrett observes the ominous shape of the clouds after falling down on the golf course in *The Second Coming*. Then follows the period of explicit seeking, a liminal and unsustainable stretch of time in which Percy's hero searches for knowledge and insight that will form the basis of his new, transformed life. If any fictional character ever faced an unsustainable predicament, it is surely Tom More in his Fourth of July weekend getaway with three women at the Howard Johnson's. The final stage, which marks the completed transformation, is actually more of a beginning than an ending, as the character finds

himself equipped to meet the world with a newfound sense of purpose and understanding—possibly to fail, yes, but at least better prepared for the endeavor than he was previously. Will Barrett, for instance, is unsure of exactly what he has just witnessed in Jamie Vaught’s hospital room—though he knows it was *something*—at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, and Lance Lamar faces an uncertain future as he departs from the Center for Aberrant Behavior for the Shenandoah Valley in the final pages of *Lancelot* (his only chance of true progress surely coming through the words of his old friend Father John, should Lance choose to heed them). Yet even after recognizing the protagonist’s three-phased development, readers may still find Percy’s unapologetically open-ended conclusions just as confusing as they are stimulating; thus, also understanding the requisite components of the hero’s transformation will shed greater light on his particular situation.

While many elements combine to elicit change in Percy’s major characters, the three common factors are memory, humility, and sacrament. They blend differently in each novel, of course, but their combined presence allows the protagonist to achieve transformation. In learning that he cannot follow his father’s example after hearing stories about his family’s past and by foregoing his self-absorbed ways to put others before himself in *The Moviegoer*, for instance, Binx is able to marry Kate and begin a relationship that is more robust than many critics have previously conceded. Will Barrett confronts the troubling memory of his father’s suicide in both *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* to find that, although he will not choose suicide himself, he must rely on the assistance of others (and provide similar assistance himself) if he is to establish meaningful relationships in his life—with Sutter and Allie, respectively. The change he experiences after Jamie’s deathbed baptism and conversion as well as, twenty years hence, his intention to unite his life with Allie’s through marriage show how

sacraments serve to establish his spiritual transformation. Lance Lamar undergoes an inverted variant of the theological quest in *Lancelot*, seeking evil rather than something metaphysically edifying, but his “confession” to Father John—as an element of the sacrament of penance—serves to humble him while confronting, for the first time, his haunting story from Belle Isle a year prior. Father John may, in fact, be the true hero of Lance’s tale, but Lance himself maintains a slight chance of continuing on the path towards salvation if he will listen to the words of the priest, his childhood friend. Finally, Dr. Tom More overcomes his pride and confronts the painful memory of his daughter’s death before eventually marrying Ellen in *Love in the Ruins*; years later, he appropriates Father Smith’s story of a trip to Germany to learn from the past while recognizing the need to accept proffered help from others and give freely of himself as well. His recommitment to his marriage with Ellen once again seals his transformation while illustrating the gravity and solemnity with which Percy viewed the Catholic sacrament of matrimony.

By reading these novels to comprehend the nature of the protagonist’s transformation, we begin to see that Percy’s endings are more resolved than they are frequently given credit for being. In accepting the claims this project sets out to make, we obtain a greater—if necessarily incomplete—understanding of Percy’s fiction, touching on the mystery ourselves that so many of his characters seek to locate in their own spiritual searches. And like these characters, we emerge from the experience changed, transformed—the path ahead of us still difficult but our approach more hopeful than before.

My journey with Walker Percy began when I was fifteen, reading *The Moviegoer* as a summer assignment on a long road trip to my first year of boarding school in Virginia. At that

time, I was yet to make “the breakthrough into the delight of reading” that Percy describes in his essay, “Another Message in the Bottle” (*Signposts in a Strange Land* 356). I was one of the frustrated readers mentioned in the Introduction to this project. But like he has for so many others, Walker Percy stuck with me. I am grateful and the better for it.

Fifteen years later, standing above Percy’s grave at the Saint Joseph Abbey Cemetery near Covington, Louisiana, I was reminded, as I am now at the conclusion of this project, that endings are only beginnings for Percy. A small rectangle of stone bearing a light inscription marks his earthly resting place, but that’s not the conclusion to his story. Yet what, one must wonder, remains to be told? Percy died twenty-six years ago, in 1990; will his fiction remain of interest to future students of literature, especially given the relatively recent broadening of our literary canon to include more authors who cannot be subsumed under the category of dead white male? Considering Percy’s apocalyptic views, which are very much present in his fiction, how will others approach his work if the twenty-first century fails to produce any tangible signs of a messianic presence, or if scientism makes even further inroads? Will some continue to watch and wait, like Father Smith in the fire tower, with the novels of Walker Percy by their sides? I offer a modest hope, which is that, for all Percy’s concerns with the ills of contemporary society in his novels, it is the mystery he so deftly closes upon—that unspoken, undefined secret his characters approach but which unfailingly leaves them, like us, on the brink of revelation, pulling away only at the last moment—that will appeal to current and future readers alike. For, after all, curious creatures that we are, who among us can resist pursuing Percy’s unabating question, *What happened back there?*

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