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Walking Percy's tightrope : from alienation to affirmation

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Walking Percy's Tightrope: From Alienation to Affirmation

By

Karen Y. Carter

Master of Arts in English

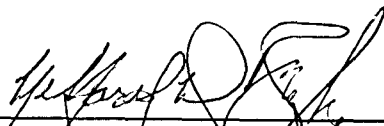
University of Richmond

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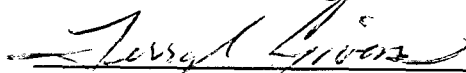
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Walker Percy's Binx Bolling, of The Moviegoer, and Will Barrett, of The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming, are two Southern existential seekers who move from alienation and despair to create lives of meaningful commitment with the promise of fulfillment. Because of their similarities, we can trace a development in Percy's fiction which parallels the questor's development. These three books move from a preoccupation with death-in-life to a discovery of self and on to individual and cultural rebirth. Thus, The Moviegoer (1960) is about alienation and despair; The Last Gentleman (1966) is about the possibility of human relationships, friendships that develop out of an awareness of despair; and The Second Coming (1980) is about love and the promise of renewal. For Percy, the key to this development lies in the act of naming, or "symbolization": in the mystery of language and symbol lies the answer to man's being and purpose.

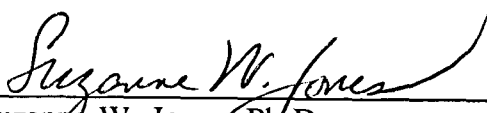
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.



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Walking Percy's Tightrope: From Alienation to Affirmation

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A.B., University of Illinois, 1976

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
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I.

INTRODUCTION: SOME PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

When Walker Percy accepted the National Book Award in 1962 for *The Moviegoer*, he compared his posture as novelist to that of the pathologist who suspects something is wrong.

. . . the pathology in this case has to do with the loss of individuality and the loss of identity at the very time when words like the "dignity of the individual" and "self-realization" are being heard more frequently than ever. Yet the patient is not mortally ill (SP 246).

The twentieth century, according to Percy, has been overtaken by a sense of "malaise rather than exuberance, by fragmentation rather than wholeness" (206). Observing that something has indeed gone wrong, Percy, a physician as well as a novelist, maintains that it is the task of the serious novelist, "if not to isolate the bacillus under the microscope, at least to give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable" (206).

According to Percy, the modern age suffers from a strange spiritual malady. Our world has been transformed by technology. Dazzled by the victories of science, we have come to rely on the "experts" to fix whatever needs fixing, to cure whatever ails us. Yet what happens when we experience the "common complaint of the age, the loss of meaning, purposelessness, loss of identity, of values," (SP 211) when we feel that something is wrong with ourself in the deepest sense? The layman, in his idolatry of

science, gives up his sovereignty and turns to the experts for a cure. The pervasive isolation, loneliness and alienation of modern man may be traced to this surrender to scientists, technologists, and specialists (214).

Before Percy, Kierkegaard observed that we have lost our ability to choose inwardness and exert our selfhood. The real cultural crisis, says Kierkegaard, is the loss of the self, the threat of depersonalization in the face of a massive, urbanized, technological society. We have relinquished the individual in favor of the group, avoiding personal encounter. We have lost our ability to act based on our capacity for "inwardness," the ability to act on one's inner convictions. "The result is a bland existence in which all life is reduced to appeasement and the studied avoidance of conflict . . ." (Bedell 19). The modern age lacks passion and meaning. It is infected with the malaise of indifference or alienation.

Percy's debt to the European Christian and secular existentialists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly to Kierkegaard and Marcel, has been well documented by Robert Coles and others. In Percy's novels these abstract speculations concern Percy only in so far as they pertain to human experience. For Percy, "Being," in the existential sense, is a lifelong search with no final answer. It cannot be separated from ordinary life. Yet, Percy observes that it is possible to live your entire life without ever being aware of "the search." In *The Message in the Bottle* Percy describes such a man, a commuter on a train who is,

... as the expression goes, fat, dumb, and happy. Though he lives the most meaningless sort of life, a trivial routine of meals, work, gossip, television, and sleep, he nevertheless feels quite content with himself and is at home in the world (134).

In contrast, he describes a second commuter, who leads a similar life but who suffers from feelings of homelessness or anxiety, which he does not understand. He feels

... quite lost to himself. He knows that something is dreadfully wrong. More than that, he is in anxiety; he suffers acutely, yet he does not know why. What is wrong? Does he not have all the goods of life? (134)

What is wrong, says Percy, is that human existence, as understood by Judeo-Christianity, is "by no means to be understood as the transaction of a higher organism satisfying this or that need from its environment, by being 'creative' or enjoying 'meaningful relationships,' but as the journey of a wayfarer along life's way. Human alienation is "first and last the homelessness of a man who is not in fact at home" (24). In contrast to an organism responding to his environment, the human individual may choose his mode of being in the world. Yet to whatever degree he is able to "make do," or satisfy his biological and psychological needs within his culture, he must never forget that something is missing. Like Jasper's "shipwrecked man" and Heidegger's "castaway," his feelings of being sick, or homesick, or lonely, or anxious must serve as a reminder that he is "in the last analysis a castaway, a stranger who is in the world but who is not at home in the world" (142). He must turn his life into a search for news of where he came from, of who he is, and of what he must do (149). "The castaway is

he who waits for news from across the seas" (146). The news will be meaningless to the man who, like the first commuter, is a castaway but believes himself to be at home in the world, for he does not recognize his predicament. It is only news to a castaway who knows himself to be a castaway.

With Kierkegaard this search becomes overtly religious. The piece of news that will deliver Kierkegaard's castaway attempts to answer what the individual must do in order to come to terms with the Infinite. In *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard describes the progression of the individual seeker as he attempts to place himself with regard to the Infinite. Because Percy's characters struggle to progress through Kierkegaard's stages,¹ it is helpful to elucidate them briefly.

Kierkegaard describes three stages, three "existence spheres" or "modalities": the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each stage offers the questor an increasingly more satisfactory answer to how an individual should live his life. Kierkegaard intended these stages to be descriptive, to be helpful not as metaphysical abstractions, for "there is no man who exists metaphysically" (Bedell 79), but rather as they describe concrete possibilities and elucidate the particular way in which an individual may inhabit his own peculiar sphere.

An individual who dwells in the "aesthetic" modality is one who has abdicated all responsibility for his own life and allows his destiny to be determined by forces outside his control. He finds meaning for his existence outside of himself. He lacks sufficient

internal resources and so he depends on external stimuli to make sense of his environment, and for the substance and meaning of his life. He lives for the outward pleasures of the moment, in the category of the immediate. He recognizes himself only by his dress, by externals. He is Percy's content commuter, the castaway who is unaware he is a castaway. He refuses the radical commitment which, for Kierkegaard is the essence of Christianity; however, he is unaware that he has adopted a non-religious way of being in the world. This is the fundamental cause for *taedium vitae* (Bedell 9). When momentary pleasures fail to provide fulfillment, the individual is left in despair. The "aesthetic modality" ends in despair because it wishes to exclude and deny the infinite.

If an individual becomes aware of his despair and alienation from his real self, he may seek a more authentic expression of his identity. Like Percy's anxious commuter, the castaway who is aware he is a castaway begins to search for clues of who he is, where he came from, and a better way to live. He has entered the ethical sphere. Kierkegaard described the sole ethical interest as "the interest in one's reality" (Hobbs 39). The individual who dwells in the "ethical" modality believes he can choose himself and choose unalterably what his relationship to the external world will be. He can choose his best, ideal self. He is confident that his decisions are powerful and authentic because they are his. He does the good thing because he knows the good thing, according to the principles of civilized societies. The ethical man attempts to achieve the

ideal through action. However, the ethical modality ends in despair because it ends in exhaustion. It is not possible for an individual to live up to its infinite requirements. It wishes to do what it cannot: choose the Infinite by way of heroic action (Bedell 88).

For Kierkegaard, the Christian revelation accounts for our origin as well as our destiny. In contrast to the ancient Greek world, which was humanly, finitely conceived, a "psychically" determined "Cosmos" or "order" characterized by rationality, harmony, communion and orderliness, the world inaugurated by the Christ event is "spiritually" determined, a "pneumatically qualified" universe. Whereas the Greek Cosmos was contained and orderly, the "pneuma" or spirit of the Christian West is infinite, powerful, and absolutely transcendent to the world. Time in ancient Greece was cyclical and repetitious. In the Christian West, time rushes into infinity. The Spirit, or God, is the foundation of freedom to be or choose one's existence. Whereas freedom for the Greeks meant emancipation of the intellect from the prison house of the body, for Kierkegaard freedom means the capability of the whole man (the body-mind totality) to escape the narrowness of the egocentric life. The Spirit (infinite), instead of the intellect (finite), directs man. The individual who lives in a spiritually determined universe without coming to grips with the spirit will necessarily be alienated from the ground and source of his existence.

Kierkegaard believed that the only way for an individual to enter the religious sphere was to make a dramatic leap. He saw the religious as a paradox wherein first the

individual must completely surrender himself to God (i.e. forfeit the ethical, or the world) followed by a dramatic leap of faith whereby the ethical, the world, is returned to him by God. He defined "faith" in *Fear and Trembling* as "the paradox that inwardness is higher than outwardness" (Hobbs 39). The religious is a paradox whereby the Infinite appears in history; and only in the religious modality is the Infinite present in His paradoxical glory. One discovers authenticity not apart from but in the midst of the historical, the everyday world where God is present. The religious fuses existence in the finite world with transcendence to the infinite, and focuses on the particular or individual relationship between God and Man. It is the only valid alternative to alienation.

Percy's castaway who searches for news from across the seas has entered the religious sphere. For Percy, as well as for Kierkegaard, the seeker must choose inwardness over outwardness in order to reunify his fragmented self so that he may begin to resolve subjectively the problem of how to live and how to die (Hobbs 39). It must be noted, however, that Percy does not necessarily stress the ethical as a separate stage. His protagonists tend to make the break with immediacy by choosing despair and immediately beginning the search. The search is an inner call, and does not have to be motivated by an explicit sense of God (Taylor 9).

Kierkegaard never intended that an individual would inhabit a single stage exclusively, and in fact, an individual would typically combine characteristics of two or

more categories. Thus, Kierkegaard may describe an individual as "ethico-religious" or "aesthetical-ethical" or "aesthetical religious." And the "progression" which is implied by Kierkegaard's "stages" may take a variety of turns, and is subject to the same contradictions as life. In contrast to Hegel, whose thesis, antithesis and synthesis attempts to rationalize the universe, Kierkegaard accepted the conflicting poles of life and refused to synthesize them or attempt to rationalize life or make it conform to some informing "Principle" or overarching "Idea" (Bedell 87). This is what is meant by the "dialectical" in his works. Percy is equally suspicious when any definitive answer is given to life's problems. He treats ironically those characters who believe they have found "the real right thing," (!) and refrains from setting either his protagonists or himself up as the "Answer Man" (SP 385).

Like Kierkegaard, Percy insists that the malaise of contemporary culture is due to the erosion of the traditional Judeo-Christian view of man as wayfarer and pilgrim. In Percy's view, it is the task of the artist (and especially the serious novelist) to explore "the great gap in our knowing, knowing ourselves and how it stands between ourselves and others" (SP 217). Whereas science beholds what is generally true about individuals, art beholds what is uniquely true (SP 218). Science can tell nothing about an individual as an individual, but only as he resembles other individuals. It can tell nothing about what it is like to be "an individual living in the United States in the twentieth century" (SP 213). It is the serious enterprise of literature, undertaken in hope, to explore the

options of the seeker (SP 217). Binx Bolling and Williston Bibb Barrett are such seekers.

II.

PERCY'S PROTAGONISTS BINX AND WILL: SYMBOLIZATION AND THE SEARCH

Walker Percy's Binx Bolling, of *The Moviegoer*, and Will Barrett, of *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, are two Southern existential heroes who move from alienation and despair to create lives of meaningful commitment with the promise of fulfillment. They are each honest, intelligent and courageous questors. Each is willing to confront his despair and to look honestly at his past--which often involves returning to the specific place of a particular painful memory--and his present surroundings in order to discover his authentic self. But the search does not end within. Binx and Will must accept responsibility for their lives and for those around them, create authentic values, and live with the tension of constant moral re-evaluation. Like a tightrope walk, life becomes a delicate balancing act: a fall to one side is a fall to alienation and despair with the threat of self-destruction that lurks beneath; to fall to the other side is to succumb to the comforts of an inauthentic life. From watchers and wanderers, they move to action. From alienated observers, they move to commitment and responsibility.

In *The Moviegoer*, Binx establishes the requirements for a successful tightrope walk, and sets forth the stern admonition that it is a lifetime struggle. In *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, Will offers insights into the rewards of this arduous quest as he emphasizes the importance of appreciating what is distinctly human. He offers insights into the joy of authentic relationships, and the promise of creative cultural

revival such relationships can generate. Because of the similarities between Binx and Will, we can trace a development in Percy's fiction which parallels the questor's development. Seen as a progression, these three books move from a preoccupation with death-in-life to a discovery of self and on to individual and cultural rebirth. Thus, *The Moviegoer* (1960) is about alienation and despair; *The Last Gentleman* (1966) is about the possibility of human relationships, friendships that come out of an awareness of despair; and *The Second Coming* (1980) is about love and the promise of renewal.

For Percy, the key to this development or progression lies in the act of naming, or "symbolization." Percy observes that the distinguishing characteristic of man is man's ability to symbolize his experience rather than simply respond to it: by naming or symbolizing things in his environment, man transcends it. In *The Message in the Bottle*, a collection of philosophical essays about language, meaning and existence, Percy explores the consequences of man's unique discovery of the symbol. He believes that in the mystery of language and symbol lies the answer to man's being and purpose.

According to Percy, man became man "by breaking into the daylight of language"

(3).

In the beginning was Alpha and the end is Omega, but somewhere between occurred Delta, which was nothing less than the arrival of man himself and his breakthrough into the daylight of language and consciousness and knowing, of happiness and sadness, of being with and being alone, of being right and being wrong, of being himself and being not himself, and of being at home and being a stranger (3).

Prior to our naming, explains Percy, an individual

is an organism responding to his environment; he is never more nor less than what he is; he either flourishes or he does not flourish. A tiger is a tiger, no more, no less, whether he is a sick tiger or a flourishing tiger. But as soon as an individual becomes a namegiver or a hearer of a name, he no longer coincides with what he is biologically. Henceforth he must exist either authentically or inauthentically. An organism exists in the biological scale of flourishing-not-flourishing; a person exists in the normative scale of authentic-inauthentic. The scales are not the same. A person may flourish biologically while, at the same time, living a desperately alienated and anonymous life, or a person may be sick biologically and, at the same time--perhaps even as a result of it--live authentically. In the joy of naming, one lives authentically. No matter whether I give a name to, or hear the name of, a strange bird; no matter whether I write or read a line of great poetry, form or understand a scientific hypothesis, I thereby exist authentically as a namer or a hearer, as an "I" or a "thou"--and in either case as a co-celebrant of what is (SP 134-135).

The new orientation which comes about from naming is no longer biological; it is ontological. It results from a need which is neither adaptive nor reproductive, but is the need to affirm that something is what it is for "both of us."

This uniquely human act of "symbolization" is the very act by which one becomes an individual. "When one symbolizes things within the environment he transcends it and becomes lord over it. That is, he becomes a self" (Taylor 96). Percy uses the example of the young child's breakthrough into language. From the moment the child hears names, understands them and uses them, he is no longer merely an organism in an

environment; he becomes a person (MB, 42-43). Autonomous seeing and symbolizing, however, is an ability that must be continually recovered. An individual may become dependent upon the perceptions of the crowd, what Kierkegaard calls "intellectual immediacy." In order to recover his selfhood, the individual, according to Percy (and Kierkegaard), must choose despair, which may present itself in the form of catastrophe or ordeal. This allows for a recovered ability to see afresh and therefore act from one's inner convictions. By choosing despair or accepting ordeal, one becomes again an autonomous self. As Jerome Taylor explains,

Accepting catastrophe or ordeal and choosing despair mean essentially the same thing. If one makes this choice, something remarkable happens. One's bondage to the many pre-formed symbolic complexes in which one rests is broken and one becomes once again a sovereign, seeing, and acting self. One has moved into what Kierkegaard calls the ethical mode of existence in which for the first time one is responsible for what one does (Taylor 97).

One moves away from the sort of death-in-life to life, and begins the search for the answer to who he is, where he came from and where he is going.

III.

WALKING PERCY'S TIGHTROPE: A DELICATE BALANCE

In the opening scene of *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling has been formally summoned by his aunt, Emily Cutrer, for one of her serious talks. Binx, a Korean War veteran who is a week away from his thirtieth birthday, has been living in Gentilly, Louisiana for the past four years. He is a handsome, charismatic, and successful stock and bond broker who, to the disappointment of his family, abandoned his earlier grand ambitions to pursue law, medicine or even pure science, in exchange for what he calls self-mockingly the "Little Way." "I even dreamed of doing something great. But there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings" (9). He lives peacefully and comfortably in an impersonal basement apartment, and lives his life according to a socially accepted pattern of behavior: the role he has accepted for himself is that of model citizen and educated consumer, defined from without. His wallet, full of identity cards, could belong to anyone.

Binx spent his four college years dreaming, watching, "lost in the mystery of finding himself alive at such a time and place" (38). For years now he has had no friends, and he spends his time "working, making money, going to the movies, and seeking the company of women" (41). An aura of malaise pervades Binx's New Orleans. Despair abounds. To escape, he tries to satisfy his sexual longings--and presumably his

need for human companionship--with his secretaries, who are also generally his movie companions. They tend to be attractive, happy, pleasant, unreflective, and eager to marry. These fleeting relationships begin as love affairs and inevitably dissolve, leaving him depressed and melancholy.

On the particular morning that the book begins, however, things have suddenly changed. Binx awakens from a dream of an incident during the Korean War in which he was wounded and near death, and the possibility of a search first occurred to him. On this gloomy March day, years later, his peaceful existence is complicated by the memory of his brush with death, and once again, this awareness triggers the possibility of a search. He awakens, like Robinson Crusoe, a shipwrecked victim, a castaway on a strange island. "And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick" (13). It is with this heightened sense of awareness that Binx pokes around his own neighborhood. For Binx, the search is a matter of life or death-in-life: "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (13).

The epigraph to *The Moviegoer* is from Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: ". . . the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Kierkegaard saw a qualitative difference in individuals' despair, as they progress, or fail to progress, from the aesthetic to the ethical and through the ethical to the religious stage (Bedell 113). This is a reflection of the degree to which an individual

is aware of his despair. The most serious cases of despair are those who are unaware of their predicament, who remain in the unreflective state of the aesthetic, who have lost sight of their individual self. For despair

. . . must be viewed under the category of consciousness: the question whether despair is conscious or not, determines the qualitative difference between despair and despair. . . . The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; and the more will, the more self. A man who has no will at all is no self; the more will he has, the more consciousness of the self he has also (113).

The despair that is "the sickness unto death" in effect shuts up the individual within his predicament so that he sees no way out at all.

Whereas we ordinarily think of death as the end, "the sickness unto death" is precisely the opposite: "Not to be able to die." It is an unending end to one's desperation; it is the permanent attachment to despair (114).

This permanent attachment to despair is Binx's death-in-life. The way out is to become aware of despair, to choose despair, as Kierkegaard's fictional Judge Williams in *Either/Or* counsels,

. . . for despair itself is a choice; for one can doubt without choosing to, but one cannot despair without choosing. And when a man despairs, he chooses again--and what is it he chooses? He chooses himself, not in his immediacy, not as the fortuitous individual, but he chooses himself in his eternal validity" (113-114).

Binx chooses despair and immediately begins his search. He explains the nature of his search: The polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God, and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics, which leaves no percentage points for a seeker. He wonders if 98% of Americans have already found what he seeks, or if they are so sunk in everydayness, or the benumbing boredom that results from repetition, that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them (14). Ted R. Spivey, in *Revival, Southern Writers in the Modern City*, discusses the nature of Percy's quest and that of his heroes. He explains Kierkegaard's influence on Percy, as well as that of Marcel and other religious existentialists. For Kierkegaard, the only cure for despair (melancholia, depression, anxiety) was a "leap of faith" (178). His "Knight of Faith" is a simple individual who turns his daily life into a search for God" (178). Percy carries on this tradition of the religious quest, like Marcel's wayfarer, "an old-fashioned pilgrim on a serious quest. He is not merely content to do what everybody else does--be satisfied with a consumer's paradise" (178). While Binx is clearly searching for God, and for signs of the mystery and wonder of life, Percy refrains from overt symbolic references to Christ or Catholicism, even if many of the characters are Catholic. Spivey explains that the

. . . chief reason for this is that Percy believes that the old symbols now fail to work for most people. He is painfully aware of the collapse of the cultural values contained within religion, education, and the family--once potent transmitters of knowledge about the symbols and rituals needed for true communication. Therefore what is

important for the protagonists of his novels is that they experience the pragmatic results of faith itself instead of what might be called "religious experience." The result is manifested in the pilgrim's gradual loss of his despair and the recovery of enough love to show a real concern, not for "mankind" in general, but simply for a handful of people met on the pilgrimage (178).

It occurs to Binx this morning that his "exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception" (18). In a doomed effort to evade his anxiety, he has allowed his life to be determined by external lures--money, sex, socially accepted behavior. His wallet full of credit cards, his "identity cards," comment ironically on his lack of identity and are part of his nothingness (284). He inhabits an impersonal basement apartment, where up until now he has chosen to lead the most ordinary life imaginable, a life in the realm of the sensuous, which he calls the "Little Way." Kierkegaard's comparison of the levels of existence (aesthetic, ethical and religious) to the levels of a house (basement, ground floor, attic) provides an apt description of Binx's situation (Johnson 140). On this particular morning, Binx chooses to give up the security of his basement existence. He chooses to acknowledge that there is something beyond the immediate satisfaction of his needs. Realizing he is no longer at home in the purely finite world he chooses to exchange the security of the "Little Way" for the tension of the search. How then does a seeker live a life? Binx is walking the tightrope, and as he inches his way forward, he must look for every clue to unravel the mystery of what he is seeking.

First he must discover himself. Unlike many moviegoers who use movies to escape, Binx uses them to explore and understand. The movies provide an opportunity for him to search his soul, quietly, unobserved and apart from reality, hence the title of the book. In the first movie this alienated moviegoer mentions, a man loses his memory in an accident and as a result loses everything--family, friends, money. "He found himself a stranger in a strange city" (M 4). He resembles the castaway in *The Message in the Bottle* who has lost his memory in a shipwreck and who, finding himself cast up on the beach, has no recollection of where he came from or who he is (MB 20). He also resembles Binx who, like the amnesiac and the castaway, is seeking consciousness in order to achieve awareness.²

In "The Man on the Train" Percy explains that moments of "rotation" and "repetition" are of particular interest to the alienated consciousness because they represent two alternatives to "everydayness" (MB 86). Both may also be used as tools for the search. He defines rotation as "the quest for the new as the new, the reposing of all hope in what may lie around the bend" (86). The amnesiac in the movie experiences a rotation. He has to make a fresh start, which has a wonderful potential. Percy explains that amnesia may be the supreme rotational device in that the amnesiac may exist in a state of pure possibility. However, it is only a matter of time before everydayness overtakes him. The perfect rotation "could only be achieved by a

progressive amnesia in which the forgetting kept pace with time so that every corner turned, every face seen, is a rotation" (MB 92).

Getting "clean away," however, requires a moral as well as a physical freedom (91). As Binx observes, the amnesiac in the movies botches it. He marries the local librarian and comfortably settles down, sinking into the everydayness of life such that he might as well be dead.

In the exercise of rotation, one must constantly be on the move. Percy explains how the Western movie is an exercise in rotation. The silent stranger walks through town and experiences a ritual adventure before moving on. The stranger in the movie exists as pure possibility. He may pass through town silently, as nothing, the unrisken possibility, or he may act. When he acts, he acts with ritual and gestural perfection. Both the stranger in the movie and the moviegoer walk the tightrope of anxiety, but the actor only seems to. His tightrope is only one foot off the ground, and he will not fall (MB 94). In contrast, the moviegoer's tightrope is over the abyss. He cannot transpose the aesthetic rotation to the existential. The aesthetic rotation necessarily ends with the end of the movie, leaving the moviegoer dangling over the abyss. Despair yawns at his feet.

Whereas rotation as a mode of experience is much the same in the reading as in the experiencing (MB 86), repetition requires a more radical identification. Like rotation, repetition offers itself as a deliverance from everydayness. It is a conversion

of rotation, a turning backwards, a voyage into one's own past in search of one's self. Unlike rotation (which is aesthetic), a repetition may be either aesthetic or existential. An aesthetic repetition "captures the savour of repetition without surrendering the self as a locus of experience and possibility" (MB 95). It may be an excursion into the interesting, a savouring of the past as experience (95). By contrast, an existential repetition is a passionate quest in which an incident serves "as a thread in the labyrinth to be followed at any cost" (95-96). This may be polarized by art, becoming on the one hand an occasion for the connoisseur sampling of a rare emotion. On the other hand, it may literally and seriously ask, "what does it really mean to stand before the house of one's childhood" (96)?

Binx's arrival at Aunt Emily's for lunch marks the beginning of just such a serious confrontation. Aunt Emily is Binx's "fixed point in a confusing world."³ She is his greatest influence and her example is admirable and seductive. Much of his journey inward, to discover his authentic self, must be made in relation to her. After Binx's father died, Binx's mother, a nurse, returned to her hospital in Biloxi and Aunt Emily raised Binx. She provided his education, and in her home he developed an appreciation for music and literature. Aunt Emily is a Southern aristocrat who accepts responsibility for others in her life as a matter of duty. She married Jules Cutrer after his wife died and assumed full responsibility for his depressive daughter Kate. Aunt Emily is a stoic, "soldierly both in look and outlook" (27), and she expects the same

from Binx. When his older brother Scott died when Binx was eight years old, Aunt Emily advised Binx, "Scotty is dead. 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" (4). Binx realized then, and must contemplate now, that Aunt Emily wants him to play a role. "This was true. I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do" (4)?

Binx's awareness of the dangers of his own inauthentic role playing is growing, for as he awaits Aunt Emily he examines his favorite photograph on the mantelpiece, one which he has admired and tried to understand for ten years. It is a picture of Binx's father and his father's brothers in the Schwarzwald. The youngest brother, Alex, is missing, for he had died in the Argonne five years before. The older brothers had gotten together a few years after the war to make the grand tour. But what is striking in the photograph is that, where each of the elder brothers, Dr. Wills and Judge Anse, "coincides with himself" (25) and fits comfortably in the picture, and where even the youngest, Alex, who is featured in the next frame, is serene in his identity, Binx's father is not. He is playing a role. He is not "one of them" (25). Searching his father's eyes, Binx discovers they are ironical. He remembers his father as something of a dude, commissioned in the RCAF in 1940, and killed before America entered the war. He died romantically, in Crete in "the wine dark sea" (25) with a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* in his pocket.

Emily sees the same picture from her own perspective, which she would like to impose on Binx. She sees the Bolling brothers in the picture on the mantelpiece as a dying breed of heroes, and Binx as a hero in their long line. But to Binx this would be yet another role to play.

Emily transfigures everyone. She sees people as either heroic or craven, they "become what she sees them to be" (49). Where Aunt Emily sees Jules as the last of the heroes, to Binx he is the totally successful Louisiana businessman whose victory in the world is so complete that it is difficult to see why he takes the trouble to be an exemplary Catholic, for "the world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him" (M 31).

In *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Walker Percy takes issue with both the Southern Stoic tradition, as exemplified by Aunt Emily, and contemporary southern Christianity, as modeled by Jules. He explains that the greatness of the South always had a stronger Greek flavor than Christian. Its nobility and graciousness was that of the Old Stoa, to "think steadily, as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and a feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice" (84). The natural perfection of the Stoics was

the stern inner summons to man's full estate, to duty, to honor, to generosity toward his fellow men and above all to his inferiors--not because they were made in the image of God and were therefore lovable in themselves, but because to do them an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which was oneself (85).

Out of this tradition emerges the *noblesse oblige* on the one side, and an extraordinary native courtesy and dignity on the other (85). Southern society was above all a society of manners.

For the Stoic, it is not the individual who is intrinsically precious, but one's attitude toward him, specified by the other's good manners, or lack of them. To the Stoic, the deterioration of manners marks the deterioration of the world. The Stoic's posture is one of poetic pessimism. "For the Stoic there is no real hope. His finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him" (86).

This is not so for the Christian, who must live in hope and who must acknowledge the sacred right of the individual. Yet according to Percy the Southern Christian has lived alongside the Southern Stoic for so long he has lost sight of his goals. Kierkegaard's Christian is an exile, tormented from within and haunted from without (Coles 6). This hardly describes Jules. With honest, gentle humor, Binx rejects Uncle Jules as a role model. He senses that Jules' Christianity, with its emphasis on the immediate pleasures of daily life, has missed the point.

Aunt Emily wonders what Binx wants out of life. For her it is clear: Binx should use his fine brain and make a contribution. He should go to medical school and live a long and useful life serving his fellowman. She has fixed up his old garconnière in the Carriage House for him, where he can live. In exchange, he could help her with her stepdaughter, Kate, who, in her depressive suicidal state could benefit from Binx's

companionship. She proposes that he give her an answer in a week, on his thirtieth birthday. But her argument is stern and fraught with urgency: Binx is the last in a line of heroes whose world is crashing down around them.

A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world, goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less of a man (54).

For Aunt Emily, even the chaos of a dissolving world makes sense. Her plan for his life seems simple enough if he can only remember to follow it. But as Aunt Emily reminds Binx of his scientific calling, as well as his love of books and music, he suddenly perceives that it has all been through her--she discovered these things for him. Now she is urging him to pursue science and research. Can he fulfill this role authentically? Clearly, his first task must be to acquire his selfhood through personal choice and action.⁴ The tension rises as Binx faces some difficult decisions. Teetering on his tenuous tightrope, he has a week to observe, reflect, and consider.

Kate also walks a tightrope, although not as heroically as Binx. Exceedingly shy and anxious, she teeters between trying to cope with reality and trying to escape through drugs, alcohol and suicide attempts. Like Binx, she tries to explore reality by seeing honestly. This shared quality enables them to help each other: he treats her truthfully; she provides him with certain insights and wisdom. Kate, like Binx, is searching for her authentic self and for an explanation of how to live. She can see that Binx is not the

"proper Bolling" or "go-getter" (43) that Aunt Emily and Uncle Jules think he is; rather, he is more like herself. Refusing simply to act out a role, she rejects her father's "Catholic unseriousness . . . his dumbness about his God . . . the everlasting dumb importuning of her just to be good, to mind the sisters . . ." (45). Yet she seems to lack the courage and fortitude necessary to find replacement values in order to live a life. She has a tendency to turn "everything she touches to horror" (63) and it becomes Binx's responsibility to protect her from herself.

Kate's "tight rope" refers to the first time she was ill, when she became "aware of the abyss that yawned at their feet even on the most ordinary occasions--especially on the most ordinary occasions" (11). Kate became aware that one can escape this everydayness, or death-in-life, through catastrophe, that people will act real in a disaster, as she witnessed when her fiancée was killed in an automobile accident. Her fiancée's death gave Kate her life. With his death she ceased to be an automaton with no choice in what to say or do, locked in the everydayness of expected behavior. With his death, her role, as Lyell's wife and Southern aristocratic matron, dissolved. Like the insomniac in the movie, she is offered the possibility of a new start. In searching for herself, she rejects the depersonalized prescription offered by her psychiatrist Dr. Mink,⁵ refusing to be his "joyous and creative person" (115). Because Binx understands her anxiety and because he is aware that it must be willfully heeded, rather than quieted with drugs, he can help her better than Dr. Mink. However, she is much weaker than Binx. Wavering

on the tightrope, it remains to be seen whether she will succumb to her fears and doubts and collapse into despair; whether she will sink into the comfortable, living-death of everydayness; or if, finally, she will have the courage and insight and inner strength to steady herself enough to inch along, with (or without) Binx's aid.

Binx also understands that catastrophe calls people to life, for it was his near-death in Korea that originally inspired the idea of a search. He, too, is aware of the necessity to escape everydayness. "For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead" (99), that "this is death" (100). As a Percy hero, Binx must make ". . . the movement from a kind of death-in-life to a finding of himself such that "he who was dead is alive again" (Taylor 2). Like Kate, who feels fine when she is sick, Binx tends to feel happy when others are gloomy. Binx's anxiety becomes curative, in a sense, and beckons him from the living dead. His anxiety causes him to suffer from insomnia. Wakeful, watchful, anxious, he has not slept soundly in years. Yet he understands that his anxiety and resulting insomnia is a call to heightened awareness, and he is determined to understand his despair. He uses these wakeful, anxious nights to contemplate the "mystery of the suburb at dawn" (86), the defeated houses, the pervading despair.

His first real clue for how to go about the process of rebuilding his life, of creating meaningful values, comes from the Jews, with whom he finds he has much in common. A significantly large percentage of solitary moviegoers are Jews" (89). The

Jew lives, works and functions within his society. However, he is never a fully integrated member. Binx observes:

. . . I am Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile. The fact is, however, I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my exile (89).

This ability to see his life with perspective, and to maintain his exile from within, will provide much of the tension he will require to keep his balance.

His anxiety urges him forward along the tightrope, away from despair and towards the search. Yet, he wavers between aesthetic and ethical choices, as exemplified by his sensual relationship with Sharon on the one hand, and his ethical obligation to Kate on the other. A visit to his mother, Mrs. Smith, with Sharon combines rotation with repetition in order to revive the search. Sick with desire for Sharon, and in a desperate attempt to escape the pervading malaise, Binx allows his vision to be temporarily clouded by aesthetic lures. The seduction of money and sex (as well as the malaise) threaten to thwart his progress. After a romantic interlude on the beach with Sharon, Binx wonders:

Joy and sadness come by turns, I know now. Beauty and bravery make you sad, Sharon's beauty and my aunt's bravery, and victory breaks your heart. . . . It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh (136).

However, the consolation of making money ("for money is a great joy" (94)) and the sweet satisfaction of Sharon's embrace offer only temporary relief from his despair.

He and Sharon forge on to his mother's fishing camp at Bayou des Allemands. Examining how his mother has chosen to live her life, he has an opportunity to reflect and finally reject her hardened belittlement of the individual mystery, the pain and joy of life. Here we meet Binx's half brothers and sisters, including Lonnie, Binx's favorite and a moviegoer like himself. Crippled and confined to a wheelchair, Lonnie is dying. Binx and Lonnie are good friends because Lonnie knows Binx does not feel sorry for him.

For one thing, he has the gift of believing he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ. For another thing, I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business (137).

Binx is perturbed by his mother's casual attitude toward Lonnie's illness, and observes that losing Duval, her favorite son, "confirmed her in her election of the ordinary. No more heart's desire for her, thank you. After Duval's death she has wanted everything colloquial and easy, even God" (142). She calls God out as a handy device to be used in an "outrageous man's world . . . a bargain struck at the very beginning in which she settled for a general belittlement of everything, the good and the bad" (142). In contrast to Aunt Emily, who inflates the value of existence, Mrs. Smith devalues life, and misses the point. As Kierkegaard asserts, "only that man's life is wasted who lives on, so

deceived by the joys of life or by its sorrows that he never becomes eternally and decisively conscious of himself as spirit" (Hobbs 32). But Binx refuses to be indifferent toward Lonnie. He takes responsibility for Lonnie's happiness, shows his love for his half-brother and takes him to the movies. Lonnie's expected death at the end of the book is more painful as a result of this shared relationship. Binx's loss is greater but his life has been made more meaningful.

Taking Lonnie to the movies proves to be a good rotation. Binx defines a good rotation as "the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of experiencing the new" (144). Lonnie is happy to enjoy the film and share with Binx the secret touches they see in the movie. Sharon is happy because she thinks Binx is a nice guy to take Lonnie to the movies. Binx is happy with all of this, and the good movie. It is followed, however, by another sleepless night. Binx is awakened at three o'clock the next morning, momentarily in the "grip of everydayness. Everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible" (145). Suddenly, in a fit of rage, he vows to battle it. "I'm a son of a bitch if I'll be defeated by the everydayness" (145). Again there is a sense of urgency. "Something has to be done. Let us please do something about it" (146). Following a dream and a revelation, in the mysterious setting of the bayou, in the early morning fog and isolation of the great white marsh, Binx experiences a repetition as he confronts the haunting ghost of his father. Binx and his mother talk, and she recalls for Binx his father's bouts of anxiety, his sleeplessness and inability to eat, his endless

walks, until disaster--that great cure for everydayness and for despair--the war, came. Binx's father became a flight surgeon in the Canadian Royal Air Force and, Binx realizes, escaped despair by dying romantically in Crete in the wine dark sea. He found a way to please his family and himself: "To leave. To do what he wanted to do and save old England doing it. And perhaps even carry off the grandest coup of all: to die" (157).

But Binx's father was mistaken. Binx will not try to sleep, or placate his anxiety and despair, or try to escape, or die romantically. Instead, he returns to Gentilly and picks up Kate, who is recovering from another suicide attempt, and the two embark by train for Chicago. Together they experience a combined rotation and repetition. Uncle Jules has requested that Binx attend a broker's convention in Chicago in his place. Kate has decided to accompany him, believing that a trip will improve her condition. Binx knows better. The thought of Chicago is unbearable to Binx because of his Southerness ("nobody but a Southerner knows the wrenching rinsing sadness of the cities of the North" (202)). For Binx, this trip is also a repetition. It reminds him of his father, for they had visited Chicago twenty-five years earlier--Binx, Scott and his father--and then once again after Scott's death. Chicago is even more unbearable because of this painful memory which must be confronted. The train ride itself is shrouded in death, and despair abounds. Binx is like a "prisoner in the death house" (193) for whom staying awake has become a "kind of sickness and sleep is forever guarded against by a dizzy

dutiful alertness" (189). He has the feeling that the last ten years of his life have taken on "the shadowy aspect of a sojourn between train rides" (184).

Kate, drugged with alcohol and nembital, is "shaking like a leaf because she longs to be an anyone who is anywhere and she cannot" (190). But through their despair they speak of marriage, hope, love, and craziness. Kate offers some of her drugged wisdom, which foreshadows Binx's final confrontation with his father's ghost. Kate has earlier accused Binx of being "cold as the grave" (83) and even now believes that he would marry her only as "another one of [his] ingenious little researches" (193). She accuses Binx of being nuttier than she. But she acknowledges the importance of the awareness of despair. She understands that to lose hope is not as bad as to lose hope and hide it from yourself, and that the possibility of suicide--knowing that it is her personal choice not to kill herself--is the only thing that keeps her alive. She would like to believe in Binx as she would believe in God; she will marry him if he will tell her how to live her life. He agrees, and as if in a feeble attempt to consummate their marriage vows, and probably more to overcome the despair that is overtaking them, they engage in sex. They in fact do badly and almost not at all, "flesh pour flesh now at this moment summoned all at once to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope--quails and fails" (200). They have demanded more of a sexual encounter than it could possibly give. Once again, sex fails to quiet despair.

Binx is especially shaken, for this is a repetition of an earlier occasion when he was unable to give the love that was demanded of him. The train thrusts Binx into Chicago and into the recesses of his memory. He is reminded of his third visit to Chicago, after Scott's death, when he and his father visited the Field Museum. Recalling the menacing quiet of the museum halls, Binx realizes that by withholding love he was responsible for his father's death.

. . . feeling my father's eye on me, I turned and saw what he required of me--very special father and son we were that summer, he staking his everything this time on a perfect comradeship--and I, seeing in his eyes the terrible request, requiring from me his very life. I through a child's cool perversity or some atavistic recoil from an intimacy too intimate, turned him down, turned away, refused him what I knew I could not give (204).

Binx will not make the same mistake again. Like Gabriel Marcel's homo viator, he must open himself to the giving and receiving of love. Marcel saw us as lonely and inclined to misunderstand and disappoint each other, and also as longing for friendship. He believed that "trust" and "fidelity" are what make human life distinctively what it is. He counsels that as each of us strives for meaning, purpose, personal integrity, we must not shut ourselves off from others. Awakened from the land-of-the-living dead, Binx is offered an opportunity to start afresh. Suddenly the fog is clearing. He sees Kate "plain for the first time since I lay wounded in a ditch. . ." (206). Binx may lack warmth, as Kate has observed, but he does possess the strength and courage to respond to her

vulnerability, her sense of being alone and uncertain. He will love her and assume responsibility for her, and, through his loving commitment, he will escape death-in-life.

When Binx and Kate return to New Orleans, Aunt Emily confronts Binx and he is ready for her. It is a poignant and dramatic scene. Confronting Emily, he confronts yet another ghost: the ghost of historical nostalgia. No longer can he accept blindly and entirely the Southern aristocratic tradition that has influenced Aunt Emily, as well as his father and other Bolling ancestors. Whereas Aunt Emily maintains that "at the great moment of life--success, failure, marriage, death--our kind of folks have always possessed a native instinct for behavior, a natural piety or grace. . ." (222), Binx maintains that this is a role he cannot honestly fulfill. To act like a soldier at Scott's death--or Lonnie's illness--is an inauthentic response which serves only to lessen the pain and loss. Aunt Emily declares that,

"More than anything I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women -- the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life" (224).

and Binx can say very little, for, on the one hand, it is painful to reject those you love and admire, and Binx loves Emily and admires her for her courage, character, and the quality of life she has created for herself. However, the task before him is arduous, for if Aunt Emily's tradition has lost the ability to convey a sense of purpose for Binx and for Kate, then they must recreate values appropriate to a world that has and is changing

dramatically, a world which, in Aunt Emily's view, is crashing down upon them. Ted R. Spivey underscores Percy's emphasis on the decline of old values and the painful quest for replacement values:

Percy is acutely aware of the fact that facing the decline of old cultural values is painful, but he is also aware that restoring the cultural framework is necessary to make civilized existence possible. His work tells us that new values will evolve slowly through the efforts of seekers who struggle to slough off the past and seek a basis for the renewing of such values (177).

It is only at his departure, when Aunt Emily claims she can no longer recognize Binx--a moment made dramatic by her refusal to call him by name--that Binx finally begins to recognize himself.

On his thirtieth birthday Binx stumbles briefly and sways toward the side of despair. He claims he inherited only a "nose for merde" (228) from his father, and even attempts a fling with Sharon. But he recovers his balance and determines that there is only one thing he can do, ". . . listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons" (223). He will go to medical school. He will marry Kate who, quite sick and very frightened, will demand a great deal of him, which he is prepared to give. And he will continue his search.

As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than the edifying. For another thing, it

is not open to me to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself (237).

This sense of urgency and the hope of the revelation of mystery keep Binx inching his way forward, now more steadily.

Despair and death surround the ending of *The Moviegoer*, but Binx is better able to deal with it. With Lonnie dying, Binx looks honestly at the pain and mystery of death, and truthfully relates the fact of Lonnie's death to his step brothers and sisters. With unsparing honesty he confirms to them that Lonnie is dying. "But he wouldn't want you to be sad. He told me to give you a kiss and tell you he loved you" (239). With gained poise and confidence, even grace, Binx seems to be walking the tightrope. Having recovered enough love, he is able to help the Smith children cope honestly with Lonnie's death.

The Moviegoer ends with Kate making a bus journey alone, frightened, but with Binx's encouragement and guidance. Alfred Kazin has suggested that the "madness" of Percy's women signifies their never having attempted the search (Kazin 103). The "madness" of Percy's heroes, according to Kazin, is a figure of speech for the immense loneliness of looking for a God who, in Nietzsche's phrase, is the great unknown and as so cannot be found" (103). Perhaps in sending Kate off alone, Binx is gently setting her on her feet, asking her to walk along beside him as they inch their way together. And the reader is left to feel that Binx will guide her along with him, courageously and with

compassion, while maintaining that delicate balance, so that together they may create lives of meaningful commitment with the promise of fulfillment.

IV.

SEEING AND NAMING: FROM LONELINESS TO COMMUNION

The strong resemblances between Binx Bolling and Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman* allow Percy to examine the potential for joy and fulfillment along the seeker's way. Like Binx, Williston Bibb Barrett is an intelligent, handsome, and charismatic wandering worrier. He is also, as Ashley Brown noted in his interview with Percy, "one of the few 'good' characters to turn up in recent fiction" (Brown 16). In *The Last Gentleman* Will follows the pattern of an existential questor that Binx has laid out in *The Moviegoer*. He must move from being a passive observer to assuming a life of action, from alienation to commitment and responsibility. Like Binx, he must confront his traumatic past in order to establish his own identity. He must learn to walk Binx's tightrope.

Percy has said that with Will Barrett he wanted to create someone "not quite as flat as Binx in *The Moviegoer*, more disturbed, more passionate, more in love, and above all, *on the move*. He is in pilgrimage without quite knowing it" (SP, 382-3). With his symptoms of epilepsy, déjà vu, amnesia, disorientation, and hysterical deafness (to mention only a few!), he is "sicker" than Binx. Percy has admitted that the symptoms were left deliberately ambiguous, so that the reader may see him as "a sick man among healthy businessmen, or as a sane pilgrim in a mad world" (Brown 13). Of course, it is precisely the dislocation of his being a pilgrim stranger that enables his "seeing

clearly." Percy has also said that he consciously placed Will Barrett in Kierkegaard's religious mode (Brown 13). Like Gabriel Marcel's wayfarer, Will is an old-fashioned pilgrim on a serious quest. Whereas Binx enjoys his alienation and lives in a place like Gentilly to savour its ordinariness, Will has fled his home in Mississippi and is passionately seeking a father-figure, someone to offer him the human contact he craves as well as the answers to his serious questions. His own father, we learn, has committed suicide.

Will's keen powers of observation, on the one hand, and his desperate need for human contact, on the other, provide Percy with an opportunity to show how seeing and naming enable human relatedness, and how relationships, through shared symbolization, give life. Will's search for a father-figure leads him first to Dr. Gamow, his psychoanalyst, then on to Sutter Vaught, a suicidal doctor teetering on the brink of despair, and backwards to the memory of his own father. Each fails to provide the answers to the questions he desperately seeks, and each fails to offer the human contact, warmth, or friendship he needs. Yet in the course of the search, he ends up doing a Kierkegaardian repetition which leads him to the very answers he is seeking--answers he must find within himself. In addition, his search leads him to Jamie Vaught. Through Will's relationship with Jamie, Percy demonstrates his belief that authentic seeing and naming, symbolization, gives life as it offers possibilities for friendship and love.

Will is a keen observer with an ability to see things afresh. "Like the sole survivor of a bombed building, he had no secondhand opinions" (17). As the book opens, he lies watchful, thinking, in Central Park, with a 35-millimeter camera fitted to an expensive telescope beside him. He is waiting for the return of the peregrine falcon he had spotted the previous day. Will has spent his last savings on this expensive telescope, and he attaches magical powers to it. He believes his life will be changed as a result of owning it. "These lenses did not transmit light merely. They penetrated to the heart of things" (31). Through the telescope he examines the brick on a building across the park, and is able to examine every crack and excrescence.

Beyond any doubt, he said to himself, this proves that bricks, as well as other things, are not as accessible as they used to be. Special measures were needed to recover them.

The telescope recovered them (32).

After five fruitless years of psychoanalysis with Dr. Gamow ("A laborer digging in a ditch would know more about his partner in a week than the doctor had learned about this patient in a year" (33)), Will rejects Dr. Gamow and psychoanalysis in favor of the telescope. Dr. Gamow muses that Will intends to become a seer and asks, "Could it be that you believe that there is some ultimate hidden truth and that you have the magical means for obtaining it" (37)? He further observes that "this great thirst for the 'answer,' the key which will unlock everything, always overtakes you just before the onset of one of your fugue states" (37). Will's "fugue states" suggest a form of rotation,

where his amnesia allows him to exist in a state of pure possibility. Will refuses Dr. Gamow's warning, choosing instead to heed his anxiety as a call to authentic existence, as did Kate in *The Moviegoer*. As Heidegger observes, anxiety is an essential part of our inheritance as human beings. It is the means by which we become in touch with ourselves. It is the only real instrument of self-discovery we have, and it opens us to the awareness of being (Coles 26-27).

Percy has said that "being" is elusive; it tends to escape, leaving only a simulacrum of symbol" (SP 135). In authentic naming, or the laying of *symbol* alongside *thing*, we may know and affirm a thing for what it is. The symbol, or name, properly used, should discover being. Yet, over time and with frequent use, names may eventually cease to discover being but rather conceal it under hardened symbols. "This is why new names must be found for being, as Heidegger thinks, or the old ones given new meaning, as Marcel thinks" (135). In the new seeing--suggested by Will's telescope--and new naming there is the possibility for an affirmation and celebration of the discovery of being. It is with the promise of such a discovery that Will, instead of exploring his own psyche, sets off on an actual journey, (SP 219) with the aid of his telescope.

Will is described repeatedly as "an unusual young man" (11). In addition to his remarkable ability to see afresh, he is a sensitive listener, and he is open and responsive to those in need. He has a wonderful gift for fathoming people, for "divining persons

and situations" (46), for appreciating what is uniquely human in each individual. His good manners, mentioned repeatedly and in contrast to those around him (and in contrast to the Stoic attitude as exemplified by Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer*), stem from a genuine concern for the feelings or well-being of others, and suggest part of the meaning of the title of the book. He possesses what Marcel calls that "consciousness capable of caring for another person" (Taylor 111). Marcel explains that being open to another human being involves the free choice of opening to the other and giving of oneself. A person may be aroused to action by responding to events or persons or demands as they present themselves, each an invitation to create oneself. When, instead of the falcon, Will sees a young woman, Kitty Vaught, through his telescope, he responds to her in such a way: he falls in love "at first sight and at a distance of two-thousand feet" (14). He believes she may be the sign he is looking for, and he pursues her at any cost. She, in turn, leads him to her family, the Vaughts, Percy's parody of an aristocratic Alabama family. They are the catalyst for Will's adventures in *The Last Gentleman*.

The Vaughts are in New York because their youngest son, Jamie (Kitty's younger brother), who recalls Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*, is being treated for atypical mononucleosis; he is dying. Chandler Vaught, Jamie's father, would like Will to come to Alabama with the Vaughts and be a companion to Jamie.

In the hospital, Will triggers a special friendship with Jamie when he lends Jamie his telescope. Gazing through the scope, and affirming what he sees with Will, Jamie's

excitement is contagious; it fills his cheeks with color. This remarkable effect through sharing demonstrates Percy's belief that authentic seeing and naming, symbolization, gives life as it offers possibilities for human relatedness. "Intersubjectivity" is Percy's term for "that meeting of minds by which two selves take each other's meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common" (MB 265). Intersubjectivity founded on mutual acts of symbolization is a unification which allows each individual to "transcend his own separateness through sharing with and caring for the other" (Hobbs 47).

Percy explains that in the act of symbolization, there is the *symbol*, the *conception*, and the *thing*. There is also the *I*, or "the consciousness which is confronted by the thing and which generates the symbol by which the conception is articulated" (MB 281). And, in addition, there is the *you* (281). *Consciousness*, Percy reminds us, is a knowing "with."

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

When I name a flower it *is* a flower for *you* and for *me*. Our common existence is validated. This is the foundation of Marcel's metaphysics of *we are* (295). For Marcel, the friendship and love that emerge as a result of our naming, are the vehicles by which we can move to a "radical openness to Being" (Coles 27). Together, through the telescope, Will and Jamie observe a solitary man reading The Wall Street Journal in a fifty-foot Chris-Craft. *"Yes, said Jamie, registering and savoring what the engineer registered and savored. Yes, you and I know something the man in the Chris-Craft will never know"* (130)--friendship.

In addition, Will's ability to relate to Jamie as a unique human being sets him apart from the Vaughnts and provides the foundation for his friendship with Jamie. Jamie's siblings other than Kitty--Rita (Sutter's estranged wife), Val (Jamie's and Kitty's older sister), and Sutter (Jamie's and Kitty's older brother)--who claim to know how to help him, do not see Jamie, but rather their own causes. Rita, Sutter's estranged wife, is devoted to charitable causes, to helping mankind in the abstract and general. Her present cause is to help Kitty become a ballet dancer and she would prefer that Will not interfere with this. With a mind to keeping Will away from Kitty, she proposes that Will take her camper and drive Jamie to Alabama. Val, the second oldest Vaught child, is an alienated nun who has joined a remote religious order. Her cause is to have Jamie baptized before he dies, whether or not he so desires. Although Jamie, at his lowest moments, calls her to talk, he will not accept her explanation of "the economy of

salvation." Sutter, the oldest, is a doctor. Suicidal, teetering on the brink of despair, Sutter cultivates destructiveness, pornography and lewd sex. His wish for Jamie is simply that he "die well," and that he, Sutter, not outlive him more than two hours.

There is an aura of wisdom and mystery surrounding Sutter, whom Will has not yet met. Will comes to believe that Sutter may succeed in treating his various symptoms where Dr. Gamow failed, or answer fundamental questions plaguing him. Will agrees to drive the Trav-L-Aire Camper and Jamie to Alabama in order to pursue Sutter and Kitty as well. ("What was wrong with marrying him a wife and living a life, holding Kitty's charms in his arms the livelong night" (149-150)? He is also in search of his own identity. ("It mightn't be a bad idea to return to the South and discover his identity, to use Dr. Gamow's expression" (68)). The Camper is named Ulysses, and as Will observes, Ulysses "was meant to lead us beyond the borders of the western world and bring us home" (82). As Will returns to the South and his point of origin, he begins a Kierkegaardian repetition. "It is there, he feels, that there is some dread secret to be discovered, something that happened, something he can't quite remember because he can't bear to remember" (SP 219).

In his book, *Walker Percy, A Southern Wayfarer*, William Rodney Allen compares the Trav-L-Aire to Huck Finn's raft, in that it is the perfect rotational device: it allows Will to temporarily forget his anxiety (62). It is "mobile yet at home, . . . in

the world yet not of the world, sampling the particularities of place yet cabined off from the sadness of place" (124).

Nights were best. Then . . . they might debark and, with the pleasantest sense of stepping down from the zone of the possible to the zone of the realized, stroll to a service station or fishing camp or grocery store, where they'd have a beer . . . (130).

How different from the death-like train which carries Binx to the painful memories he must confront in Chicago! However, like Binx in Chicago (and Huck at the Phelps' farm), Will must debark and confront the South and a past that he had earlier tried to escape in New York.

As they get closer to Alabama, Will's symptoms worsen. He observes that the "South he came home to was different from the South he had left. The new South was happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican" (149), and it drove him "wild with despair" (150). He was lost "in his own potentiality, having come home to the South only to discover that not even his own homelessness was at home here" (171). Geography is significant, for as Will approaches the South, he comes closer to his painful past. In denying it, by escaping to New York, he has been denying his very identity. He must recover his past to recover himself. In self-defense, his memory deteriorates.

The Sutter that Will finally meets at the Vaughnts' is a bitter, despairing, violent man whose brazen flirtations with death prompt his sister Val to remark "It would please you, wouldn't it, to die absurdly" (172)? Will is eavesdropping on Sutter and Val when

a shot rings out. Will bursts into the room, fearing that Sutter has shot himself. In fact, Sutter was aiming at a picture of an old Arab physician ministering to some urchins, a role Sutter refuses to play for Will. The gun shot, which barely misses Will's peephole, has awakened Will to Sutter's example of despair and violence, an awareness that will help Will confront the terrible memory he has buried until now. Sutter's violence has brought Will perilously close to losing his own life. Yet Will persists, so anxious is he to have Sutter diagnose his illness and answer his questions, and so firmly does he still believe in Sutter. Will receives a heavy dose of Sutter's bitterness,

"I can't help you. Fornicate if you want to and enjoy yourself but don't come looking to me for a merit badge certifying you as a Christian or a gentleman or whatever it is you cleave by" (179).

Sutter's notebooks explain his fascination with pornography and lewd sex. His autopsies have shown repeated examples of suicide after sex, sex being used to mask despair and succeeding only fleetingly. If Sutter is challenging God with his perverse sexual acts and flirtations with death, perhaps his unwillingness to answer Will's questions outright is also a challenge to Will who, still fascinated with the aura of mystery surrounding Sutter, could possibly be lured off the tightrope to despair and suicide. Clearly, the answers to Will's questions must come from within. Notably, Will writes to Sutter before he challenges God in the cave in *The Second Coming*.

The gunshot has also awakened in Will the terrible memory that he has buried until now: his father's suicide. When Sutter takes Jamie to Santa Fe to die, Will springs

into action to rescue Jamie and to save Sutter from self-destruction. Will is also in desperate search of himself. On his way he stops in Ithaca. Will literally stands in front of the house of his childhood and has an authentic confrontation with himself as he confronts the haunting ghost of his father. Will's epiphany now, as he recalls their final conversation, is that his father died because he was unwilling to accept life in the face of the moral erosion and decay of the South. His father observed, "Once they were the fornicators . . . now we are like them" (258). As Will cried out to his father, "Wait" (259), his father had climbed the back stairs to the attic and the ring of the gunshot came crashing "louder than twenty Philcos" (259) through the sound of the Brahms recording, which his father nearly always played. William Rodney Allen underscores the importance of Will's talismanic "Wait":

This is the source of this all important word in Percy's fiction, one uttered time and time again by characters reaching out in the deepest need for human contact (70).

Will gradually reveals that his father was looking in the wrong place, that 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 . . . (260).

in the everyday and the ordinary. As if to confirm his father's observations of decay and decline, a Negro passes but Will does not communicate with him. "There was nothing to say. Their fathers would have had much to say" (260). This erosion of

communication and its effect on relationships foreshadows a central concern in *The Second Coming*; that language has lost its ability to communicate. The silent passing of the Negro emphasizes the importance of one of Will's next tasks, finding Jamie and communicating Jamie's last wishes to the priest.

Will's first act is to find Jamie to offer the warmth and contact that Will's own father failed to offer him, and do whatever else he can for Jamie before he dies. In this heartrending death scene, Will arranges for Jamie to be baptized, and with Sutter standing by, Will interprets Jamie's barely audible responses for the priest. As Jerome Taylor points out,

Will was the other one who saw and named with him as they had done so many times before. As Percy commented, Barrett was the instrument of Jamie's salvation--such are the lengths to which real human relatedness can go (124).

In the moments after Jamie's death, Will still seems to believe that Sutter has the answers he is seeking. His call to Sutter to "Wait" is loaded with meaning. On the one hand, it is a call for companionship and the continued dialogue that friendship implies. He may still be seeking Sutter's approval, in this case of his plan to marry Kitty and settle down. In addition, having done all he can for Jamie, he is now able to give of himself to Sutter, and the implication is that he will save Sutter from killing himself. In taking responsibility for Sutter, Will is choosing the burden of despair, for only with the awareness of despair can he keep inching along his tightrope.

Percy has said that whereas Sutter is aware of what goes on at Jamie's baptism, Will misses it, even though Will is the instrument of Jamie's salvation (Brown 14). Insofar as Will believes that Sutter may have the "answer" to his problems, he resembles the castaway in *The Message in the Bottle* who is seeking "knowledge" rather than "news." Percy distinguishes between knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* (Kierkegaard's term)--that which can be arrived at anywhere by anyone and at anytime (MB 125)--and news. "By a 'piece of news' the castaway generally means a synthetic sentence expressing a contingent and nonrecurring event or state of affairs which is peculiarly relevant to the concrete predicament of the hearer of the news" (126). The hearing of news is possible only to the castaway who knows he is a castaway. The predicament of the castaway is "that he is a stranger . . . who despite a lifetime of striving to be at home on the island is as homeless now as he was the first day he found himself cast up on the beach" (143). This "sickness," or "homesickness" is not a need to be satisfied. The castaway must be a castaway and "not pretend to be at home" (144). Clearly, Will stands in need of a piece of news. However, as Richard Pindell has pointed out, Will fails to make the discovery of his fundamental identity upon which the hearing of news depends.

Man perpetuates his forgetfulness of his fundamental identity as a pilgrim stranger--Will's amnesia is representative--by supposing himself an organism adapting to his environment. . . . The sovereignty of man, the efficacy of his placing and naming, the most felicitous possible fulfillment of his being here, roots directly in his

lived nomination of himself as a pilgrim stranger. Will misplaces himself because he misnames himself (58-59).

But he also is aware that something happened back in the hospital room and he wants to know, from Sutter, what it was.

"Wait."

"Wait for what?"

"What happened back there?"

"In the hospital room? You were there."

"I know, but what did you think? I could tell you were thinking something."

"Do you have to know what I think before you know what you think?" (317)

Sutter will not tell him, of course. Pindell observes that "Wait" is Percy's watchword.

"It betokens, we can hope, an orientation at once chastened, almost supplicant, and alert, toward news" (68). As the novel ends, Will, pointing to himself, names himself.

"Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett—" and he actually pointed to himself lest there be a mistake, "need you and want you to come back" (318).

As a final question occurs to him, he once again calls out to Sutter.

"Wait," he shouted in a dead run. The Edsel paused, sighed, and stopped. Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds.

The Edsel waited for him (319).

The Last Gentleman ends joyously, with Will making "great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds" after Sutter and possibly toward the leap of faith that he eventually makes in *The Second Coming*. As a sovereign self, a sovereign pilgrim stranger, he may begin to seek the answer to his final question--who he is, where he came from, and where he is going.

V.

THE MYSTERY OF LANGUAGE: LOVE AND RENEWAL

Percy was greatly influenced by Ernst Cassirer, the German philosopher of the symbol, and Suzanne Langer, whose general thesis in *Philosophy in a New Key* is that the peculiarly human response is that of symbolic transformation (MB 288). Langer distinguishes between sign and symbol. Percy explains,

Signs announce their objects. Thunder announces rain. The bell announces food to Pavlov's dog. When I say James to a dog, he *looks* for James; when I say James to you, you say, "What about him?"--you *think* about James. A symbol is the vehicle for the conception of an object and as such is a distinctively human product (293).

In "The Mystery of Language" Percy pursues this distinction. A sign directs our attention to something else. A symbol does not "direct"; it "means." It somehow "comes to contain within itself the thing it means" (MB 153).

Cassirer has shown that we cannot know anything unless we symbolize it (72). Percy explains, "when I name an unknown thing or hear the name from you, a remarkable thing happens. In some sense or other, the thing is said to "be" its name or symbol" (156). Certainly the "round thing" is not the word "ball," but unless it becomes in some sense the word "ball" in our consciousness, we will never know it. This naming is a "pairing," an "is-saying," an affirmation that the thing is what it is for both of us. Furthermore, this "is-saying" is not only unprecedented, it is scandalous.

A is clearly not B. But were it not for this cosmic blunder, man would not be man; he would never be capable of truth. Unless he says that A is B, he will never know A or B; he will only respond to them. A bee is not as foolish as man, but it also cannot tell the truth. All it can do is respond to its environment (157).

Because man is not merely an organism responding to his environment, the existentialists have taught that man cannot be fully understood by the sciences. We must come face to face with language, says Percy. Somewhere in the nature of language is the nature of man. He is, in Heidegger's words, "that being in the world whose calling it is to find a name for Being, to give testimony to it, and to provide for it a clearing" (158).

Percy explains, "We can only *conceive* being, sidle up to it by laying something else alongside" (72). In "Metaphor as Mistake" Percy examines the way in which metaphor discovers being. Metaphor, which asserts an identity between two different things, is wrongest when it is most beautiful. He cites several examples of namings, or misnamings--such as a Negro guide calling a blue darter hawk a blue dollar hawk--mistakes which have resulted in authentic poetic experience, what Blackmur calls "that heightened sense of being" (65). When the namer conceives the bird as a blue dollar hawk he conceives it with richer tones of meaning. Somehow by conceiving it under the "wrong" symbol we are able to know it better, have greater access to it, than under its descriptive title (68). The guide, perceiving the bird's distinctive yet incommunicable flight, its speed, wing movement, sudden plummeting, (Hopkins' *inscape*, "the unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, selving") has a need to capture its

unformulable presence in a name. This need, insists Percy, is ontological rather than instrumental and strives for a real knowing, a truth-saying about what a being is.

Percy goes on to explain that the naming situation is comprised of several elements. There is the distinctive something beheld, the Namer who beholds it and gives the symbol, and the Hearer who receives the symbol as meaningful. The knowing--however imperfectly--and the affirming of this something for what it actually is, is the "unique joy which marks man's ordainment to being and the knowing of it" (71). There are two further conditions to be met. There must be an authority behind the naming, i.e., good faith by the Namer, and an element of obscurity or mystery about the name. This is the scandal, says Percy. The name is "wrong." It refers to something else besides the bird, something which occupies the same ontological status as the bird. "For this ontological pairing, or, if you prefer, "error" of identification of word and thing, is the only possible way in which the apprehended nature of the bird, its inscape, can be validated as being what it is" (72). There is a distinction between the thing privately apprehended, and the thing apprehended and validated for you and me by naming. At the basis of the metaphor is the hope that my secret apprehension will be validated by you. There must be a space between the name and the thing, or the private apprehension will be oppressed. The thing must be sanctioned yet given freedom to be what it is. As Heidegger said, "the essence of truth is freedom" (73). According to Percy, "the essence of metaphorical truth and the almost impossible task of the poet is, it seems to me, to

name unmistakably and yet to name by such a gentle analogy that the thing beheld by both of us may be truly formulated for what it is" (73). We must not fail to recognize the discovering power of analogy, for only then is there hope of a celebration of the thing beheld in common. "Metaphor is the true maker of language" (79). We know, not as angels and not as dogs, but as men, "who must know one thing through the mirror of another" (82).

Percy warns us, however, that language can lose its symbolic mystery, it can become overused, worn out, and become a kind of sign. We must continually recover our ability to see and name authentically or our language becomes cliché. As Charles Bigger explains, a thing freshly seen and grasped through metaphor generates a concept. In the shock of recognition we transcend the "little facts" which are the outcome of the regimentation of experience (Bigger 54). Experience is creative. As Heidegger emphasizes, our responsibility for our world, our relations to nature, to our fellows and to ourselves, must be a function of the way we talk about being. Through metaphor, we break away from the conventional into an openness for Being. "Language is the instrument of this continual recreation of the world" (Bigger 56). Naming restores the world and reveals our participation in Being.

* * *

Despite the indication at the end of *The Last Gentleman* that Will has joyfully accepted his identity as a sovereign pilgrim stranger, a seeker similar to Binx, at the

beginning of *The Second Coming*, we find that Will has leapt clear off his tightrope, into the depths of despair and is himself contemplating suicide. We learn that he did not marry Kitty after all. Instead, he became a very successful Wall Street lawyer and married Marion, a crippled, wealthy philanthropist. It is now twenty-five years later. Will has retired early and returned to the South (to North Carolina). With Marion's death a few years before the beginning of the novel, Will's role as a successful Wall Street lawyer and devoted husband has dissolved. He manages her money, plays golf, and feels depressed "without knowing why" (3). Life, spent mostly on the golf course or driving there in his \$35,000 Mercedes, seems meaningless. Percy describes Will as the American success story. "But more than that--I mean it wasn't just material things--he had cultivated himself; he was well-read, loved music, and achieved everything he had set out to do. And yet his life had fallen apart" (Forkner and Kennedy 236).

With *The Second Coming*, Percy makes a strong case for his conviction that the quest--Binx's, Will's--is a lifetime matter. Will's reappearance in a depressed state is part of the meaning of the title. Will's material success has clouded his moral vision, and he has been temporarily distracted from the mystery and wonder of life. New York once again has offered Will an escape from his painful past, which he apparently has not completely resolved. It has distracted him from his task as outlined by Binx, to accept his exile, and be, "more Jewish than the Jews" (M 89). Having returned to North Carolina, Will is looking for Jews--they all seem to have left.

In *The Second Coming*, Will confronts for the second time the painful memory of his father. Here the revelation is more bitter and made more profound by the added insights his own mature age affords. This time he is able to remember that there were two attempts at suicide. In the first, his father tried to kill Will too--this accounts for the ringing in his ear--in order to save him from the anguish of living with everydayness. Will comes to understand this episode as a warning shot. "He was trying to warn me. He was trying to tell me that one day it would happen to me, too" (SC 62).

This everydayness, Heidegger's "Alltäglichkeit" is the boredom that results from repetition. Activities, repeated day after day, tend to get worn out. And, because most human activities involve the use of signs, words, sentences, the sign-user gets worn out.

Percy explains,

In the human use of signs, which includes words and sentences of course, the theory goes that words which may in the beginning convey information with a sense of excitement--like Helen Keller first learning the word "water" spelled into her hand by her teacher Miss Sullivan--that these same words can become overused to the point of exhaustion, so that instead of transmitting information, they block it. Instead of being attended by the excitement of discovery as in the so-called Helen Keller phenomenon, they are attended by boredom (SP 353).

Percy has said that when Will confronts his father's death in *The Last Gentleman* and discovers something in the curiousness and drollness and extraneousness of the iron and bark he catches a glimpse of what, in terms of traditional metaphysics, is "the goodness and gratuitousness of created being" (SP 221). It is at this point that Will feels he is on to

something, a clue or sign, but it slips away from him (221). In *The Second Coming*, Will finds himself 25 years later, like his father, facing a world in which things and people are devalued, and meanings have broken down. With Will Barrett, Percy asks if a search for signs and meanings is possible. Is it possible to recover the mystery of language, to re-create or re-discover language and meaning and thereby create a new world? Can Will see himself once again as "a man among men rather than a self sucking everything into itself" (SC 14)? Can Will recover his ability as a sovereign seer and namer to see and name the world afresh?

Jac Tharpe has observed that while Percy has often treated separately man's being and purpose as exemplified in the mystery of language and symbol, this represents an alternative approach to the idea of God's relationship to man (5). In *The Second Coming*, Will is obsessed and determined for once and for all to prove God's existence by demanding that God give a sign. His plan is simply to climb into Lost Cove Cave, which is adjacent to the golf course, and refuse sustenance until God gives a sign of his existence. Will reasons that his father's suicide was wasted because it proved nothing, and furthermore, because it was a suicide, Will was unable to claim the insurance to which he otherwise would have been entitled. Will has structured his "experiment" so that in the event of his death, the insurance company will still be obligated to pay. "Under the law, life insurance must be paid in the event of death by natural causes, accidents, or acts of God. My death, if it occurs, shall occur not by my own hand but

by the hand of God. Or rather the handlessness or inaction of God" (186). Once again, Will believes he needs Sutter Vaught, and it is to Sutter that he writes an explanation of his plan before his Sutter-like challenge to God in the cave.

My experiment is simply this: I shall go to a desert place and wait for God to give a sign. If no sign is forthcoming I shall die. But people will know why I died: because there is no sign. The cause of my death will be either his non-existence or his refusal to manifest himself, which comes to the same thing as far as we are concerned (193).

In contrast to Binx, who knows that proof of God's existence is an oxymoron, Will aims "to settle the question of God for once and for all" (186). His plan is simply to "wait" (212). Instead he is brought out of the cave because of a toothache and falls into the arms of the poetic and mysterious Allison. As Percy put it, "Will Barrett falls out of a cave into Allie's arms, i.e., out of his nutty gnostic quest into sacramental reality" (SP 386).

Allison reminds us of an innocent hippie, a sincere child of nature, clearly grounded in the concreteness of the earth. That she becomes part of Will's salvation illustrates how mystery can be found in the everyday, and suggests that Percy is also grounded in the everyday, practical world. She is Kitty's daughter (Kitty's second coming), and has escaped from a mental institution where for three years she had been undergoing electroshock therapy. When Will meets her she is hiding out in a deserted greenhouse near the golf course, which she has inherited from an elderly aunt. After three years in the hospital, she returns to a world she neither recognizes nor understands.

Whereas Will is a worldly success and yet finds himself in despair, Allison is a failure (93), a straight-A student who flunks life and must go crazy (she exhibits schizophrenic tendencies) in order to discover that she is free to act for herself (40). Whereas Will remembers everything--he suffers from recurring rushes of haunting memories (79), Allie remembers nothing--she suffers from the amnesia that results from electroshock therapy. She must keep a journal which she reads in order to recover her memory and herself.

Allison understands the nature of her search: "It is the very nature of the thing to be discovered and the very nature of the seeking that it could not be found by asking somebody or by reading a book" (40). She will not be distracted by material possessions. "She meant to live with very few things" (43). And she begins with hope. "For the first time in her life, she felt that it, her life, was beginning" (43).

As she sets about making a new life for herself in her greenhouse, she reminds us of Robinson Crusoe coming to himself on his island, able to see and name the world anew. Having forgotten so many words, she must begin rebuilding her world by naming it. "Where is the word, the girl in the greenhouse would say, and look around" (126). Allison observes that people don't mean what they say (82). People ask questions and answer them "differently from her. She took words seriously to mean more or less what they said, but other people seemed to use words as signals in another code they had agreed upon" (34).

Allie, through her schizophrenic speech, discovers language's powers of discovery. Will, who is also aware that everyday language is used up, is the "other" who sees and names with her. They come to help each other like two castaways on a desert island. They need each other for different things. Will explains, "I need you for hoisting and you need me for interpretation" (329). Because of his epileptic seizures, Will tends to fall. He has also "fallen into despair." It is his condition of having "fallen" into despair or depression that opens him to an awareness of new possibilities for being. It is with this heightened sense of awareness that he is able to attend to Allison's peculiar speech and understand what she means. Between them what was unspeakable becomes speakable. He supplies her with the words she has forgotten. She receives these words as gifts, which she infuses with meaning. Allison hoists. Her naming transcends.

The one thing she does not want to name, however, is Will.

What to call *him*? Mr. Barrett? Mr. Will? Will Barrett? Bill Barrett? Willister Bibb Barrett? None of the names fit. A name would give him form once and for all. He would flow into its syllables and junctures and there take shape forever. She didn't want him named (249).

Percy explains that naming is both existential and figurative.

It affirms that this *is* something, but in so rescuing the object from the flux of becoming, it pays the price of setting it forth as a static and isolated entity--a picture-book entity. But at any rate it is the requirement of consciousness that everything *be* something and willy-nilly everything *is* something--*with one tremendous exception!*

The one thing in the world which by its very nature is not susceptible of a stable symbolic transformation is *myself!* I, who symbolize the world in order to know it, am destined to remain forever unknown to myself. The self, that which symbolizes, will, if it perverts its native project of being conscious of something else and tries to grasp itself as something, either fail and remain as the unformulable, a nothingness (Sartre), the aching wound of self (Marcel) – or it will fall prey to miserable inauthentic transformations . . . (MB 284).

As Will steadily becomes Allison's trusted companion and co-celebrant of her discovery of being, her need for him as authentic namer and seer grows. He becomes the indispensable source, the sustainer and validator of her consciousness (285).

And, he is the only one whose looks she does not receive as aggressive. Percy explains that a "look" or "stare" can only be either an aggression or a communion (285). For Allison, much of her incapacity to succeed in life stems from her shyness before the "impaling" looks of others.

She could do anything if nobody watched her. But the moment a pair of eyes focused on her, she was a beetle stuck on a pin, arms and legs beating the air. There was no purchase. It was an impalement and a derailment (233).

Will's looks are different. His "did not dart or pierce or impale. They did not control her. They were shy than she and gave way before her, like the light touch of a child's hand in the dark" (236).

In contrast to the communion Will offers her, Allison generally finds herself threatened by others. As she searches for definitions of home and love, she wonders if

it would be better to "live in a world of books and brooks but no looks?" (241), that is, live in a world without people. Yet at about four o'clock in the afternoon she typically feels lonely. "This time of day is a longens a longing if not an unbelonging" (238). One way she is able to escape this feeling is by retreating, by sinking deep down into herself, and forgetting her search. "If one sinks deep enough there is surely company waiting" (242). Her notebook serves as a gentle reminder for such occasions, when she forgets what she is doing in the greenhouse: she must remember to take possession of the greenhouse and to make a life for herself (239).

Allison comes to understand home as a place, "any place, any building, where one sinks into one's self and finds company waiting" (242). When she is with Will, for the first time in her life, she is able to get away from her "everlasting self sick of itself to be with another self and is that what it is and if not than what" (257)? From a definition of home she progresses to a definition of love. "It" must be love, a word she is trying very hard to define. With Will, her body "had at last found the center of itself outside itself" (257). She imagines how wonderful it would be to have Will around at four o'clock each afternoon.

What I need to know and think I know is, is loving you the secret, the be-all not end-all but starting point of my very life, or is it just one of the things creatures do like eating and drinking and therefore nothing special and therefore nothing to dream about? Is loving a filling of the four o'clock gap or is it more (258)?

Will is also trying to understand love. Earlier in the novel, contemplating his own death, Will muses: "Did you not then believe, old mole, that these two things alone are real, loving and dying, and since one is so much like the other and there is so little of the one, in the end there remained only the other" (162)? Later he wonders how he came to marry Marion. Had he loved her? Had he married her because she was vulnerable and he could protect her? Or because she was rich and decent and he could make her happy? Or because his life "had come to such a pass that he could at least do this, take an action just for the mystery of it, an action which couldn't be bad and might even be a great good" (220). He also wonders whether he has really loved his daughter, Leslie, or if the word "love" itself has become so overused it fails to express how he feels about her.

But 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 tell her I "love" her, because I don't really know what "love" means except as it applies to one's feeling for children--and then it may only mean one's sense of responsibility for their terrible vulnerability, which they never asked for" (196).

Will's turning point comes when he is hospitalized for a seizure. Kitty, having discovered that he has been with Allison, forbids him to see her. It is at this point that Will comes to understand that up to this point he has been living a kind of death-in-life, blinded by a basically false meaning of existence (Hofstadter xx). He understands that when his father fired the "warning shot" he "killed me then and I did not know it. I

even thought he had missed me. I have been living, yes, but it is a living death because I know he wanted me dead" (324). Will awakens to the discovery that there is "a whole world of meaning, of talking and listening, which took place everywhere and all the time and which no one paid attention to, at least not he" (325).

Will slips out of the hospital and rushes back to Allison at her greenhouse, to Allison and toward a revelation of the truth he has been seeking. He has something for her.

"Oh, I think you have something for me."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Love. I love you," he said. "I love you now and until the day I die" (355).

In contrast to the sombre and reticent mood at the end of *The Moviegoer*, even with the union of Binx and Kate, the mood at the end of *The Second Coming* is one of joyful, even euphoric affirmation. Having discovered love, Will and Allie will "begin" their lives--"It's about time!" They will marry.

"It is possible that though marriage in these times seems for some reason to be a troubled, often fatal, arrangement, we might not only survive it but revive it."

"Yes, we could survive and revive it" (343).

Together they have figured out how to live their lives happily. Allison will grow things in her greenhouse and Will will practice law. They will have two children and walk to school with them in the mornings. They will be together at four o'clock each afternoon.

If Will falls, Allie will hoist him. If Allie forgets, Will will remember for her. He will interpret her unusual language because he understands it. "In fact, it means more than other people's." The love that has grown from their need to symbolize the world authentically and affirm it together promises rejuvenation.

Allison now understands what she wanted. "It is a needfulness that I didn't know until this moment that I needed. What a mystification" (340). She resembles Percy's pilgrim for whom the world is a sacrament and a mystery and for whom life is a searching and a finding. Hers is a search for words, for a language that will reveal the mystery that she knows surrounds her.

Through Allie, Will comes to understand the possibility for love. This new understanding enables him to toss his guns over the cliff. Rejecting the guns, he rejects "the one quick sure exit of grace and violence and beauty. It is not, he concludes, "the ultimate come, not the first come which we all grow up dreaming about and which is never what we hoped." It is not after all "the second, last and ultimate come to end all comes" (337). It is not the "Second Coming."

Rather, Will has come to resemble Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith who lives solidly in the world and who enjoys the simple pleasures of life, yet whose life is also a searching and a finding. At the end of *The Second Coming*, Will comes to believe that Allison is the sign he was seeking from God in the cave. In his happiness he muses,

"Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have" (360).

Certainly Walker Percy himself rings through Barrett's words. Percy has said "Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e. God" (Percy in Crowley 87). Yet Percy speaks through Binx as well, who reminds us that whether or not God exists, the task of the tightrope walker remains the same, to "plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself" and continue to seek mystery in the everyday world. With Allie and Will, Percy illustrates the tremendous potential for rejuvenation and joy along the seeker's way. Percy has made "only one small, single modest claim for this book; it's the first unalienated novel since *War and Peace*" (Forkner and Kennedy 235) (!) Surely with *The Second Coming*, Percy moves beyond alienation and despair towards revival, rebirth and comedy with the potential to endure.

NOTES

¹ Janet Hobbs observes that Kierkegaard's "Stages" form a neat matrix for Percy's protagonists.

² The movies, a form of art, provide an aesthetic reversal of his alienation through its re-presentation. Binx may rejoice in the "speakability of his alienation and in the new triple alliance of himself, the alienated character, and the author" (MB 83), in this case, the movie director.

³ Aunt Emily is Percy's unmistakable tribute to William Alexander Percy, to whom *The Moviegoer* is dedicated. Like Aunt Emily, Will raised Walker under similar circumstances. Walker Percy acknowledges this debt as well as some observations about Will's Southern aristocratic stoicism in his "Introduction" to William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*. (Percy, "Introduction" to William Alexander Percy xi).

⁴ Jerome Taylor maintains that Percy, like Kierkegaard, is concerned with the "inner movements" that lead to becoming a self in the real sense (Taylor 2).

⁵ Dr. Mink is the first of many psychiatrists to be ridiculed by Percy. Percy uses psychiatry to probe at his characters, but he becomes frustrated and angered by its limitations. Science, after all, cannot cure moral sickness. Arrogant psychiatrists and smug behavioralists receive a fair number of pokes in his novels.

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