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Toward a triadic theory of Walker Percy: A semiotic reading of the novels

McDonald, Harold Lawson, Jr., Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1992

TOWARD A TRIADIC THEORY OF WALKER PERCY:

A SEMIOTIC READING OF

THE NOVELS

by

Harold L. McDonald, Jr.

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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MCDONALD, HAROLD L., JR., Ph.D. Toward a Triadic Theory of
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The purpose of this study was to explore the
relationship between Walker Percy's work in linguistic
theory and his fiction. An investigative apparatus was
distilled from Percy's essay "Toward a Triadic Theory of
Meaning" and applied to the language behavior of important
characters from each of his novels.

This procedure revealed a significant progression
thoughout Percy's fiction in his awareness of language as an
overt, distinctly human behavior. In his first published
novel, The Moviegoer, Percy's characters certainly engage in
verbal behavior, but it does not dramatically call attention
to itself as rule-governed normative behavior. In each
succeeding novel, however, Percy shows a growing awareness
of the verbal behavior of his characters, and manipulates
this behavior to illuminate various psychological and
spiritual aspects of the characters and the communities in
which they live. This manipulation reaches a climax in
Percy's penultimate novel, The Second Coming, which focuses
on the relationship between the relative unconventionality
of one character's verbal behavior and her community's
consequent perception of her as mentally ill. Percy uses
this relationship to demonstrate, as he does to some degree
in all of his novels, that language in the postmodern world

is bankrupt, and that the only way for a speaker to escape this bankruptcy is to deviate from what this world considers "normal" verbal behavior.

The application of Percy's language theory to his fiction demonstrates a mutually beneficial relationship between Percy's two abiding interests. More importantly, it provides a means of articulating the precise nature of this relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In an unpublished letter written in 1977 to Shelby

Foote, Walker Percy outlined some of the writing projects he

had in mind for the future. Among these was an attempt

> to devise a semiotic experiment (a regular scientific
> article) in which I actually demonstrate that Peirce-
> Percyan semiotic is true. At present the various
> theorists who have read Message in Bottle simply shrug
> and say it ain't so (a few exceptions). A proper
> Galileo-Einstein hypothesis: say a semiotic study of
> Faulkner: if such an [sic] such a set of theorems are
> true and such an hypothesis can be induced from
> Faulkner's life-and-writings at stage A, then facts a,
> b,...n, will hold true at a later stage B. (Letters)

Unfortunately, Percy never got around to conducting this

ambitious experiment before his death in 1990. (Indeed, in

the same letter to Foote he suspected such might be the

case--that Faulkner might be "too hard to get a holt of"--

and proposed as an alternative "a pop field like TV or print

media.") The student of Percy, familiar with his long-term

interest in language and semiotics, wishes that he had at

least had a go at this project. The concept of applying this

novelist's semiotic theories to the fiction of a fellow

novelist is quite intriguing.

Equally intriguing, however, is the concept of applying

Percy's theories to his own works of fiction in order to see

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what sort of light might be shed by each upon the other.
While a study of the sheer scope of that proposed by Percy,
with its heavy dependence upon minute, accurate biographical
information about the author, is as untenable for Percy as
it would be for Faulkner, a more purely literary study is
both possible and promising. Such a study would regard the
fiction as a world within itself, and concentrate upon the
characters who people this world, or more specifically their
use of language, as the proper subject of its investigation.
The more salient features of Percy's semiotic theories would
be extracted from the numerous essays on language to form a
concise, coherent investigative apparatus, which could in
turn be applied to the linguistic behavior of the fictional
characters in order to determine the significance of this
behavior, on a semiotic level, to the fictional world in
which it occurs.

Such a study is precisely what will be attempted within
this dissertation, in which it will be demonstrated that
Percy's semiotic theory does inform the language behavior of
his characters, and that viewing this behavior in light of
the theory provides a whole new dimension to our
understanding of Percy's fictional concerns. Before we
undertake a semiotic analysis of Percy's fiction, however,
we must begin where Percy began--with his interest in
language.

Long before Walker Percy published his first novel, <u>The</u> <u>Moviegoer</u>, he began writing essays on the nature of language. This interest in language grew out of Percy's extensive self-conducted study of philosophy during his recuperation from the bout with pulmonary tuberculosis that ended his medical career before it began. After discovering that no one actually reads the types of essays he was writing (Lawson and Kramer 89), he decided to try his hand at fiction "as a vehicle for incarnating ideas, as did Jean Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel" (Lawson and Kramer 9). Despite the enormous success brought him by this felicitous marriage of fiction and philosophy, Percy continued to write essays on language to the very end of his life.

Throughout these essays, certain key concepts on the nature of man and language recur with great regularity. At the very heart of all of his reflections on language is the concept of the inseparability of the notions of man and language. Man is that creature on earth who uses language. He is "Homo loquens, man the talker," or even more accurately, "Homo symbolificus, man the symbol-monger" (<u>Message in the Bottle</u> 17). In <u>Lost in the Cosmos</u> Percy recreates the moment in evolutionary history at which man made his qualitative split from the other species, and describes the nature of this split:

> Extremely recently in the history of the Cosmos,
> at least on the earth--perhaps less than 100,000 years
> ago, perhaps more--there occurred an event different in
> kind from all preceding events in the Cosmos. It cannot
> be understood as a dyadic interaction or a complex of
> dyadic interactions.
> It has been called variously triadic behavior,
> thirdness, the Delta factor, man's discovery of the
> sign (including symbols, language, art). (94)

For his distinction between "dyadic" and "triadic" behavior,

which lies at the heart of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory,

Percy is indebted to Charles Peirce's isolation of two and

only two types of interactions that take place between

objects/organisms in the Cosmos:

> All dynamical action, or action of brute force,
> physical or psychical, either takes place between two
> subjects...or at any rate is a resultant of such action
> between pairs. But by "semiosis" I mean, on the
> contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or
> involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a
> sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-
> relative influence not being in any way resolvable into
> actions between pairs. (MB 161).

The first of these types of interaction, the "six-billion-

year-old chain of causal relations, the energy exchanges...

from the earliest collision of hydrogen atoms to the

responses of amoeba and dogs and chimps" (MB 38), is

labelled by Peirce "dyadic" because it takes place betweeen

two subjects and can be understood in terms of a strict

stimulus-response relationship. For example, chlorine and

sodium, each highly toxic to human beings, come together

under the right circumstances and become table salt. Or, to give an example from the animal kingdom, a dog in a laboratory hears a bell every time he is fed. Before long he begins to salivate at the sound of the bell, even when food does not accompany the sound. Each of these examples involves a simple, two-way cause and effect interaction, or a sequence of such interactions. The other kind of interaction described by Peirce, however, involves a _third_ dimension, a third subject, and is hence labelled "triadic." Triadic interactions "characteristically involve symbols and symbol users" (MB 162), with the term "symbol" being understood here as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (MB 161-2). The dog in our laboratory experiment is conditioned to associate the bell he hears with the food he eats, but the bell does not symbolize food for him as, say, the word "food" or a picture of a steak symbolizes food for a human being. For the dog, a dyadic creature, the sound of the bell is merely a signal that alerts him to the possible presence of food. For the human being, a triadic creature, the word "food" or the picture of a steak _is_ food. The triadic creature's world is named in a way that the dyadic creature's world is not, and is thus communicable in a way that the dyadic creature's world is not.

Indeed, this very communicability of his world most

substantively distinguishes the triadic creature man from the dyadic creatures from which he evolved some 100,000 years ago. Triadic creatures are uniquely capable of sharing their world with one another:

> ...all such triadic behavior is _social_ in origin. A signal received by an organism is like other signals of stimuli from its environment. But a sign requires a sign-giver. Thus, every triad of sign-reception requires another triad of sign-utterance. (_LC_ 96)

The vehicle through which this sharing of the world, this uttering and receiving of signs, takes place is, of course, language. It is thus his capacity for language which most definitively separates man from the other species on the earth--which makes man Man (between a dyadic and triadic mammal there is "semiotically speaking, more difference between the two than there is between the dyadic animal and the planet Saturn").

Given its fundamental role in man's very identity as a species, language would seem to be _the_ proper subject of study for him. Unfortunately, this very quality that makes language such a natural subject of study for man also makes it a very difficult subject of study for him. Since language is virtually synonymous with both the faculty with which he would undertake such a study, and the medium through which he would articulate his findings, or in other words, since language is what he knows with and talks with, it is an

extremely difficult subject for him to know or say anything

about. As Percy puts it:

> The difficulty with it [the study of language] is that
> it _is_ under our noses; it is too close and too
> familiar. Language, symbolization, is the stuff of
> which our knowledge and awareness of the world are
> made, the medium through which we see the world. Trying
> to see it is like trying to see the mirror by which we
> see everything else. (MB 151)

Elsewhere, using a slightly different analogy, Percy writes:

> The truth is that man's capacity for symbol-mongering
> in general and language in particular is so intimately
> part and parcel of his being human, of his perceiving
> and knowing, that it is all but impossible for him to
> focus on the magic prism through which he sees
> everything else. (MB 29)

With the problem thus stated, how does one go about studying

this mysterious entity called language? Or, for that matter,

from what vantage point does one even attempt to observe it?

Percy answers these questions, with his tongue only partly

in his cheek: "In order to see it, one must either be a

Martian, or, if an earthling, sufficiently detached,

marooned, bemused, wounded, crazy, one-eyed, and lucky

enough to become a Martian for a second and catch a glimpse

of it" (MB 29). As we shall see, the above prescription for

"seeing" language reads like a catalogue of maladies

suffered by Percy's major fictional characters. It is

through these characters' personality flaws, with their

concomitant disruptions of language, that Percy distorts this mirror or prism so that we, the readers, may "catch a glimpse of it."

Just being able to see language, however, does not carry us very far toward an understanding of its significance for either Percy or his characters, any more than, say, just looking at an X-ray can tell us what is going on inside a tuberculosis patient's chest. One needs some sort of theoretical apparatus for describing what one sees. Using Peirce's notion of man as a triadic creature as a starting point, Percy provides us with just such an apparatus.

Percy's indebtedness to Peirce's work is evident throughout his essays on language, but nowhere is this influence more cogently realized than in the essay "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning." In this essay, ostensibly aimed at psychiatrists, but relevant wherever language is used, Percy expresses amazement at the fact that, even though psychiatrists "traffic in words," there does not currently exist "a basic science of listening and talking, as indispensible to psychiatrists as anatomy to surgeons" (MB 159). He then proposes to build upon the foundation laid by Peirce "a theory of language as behavior" (MB 159), with which psychiatrists may fill in the enormous gaps left by both classical behaviorism and classical psychoanalysis.

From Peirce's notion of man as a triadic creature, from

his "triadic theory of signs," Percy distills a "loose list

of postulates" implied by Peirce's theory. Of these

postulates, the one that is of greatest practical value to

the psychiatrist's study of his patients' verbal behavior,

as to our own study of the verbal behavior of Percy's

characters, is postulate 1.5:

> When one studies dyadic behavior, i.e., the learned
> response of an organism to stimuli, it is proper to
> isolate certain parameters and variables. These
> include: amplitude of response, frequency of stimulus,
> reinforcement, extinction, discrimination, and so on.
>   But if one considers triadic behavior, i.e., the
> coupling of a sentence by a coupler, a different set of
> parameters and variables must be considered. (171-2)

Percy then lists a series of such parameters and variables

designed to enable the psychiatrist to analyze those aspects

of a patient's behavior heretofore not covered by either

behaviorism or psychoanalysis. These parameters and

variables are as follows:

> 1.51.   Every sentence is uttered in a community. The
> community of discourse is a necessary and nontrivial
> parameter of triadic behavior....
> 1.511.   In triadic behavior, the dimension of
> community can act as either parameter or variable....
> 1.52.   A signal is received by an organism in an
> environment. A sentence is received and uttered in a
> world.
> 1.521.   An environment has gaps for an organism, but
> the world is global, that is, it is totally accounted
> for, one way or another, rightly or wrongly, by names
> and sentences....
> 1.522.   Sentences refer to different worlds [e.g.

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"present world," "future world," "fictional past world," etc.].

1.523.   Since a sentence entails a world for both utterer and receiver, both utterer and receiver necessarily see themselves as being placed vis-a-vis the world. A sentence utterer cannot not be placed vis-a-vis the world of the sentence. If he is not placed, then his relation to the world of the sentence is the relation of not being placed....

1.53.   Every sentence is uttered and received in a medium.

The medium is a nontrivial parameter or variable in every transaction in which sentences are used. The medium is not necessarily the message, but the message can be strongly influenced by the medium.

1.54.   Every sentence has a normative dimension [e,g. "true-false, stale-fresh, appropriate-inappropriate, crazy-sane, etc."].

After listing the parameters and variables involved in Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, Percy concludes the essay by applying the theory to a verbal exchange between a psychiatrist and his patient:

THERAPIST (after a long silence): "What comes to mind?"
PATIENT (seeing the curtain at the window stir in the breeze): "There's a rat behind the arras."
THERAPIST: "Who's the rat?"
PATIENT: "Polonius."
THERAPIST: "Don't forget that Hamlet mistook Polonius for the king."
PATIENT (agitated): "You mean--it's oedipal? Hm. No. Yes. It is!"   (184)

Percy's semiotic analysis of this exchange may be summarized as follows: since it is clear that the patient is not referring to a literal rodent, the normative mode of true-false does not apply. If the therapist mistakes the normative parameter of the patient's sentence and gets up to

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look behind the curtain, he will completely miss the
pathological cues offered by his patient's verbal behavior.
Furthermore, if the therapist reads his patient's agitation
at the disclosure of his oedipal feelings from a dyadic
standpoint, he will fail to perceive the true nature of this
agitation. A dyadic theory would trace it to "repression" of
and "resistance" to "the disclosure of unconscious contents"
(185). Triadic theory, however, views this agitation, not as
misery, but rather as delight, at exhibiting "the proper
pathology, in this case the central pathology of the Master
himself [Freud]" (185). It is

> ...a naming delight which derives from the patient's
> discovery that his own behavior, which until now he had
> taken to be the unformulable, literally unspeakable,
> vagary of one's self, has turned out not merely to be
> formulable, that is to say, namable by a theory to
> which both patient and therapist subscribe, but to be
> namable with a name which is above all names: oedipal!
> (187-8).

When the normative dimension of this delight is examined, it
turns out to have both "authentic and inauthentic
components." It is good that the patient confronts his
pathology, but his delight at the perceived prestige of the
pathology indicates "a certain loss of sovereignty by the
patient," a "falling prey to valid theory" (185).

Such is Percy's "basic science of listening and
talking." By applying this list of "parameters and

variables" to his patients' verbal behavior, a psychiatrist can add a whole new dimension to his treatment of them that psychoanalysis and behaviorism both ignore, for while these two "classical" branches of psychiatry focus solely upon the content of a patient's utterances, Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory unlocks the very act of uttering itself, and reveals important psychological information about a patient that is completely inaccessible to either a Freudian or a Skinnerian approach. As valuable a tool as Percy's "basic science of listening and talking" may be for psychiatrists, however, we might reasonably wonder what it has to offer the reader of his fiction. Certainly Percy's characters engage in listening and talking just as a psychiatrists' patients do, but beyond this most general of similarities between real people and fictional characters, is there any meaningful connection between Percy's semiotic theories and his fiction?

According to Percy, no such connection exists. In an interview conducted in 1975, when asked, "Has your interest in language theory affected your practice as a novelist?" Percy replied: "I think they have very little to do with each other. Maybe it's just as well. God help us if a novelist was thinking in terms of theoretical linguistics when he was writing. It'd be pretty bad" (Lawson and Kramer 138). While this contention has a good deal of truth to it,

one tends to be skeptical about the claim that his language
theory and novel writing "have very little to do with one
another." When a writer devotes as much time and energy to
the theoretical study of language as Percy has, and then
sits down at his desk to create a fictional world out of
language, it is difficult to believe that this interest will
not manifest itself in the writer's fiction, whether with or
without his conscious awareness.

Many critics, however, take Percy at his word on this
point and treat his linguistic work and his fiction as two
completely unrelated, or at least only obliquely related,
entities. Those few who do acknowledge a meaningful
connection between the two, and attempt to elucidate it
(e.g. Howland, Telotte) tend to do so in only the most
general, abstract manner, focusing their attention on the
union between two characters, or between the author and his
reader, that results from the shared experience of "naming"
various aspects of the world, or as Telotte sums it up, "the
creation of intersubjective relationships through human
communication" ("Walker Percy's Language of Creation" 116).
No one has yet focused on the verbal behavior of Percy's
characters as a behavior, and analyzed it for evidence of
the relative soundness of these characters' inner selves
(i.e. their psychological and spiritual well-being). This
critical neglect of the semiotic aspects of Percy's fiction

is difficult to understand because, regardless of what he says to the contrary, his characters' verbal behavior quite regularly calls attention to itself as a behavior, and hence invites semiotic analysis.

While reading Percy's fiction, one is often struck by instances of verbal behavior, by speech acts (e.g. statements, stray bits of dialogue, whole conversations) which somehow stand out from those dialogues that merely move the story along. Whether they be utterances that seem somehow to stray from the norm, or conversely, that adhere too closely to the norm, such semiotic flags alert the reader to pay more attention (e.g. to the values held by the speaker, to the values held by those around him, to the effect of his speech upon those around him), for which he is rewarded by insight into a rhetoric of tonal variation more subtle, yet more effective, than more obvious devices. When it is working for him, Percy uses this ineffable rhetoric to support and even develop the major thematical concerns of the novels, in ways that are often contradictory to their more apparent thematic concerns, a fact which is at times one of the main points Percy is trying to get across.

As abstract and intangible as this strategy may seem, when it is examined in conjunction with Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, a coherent pattern emerges. Within the notion of language as triadic behavior, and the parameters

and variables formulated by Percy for studying this behavior, is implied the concept of language as rule-governed normative behavior. Governing language behavior is a regulatory structure which inhabits the third dimension of the Peirce-Percy triad, the same dimension that distinguishes man from the lower, dyadic creatures in the world around him. Within Percy's fiction, this regulatory system is synonymous with the social realm in which man lives, breathes, eats, sleeps, and, of course, talks. Given this synonymy, since man's language behavior is more or less rigidly governed by this regulatory structure, any aberrant use of language automatically places a speaker at odds with the social world around him. In other words, deviant language behavior is _ipso facto_ deviant behavior, period.

It is this very condition that Percy manipulates so very effectively in his fiction. The extent of a character's integration into the society in which he lives can be inferred from the degree to which his language behavior "follows the rules." Through verbal behavior alone, therefore, Percy is able to depict a character's relative integration or alienation, as well as to explore the merits or drawbacks of such integration or alienation. (Given society as it is portrayed in Percy's fiction, alienation is not always a bad thing.)

With each succeeding novel, Percy's manipulation of the

relationship between language behavior and society becomes bolder and more self-conscious until reaching an apex in his next to last novel, The Second Coming. So central are Percy's semiotic interests to the overall theme of this novel, in fact, that in his last novel he all but abandons these interests, having in The Second Coming taken semiotic fiction about as far as it is capable of being taken. With the aid of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, we will trace this progression toward semiotic awareness throughout Percy's fictional career, and demonstrate how this semiotic awareness enriches his more overt thematic concerns. By examining the verbal behavior of Percy's characters in conjunction with the parameters and variables that he sets forth in "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning"--by stretching it out on the psychiatrist's couch, so to speak--we will be able to diagnose precisely what is wrong, and on rare occasions right, with Percy's speakers, with their auditors, and with the world in which they all live.

CHAPTER I

"SUNK IN THE EVERYDAYNESS":

The Moviegoer

Thirty years after its initial publication, The
Moviegoer remains Percy's most popular book. Indeed, Harold
Bloom sees it as Percy's one and only "permanent American
book" (3). The enduring popularity of the book results from
the particularly responsive chord that it strikes in the
minds of its readers. That younger readers in particular
have a strong sense of recognition of, and sympathy with,
the central thematic concerns of the book is not surprising
considering the fact that it deals with a universally
youth-oriented subject--alienation (Henisey 208).

In an early interview, Percy described The Moviegoer
as "an attempt to portray the rebellion of two young people
against the shallowness and tastelessness of modern life"
(Lawson and Kramer 3). Accurate as far as it goes, this
description belies the complexity of the philosophical
framework around which the novel is constructed. Drawing
from the ideas of such philosophers as Heidegger and, most
importantly, Kierkegaard, Percy depicts a modern world that
is absolutely permeated with despair, of which,
incidentally, it is wholly unaware, and toward which the

only healthy relationship is one of alienation. Specific components of this despair are "everydayness," a term borrowed from Heidegger and used to describe a phenomenon "which is almost omnipresent in The Moviegoer," and "malaise," a "postwar mood" which "threatens the psychic annihilation of us all" (Luschei 21, 17). The Moviegoer thus diagnoses these societal ills, and while it may not offer a cure (Tharpe 63), the very awareness that it promotes at least helps to rescue man from the sort of despair described by Kierkegaard in the novel's epigraph: "...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair."

Now, this general theme of The Moviegoer does not dramatically differ from that of The Gramercy Winner or, presumably, of The Charterhouse, the two very bad novels that Percy wrote and shelved before finally getting it right with The Moviegoer. Why, then, the failure of the first two efforts, and the success of the third? A large part of the answer lies in what Percy learned to do with language itself during the interim. Martin Luschei comments that, in writing The Moviegoer, "what [Percy] stumbled onto, by his own account, was a close relation between style and content" (15-16). Luschei refers specifically here to Percy's "laconic tone which allowed him to treat his recurring themes without Faulknerian or Wolfean excesses," but another aspect of this felicitous marriage between style and content

is what Percy does with the dialogue, with the actual speech acts, of his characters.

In his treatment of dialogue in The Moviegoer, Percy is clearly thinking in terms of triadic theory. When "listening" to Percy's characters talk to one another, the reader is acutely aware, not only of what they are saying, but of the very medium through which they express themselves. The reader quickly comes to see speech, not only as a means of advancing the story line from point A to point B, but as a distinct human behavior that is as worthy of close scrutiny as overt physical activity and just as revealing. We may learn a lot about a character like Kate by observing her booze-drinking, pill-taking, and thumb-chewing, but we can learn still more about her by paying close attention to her language behavior. Indeed, all of Percy's major characters reveal themselves through their language behavior. Just as important, however, is what this language behavior reveals about the world in which the characters live. In The Moviegoer, Percy consciously and effectively manipulates verbal behavior to undergird, and even to develop, the novel's central themes: the malaise and everydayness which permeate modern society, and the alienation from this society of those who would escape its pernicious influences.

Behind this effective use of dialogue is the notion of language as rule-governed normative behavior, as indigenous

to a particular culture as, say, table etiquette, and just as strictly regulated. Or, in terms of Percy's "loose list of postulates:" "Every sentence is uttered in a community. The comunity of discourse is a necessary and nontrivial parameter of triadic behavior" (MB 172). Language behavior only has meaning in relation to a particular community. Each community has its own elaborate system of rules governing language behavior, and each of its members must learn these rules in order to participate in its social/verbal life. Failure to master these rules, or to abide by them once mastered, results in a member's alienation from the community at large, which is not necessarily a bad thing, considering the communities in which Percy's characters live.

The New Orleans and environs that surround Binx Bolling, narrator/protagonist of The Moviegoer, is one such community. Early in the novel, Binx first mentions the "search" on which he has embarked and describes the community around him that has made him aware of the need for such a quest: "The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (13). Binx's New Orleans, and the modern America which it represents, are "sunk in the everydayness," and desperately riddled with malaise. Given Percy's assertion of the inseparability of language behavior and the notion of community, it is no surprise that the language of his

characters very clearly reflects these societal ills. The
language of this community is bankrupt, completely without
substance. The rules that govern it, however, are still very
much intact, and followed religiously by the majority of its
members, who fail to see anything wrong with society. These
are the characters described in Kierkegaard's definition of
despair.

Before Percy can effectively use this concept of
linguistic conformity to reflect the prevailing everydayness
of society, he must first demonstrate the very fact of
language as rule-governed normative behavior; he must show
that there are, in fact, rules which must be learned before
one can participate in the language-using community. A few
examples will illustrate how Percy makes his reader aware of
this aspect of language.

Early in the novel, Binx Bolling pays a visit to his
Aunt Emily's house, where he is greeted at the door by
Mercer, the family's black retainer. Discussing Mercer,
Percy once stated that "if you have ever known many
middle-class Negroes, nobody in the world is more
middle-class or conventional than the middle-class Negro"
(Lawson and Kramer 21). Mercer's extreme conventionality is
reflected in his acute awareness of the rules by which the
game of language must be played:

>Mercer lets me in. "Look out now! Uh oh." He carries on
>in mock astonishment and falls back limberkneed. Today

he does not say "Mister Jack" and I know that the
omission is deliberate, the consequence of a careful
weighing of pros and cons. Tomorrow the scales might
tip the other way (today's omission will go into the
balance) and it will be "Mister Jack...."
    "Didn't nobody tell me you was coming!" cries
Mercer, feeling the balance tip against me. "I was just
commencing to make a fire."
    Mercer is a chesty sand-colored Negro with a
shaved head and a dignified Adolph Menjou mustache, his
face, I notice, is not at all devoted but is as sulky
as a Pullman porter's. My aunt brought him down from
Feliciana, but he has changed much since then. Not only
is he a city man now; he is also Mrs. Cutrer's butler
and as such presides over a shifting menage of New
Orleans Negresses, Jamaicans and lately Hondurans. He
is conscious of his position and affects a clipped
speech, pronouncing his R's and ings and diphthonging
his I's Harlem-style....
    "--but they still hasn't the factories and
the--ah--producing set-up we has."   (21-3)

Mercer desires more than anything to fit in, to be a member

of the extraordinarily conventional community of middle-

class America. Appropriately, Mercer's efforts to conform

have a linguistic component. He has carefully studied the

rules governing proper language behavior, and tries to

follow them to the letter. The rules are complex, however,

and in watching Mercer play the language game, Binx

questions his mastery of them: "My main emotion around

Mercer is unease that in threading his way between servility

and presumption, his foot might slip" (22).

    Like Mercer, other characters in the novel try to catch

on to the complicated rules governing language behavior, but

are frequently frustrated in their attempts. Walter Wade,

for instance, fiance of Kate Cutrer and all-around good guy,

finds himself struggling to master the language rules of the community-within-a-community of the Bolling family. Seated at the lunch table with Binx, Binx's Uncle Jules and Aunt Emily, and Kate, Walter effortlessly talks football with Uncle Jules. Then Binx mentions seeing Eddie Lovell, his cousin Nell's husband, and the conversation takes an odd turn:

> "Poor Eddie," my aunt sighs as she always does, and as always she adds: "What a sad thing that integrity, of itself, should fetch such a low price in the market place."
> "Has she gone to Natchez again?" asks Uncle Jules, making his lip long and droll.
> Walter Wade cocks an ear and listens intently. He has not yet caught on to the Bollings' elliptical way of talking. (31)

This conversation is obviously a language game that has been played many times in the Bolling family, and on this occasion it is being played by the same rules "as always." Walter is a neophyte in the community of Bollings, however, and he has not yet mastered the rules. Because the reader is an outsider just like Walter, Binx thoughtfully translates Uncle Jules' cryptic comment:

> "She" is Eddie's sister Didi, and "going to Natchez" is our way of referring to one of Didi's escapades. Several years ago, while Didi was married to her first husband, she is said to have attended the Natchez Pilgrimage with several other couples and "swapped husbands." (31-2)

Walter follows along with the conversation as well as
possible, making occasional unsuccessful attempts to join
in, until finally a familiar part comes up and he is able to
play once again. Aunt Emily is good-naturedly chastizing
Binx for not wanting to ride on the Neptune float in the
Mardis Gras parade:

> "What a depraved and dissolute specimen," she says
> as usual. She speaks absently. It is Kate who occupies
> her. "Grown fat-witted from drinking of old sack."
> "What I am, Hal, I owe to thee," I say as usual
> and drink my soup.
> Kate eats mechanically, gazing about the room
> vacantly like someone at the automat. Walter is certain
> of himself now. He gets a raffish gleam in the eye.
> "I don't think we ought to let him ride, do you,
> Mrs. Cutrer? Here we are doing the work of the economy
> and there he is skimming off his five percent like a
> pawnbroker on Dryades Street." (32)

Conversation is thus a complicated affair. Until a speaker
learns the language rules of the community within which he
finds himself, he must be content to sit on the sidelines,
listening and waiting for a part to come up that is easy or
familiar enough for him to join in. Otherwise, he may
attract the disfavor of the community by breaking one or
more of its rules.

Such is the case with another of Binx's relatives,
Uncle Oscar Bolling. Oscar and his wife Edna are in town for
Carnival and the Spring Pilgrimage, "an annual tour of old
houses and patios" (173). At dinner, the Bolling table is
also graced by the loquacious presence of Sam Yerger, in

town at Aunt Emily's request to deliver a speech at the Forum, where she is president. Even though he is not yet at the Forum, he is "on" nevertheless, speaking "down the table to [Binx's] aunt but with a consciousness of the others as listeners-in" (176). One of "Em's people," who are "persons of the most advanced views on every subject and of the most exquisite sensitivity to minorities (except Catholics...)," Sam will no doubt say something contrary to the Bollings' aristocratic sensibilities, but most of the family takes such comments in stride, merely accepting them as normal behavior for "Em's people." Long ago, the Bollings discovered that, for all their strange world views, these guests of Aunt Emily's nonetheless "observe the same taboos and celebrate the same rites" as they themselves do (176-77). Uncle Oscar, however, has never caught on to this fact:

> Sitting there rared back and gazing up at the
> chandelier, he too is aware that he has fallen in with
> some pretty high-flown company, but he will discover no
> such thing; any moment now he will violate a taboo and
> blaspheme a rite by getting off on niggers, Mrs.
> Roosevelt, dagos and Jews, and all in the same breath.
> (177)

Even though Oscar's basic world view is much more in line with that of the other Bollings than is Sam Yerger's, Oscar will inevitably embarrass everyone present by expressing this view at an inappropriate time. He will, in other words, violate the rules of language behavior, and alienate the community in which these rules hold sway.

Now while an Uncle Oscar may violate language taboos left and right and never realize what he has done, never feel the semiotic strain of trying to abide by a set of rules the existence of which he does not even acknowledge, other characters are acutely aware of the sometimes enormous effort involved in playing by a community's language rules. Sam Yerger, for instance, recalls an incident from a few years back in which the pressure to perform appropriately became so severe that physical pain was pleasant in comparison:

> "It was 1951--you were in the army. Father and I were warring over politics. Come to think of it, I might actually have been kicked out of the house. Anyhow Mother suggested it might be a good thing if I went to visit an old classmate of hers in Memphis, a lady named Mrs. Boykin Lamar. She was really quite a person, had sung in the Civic Opera in New York and wrote quite a funny book about her travels in Europe as a girl. They were as kind to me as anyone could be. But no one could think of anything to say. Night after night we sat there playing operas on the phonograph and dreading the moment when the end came and someone had to say something. I became so nervous that one night I slipped on the hearth and fell into the fire. Can you believe it was a relief to suffer extreme physical pain? Hell couldn't be fire--There are worse things than fire."
> (179-80)

This anecdote illustrates that not all violations of a community's language rules are active violations like those of Uncle Oscar. In some situations silence itself violates the rules, particularly when unfamiliarity requires the maintenance of a certain degree of politeness. Sam Yerger's evenings with Mrs. Boykin Lamar call for such politeness,

the verbal component of which demands, not brilliant

oratory, but small talk, or any talk for that matter. While

Sam has no difficulty whatsoever delivering a speech to an

audience, he is at a loss when it comes to filling in the

dread silences between phonograph records with chit-chat.

The pressure eventually becomes so great that Sam falls into

the fire to escape it, actually feeling "relief" in extreme

physical pain.

The dread and nervousness which Sam experiences when

trying to stay within the bounds of normal verbal behavior

are not at all uncommon in Percy's world. In fact, Binx and

Kate both refer to acceptable language behavior as a

"tightrope," precariously spanning the horrible chasm

beneath it. While Binx has been aware of this precariousness

for some time (see p. 36), Kate has discovered it

relatively recently:

> "Tight rope" is an expression Kate used when she was
> sick the first time. When she was a child and her
> mother was alive, she said, it used to seem to her that
> people laughed and talked in an easy and familiar way
> and stood on solid ground, but now it seemed that they
> (not just she but everybody) had become aware of the
> abyss that yawned at their feet even on the most
> ordinary occasions. Thus, she would a thousand times
> rather find herself in the middle of no man's land than
> at a family party or luncheon club. (110-11)

Percy hopes to bring this tight rope, and the abyss that

yawns beneath it, to our attention in passages such as those

just cited. Language is rule-governed normative behavior,

the tight rope is the system of regulatory rules, and the
abyss is the metaphysical void into which man plunges if he
violates them. The metaphor of the tight rope illustrates
the dread people commonly feel at the thought of straying
beyond the bounds of what a community considers "acceptable"
behavior, but it also, more importantly, hints at the
relative flimsiness of the grounds upon which such
regulatory systems are established. As prescriptive and even
dictatorial as a given community may be in regard to
language behavior, often going so far as to ostracize or
even banish those who do not fit in, it would be hard-
pressed to provide an objective defense of the validity of
its definition of "normal" behavior. Most people, of course,
do not require such explanations, are not even, in fact,
aware of the tightrope upon which they walk, or of the abyss
which yawns at their feet. They are, with every fiber of
their being, "members" of the community, well-adjusted and
normal in every respect.

But what if the community is both morally and
spiritually bankrupt? Because of its members' blind
adherence to its regulatory structures, chances are that no
one will even be aware of this bankruptcy, which is
precisely the condition in which Percy perceives modern man
to live. It is "despair" in the true Kierkegaardian sense of
the word. In <u>The Moviegoer</u> Percy portrays a representative
community saturated with despair and "sunk in the

everydayness." Because language is virtually synonymous with humanity (man is, after all, "homo loquens" or "homo symbolificus") Percy gives a distinctly linguistic component to this despair. By so clearly establishing the regulatory aspect of language in passages such as those just discussed, Percy illustrates this synonymy between language behavior and humanity, and prepares us to see in the language behavior of his characters signs of a community- wide human sickness.

One of the most vivid verbal manifestations of the societal sickness depicted in The Moviegoer is the compulsion that characters feel to somehow certify the validity of their own lives. Society, in the form of TV, radio, books, and the like has provided its members with criteria by which to gauge the value, or even reality, of their own meaningful experiences. Depending upon how closely these experiences match up with the criteria, established by society and embedded in the consciousness of the individual, for meaningful behavior, a character can determine right away whether or not he has achieved anything worthwhile.

For instance, Binx recalls the weekends which he, Walter Wade, and some Korean War veterans used to spend on a houseboat on Vermilion Bay near Tigre au Chenier (the weekends still go on as usual, but without Binx, who found them "boring"):

> Walter liked nothing better than getting out in that
> old swamp on weekends with five or six fellows, quit
> shaving and play poker around the clock. He would get
> up groaning from the table at three o'clock in the
> morning and pour himself a drink and, rubbing his
> beard, stand looking out into the darkness. "Goddamn,
> this is alright, isn't it? Isn't this a terrific
> set-up, Binx? Tomorrow we're going to have duck
> Rochambeau right here. Tell me honestly, have you ever
> tasted better food at Galatoire's?" "No, it's very
> good, Walter." "Give me your honest opinion, Binx."
> "It's very good." (39-40)

Walter thinks he is having fun, but must have this fact

officially certified before he can know for sure. He holds

the experience up to the light, as it were, for Binx's

approval. It is "all right"; in fact, it is "terrific." In

other words, our behavior on this particular occasion meets

all of the necessary criteria to officially qualify as what

society labels "fun," doesn't it? This certification process

obviously diminishes the experience. By isolating the

weekend in the swamp, the all-night poker game, and the

anticipation of duck Rochambeau "right here," and attempting

to place them in the abstract category of "things that are

fun," Walter has removed himself from direct contact with

the experience and relinquished whatever real pleasure might

have been found there.

This same certification process, and the diminishment

that results, can be seen in Binx's memory of some friends

he had eight years ago. After returning from the Korean War,

and recovering from a wound he received there, Binx "took up

with two fellows [he] thought [he] should like."

> They were good fellows both. One was an ex-Lieutenant
> like me, a University of Cal man, a skinny impoverished
> fellow who liked poetry and roaming around the
> countryside. The other was a mad eccentric from
> Valdosta, a regular young Burl Ives with beard and
> guitar. (41)

The trio thought hiking might be fun and set out on the

Appalachian Trail toward Maine from Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

Binx enjoyed himself for a while but then, in the midst of

all their fun, became unaccountably depressed.

> The times we did have fun, like sitting around a fire
> or having a time with some girls, I had the feeling
> they were saying to me: "How about this, Binx? This is
> really it, isn't it, boy?", that they were practically
> looking up from their girls to say this. For some
> reason I sank into a deep melancholy. What good fellows
> they were, I thought, and how much they deserved to be
> happy. If only I could make them happy. But the beauty
> of the smoky blue valleys, instead of giving us joy,
> became heartbreaking. (41)

This compulsion to certify the validity of one's meaningful

experiences inevitably places a barrier between the person

and the experience itself, so that immediate enjoyment, or

"fun," is replaced by a sort of detached aesthetic approval.

The hikers, like the hunters on Vermilion Bay, thus

sacrifice their pleasure by distancing themselves from their

pleasurable experiences before they are even over.

In terms of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, the

diminishment of pleasure or meaning in these examples

results from a problem with the participants' view of their

placement in the world. Postulate 1.523 states that, "Since

a sentence entails a world for both utterer and receiver, both utterer and receiver necessarily see themselves as being <u>placed</u> vis-a-vis the world. A sentence utterer cannot not be placed vis-a-vis the world of the sentence" (<u>MB</u> 174). By simply watching the overt physical behavior of the hunters and the hikers, we might very well conclude that they are having "fun," as they themselves believe. Their linguistic behavior, however, their verbal insistence that they are, indeed, having fun, shows that they have relinquished sovereignty over the experiences in question.

In his essay, "The Loss of the Creature," Percy presents a hypothetical account of an American couple's visit to Mexico. Disappointed because they find themselves "surrounded by a dozen other couples from the Midwest," they rent a car in Guanajuato and set out for Mexico City by themselves. On the way, they get lost and finally wind up in a tiny Indian village not even marked on the map. Some sort of religious festival is going on, and the couple spends several days observing and enjoying life in this quaint, unspoiled community. They feel some uneasiness in the midst of their pleasure, however, the source of which they are at a loss to discover. Percy finds a clue to the nature of their restiveness in their remarks to an ethnologist friend when they return home: "How we wished you had been there with us! What a perfect goldmine of folkways! Every minute we would say to each other, if only you were here! You must

return with us" (<u>MB</u> 53). Percy explains that, for all the generosity of feeling apparent in these remarks, the couple's desire for the presence of the ethnologist is actually motivated by a need "to certify their experience as genuine."

> "This is it" and "Now we are really living" do not necessarily refer to the sovereign encounter of the person with the sight that enlivens the mind and gladdens the heart. It means that now at least we are having the acceptable experience. The present experience is always measured by a prototype, the "it" of their dreams. "Now I am really living" means that now I am filling the role of sightseer and the sight is living up to the prototype of sights. This quaint and picturesque village is measured by a Platonic ideal of the Quaint and the Picturesque. (53)

This compulsion to certify the validity of their experience produces "a radical loss of sovereignty over that which is as much theirs as as it is the ethnologist's" (54). The couple's "basic placement in the world is such that they recognize a priority of title of the expert over his particular department of being. The whole horizon of being is staked out by 'them,' the experts. The highest satisfaction of the sightseer...is that his sight should be certified as genuine."

This couple's experience in Mexico corresponds directly with that of the hunters on Vermilion Bay and the hikers on the Appalachian Trail. Binx's friends feel that they are finally experiencing "it"; they are having an experience that matches in every way the Platonic ideal of Fun. Their

assertion of this fact to Binx indicates that, like the couple in Mexico, their "basic placement in the world is such that they recognize a priority of title of the expert over his particular department of being." The "experts" in this case are society in general and Binx in particular, and Binx's friends appeal to their judgment for certification of their experience. They suffer the same "radical loss of sovereignty" over their experience that the couple suffers. In his discussion of the couple, Percy goes on to say that the "worst of this impoverishment is that there is no sense of impoverishment" (54). This is likewise the case with Binx's friends, who are completely blind to their own impoverishment. The unacknowledged impoverishment and loss of sovereignty exhibited in the verbal behavior of Binx's hunter and hiker friends effectively demonstrate the sort of despair (which "is unaware of being despair") that plagues the modern world and permeates the fictional world of The Moviegoer.

The impoverishment and lack of authenticity exhibited by these two examples pale in comparison with the utter vacuity that characterizes the verbal behavior of two other of Binx's acquaintances--Eddie and Nell Lovell. Nell, Binx's cousin, and her husband Eddie are two of the most insufferable bores in all of Percy's fiction. They are the very epitome, the apotheosis, as it were, of everydayness. They come to Binx as ambassadors from that morally and

spiritually bankrupt world which surrounds him on every side. Percy only gives the reader a single verbal encounter apiece with Eddie and Nell, but in these encounters he makes his point abundantly clear. Like most everyone else in Binx's world, Eddie and Nell are "sunk in the everydayness" of their own lives, which, unbeknownst to them, contain virtually no meaningful substance. Percy offers little evaluative commentary concerning these characters (although what little he does offer is scathing), but prefers instead to let them speak for themselves. In these two conversations, Percy distills the very essence of everydayness, the aroma of which hangs over the entire novel like the smell of cheap perfume.

Early in the novel, Binx runs into Eddie on the street. They converse for a full ten minutes, but after they part Binx realizes that he "cannot answer the simplest question about what has taken place."

> As I listen to Eddie speak plausibly and at length of one thing and another--business, his wife Nell, the old house they are redecorating--the fabric pulls together into one bright texture of investments, family projects, lovely old houses, little theater readings and such. It comes over me: this is how one lives!....And all the while he talks very well. His lips move muscularly, molding words into pleasing shapes, marshalling arguments, and during the slightest pauses are held poised, attractively everted in a Charles Boyer pout--while a little web of saliva gathers in a corner like the clear oil of a good machine. (18-19)

Eddie asks Binx if he is riding the Neptune float during

Mardis Gras, and thanks him for sending a Mr. Quieulle to

him. With "eyes twinkling from the depths," Eddie tells Binx

how the old man "set up his trust fund and died," leaving

Eddie with a tidy profit. Then, becoming "solemn as a

bishop," Eddie goes on to eulogize this wonderful old man,

this source of so much prosperity:

> "I'll tell you one thing, Binx. I count it a great
> privilege to have known him. I've never known anyone,
> young or old, who possessed a greater fund of
> knowledge. That man spoke to me for two hours about the
> history of the crystallization of sugar and it was pure
> romance. I was fascinated." (20)

Eddie also expresses his admiration for Kate and Aunt Emily:

"'I have never told anybody what I really think of that

woman--' Eddie says 'woman' as a deliberate liberty to be

set right by the compliment to follow. 'I think more of Miss

Emily--and Kate--than anyone else in the world except my own

mother--and wife. The good that woman has done'" (23). As

the two friends prepare to part, Eddie asks Binx "in a

special voice" how the troubled Kate is doing. To Binx's

assurance that she is fine, Eddie responds: "'I'm so damn

glad. Fellah!' A final shake from side to side, like a

tiller. 'Come see us!'" (21).

If nothing else, this conversation makes clear Percy's

incredible ear for banal conversation. The reader

immediately recognizes in this encounter the sort of empty

small talk that occurs at cocktail parties, checkout lines, and coffee breaks. He is inclined to agree with Binx that Eddie does, indeed, "talk very well." In terms of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory (Postulate 1.53 "Every sentence is uttered and received in a medium") the medium through which Binx and Eddie exchange utterances is that of small talk. This medium is, by definition, characterized by a sort of necessary triviality, or emptiness, so neither Eddie nor Binx is condemned here for not saying anything profound. Eddie's great facility with this medium, however, provokes Percy's scorn. Eddie is so skilled at small talk, and follows the rules so well, that he can speak for a full ten minutes and manage to say absolutely nothing.

Binx, who has just embarked on his great "search" (13), experiences a sense of uneasiness when confronted with such vacuity, reflecting some time after the conversation: "lately it is all I can do to carry on such everyday conversations, because my cheek has developed a tendency to twitch of its own accord. Wednesday as I stood speaking to Eddie Lovell, I felt my eye closing in a broad wink" (100). Binx's uneasiness can be explained in part by Eddie's great facility at, and identification with, a medium that is semantically devoid of substance. Other aspects of Eddie's conversation, however, are even more deadly, more indicative of the great spiritual emptiness which plagues the modern world. Since these aspects exhibit the same

pathology, as it were, and can be explained by the same postulates as Binx's conversation with Eddie's wife Nell, we would do well now to turn to this conversation and examine the verbal behavior of both Lovells as a single entity.

Several days after his conversation with Eddie, Binx ruminates:

> For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead.
> It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death. There is little to do but groan and make an excuse and slip away as quickly as one can. At such times it seems that the conversation is spoken by automatons who have no choice in what they say. I hear myself or someone else saying things like: "In my opinion the Russian people are a great people, but--" or "Yes, what you say about the hypocrisy of the North is unquestionably true. However--" and I think to myself: this is death. (99-100)

Binx gives his earlier conversation with Eddie as an example of such deadness, and then recalls an equally deadly conversation he recently had in the public library with Nell. Nell, who has just finished a "celebrated novel" which "takes a somewhat gloomy and pessimistic view of things," storms over to Binx with book in hand and fire in her eye:

> "I don't feel a bit gloomy!" she cries. "Now that Mark and Lance have grown up and flown the coop, I am having the time of my life. I'm taking philosophy courses in the morning and working nights at Le Petit Theatre. Eddie and I have re-examined our values and found them pretty darn enduring. To our utter amazement we discovered that we both have the same life-goal. Do you know what it is?....To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off....

> "--we gave the television to the kids and last
> night we turned on the hi-fi and sat by the fire and
> read The Prophet aloud. I don't find life gloomy!" she
> cries. "To me, books and people and things are
> endlessly fascinating. Don't you think so?"   (101)

As Binx listens to Nell talk he "shift[s] about on the

library steps" and finds that "Looking in her eyes is an

embarrassment." He feels a rumble in his descending bowel

"heralding a tremendous defecation." As she drones on about

her wonderful life with Eddie, Binx concludes that "there is

nothing to do but shift around as best one can, take care

not to fart, and watch her in a general sort of way."

> I get to thinking about her and old Eddie re-examining
> their values. Yes, true. Values. Very good. And then I
> can't help wondering to myself: why does she talk as if
> she were dead? Another forty years to go and dead,
> dead, dead."   (102)

Nell finally finishes, and the two part, "laughing and

dead."

Like her husband's conversation, Nell's verbal behavior

is characterized by a certain degree of triteness (Postulate

1.54. "Every sentence has a normative dimension....A

sentence may be true or false, significant or nonsensical,

trite or fresh, bad art or good art, etc."). This triteness

indicates a fundamental lack of substance beneath all of

those fine-sounding words. Also like her husband, Nell shows

great skill in the medium of small talk. Her skill in this

medium may, in fact, be even greater than Eddie's because

she somehow manages to take such worthy concepts as "values" and "life goals" and trivialize them to such an extent that they are admissible subjects for small talk. Both the triteness of their talk and their facility for chit-chat hint at the emptiness of their lives and the degree to which they are "sunk in the everydayness." Examination of their verbal behavior in conjunction with yet another parameter from Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, however, reveals an even deeper problem.

As mentioned in the earlier discussion of Binx's hunter and hiker friends, Postulate 1.523 describes the necessary condition of a speaker's "placement" in a "world." Like these other friends of Binx, Eddie and Nell both display a need to certify the validity of their experience (Eddie's "I was fascinated," and Nell's "I don't feel a bit gloomy!"). Percy's later elaboration of this parameter, however, allows us to peer even more deeply into the problem. In Lost in the Cosmos, Percy narrows the possibilities of a person's placement within his world to two: "self conceived as immanent, consumer of the techniques, goods and services of society; or as transcendent, a member of the transcending community of science and art" (113). Eddie and Nell are immanent selves to the highest degree; they have made immanence an art form. In his discussion of the immanent self in Lost in the Cosmos, Percy asserts that such immanence is a "continuum":

> At one end: the compliant role-player and consumer and holder of a meaningless job, the anonymous "one"-- German man--in a mass society, whether a back fence gossip or an Archie Bunker beer-drinking TV watcher.
>   At the other end: the "autonomous self," who is savvy to all the techniques of society and appropriates them according to his or her discriminating tastes, whether it be learning "parenting skills," consciousness-raising, consumer advocacy, political activism liberal or conservative, saving whales, TM, TA, ACLU, New Right, square-dancing, creative cooking, moving out to the country, moving back to the central city, etc. (113)

Eddie, with his aesthetic detachment ("...it was pure romance. I was fascinated") from a man whose timely death brought him a handsome profit, and Nell, with her philosophy courses and involvement with Le Petit Theatre, her re-examination of values and "endless fascination" with "books and people and things," both clearly qualify as Percy's "autonomous" selves. They are, indeed, "savvy to all the techniques of society," and they appropriate them "according to [their] discriminating tastes." And with good results. Their life together, after all, appears as "one bright texture of investments, family projects, lovely old houses, little theater readings and such" (18). On a purely dyadic level, as organisms in an environment, the Lovells lack for nothing. This accounts for their irrepressible, highly annoying cheerfulness. ("I'm so damn glad. Fellah!"; "I don't find life gloomy!").

For all its material benefits, such prosperity has one glaring, fundamental flaw. Eddie and Nell, like all human

beings, are not merely organisms in an environment, but are selves in a world, and prosperity in the former category has little to do with prosperity in the latter. Regardless of how successful an immanent self may be in the dyadic realm, his immanence results in impoverishment in the triadic realm where man, homo symbolificus, actually lives:

> The impoverishment of the immanent self derives from a perceived loss of sovereignty to "them," the transcending scientists and experts of society. As a consequence, the self sees its only recourse as an endless round of work, diversion, and consumption of goods and services. (122)

Percy refers to a "perceived" loss of sovereignty. Eddie and Nell do not, even vaguely, perceive the loss of sovereignty entailed in their immanence. Like most of the people in Binx's world, they are so "sunk in the everydayness of their own lives" that they fail to see the desperate nature of their own existence and, failing to see it, live in a state of genuine despair.

By so clearly portraying language as rule-governed normative behavior, as a game of sorts, while at the same time using language behavior to show the emptiness and despair which permeate the world of The Moviegoer, Percy implies that to escape from the despair one must also escape from the normative structure which both reflects and propagates it; one must, as it were, play the game by a different set of rules. Among the characters surrounding

Binx, we see a few abortive attempts to change the rules of the game, but these efforts at escape are generally doomed from the start because of a fundamental lack of understanding of the problem on the part of the would-be escapees.

For instance, some characters feel that they can escape by adopting unconventional social roles. Closest to home are the courageous, if misguided, efforts of Kate Cutrer, Binx's cousin and eventual wife. Kate perceives only too clearly the despair of the world around her, and seeks to escape it by adopting a series of roles that are in some way or another at variance with what the community considers to be "normal" behavior. Not unexpectedly, Kate's role-playing has a marked linguistic component. At one point, Kate reveals to Binx the rather startling fact that the happiest moment in her life occurred just after a car accident in which she was uninjured but her husband Lyell was killed. After taking one last look at Lyell, lying on the side of the road with "gravel driven into his cheek," she got on a bus and headed for Natchez where she checked into a motel, sent her clothes out to be cleaned, ate a huge breakfast, and read the Sunday paper. The "happiest moment" was on the bus: "'I just stood there until the door opened, then I got on and we went sailing along from bright sunshine down through deep clefts as cool and dark as a spring house'" (58-60). Immediately

following this moment of personal revelation, Kate grows

uncomfortable with the sense of exposure:

> Kate frowns and drums her fingers on the wicker. A
> diesel horn blows on the river. Overhead a motor
> labors...."Pardon," says Kate, rising abruptly and
> leaving. The little Yankee word serves her well: she
> leaves in disguise. (60)

On another occasion, Binx finds talking to Kate on the phone

a "strain" because "For some reason or other she feels

obliged to keep one jump ahead of the conventional" (65).

Instead of "Hello, this is Kate'" she will say things like

"Well, the knives have started flying," or "What do you

know? I'm celebrating the rites of spring after all."

In these and other attempts to escape the despair of

conventional society by adopting unconventional roles, Kate

meets only frustration, and ends up feeling even more

desperate than before. Sarah Henisey describes the nature of

Kate's failure to escape:

> Kate is lost in a world of the objective empirical,
> talking of people in her social work as case studies,
> observing her surroundings without commitment...and
> playing roles. But Kate always catches herself creating
> unauthentic selves and despairs. (210-11)

Even though Kate, through her awareness of society's

despair, is somewhat better off than the Eddie and Nell

Lovells of the world, she still has no power to escape it

because of a flawed perception of her own placement

vis-a-vis the world around her. The linguistic roles which

Kate slips into and out of like poorly fitting clothes, and which she perceives to be so unconventional, exhibit just as high a degree of immanence as do the conventional roles adopted by the Lovells. Kate's unconventional behavior is only conventionally unconventional (i.e. different according to society's definition of "difference"). And, as reactionary nonconformity is no less dependent upon the norms of society than strict conformity, Kate suffers from the same "loss of sovereignty" as most everyone else in the world of the novel, and her escape attempts fail.

Binx encounters another would-be escapee while he and Kate are headed back to New Orleans from Chicago on a bus. Binx never learns the young man's name, but immediately recognizes him as a "romantic"--"a romantic from Wisconsin," no less (214). Before speaking to him, Binx makes some rather Percyan observations on the romantic's placement vis-a-vis the world--on the authenticity of his romantic self:

> He is reading The Charterhouse of Parma....Two things I am curious about. How does he sit? Immediately graceful and not aware of it or mediately graceful and aware of it? How does he read The Charterhouse of Parma? Immediately as a man who is in the world and who has an appetite for the book as he might have an appetite for peaches, or mediately as one who finds himself under the necessity of sticking himself into the world in a certain fashion, of slumping in an acceptable slump, of reading as acceptable book on an acceptable bus? Is he a romantic?
> He is a romantic. His posture is the first clue: It is too good to be true, this distillation of all graceful slumps. (214-14)

This poor soul, recognizing the crass materialism,
superficiality, etc. of society and deciding that he is too
good for all of that, has, in an effort to escape it,
latched on to probably the most conventional of all
unconventional roles--the young romantic. The inauthenticity
of this adopted self is immediately apparent to Binx, who
walks over to rescue him from the "spasm of recognition and
shyness" that seized him when he saw Binx reading <u>Arabia</u>
<u>Deserta</u>. During this brief encounter, the romantic's verbal
behavior verifies Binx's suspicion about the authenticity of
his role. When Binx asks him how he likes his book, he
closes it and "stares hard at it as if he would, by dint of
staring alone, tear from it its soul in a word. 'It's--very
good,' he says at last and blushes" (215). As they talk,
Binx asking direct questions and the romantic answering, the
romantic tries hard to live up to the role he has chosen for
himself: "he speaks in a rapid rehearsed way, a way he
deems appropriate for our rare encounter, and when he is
forced to use an ordinary word like 'bus'--having no other
way of conferring upon it a vintage flavor, he says it in
quotes and with a wry expression" (215-16). He is trying so
hard to escape from the conventional that he is paralyzed
with self-consciousness, in deep despair, although not in
the romantic way he believes, and finally every bit as sunk

in the everydayness as those people from whom he wishes to distinguish himself.

As such examples indicate, role-playing does not provide a valid means of escape from everydayness in _The Moviegoer_. The verbal behavior of such would-be escapees as Kate and the romantic clearly betrays the inauthenticity of the roles selected and, consequently, the invalidity of role-playing as a means of escape. But if adopting unconventional roles does not succeed in extricating a person from, or lifting him above, the everydayness in which the conventional community around him is sunk, what option, short of physical isolation from the community itself, remains open to him? And what ever becomes of Binx's "search"?

To anyone familiar with Percy's work, and his Catholicism, the solution is obvious. Only through faith in God can man ever hope to escape the everydayness in which the majority of modern human society is sunk. In Binx's case, escape is achieved through a specifically Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" from one "sphere of existence" to another. Linda Whitney Hobson explains the concept:

> Kierkegaard saw human activity divided into three spheres or stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. People move back and forth among these stages, though most people in postmodern Western culture live in the aesthetic and fewest attain the religious sphere. The aesthetic man does not often know

that he is in despair, and Percy pictures him as the
happy consumer, anxious only to purchase the "right"
things by which he can identify himself to himself.
(Understanding... 18)

The highest level of human existence is the religious
sphere, and it is ultimately toward this sphere that all of
Percy's heroes strive, whether consciously or otherwise.
When we first encounter Binx, he is firmly entrenched in the
lowest sphere, the aesthetic, although he has just commenced
his "search" for a more meaningful existence. Normally, a
seeker such as Binx would pass through the second sphere,
the ethical, before moving on to the religious, but Binx
"jumps from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the
religious. He has no ethical sphere at all" (Lawson and
Kramer 66). Binx's failure to pass through the ethical
sphere is evident in the reaction of his Aunt Emily to his
unannounced and ill-fated trip to Chicago with Kate. Upon
the couple's return to New Orleans, Aunt Emily, whose stoic
philosophy of life embodies the basic values of the ethical
sphere (Hobson, Understanding... 30, 38), expresses her
total incomprehension of, and contempt for, Binx's behavior:

> "I ask you again. Were you intimate with her?"
> "I suppose so. Though intimate is not quite the
> word."
> "You suppose so. Intimate is not quite the word. I
> wonder what is the word. You see--" she says with a
> sort of humor, "--there is another of my hidden
> assumptions. All these years I have been assuming that
> between us words mean roughly the same thing, that
> among certain people, gentlefolk I don't mind calling
> them, there exists a set of meanings held in common,

> that a certain manner and a certain grace come as
> naturally as breathing." (222)

Aunt Emily's failure to understand Binx, which she expresses in strikingly semiotic terms, results from a fundamental incompatibility of spheres of existence. Having found the aesthetic sphere in which he lives, along with the verbal behavior through which its inhabitants communicate with one another, totally devoid of meaning, empty of substance, Binx repudiates it and sets out on his "search" for a more meaningful existence. His logical next move would be to slip comfortably into the ethical sphere and adopt Aunt Emily's value system with its "set of meanings held in common" and its "words [which] mean roughly the same thing." Sensing, however, a certain abiding emptiness in this sphere, and a hollow ring to its language, Binx rejects it as well and moves directly on to the highest sphere--the religious sphere. Since Binx's rejection of the first two spheres has such a marked linguistic component (i.e., we are given plenty of examples of the verbal behavior indigenous to these spheres), we might expect to see a verbal manifestation of the religious sphere, to hear what its inhabitants sound like. After all, the entire novel points toward this religious sphere as the ultimate object of Binx's search.

Because of Percy's basic distrust of language in the postmodern world, his feeling that it is "almost bankrupt"

when it comes to communicating meaningful truths such as those found in the religious sphere (Lawson and Kramer 79), he finally eschews the attempt to portray the religious sphere in linguistic terms. Now in possession of the object of his search--religion--Binx concludes that language, as he knows it, is powerless to describe it; the experience is literally too deep for words:

> Further: I am a member of my mother's family after all and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion (a peculiar word this in the first place, _religion_; it is something to be suspicious of).
> Reticence, therefore, hardly having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time as any to make an end.   (237)

Even though Percy intimates, through the unusual language of Binx's crippled half-brother Lonnie, the possibility of a still fresh language capable of communicating significant meaning ("Lonnie's monotonous speech gives him an advantage, the same advantage foreigners have: his words are not worn out" 162), he finally leaves us with nothing more than intimations, and concludes, along with Binx, simply that "It is impossible to say" (235). Percy will eventually succeed in discovering the fresh new language hinted at in The Moviegoer, but it will take him another four novels to do so.

As will become apparent in the following chapters, The Moviegoer is not one of Percy's more "semiotic" novels. In other words, in this first of his published novels, Percy is

far less conscious of manipulating his characters' verbal
behavior toward a specific thematic end than he will be in
subsequent novels. If we read the novel, however, in light
of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, as distilled in "Toward a
Triadic Theory of Meaning," a new diagnostic dimension opens
up for us. After all, these postulates are formulated to aid
psychiatrists in reading their patients' verbal behavior for
signs of psychological/emotional trouble, and then
articulating the precise nature of this trouble. They can
also help the reader to articulate an otherwise vague
impression he has of a character based on clues in his
verbal behavior. So, if a character's speech has a generally
hollow ring to it, the reader can actually put the symptoms
into words and get at their psychological or spiritual
etiology. In The Moviegoer, such hollowness can be clearly
traced back to its source in the malaise that permeates
postmodern American culture. The novel can thus support a
limited semiotic reading even though it is not a consciously
semiotic work. The value of The Moviegoer to this study,
then, is not that in it Percy does anything strikingly
original with his characters' verbal behavior, as he will in
some of his later work, but that it demonstrates the general
effectiveness of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory as a
critical/diagnostic tool. It will become even more
effective, however, when it is applied to the more self-
consciously semiotic novels to come.

CHAPTER II

CONFUSING THE MEDIUM WITH THE MESSAGE:

THE LAST GENTLEMAN

Some five years in the making, Percy's second published
novel is "more ambitious...more spacious" (Luschei 1972),
and "subtler and finer-grained" (Wolfe 182) than The
Moviegoer. It has been described variously as "a comic
version of the traditional heroic quest for adventure and
accomplishment" (Tharpe 64), "the familiar novel of social
observation" (Coles 178), a "Baedeker of the journey
towards Kierkegaard's essential freedom, defined as dread"
(Gaston 463), and even a "hospital hurrah of lunatic humor"
(Cheney 345). The most fruitful readings of the novel are
those such as Luschei's that view it as "a kind of
pilgrimage" (112), for, like The Moviegoer, The Last
Gentleman chronicles one man's search for some means of
escaping the malaise which grips postmodern society. Of the
novel's protagonist, Will Barrett, and his pilgrimage Percy
has remarked: "He really existed in what Kierkegaard would
call the religious mode. He was a real searcher. He was
after something" (Lawson and Kramer 67). Unlike The
Moviegoer's Binx Bolling, however, Will Barrett ultimately
fails in his quest: "Well, it ends...with Barrett missing

it" (Lawson and Kramer 67). The world in which Will lives is every bit as "sunk in the everydayness" as Binx Bolling's, and is actually quite a bit more consumer-oriented, indicating a high degree of immanence among its inhabitants. Tenenbaum has observed of this world that "a pervasive commercialism is a major constituent, and force" of it, and that "most of Will's acquaintances are prodigious consumers" (304). Immanent selves such as Eddie and Nell Lovell feel comfortably at home in this world. Will Barrett does not feel at home here, however, and he spends the entire novel searching for some meaningful way of dealing with his sense of homelessness. With such good intentions and sincere effort, why does he finally end up "missing it"?

Will Barrett is plagued by a variety of personal problems, not the least serious of which is a tendency to drift off into "fugue" states: "To be specific, he now had a nervous condition and suffered spells of amnesia and even between times did not quite know what was what" (11). Percy himself has called Will "half-crazy" (Lawson and Kramer 111). As inconvenient as they are, these mental problems are not responsible for the ultimate failure of Will's search for meaning. In fact, these problems are an ontologically healthy sign, indicating Will's perception that something is amiss in his world. The "alienation and dislocation" actually "function positively to unveil existence" (Broughton 157). The greatest obstacle to Will's search for

meaning is a condition not unlike that which we saw in such great abundance in The Moviegoer--it is a problem with the self. The master diagnostician Dr. Sutter Vaught sums up the problem in his casebook:

> Barrett: His trouble is he wants to know what his trouble is. His "trouble," he thinks, is a disorder of such a character that if he only can locate the right expert with the right psychology, the disorder can be set right and he can go about his business.
>
> That is to say: he wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcender (e.g., me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence (e.g., "environment," "groups," "experiences," etc.) in such a way that he will be happy. Therefore I will tell him nothing. For even if I were "right," his posture is self-defeating. (338-9)

Now Sutter is not without his own problems, including a deep-seated cynicism and marked suicidal tendencies, but because of his frequently cited brilliance in medical diagnostics (e.g., he once met a physicist at a party, spoke with him for five minutes and correctly predicted that he would be dead of malignant hypertension within a year 174), and the unmistakably Percyan language of his diagnosis, his summation of Will's condition is clearly trustworthy. Sutter is "onto the malaise" and "has some sense of its etiology" (Hobson Understanding... 50).

Basically, Will has a flawed view of his own placement vis-a-vis the world (Postulate 1.523). This flaw is evident in his resolution, immediately following his decision to end five years of psychoanalysis, to take control of the

remainder of his life: "I am indeed an engineer...if only a humidification engineer, which is no great shakes of a profession. But I am also an engineer in a deeper sense. I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge I have so arduously gained from five years of analysis" (40). Such a transcendent attitude may be the proper way for a scientist to approach an experiment in the dyadic realm (e.g., two chemicals reacting with one another to create another substance, a dog salivating at the sound of a bell, etc.), but it is no way for a human being to approach his own life, which must be lived on a triadic level.

Will feels detached from the immanent realm in which people go to football games, court one another, and buy Chevrolets, and he seeks some way of entering this realm without experiencing the discomfort and sense of hollowness that he has always felt in previous encounters with it (e.g., the plunge into the briar patch to escape the amiable group of Ohioans he befriended at a ski lodge, 21). He desires, in essence, some kind of bridge between the transcendent and immanent realms over which he can come and go as he pleases. Will fails to perceive (and this is ultimately at the root of his problem) that the human condition, by its very definition, does not allow for such a bridge. In his essay "A Novel About the End of the World" Percy speaks of man "as neither angel nor organism but as a

wayfaring creature somewhere between" (<u>MB</u> 113). Or, as
Sutter puts it in his casebook, at this point addressing his
sister Val: "Let us say you were right: that man is a
wayfarer (i.e., not transcending being nor immanent being
but wayfarer) who therefore stands in the way of hearing a
piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him
(i.e., his salvation) and which he had better attend to"
(339). As a "wayfarer," man is not properly at home in
either the transcendent or the immanent realm. If he
perceives himself to be at home, as so many of Percy's
characters do, then he is merely deluded, and suffers from
the Kierkegaardian despair that is unaware of itself as
being despair. Throughout his search, Will does not
actually feel at home in either realm, but he believes such
a feeling to be possible. This is why his "posture is
self-defeating"; he is simply searching for something that
does not exist.

 While the concept of man as a homeless creature in the
universe, a wayfarer, or, as Percy describes him in another
essay ("The Message in the Bottle"), an amnesiac castaway
on a desert island, may on the surface appear to be bleak
indeed, the very possibility of a "piece of news" from the
outside rescues man from a descent into sheer hopelessness.
In order to hear the news, however, he must be in a properly
receptive posture, which Will is not. Given Percy's Catholic
universe, the content of the message is nothing new or

surprising; it is the same information which catapulted Binx Bolling from the aesthetic stage of existence over into the religious. In the postmodern world, however, fewer and fewer people are in a position to receive this news. Like Will, they suffer from the "postmodern incapacity" described by Luschei: "What is it to be a pilgrim if you are blind to the signs along the way and deaf to the messages?" (112).

In a discussion of Will, Percy sums up this incapacity even more specifically: "...Barrett has eliminated Christianity. That is gone. That is no longer even to be considered. It's not even to be spoken of, taken seriously or anything else" (Lawson and Kramer 67). Without the possibility of Christianity, of a home beyond the bounds of this earthly existence, man the wayfarer is truly a homeless creature. Unwilling to accept his homelessness, however, Will searches his world high and low for something that simply is not there, while signs and messages, including what may very well be a miracle in a hospital room in New Mexico, pass before him unseen and unheard. Because of his elimination of Christianity, his self-defeating posture, Will proves to be blind and deaf to such "pieces of news," and ends the novel preparing to move to Birmingham, marry Kitty, and sell Chevrolets for her father--a dizzying descent into immanence.

Now to describe Will as unperceptive would seem to contradict the numerous references to the "amiable Southern

radar" (18) that he has at his disposal in his interactions with other people. The contradiction is only apparent, however, and is, in fact, a nontrivial component, as Percy would say, in our discussion of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory. Postulate 1.53 of Percy's "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning" states:

> Every sentence is uttered and received in a medium. The medium is a nontrivial parameter or variable in every transaction in which sentences are used. The medium is not the message, but the message can be strongly influenced by the medium. (MB 175)

By "medium" here Percy refers specifically to the mechanical means by which the words of a sentence are passed from an utterer to a receiver. More generally, however, "medium" can be understood as the means through which any message whatsoever is transmitted. The message could be transmitted through the medium of oil paint, a violin, a physical touch, or, of course, language. This more general conception of the term "medium" will be appropriate for our discussion here. The medium of language ultimately proves to be such an obstacle to Will's search for meaning, for his radar is so finely tuned to the medium itself, that the message expressed through it is completely lost to him.

Will's radar is a remarkable faculty indeed. In interpersonal encounters he can simply tune it in to the language being spoken and distinguish all manner of variations in dialect, tone, and even relative authenticity.

However questionable its spiritual merits may be, on a strictly social level this radar is quite a valuable asset, allowing Will to blend in to almost any social situation. It is solely responsible, in fact, for his introduction to, and subsequent relationship with, the Vaught family, around whom all the major thematic concerns of the novel unfold.

After several days of observing, through his new telescope, Kitty Vaught and her sister-in-law Rita leaving notes for each other on a bench in Central Park, Will catches sight of Rita, known to him only as the Handsome Woman, in the subway and follows her to her destination--the hospital in which Jamie Vaught is being treated for leukemia. As he stands outside Jamie's room, into which Rita has disappeared, Mr. Vaught comes out of the room, walks straight up to Will, and addresses him:

> "It looks like Dr. Calamera is running late." The stranger screwed up an eye and spoke directly into the smoke. He was a puckish-looking old fellow who, the engineer soon discovered, had the habit of shooting his arm out of his cuff and patting his gray hair.
> "Who?" murmured the engineer, also speaking straight ahead since he was not yet certain he was being addressed.
> "Aren't you assisting him in the puncture?"
> "Sir?"
> "You're not the hematologist?"
> "No sir."
> "They suspect a defect in the manufacture of the little blood cells in the marrow bones, like a lost step," said the stranger cheerfully, rocking to and fro. "It don't amount to much." (47)

In Will's position, most people would nod politely and
excuse themselves at the first opportunity, but Will
immediately begins trying to tune his radar in to this
stranger's verbal behavior:

> Two things were instantly apparent to the sentient
> engineer, whose sole gift, after all, was the knack of
> divining persons and situations. One was that he had
> been mistaken for a member of the staff. The other was
> that the stranger was concerned about a patient and
> that he, the stranger, had spent a great deal of time
> in the hospital. He had the air of one long used to the
> corridor, and he had developed a transient, fabulous,
> and inexpert knowledge of one disease. It was plain too
> that he imputed to the hospital staff a benevolent and
> omniscient concern for the one patient. It amounted to
> a kind of happiness, as if the misfortune beyond the
> door must be balanced by affectionate treatment here in
> the corridor. In hospitals we expect strangers to love
> us. (47-8)

As fundamentally unsingular as is this verbal exchange
between two strangers in a hospital corridor, the engineer's
reaction to it is somewhat unusual. Perfect strangers
frequently exchange words in public places, especially in
hospitals where the subject of sickness provides an
automatic common bond, but most people attribute no more
importance to such exchanges than they do to other purely
formal greetings such as "How you doing," "Hot enough for
you?," "How 'bout those Bulls?," etc. The "sentient
engineer," however, does not let it go at that, but
immediately begins to speculate on what the stranger's
remarks reveal about himself and his predicament.
Significantly, Will gleans a large amount of personal

information from a few casual remarks, and he attains the
information without relying on the semantic content of the
words themselves. Will is clearly not paying as much
attention to the literal message transmitted through the
medium of language as he is to how this man uses the medium,
and what his use of it reveals about him, for the
conclusions he draws about the stranger (e.g., "The stranger
was concerned about a patient and...had spent a great deal
of time in the hospital") could not be drawn from the
literal verbal content of his remarks. The same is true of
Will's next conclusion concerning the man's situation:

> An intern passed, giving them a wide berth as he
> turned into the ward, holding out his hand to fend them
> off good-naturedly.
> "Do you know him?" asked the old man.
> "No sir."
> "That's Dr. Moon Mullins. He's a fine little
> fellow."
> The illness must be serious, thought the engineer.
> He is too fond of everyone.   (48)

Once again, Will ignores the literal message conveyed by Mr.
Vaught's statement, and instead focuses on the man's speech
acts themselves, drawing conclusions that have nothing
whatsoever to do with the content of the message.

While there is nothing intrinsically unique about the
sort of educated guessing Will engages in in his first
encounter with Mr. Vaught, it is important here because it
establishes a recurrent thought pattern in Will that
accounts in large part for the "sentience" attributed to

him. This thought pattern is his radar, and he next

readjusts its frequency to pick up regional accent:

> "Excuse me, sir, but are you from Alabama?" He had
> caught a lilt in the old man's speech, a caroling in
> the vowels which was almost Irish. And the smell. The
> iron washpot smell. No machine in the world ever put
> it there and nobody either but a colored washwoman
> working in her own back yard and sprinkling starch with
> a pine switch.
> "I was." The old man took a wadded handkerchief
> from his pocket and knocked it against his nose.
> "From north Alabama?"
> "I was." His yellow eyes gleamed through the
> smoke. He fell instantly into the attitude of one who
> is prepared to be amazed. There was no doubt in his
> mind that the younger man was going to amaze him.
> "Birmingham? Gadsden?"
> "Halfway between," cried the old man, his eyes
> glittering like an eagle's. "Wait a minute," said he,
> looking at the engineer with his festive and slightly
> ironic astonishment. "Don't I know you? Aren't you--"
> snapping his fingers.
> "Will Barrett. Williston Bibb Barrett."
> "Over in--" He shook his hand to the southwest.
> "Ithaca. In the Mississippi Delta."
> "You're Ed Barrett's boy."   (48-9)

It turns out that Mr. Vaught was once acquainted with Will's

family in Mississippi, but the previous connection has

nothing to do with Will's identification of his regional

origins, as he explains to the amazed gentleman:

> "How did you know I wasn't from Georgia? I spent
> many a year in Georgia."
> "You don't sound like a Georgian. And north
> Alabama doesn't sound like south Alabama. Birmingham is
> different from Montgomery. We used to spend the summers
> up in Mentone." (49-50)

Listening to Mr. Vaught speak, Will has tuned his radar to

the man's Southern accent, adjusted the frequency to weed

out traces of south Alabama and Georgia, and placed him

accurately within sixty miles. Mr. Vaught is suitably

impressed, and Will is ushered into the patient's room to

meet the rest of the family, including his new love from the

park, Kitty Vaught.

One interesting side effect of Will's radar is a

tendency, not only to distinguish between dialectical

variations in other people's speech, but to adopt such

variations as his own. When he first encounters the Vaughts,

he has just recently ended a brief relationship with a group

of Ohioans who worked at Macy's, where he had his job as

humidification engineer. This relationship has not been

without its effect on him:

> "Sho. But now you don't talk like--"
> "No sir," said the engineer, who still sounded
> like an Ohioan. "I've been up here quite a while."
> (50)

The residual effects of this Ohioan influence do not survive

this first meeting with the Southern Vaughts, however.

After delivering a glowing account of Will's linguistic

sleight of hand, Mr. Vaught presents Will to his wife:

> "Where're you from," cried Mrs. Vaught in a mock
> accusatory tone he recognized and knew how to respond
> to.
> "Ithaca," he said, smiling. "Over in the Delta."
> He felt himself molt. In the space of seconds he
> changed from a Southerner in the North, an amiable
> person who wears the badge of his origin in a faint
> burlesque of itself, to a Southerner in the South, a
> skillful player of an old play who knows his cues and

> waits smiling in the wings. You stand in the posture of
> waiting on ladies and when one of them speaks to you
> so, with mock-boldness and mock-anger (and a bit of
> steel in it too) you knew how to take it. They were
> onto the same game. Mrs. Vaught feasted her eyes on
> him. He was _nice_.   (52)

So accurate is his radar, and so ingratiating is his use of
it, that Will leaves the Vaughts' presence only by promising
that he will return the next morning.

As impressive as Will's radar is at tuning in to such
general features of language as regional dialect, its
accuracy does not end there. It is also capable of picking
up finer, more individual information encoded within the
medium of language. Not only is he able to ingratiate
himself to the Vaughts in general, as one Southerner to a
group of displaced Southerners, but he is also able to
ingratiate himself to each Vaught individually:

> The Vaughts liked the engineer very much, each
> feeling that he was his or her special sort of person.
> And he was.
>   Each saw him differently.   (62)

In essence, Will simply adjusts his radar to pick up the
individual frequency of each family member, and transmits
his own language at the frequency of whatever Vaught he is
addressing at any given moment. So convincing are his
transmissions through the medium of language that the
Vaughts often forget that, even though they all share the

same frequency, he does not possess the same background
information:

> So acute was his radar that neither Mrs. Vaught nor her
> husband could quite get it into their heads that he did
> not know everything they knew. He <u>sounded</u> like he did.
> (63)

Because of his radar, the Vaughts feel so comfortable with
Will, so at home in his presence, that within a week they
have virtually adopted him as one of their own. Mr. Vaught
even offers him a nebulous, unspecified job just to have him
around the Vaught family in general and Jamie in particular.
The remainder of the novel focuses on this relationship.

As important as the Vaughts are, both to Will and to
the novel itself, they are not the only targets of his
radar, for it is at work in all his encounters with other
people. For instance, while he is hitchhiking southward in
an attempt to rejoin the Vaughts, who have left him behind
in New York City because of a misunderstanding concerning
his intentions, he is picked up by a "light-colored
high-stomached Negro dressed in a good brown suit." The two
new acquaintances speak amiably enough of one subject and
another, but Will's radar soon begins to pick up something
in the man's speech that is not quite right:

> Something was amiss here. He couldn't quite get hold of
> this bird. Something was out of kilter. It was his
> speech, for one thing. The driver did not speak as one
> might expect him to, with a certain relish and a
> hearkening to his own periods, as many educated Negroes

speak. No, his speech was rapid and slurred, for all
the world like a shaky white man's. (120-1)

As it turns out, Will's radar once again proves to be
uncannily accurate, for this "black" man is actually Forney
Aiken, a white photographer posing as a Negro in order to do
a "behind-the-scene life of the Negro" (124). He has even
persuaded a dermatologist friend to darken his skin with an
alkaloid substance. Dark skin or no, however, Forney, a.k.a.
Isham Washington, cannot fool Will and his radar. When
Forney exposes his true identity to his passenger, Will's
suspicions concerning the man's speech suddenly make sense.
Will even allows Forney to benefit somewhat from his
sensitivity to regional dialect, giving him some pointers on
how blacks in the South actually speak. Forney admits
delightedly to Will:

> "You were my first test and I passed it, and you a
> Southerner.
>   "Well, not quite," replied the tactful engineer.
> He explained that for one thing you don't say
> in<u>sur</u>-ance but <u>in</u>-surance, or rather <u>in</u>-shaunce.
>   "Oh, this is marvelous," said the pseudo-Negro,
> nearly running under a Borden tanker.
>   You don't say that either, <u>mah</u>velous, thought the
> engineer, but let it go.   (124)

On this and numerous other occasions throughout the novel,
the "sentient engineer's" faculty for tuning into the medium
of language is truly remarkable.

For all its capacity to amaze and ingratiate, however,
Will's radar is not the unmixed blessing that it might

superficially appear to be. For one thing, his habit of

tuning in to, and transmitting at, whatever frequency he

happens to encounter, often takes quite a toll on his own

sense of selfhood. Early in the novel we are given one of

the primary reasons why Will is under psychiatric care:

> His trouble still came from groups.
> It is true that after several years of
> psychoanalysis and group therapy he had vastly improved
> his group skills. So thoroughly in fact did he identify
> with his group companions of the moment, so adept did
> he become at role-taking, as the social scientists call
> it, that he all but disappeared into the group. As
> everyone knows, New York is noted for the number and
> variety of the groups with which one might associate,
> so that even a normal person sometimes feels
> dislocated. As a consequence this young man, dislocated
> to begin with, hardly knew who he was from one day to
> the next. There were times when he took roles so
> successfully that he left off being who he was and
> became someone else.   (19)

One such occasion is his brief acquaintance, mentioned

earlier, with a group of Ohioans:

> He hadn't been in their company a week before he became
> one of them: he called a girl named Carol <u>Kerrell</u>, said
> <u>mear</u> for mirror, <u>tock</u> for talk, <u>ottomobile</u>, <u>stummick</u>,
> and asked for <u>carmel</u> candy. The consonants snapped
> around in his throat like a guitar string. In April he
> went to Fort Lauderdale. In short, he became an Ohioan
> and for several weeks walked like a cat with his toes
> pointed in, drank beer, forgot the old honorable
> quarrels of the South, had not a thought in his head
> nor a care in the world.   (20)

It is not at all surprising that such an interpersonal

chameleon would have problems with the stability of his

self. The very faculty which makes him so likable (e.g., the Vaughts' "each feeling that he was his or her special sort of person. And he was") is in large part responsible for the fugue states that often send him roaming the countryside unaware of who or where he is. If one does not have a constant self, then everything else becomes relative as well. And if such an unstable self takes his cues about who he is or wishes to be from something as intrinsically unstable as the medium of language, while at the same time ignoring the message being communicated through this medium (e.g., "Why is it...I cannot hear what people say but only the channel they use?" 89), he is unlikely ever to find stability.

Another problem with Will's radar is its inconsistent accuracy; it tends to "boggle" on occasions. This occurs when he encounters a frequency for which his radar is not programmed. For example, Forney Aiken, the undercover pseudo-Negro, puts Will up for the night at his house during their journey southward. After dinner, Forney discusses his plan to pick up Mort Prince, the writer, who has supposedly agreed to accompany Forney on his undercover expedition. Forney tells Will what a "sweet guy" Mort is, and how much Will is going to like him. He asks Will if he has read any of Mort's novels, and describes his latest, entitled Love:

> "You know what that guy told me with a straight face. I asked him what this book was going to be about and he

> said quite seriously: it was about --ing. And in a
> sense it is!....But it is a beautiful piece of work
> and about as pornographic as Chaucer. Indeed it is
> deeply religious. I'll get you a copy." (130)

Such a cavalier attitude toward sex is totally alien to the

Southern code of gentility that permeates every fiber of his

being. Will may be the "last gentleman," but he is a

gentleman nonetheless and, try as he might, he cannot figure

out how to take such ungentlemanly remarks as those uttered

by Forney Aiken:

> The engineer groaned. What the devil does he mean
> telling me it's about --ing? Is --ing a joking matter?
> Am I to understand that I'm free to -- his daughter? Or
> do we speak of --ing man to man, jokingly, literarily,
> with no thought of --ing anyone in the vicinity? His
> radar boggled. (130-1)

Will is completely unfamiliar with the frequency at which

Forney is transmitting here. His radar is thus incapable of

tuning into it, and boggles as a result.

Another occasion on which Will's radar fails him is his

first encounter with Val Vaught, the nun. Val speaks of

Jamie, of Will's father, of growing up in the suburbs, while

Will, who "had never spoken to a nun," tries to tune in to

her frequency:

> Now freed by her preoccupation with the forgotten
> trophies of her past, the sentient engineer swung full
> upon her. What to make of it, this queer casualness of
> hers? Was it Catholic, a species of professional
> unseriousness (death and sin are our affair so we can
> make light of them), almost frivolity, like
> electricians who make a show of leaning on high voltage

> wires? Or was it an elaborate Vaught dialectic, thus:
> Rita and the rest of you are going to be so serious
> about Jamie, therefore I am not, etc. His radar boggled
> and he couldn't get hold of her. He was obscurely
> scandalized. He didn't like her much.   (199-200)

Will thus searches his channels for the proper frequency to tune Val in, but to no avail. If there is one thing that is more alien to Will than a flippant attitude toward sex, such as that displayed by Forney Aiken, it is religion. Having "eliminated Christianity" from his consciousness, Will views religion, and its representatives such as Val, as alien entities about which he can form only the most superficial conception. Watching Val speak, Will considers: "Her wrist was broad and white as milk and simple: it was easy to imagine that if it was cut through it would show not tendon and bone but a homogeneous nun-substance" (199). When faced with something with which he is unfamiliar, Will simply scans the external features and assumes that these features are consistent all the way to the core--that the thing is composed of a "homogeneous" substance throughout. Such an attitude is not at all uncommon, and does not, in fact, necessarily handicap a person in carrying out the more quotidian functions of life. It does present a problem, however, when a person is faced with the deeper, more mysterious aspects of life such as religion and love, concepts for which external appearances provide very little, and often misleading, information concerning the true nature

of the things in themselves. In such situations, Will's radar often simply boggles and he cannot make any sense of the person with whom he is speaking.

Now such occasional malfunctions can be quite annoying, particularly to someone such as Will, who relies so heavily upon his radar. They are not nearly so serious, however, as another closely related flaw. The same superficial attitude that is evident in Will's encounter with Val, and which here causes his radar to boggle, in other instances leads Will to focus his attention so exclusively upon the medium of spoken language, and to trust so implicitly the clues he receives from this medium, that he is completely impervious to the message being expressed through it. He cannot see the forest for the trees, as it were.

Concerning the language medium through which a message is expressed, Postulate 1.53 of Percy's essay states: "The medium is not necessarily the message, but the message can be strongly influenced by the medium." Percy here acknowledges what Will suspects--namely, that the medium of language is a significant epistemological tool; it provides access to whatever truths may exist in life, and can even affect the precise manner in which these truths are received after they are uttered. In the same postulate, however, Percy also makes it clear that the medium of spoken language, in and of itself, is in no way a substitute for truth, possessing no more semantic content than, say, a

palette of oil paints before a Titian or a Giorgione uses it
to express his own unique vision of the truth. Will cannot
seem to grasp this aspect of Percy's semiotic theory, and
this inability finally results in his "missing," as Percy
says, the truth he has sought throughout the entire novel.
So finely attuned is Will's radar to the formal subtleties
of spoken language, and so deaf is he to the truth which,
while expressed through it, exists independently of it, that
he quite literally confuses the medium with the message.

Will's tendency to place barriers between himself and
reality is not confined to the medium of language. In fact,
it is something of a preoccupation for him, part of the
"overly subtle" nature he is described as having in common
with "many young men in the South" (10). On several
occasions, when confronted with a reality, even a reality
with which he has sought a confrontation, he almost
compulsively retreats from its immediacy by placing some
sort of obstacle between it and himself. In some of these
instances, he rationalizes this procedure by claiming that
it allows him to recapture an aspect of his world that has
become lost to him, and to the rest of mankind for that
matter. The most tangible symbol of this mental habit, and
of Will's rationalization of it, is the $1900 telescope that
he buys with what remains of his savings account after five
years of psychoanalysis. As remarkable as this top-of-the-
line instrument is, it is after all only a telescope and

simply magnifies the images of objects that already exist

out there. Will, however, sees it as something more, even

attributing metaphysical qualities to it:

> It must be admitted that although he prided himself on
> his scientific outlook and set great store by precision
> instruments like microscopes and chemical balances, he
> couldn't help attributing magical properties to the
> telescope. It had to do with its being German, with
> fabled German craftsmen, gnomic slow-handed old men in
> the Harz Mountains. These lenses did not transmit light
> merely. They penetrated to the heart of things.
> The conviction grew upon him that his very life
> would be changed if he owned the telescope. (28)

Will believes that by filtering images of the physical world

through the medium of the telescope, he can achieve a sense

of oneness with the world that is impossible through direct

contact. When he gets the telescope back to his room at the

Y.M.C.A., he immediately tests his hypothesis by screwing in

an eyepiece and focusing on the side of a building "clear

across the park and beyond Fifth Avenue":

> There sprang into view a disk of brickwork perhaps
> eight feet in diameter. Now stripping to his shorts, he
> drew up a chair, made himself comfortable, and gazed
> another five minutes at the bricks. He slapped his leg.
> It was as he had hoped. Not only were the bricks seen
> as if they were ten feet away; they were better than
> that. It was better than having the bricks there before
> him. They gained in value. Every crack and grain and
> excrescence became available. 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. (30)

There is no intrinsic difference between the image of the
bricks seen through the telescope from several hundred yards
away, and that seen with the naked eye from ten feet away.
The bricks exist independently of the viewer and are
composed of the same exact molecules in the same exact
configuration whether anyone sees them or not. And while
even Will is not deluded enough to deny the physical stasis
of the bricks, he places a great deal of faith in the
metaphysical superiority of the image filtered through the
telescope over that received directly through close
proximity. The bricks he sees through the telescope are
"better" because they are somehow more "available."

Now while Will's faith in his telescope, and his
closely related theory of the inaccessibility of highly
visible objects (e.g., paintings in a museum) due to the
"public secretion" with which they become "encrusted" after
being viewed by millions of people, may at first glance
appear benign enough, they become more questionable when
viewed in the light of some of his other encounters with
reality. In his first quasi-intimate encounter with his new
"love" Kitty, for instance, he exhibits a need for physical
interposition that is completely out of keeping with the
nature of such encounters. After discovering her, quite by
chance, while looking through his telescope in Central Park,
and then getting to know her along with the rest of the
Vaughts through visits to Jamie's room at the hospital, one

hot spring night he drops in on her at the apartment she shares with Rita and declares his love for her in the most gentlemanly manner, even asking her to marry him. Kitty, who has been drinking hikuli tea while listening to Rita's "fascinating account of the hikuli rite ... practiced by the Huichol Indians," and thus may or may not be in full possession of her faculties, suggests that Will take her to some place where they can be alone. With some reservations about safety, Will mentions a spot he knows in Central Park, and after Kitty changes clothes and hands Will a small revolver, the couple strolls off into the night.

By the time they reach the park, Will's mood is already somewhat out of phase with Kitty's growing fervor, but he takes her to the little covert anyway. He kisses her "with an amiable passion," and she excuses herself for a moment:

> She moved away. As he traced a finger in the dust, drawing the old Northern Pacific yin-yang symbol, he heard the rustling of clothes and the singing of zippers. She returned without a sound. He embraced her and was enveloped in turn by the warm epithelial smell of her nakedness. What a treasure, he thought, his heart beating as rapidly and shallowly as a child's. What suppleness. (104)

The average healthy young man, particularly one who has for some time fantasized about holding a specific woman's "charms in his arms," would view Kitty's actions as a welcome prelude to an even more welcome main event. Will is

not the average young man, however, and reacts strangely to her overture. Rather than becoming aroused as he might be expected to, he is overwhelmed, almost to the point of repulsion, by the sheer reality of her nakedness. Kitty asks him to hold her, and he dutifully complies: "Now holding her charms in his arms at last, he wondered if he had ever really calculated the terrific immediacy of it" (91). Holding Kitty in his arms, and trying his best to be suitably passionate, Will recalls a former work colleague's description of making love to his wife as "being in heaven":

> Now he understood. Kitty too, he would have to say, was an armful of heaven. The astounding immediacy of her. She was more present, more here, than he could ever have calculated. She was six times bigger and closer than life. He scarcely knew whether to take alarm or to shout for joy, hurrah! (105)

Kitty speaks, quite conventionally, of love (e.g., "Oh, my darling, do you love me?" "Love is everything"), and Will considers this abstract notion in light of current concrete circumstances: "He was wondering: had the language of women, 'love' and 'sweeping one off one's feet' and such, meant this all along, the astounding and terrific melon immediacy of nakedness" (106). Throughout this physical encounter with the woman with whom he has been in love from the moment he first laid eyes on her, Will simply cannot come to grips with the immediacy of Kitty's presence, or in other words with the absence of a medium through which

the two might communicate their feelings without actually
coming in direct contact with one another. Indeed, when
their lovemaking is abruptly halted by Kitty's nauseous
reaction to the hikuli tea, Will feels actual relief at not
having to carry through with the act, and tries as quickly
as possible to get some clothing between himself and her
nakedness:

> What with her swaying against him, he was having a hard
> time finding her clothes. It was too much for a man to
> follow, he mused, these lightening hikuli-
> transformations from Kitty as great epithelial-warm
> pelvic-upcurving-melon-immediate Maja to Kitty as waif,
> huddled under his arm all ashiver and sour with gastric
> acid. But when they were dressed, they felt better. Now
> trousered, collared, buttoned up, he at least was
> himself again. There is a great deal to be said for
> clothes. (107)

Will's discomfort in the presence of Kitty's immediacy, and
his relief at its removal, illustrate a psychological
predisposition that is at work in all his encounters with
reality. No matter how much he claims to desire direct
access to reality, or Truth, he generally feels more
comfortable when it reaches him through the filter of some
medium. His $1900 telescope, for instance, is therefore
nothing more nor less than such a medium, despite his belief
in its potential to "recover" bricks in a wall and girls in
the park. Given this turn of mind, it is no surprise that
the medium of language functions in the same way for him,

creating a barrier between him and reality, rather than providing direct access to it.

The amazing accuracy of Will's radar at tuning into the medium of spoken language has already been noted; it is a remarkable tool that comes in quite handy on a number of occasions. Indeed, some critics see it as responsible for Will's ultimate redemption. Hobson, for example, calls Will's radar his "one strength," and "the means by which his life is saved at the end of the novel" (47-8). Now, as helpful as this faculty is in allowing Will to ingratiate himself to total strangers, Hobson's claim strains the bounds of credibility for two reasons. First, it assumes that Will attains spiritual salvation by the novel's end, which is quite an optimistic assumption considering the fact that, as far as we know, he still plans to return to Birmingham, marry Kitty, and go to work for Mr. Vaught at Confederate Chevrolet. And even if we try to explain away the redemption problem, as Tharpe does, by claiming that even though Will "may not be quite ready for a full, earnest search for being," his return to Birmingham could be the equivalent of Binx Bolling's acceptance of the "Little Way in Gentilly" as a path to spiritual fulfillment, we run into the second weak spot in Hobson's claim--namely, that Will's radar is directly responsible for this salvation. An examination of the role of Will's radar in his search for meaning reveals quite the opposite to be true. Rather than

enabling him to seek out and find truth, his radar prevents him from seeing truth when it is right before his eyes.

To be fair to critics like Hobson, Will's radar does have its function in his search for meaning. In fact, it initiates this search by alerting him that something is missing from his own life, and that there is something out there that can fill the void. When he falls in with the group of Ohioans, for instance, he feels completely at home and even takes up with the "attractive and healthy brunette" Carol (Kerrell) Schwarz, until his radar warns him off. One evening at the ski lodge, as Will lies comfortably with his head on Carol's thigh, she leans over him and says, "'I'm a people-liker, and I think you're my kind of people. Are you a people-liker?'" (21). Will replies "yes," but it is too late; his radar has already picked up on the deadening emptiness and inauthenticity of her language: "His knee began to jerk involuntarily and at the first opportunity he extricated himself and rushed out of the lodge. Outside, he ran through the snowy woods and threw himself into a brierpatch like a saint of old." While Will's reaction to this girl's banal conversation, though extreme, may not strike the reader as remarkable, it does illustrate a pattern in Will's behavior; his radar alerts him that something is wrong and he seeks to rectify the situation, if only by escaping it.

This pattern is also responsible for his decision to undergo psychoanalysis with Dr. Gamow. After his father commits suicide, Will falls into "a long fit of melancholy and vacancy amounting almost to amnesia," revives himself, concludes his father's affairs, only to lose initiative once again. He is shaken out of inaction by a draft notice from the Army, where he serves for two years before being "honorably and medically discharged when he was discovered totally amnesiac and wandering about the Shenandoah Valley between Cross Keys and Fort Republic, sites of notable victories of General Stonewall Jackson" (16-17). After moving back into the Y.M.C.A. in Manhattan, Will takes stock of his situation and concludes that "There was something the matter with him and it should be attended to." To rectify the problem he "engaged a psychiatrist whom he consulted for fifty-five minutes a day, five days a week, for the following five years, at an approximate cost of $18,000" (17). So far so good.

But the same intuitive faculty that allows him to be so objective about his own mental problems, and to seek help for these problems, finally blocks him from receiving any benefit from the source of help that he has chosen. As Will enters into psychoanalysis, it is not long before his radar tunes into the discourse between himself and Dr. Gamow until finally the discourse becomes an end in itself. With his

patient before him "for the thousandth time," the

psychoanalyst reflects back upon the past five years:

> For the thousandth time Dr. Gamow looked at his
> patient--who sat as usual, alert and pleasant--and felt
> a small spasm of irritation. It was this amiability, he
> decided, which got on his nerves. There was a slyness
> about it and an opacity which put one off. It had not
> always been so between them. For the first year the
> analyst had been charmed--never had he had a more
> responsive patient. Never had his own theories found a
> readier confirmation than in the free (they seemed to
> be free) associations and the copious dreams which this
> one spread out at his feet like so many trophies. The
> next year or so left him pleased but still baffled.
> This one was a little too good to be true. At last the
> suspicion awoke that he, the doctor, was being
> entertained, royally it is true and getting paid for
> the priviledge beside, but entertained nonetheless.
> Trophies they were sure enough, these dazzling wares
> offered every day, trophies to put him off the scent
> while the patient got clean away....
> The last year of the analysis the doctor had grown
> positively disgruntled. This one was a Southern Belle,
> he decided, a good dancing partner, light on his feet
> and giving away nothing. For five years they had
> danced, the two of them, the strangest dance in
> history, each attuned to the other and awaiting his
> pleasure, and so off they went crabwise and nowhere at
> all. (30-1)

The doctor's understandable frustration with and mild

antagonism toward his patient prove to be well-founded when

we are given a glimpse into the patient's thoughts

concerning his doctor:

> The engineer, on the other hand, had a high
> opinion of his analyst and especially liked hearing him
> speak. Though Dr. Gamow was a native of Jackson
> Heights, his speech was exotic. He had a dark front
> tooth, turned on its axis, and he puckered his lips and
> pronounced his r's like w's. The engineer liked to hear
> him say neu-wosis, drawing out the second syllable with
> a musical clinical Viennese sound. Unlike most

Americans, who speak as if they were sipping gruel, he chose his words like bonbons, so that his patients, whose lives were a poor meager business, received the pleasantest sense of the richness and delectibility of such everyday things as words. (32)

Will, realizing that something is amiss in his mental well-being, has sought out and hired, at great expense, someone trained to deal with just the sort of problem he has. Customarily in such cases, the doctor asks his patient probing questions intended to draw him out of himself, and analyzes the patient's responses for what they reveal about his inner being. Then, based upon this analysis, the doctor formulates possible solutions to the patient's problems and communicates them to him with the assumption that he will act upon them. Will, however, short circuits this process in its earliest stages by tuning his ever-vigilant radar so closely to the spoken language through which patient and therapist interact, that the channels are completely blocked, making meaningful communication impossible.

At one point in their final session, for instance, the doctor senses some ambiguity in Will's pronunciation of the word "bad":

> "I detected a little more m than b. I think maybe you are a little mad at me."
> "I don't--" began the other, casting back in his mind to the events of the last session, but as usual he could remember nothing. "You may very well be right, but I don't recall anything in particular."
> "Maybe you think I'm a little mad at you."
> "I honestly don't know," said the patient, pretending to rack his brain but in fact savoring the

> other's words. <u>Maybe</u>, for example, was minted
> deliberately as a bright new common coin <u>mebbe</u> in
> conscious preference to <u>perhaps</u>. (33)

Given such close attention to the words spoken by Dr. Gamow, and so little attention to their content, it is little wonder that Will cannot recall anything from his previous sessions. It is also little wonder that he ends five years of intensive, costly psychoanalysis no better off than he was before he began. He has turned the medium of spoken language into a tangible barrier that prevents the aid, which he has so vigorously sought, from reaching him.

The same basic dynamic is at work in Will's most important relationship in the novel--that with Dr. Sutter Vaught, the oldest Vaught sibling who is a strange combination of physician and pornographer. Long before he actually meets Sutter face to face, he is fascinated by the things he is told about him by the other members of the family. The family's feelings for him range from Jamie's adoration of him to the almost erotic hatred which Rita, Sutter's ex-wife, feels toward him. Based upon what he has heard about Sutter, Will concludes that his diagnostic expertise extends far beyond the physical body, and he has the vague notion that Sutter might be able to help him with his own mental/spiritual problems. His chance to meet Sutter finally comes while he is staying at the Vaught mansion in Birmingham. From his room, which shares a wall with

Sutter's, he hears a single gunshot and, having been told of
Sutter's suicidal tendencies, runs to Sutter's room and
bursts through the door. It turns out that Sutter is only
taking target practice at a picture of The Old Arab
Physician Abou Ben Adhem, whose name has a prominent place
on the list of those responsible for promulgating the
"meretricious bullshit of the Western world," but the shot
provides an opportunity for Will to meet the doctor.

After some discussion about the demise of Western
culture, and Leigh Hunt's responsibility for "doing it in"
Sutter turns his attention to Will himself:

> "What's the matter with you?"
> "I feel all right now. I was quite nervous a few
> minutes ago. I've had a nervous condition for some
> time." He told Sutter about his amnesia.
> "I know. Jimmy told me. Are you going into fugue
> now?
> "I don't know. I thought perhaps that you__"
> "Me? Oh no. I haven't practiced medicine for
> years. I'm a pathologist. I study the lesions of the
> dead."
> "I know that," said the engineer sitting down
> wearily."But I have reason to believe you can help me."
> "What reason ? "   (209)

Will's reply to this last question indicates that he desires
help with something much deeper than just his "nervous
condition":

> "I can tell when somebody knows something I don't
> know."
> "You think I know something?"
> "Yes."
> "How can you tell?"

"I don't know how but I can. I had an analyst for five years and he was very good, but he didn't know anything I didn't know."
Sutter laughed. "Did you tell him that?"
"No."
"You should have. He could have done a better job."
"I'm asking you."
"I can't practice. I'm not insured."
"Insured?"
"The insurance company cancelled my liability. You can't practice without it."
"I'm not asking you to practice. I only want to know what you know." (209)

Will's radar tells him that Sutter has some information, even a piece of news perhaps, that might assist him in his search for a meaningful life. He intuits that Sutter's cynical pronouncements upon Western civilization are in some fundamental way related to his own sense of emptiness, which in fact they are. Sutter has insight into the "postmodern incapacity" from which Western man suffers. Or, as Hobson puts it, he is "onto the malaise" of postmodern culture and "has some sense of its etiology." As unique as Will is in many ways, the incapacity from which he suffers is not at all unique; it is in fact the same malaise which hangs over all of postmodern society. Few people are aware that anything is wrong, however, so Will's desire to know what Sutter knows is a healthy sign. And he is quite persistent in his desire for knowledge, finally even following him to New Mexico where he has taken Jamie to spend his last few weeks on earth.

As we have seen before, however, a desire for knowledge, or truth, only goes so far in and of itself. One must be in a proper posture to receive it once it is made available, and we have already seen how receptive Will's "self-defeating posture" is. Sutter does indeed have knowledge that could be of use to Will in his search, but as in so many other instances Will's radar, once it has picked up on the need for help, will create an effective barrier between him and the source of help by focusing on the medium through which it is communicated rather than the healing power behind it.

Throughout their many discussions, Sutter offers Will several clues into the nature of his problem, although he never spells it out for him because he knows that Will would only "receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better" (339). Even these clues are lost on Will, however, because he is paying such close attention to Sutter's individual statements or questions that he cannot see the overall pattern that Sutter is laying out for him. During their first conversation, for example, Will finally pesters Sutter into giving his psyche a brief examination. Sutter asks Will a series of questions about sex, God, gentility, and despair and then, on a hunch asks him, "What is the meaning of this proverb: a stitch in time saves nine?" When most people hear

a proverb, their minds automatically leap to the
metaphorical significance of the statement and bypass the
literal meaning altogether. Will's mind, or rather his
radar, however, locks onto the words of the proverb and
cannot get beyond their literal meaning:

> "I would have to think about it and tell you
> later," said the engineer, a queer light in his eye.
> "You can't take time off to tell me now?"
> "No."
> "You really can't tell me, can you?"
> "No."   (212)

During his conversation with Will, Sutter has come to
suspect Will's incapacity to see through the medium of
language; his question about the proverb proves his
suspicions to be true. As the conversation draws to a close,
Will further verifies Sutter's suspicions when he finally
thinks of a question he wants to ask: "I want to know
whether a nervous condition could be caused by not having
sexual intercourse" (215). At one point in his interview
with Will, Sutter does in fact ask him, "Do you have
intercourse with girls?" but the question in itself is just
one component of Sutter's theory of sex as a means of
re-entry into immanence from the realm of transcendence.
Will takes it at face value, however, and seizes on it as a
possible cure for his problem. At this point, Sutter becomes
disgruntled with his unsolicited patient much as another
doctor before him has, and dismisses him:

"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." (216)

When Will responds that he wishes only to know what it is

that Sutter "cleaves by," an exasperated Sutter tells him

simply to have a drink. Far more revealed than he realizes

by their discussion, Will, true to form, mulls over Sutter's

precise choice of words rather than what these words can

tell him about himself: "Perhaps Kitty and Rita were right,

he was thinking as he poured the horrendous bourbon. Perhaps

Sutter is immature. He was still blushing from the word

'fornicate.' In Sutter's mouth it seemed somehow more

shameful than the four letter word" (216).

On another occasion, the evening before the Tennessee

game, Will is feeling "uncommonly bad" even though he is

surrounded by the Vaughts, including his beloved Kitty, and

a carload of revelers brought to the Vaught house by Son

Thigpen. He feels dislocated and, try as he might, cannot

bring himself to join in the merriment. Sutter, seeing that

Will is slipping, approaches and asks him what is the

matter. Will tells Sutter that he feels worse--that his

memory is slipping. Sutter asks him several questions about

his Southern "nationalistic feelings," and even begins to

hint at a connection between these feelings and his amnesia

until Will confesses, "but that's not what I'm interested

in" (256). Then he tells Sutter his real problem, at least

as he sees it: "'Why do they feel so good,' he nodded toward the Deltans, 'and I feel so bad?'" (257). Will wants to fit in with his fellow Southerners, to be happy like them, and he expects Sutter, with all his wisdom, to tell him how to do it. Sutter's response, though much closer to the heart of Will's actual problem than is Will's desire to fit in, is not quite what Will is looking for:

> Sutter eyed him. "The question is whether they feel as good as you think, and if they do, then the question is whether it is necessarily worse to feel bad than good under the circumstances."
> "That doesn't mean anything to me," said the engineer irritably. (257)

Sutter's questions point to much larger issues than the perceived well-being of a group of Southern college students intoxicated with food, drink, and pre-game excitement, pleasures that are distinctly dyadic in nature. Viewed from a triadic level, from the perspective of a being in a world rather than an organism in an environment, judgmental terms such as "goodness" and "badness" lose their face value and become completely relative. Will takes them at their face value, though, and thus cannot understand Sutter's questions. All he knows is that he currently feels bad and he wants to feel good, like any person in his right mind would.

To clarify matters for Will, Sutter gives him the case history of one of his former patients:

"One morning," said Sutter, "I got a call from a lady who said that her husband was having a nervous breakdown. I knew the fellow. He was a Deke from Vanderbilt, president of Fairfield Coke and a very good fellow, cheerful and healthy and open-handed. It was nine o'clock in the morning, so I walked over there from here. His wife let me in. There he stands in the living room dressed for work in his Haspel suit, shaved, showered, and in the pink, in fact still holding his attache case beside him. All in order except that he was screaming, his mouth forming a perfect O. His corgi was howling, and his children were peeping out from behind the stereo. His wife asked me for an opinion. After quieting him down and having a word with him, I told her that his screaming was not necessarily a bad thing in itself, that in some cases a person is better off screaming than not screaming— except that he was frightening the children. I prescribed the terminal ward for him and in two weeks he was right as rain." (258)

The screaming man's situation has a great deal of relevance for Will's own situation; both men have the feeling that something is wrong with their lives. If anything, the screaming man is the better off of the two because he is screaming, while Will only wishes to feel "good" like his classmates. Will likes the story, and does perceive a connection with his own situation, although not in quite the manner Sutter intends:

The engineer leaned a degree closer. "I understand that. Now what I want to know is this: do you mean that in the terminal ward he discovered only that he was not so bad off, or is there more to it than that?"
Sutter looked at him curiously but did not reply. (258)

Once again, Will has taken Sutter's remarks strictly at their face value, their dyadic value, as it were, and

completely missed the deeper point of the story--even gotten it backwards, in fact. At its face value, the notion of death is a bad thing; for dyadic creatures it means the cessation of bodily functions and thus of being. From Sutter's perspective, however, he can see that there are things much worse than death--that the screaming man's dyadically sound existence is, triadically, a fate worse than death. And his trip to the terminal ward, rather than making him realize that he is not as bad off as the dying patients, as Will interprets the situation, actually makes him realize that he is worse off than they are. A confrontation with mortality makes him realize the despair of his own existence, and, as despair aware of itself is infinitely preferable to despair unaware of itself, he leaves the terminal ward still in despair, but with an awareness of it that negates the need for screaming. He is beyond screaming, in other words.

Will is still this side of screaming, however, and wants to know how Sutter's story relates to his happy Delta classmates:

> The engineer nodded toward the Deltans. "What about them?"
> "What about them?"
> "Would you put them in the terminal ward?"
> "They're not screaming."
> "Should they be screaming?"
> "I should not presume to say. I only say that if they were screaming, I could have helped them once. I cannot do even that now. I am a pathologist." (258-9)

Sutter here answers Will's question, and even provides him with a key to the relevance of the story of the screaming man. All Will hears, though, is Sutter's refusal to "presume to say." In his refusal to speculate upon the ontological status of Will's acquaintances, he tells Will all he needs to know about them, but Will is deaf to the information, and even irritated at Sutter for his lack of cooperation:

> The engineer frowned. He felt a stirring of anger. There was something unpleasantly ironic about Sutter's rapid wry way of talking. It was easy to imagine him ten years from now haunting a barroom somewhere and pattering on like this to any stranger. He began to understand why others made a detour around him, so to speak, and let him alone. (259)

Will is so put off by Sutter's wry ironic "way of talking" that he cannot hear the message Sutter is trying to tell him the only way he knows how. Nor can Will comprehend that Sutter's habitual irony is in itself a big part of the message.

Throughout the novel, and his constant search for a meaningful solution to his persistent unrest, Will teeters precariously between plunging into the consumer world of immanence and flying off into the outer space of transcendence. He wants to be happy, and to feel at home in his world rather than be constantly torn between two extremes. Of all the avenues he pursues, his relationship with Sutter is the most potentially beneficial, because Sutter is at least in a position to make Will understand his

unrest, even if he cannot show him a way out of it. Sutter knows that man, by definition, does not have a home in this world. Along with his sister Val, he sees that man is neither a wholly transcendent being, nor a wholly immanent creature, but rahter a homeless wanderer between the two. This is why he spends so much of his time doing autopsies on male suicides, and studying their meatuses for residual spermatozoa; he is verifying his hypothesis that sex and other such attempts to re-enter the immanent realm from the transcendent are self-defeating and consequently result in depression. Although he tries his best to communicate his knowledge of man's place in the universe to Will, Will is so intent on scanning Sutter's cryptic remarks for the cure that he is looking for that he fails to hear the more important message that runs throughout them--namely, that there is no cure, and that to seek one is to risk falling into a life of pleasant, empty-headed immanence.

This is, in fact, exactly what Will winds up doing. After following Sutter all the way across country to New Mexico, Will tries one last time to get Sutter to give him a cure for his unrest:

>"Tell me to be chaste and I will do it. Yes! I will do it easily!" he said striking the rail softly with is fist. "All you have to do is tell me."
>"I will not tell you."
>"Then tell me not to be chaste."   (366)

Of course Sutter will tell him no such thing, because such a solution, any solution for that matter, is diametrically opposed to his beliefs concerning man's place in the universe. All he can do is try to help Will see the light, or rather the darkness, for himself, and this is not good enough for Will. So, he casts his lot with immanence. Following Sutter's final refusal to tell him what to do, Will tells Sutter of his plans for a shiny new future:

> "Dr. Vaught, Kitty and I are getting married. I am going to take a good position with your father, settle down on the South Ridge and, I hope, raise a family."
> "Yes," said Sutter after a pause."
> "I think I'm going to be a pretty fair member of the community. God knows the place could use even a small contribution of good will and understanding." (368)

Will and Kitty are going to buy Cap'n Andy Mickle's place, find a sound "church home," "make a contribution, however small," and live happily and immanently ever after. As he listens to Will speak, Sutter realizes that he is finally, hopelessly cured of his problem: "I think you'll be very happy. In fact I'll go further than that. I don't think you'll have any more trouble with your fugues" (369). As bright as his future is, one thing concerns Will, something he remembers that Sutter once told him:

> "Dr. Vaught, why was that man screaming?"
> "What man?"
> "The man you told me about--the Deke from Vanderbilt--with the lovely wife and children--you know."

"Oh. Scotty. Christ, Barrett, for somebody with fugues, you've got quite a memory."

"Yes sir."

"Don't worry about Scotty. You won't scream. I can assure you that you will not scream." (370-1)

Will is finally cured of his chronic unrest, and thus beyond help. He can now go on and live a happy, useful life.

Sutter, in the meantime, has his own plans for the future. Early in this conversation, Sutter asks Will:

"Which is the best course for a man: to live like a Swede, vote for the candidate of your choice, be a good fellow, healthy and generous do a bit of science as if the world made sense, enjoy a beer and a good piece (not a bad life!). Or: to live as a Christian among Christians in Alabama? Or to die like an honest man?" (364)

As the conversation draws to a close, Sutter asks Will to stick around to take care of things after Jamie's death. Will is surprised by the request:

"You'll be here."

"No, Barrett. I'll not be here."

"Why not?" asked the other angrily--he had had enough of Sutter's defections. . . .

"If I do outlive Jamie," said Sutter, putting on his Curlee jacket (double breasted), "it will not be by more than two hours. What in Christ's name do you think I'm doing out here? Do you think I'm staying? Do you think I'm going back?" (373-4)

Sutter will remain true to his beliefs to the end; he will "die like an honest man" by committing suicide immediately after Jamie's death. This is his alternative to Will's plunge into immanence, which he views as nothing more than a

living death. It is, in fact, the only meaningful course of action left open to him, given what he knows about the human condition. Man is not at home on this earth and, barring the possibility of a home elsewhere, he is better off dead than trying desperately to fit in where he does not belong. For all his insight into the malaise of postmodern civilization, and his awareness of man's essential homelessness, his theories obviously have an enormous gap--a missing capstone necessary to prevent man's being from collapsing into formless rubble. This missing capstone is none other than the "piece of news" which his sister Val believes can rescue castaway man from his universal desert island. In one final, impressive example of Will's linguistic radar, the long-awaited piece of news enters the novel...and Will misses it.

With death clearly not far away, Jamie asks Will to "call old Val," ostensibly to find out what happened to a book on entropy she promised to send him. Val, realizing the gravity of Jamie's condition, and the imminence of his death, commissions Will to arrange to have Jamie baptized in the hospital by a Catholic priest. This request goes against everything he believes, or rather does not believe, but because Val gives him a direct command he agrees to carry out her wishes. As a devoted disciple of his brother Sutter, Val's request would seem to go against what Jamie believes as well, but when death and Father Boomer finally arrive,

something remarkable occurs, perhaps even a miracle, and Will's linguistic radar plays an integral role in bringing it about.

By the time the priest arrives at Jamie's bedside, the youth is so weak that his words are barely audible. In order for the baptism to take place properly, someone with a keen ear for language is needed to render Jamie's acceptance of the sacrament understandable. This is clearly a job for the sentient engineer. After some preliminary discussion, the baptism gets underway, while Sutter watches wryly from across the room. Father Boomer asks Jamie if he accepts the "truths of religion":

> Jamie moved his lips.
> "What?" asked the priest, bending lower.
> "Excuse me Father," said the sentient engineer.
> "He said 'what.'"   (387)

Father Boomer lists the truths of religion. After asking Will if what the priest says is true, Jamie looks toward the priest:

> The engineer cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something when, fortunately for him, Jamie's bruised eyes went weaving around to the priest. He said something to the priest which the latter did not understand.
> The priest looked up to the engineer.
> "He wants to know, ah, why." said the engineer.
> "Why what?"
> "Why should he believe that?"
> The priest leaned hard on his fists.
> "It is true because God himself revealed it as the truth."

> Again the youth's lip's moved and again the priest
> turned to the interpreter.
> "He asked how, meaning how does he know that?"
> The priest sighed. "If it were not true," he said
> to Jamie, "then I would not be here. That is why I am
> here, to tell you. (388)

Father Boomer is in Jamie's room as a messenger from God. He

has a piece of news to give Jamie, and all Jamie must do to

be saved is to accept it. Jamie is fading quickly, however,

so haste is of the essence. Just as it appears that Jamie

may die without formally accepting the sacrament, Sutter

enters the picture in a capacity that is utterly alien to

his beliefs.

> As [Will] returned with the water [for baptism],
> Jamie's bowels opened again with the spent schleppen
> sound of an old man's sphincter. The engineer went to
> get the bedpan. Jamie tried to lift his head.
> "No no," said Sutter impatiently, and coming
> quickly across simply bound the dying youth to the bed
> by folding the counterpane into a strap and pressing it
> against his chest. "Get on with it, Father," he said
> angrily. (389)

As impossible as it is for Sutter to believe in Father

Boomer's news, he sees something mysterious, even

miraculous, happening in his little brother and he does not

want to stand in its way. The priest pours water over

Jamie's head and administers last rites:

> Presently the priest straightened and turned to
> the engineer as blank-eyed as if he had never laid
> eyes on him before.
> "Did you hear him? He said something. What did he
> say?"

> The engineer, who did not know how he knew, was
> not even sure he had heard Jamie or tuned him in in
> some other fashion, cleared his throat.
> "He said, 'don't let me go.'"
> When the priest looked puzzled, the engineer
> nodded to the bed and added: "He means his hand, the
> hand there."
> "I won't let you go," the priest said. (390)

Here, before Will's eyes, a miracle has occurred. A

solitary, wayfaring soul has found a home at last, has

discovered the solution to the problem of the human

condition that Will has been seeking throughout the novel.

Certainly, witnessing this miracle could not help but have a

profound effect upon the engineer, especially since he was

the only one in the room able to tune in Jamie's final words

of acceptance.

Our last glimpse of Will, however, shows him to be just

as deaf as ever to the message conveyed by the words he has

tuned in. Outside the hospital, Will races to catch up with

Sutter, who is presumably on his way to commit suicide:

> "Where are you going?" the engineer asked in an
> unexpectedly loud voice.
> "What?" said Sutter, giving a start. "Oh, to the
> ranch."
> "The ranch," repeated the engineer absently. When
> Sutter started to leave, he held up his hand. "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?" (391)

Will, having witnessed a miracle, and even taken part in bringing it about, is utterly blind to its significance, and ends the novel just as he began it--looking for someone who can tell him what is what. In the novel's final scene, interpreted more positively by some critics than by others, Will expresses his need for Sutter to remain alive:

> Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett--" and he actually pointed to himself lest there be a mistake, "--need you and want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed you. Jamie and Val too."
> Sutter laughed. "You kill me Barrett...."
> But as the Edsel took off, spavined and sprung, sunk at one corner and flatulent in its muffler, spuriously elegant and unsound, like a Negro's car, a fake Ford, a final question did occur to him and he took off after it.
> "Wait," he shouted in a dead run.
> The Edsel paused, and stopped.
> Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds.
> The Edsel waited for him.   (393)

Some critics read this scene as a sign that Will has finally attained that receptive, non-self-defeating posture that will open him up to the good news, or perhaps less dramatically but no less optimistically, that "now he will presumably listen to Sutter intersubjectively as the two friends 'name' their pain and thus reverse the effects of the ravening particles" (Hobson 66). While it is apparent that Will's expression of need for Sutter has, at least momentarily, postponed the latter's suicide, Will himself shows no real signs of change. He is simply asking one more

question, the answer to which will no doubt escape him,
before returning to Birmingham to live the good life.

Will's problem is not unique to him, especially in the
twilight years of the twentieth century. In a culture that,
like Will, has "eliminated Christianity" from its collective
psyche, any news coming from this quarter will fall on deaf
ears. Unlike many of his fellow men, however, Will at least
perceives a void in his life, senses his own homelessness in
the universe. Because of his refusal to recognize the
validity of Christianity as a solution to the unrest he
feels because of his homelessness, however, he is condemned
to spend his life searching for something that does not
exist--a spiritual home on earth, a bridge between immanence
and transcendence. He seeks answers to his many questions,
but because the only truth that matters is one that he does
not acknowledge, the answers he receives strike him as empty
words. These words, however, these endless answers to
endless questions, at least help him to keep up a barrier
between himself and the immediacy of the reality to which
Sutter Vaught is privy, so they become an end in themselves.
The medium of language becomes an end in itself. Such faith
in language ignores the obvious, however--namely, that
language only has meaning in relation to the message,
existing independently of it, that is expressed through this
medium. Otherwise, it is like paper currency without gold to
back it up--utterly valueless. This is why Will's posture is

self-defeating, and his search for meaning is doomed to failure. He has traded his life savings for valueless paper currency; he has confused the medium with the message, and he is destined to wander the earth a spiritually bankrupt soul as a result--at least until he reappears in Percy's sequel to the novel, <u>The Second Coming</u>.

CHAPTER III

NARRATOR AS PATIENT:

"SANITY" IN LOVE IN THE RUINS AND LANCELOT

Percy's next two novels take a decidedly darker turn.
The "genteel, reflective" tone of The Moviegoer and The Last
Gentleman gives way to a "violence of imagery, plot, and
narrative voice" so striking that "many readers wondered
what had happened to Walker Percy" (Hobson 68). The world
depicted by Percy in his first two novels is in trouble--
plagued by malaise, sunk in the everydayness and so
forth--but this trouble is mild in comparison with that
which faces the characters who inhabit the worlds of Love in
the Ruins and Lancelot. In these two novels, Percy raises
the stakes and gives us "a prophetic vision of a public and
private apocalypse in America" (Hobson 69). Both books are
"end of the world" novels of the sort described by Percy in
his essay "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World":

> By a novel about "the end of the world," I am not
> speaking of a Wellsian fantasy or a science-fiction
> film on the Late Show. Nor would such a novel presume
> to predict the imminent destruction of the world. It is
> not even interested in the very real capacity for
> physical destruction: that each of the ninety-odd
> American nuclear submarines carries sixteen polaris
> missiles, each of which has the destructive capacity
> of all the bombs dropped in World War II....
> No, what the novelist sees, or rather senses, is a
> certain quality of the postmodern consciousness as he

finds it and as he incarnates it in his own characters.
What he finds--in himself and in other people--is a new
breed of person in whom the potential for catastrophe--
and hope--has suddenly escalated. Everyone knows about
the awesome new weapons. But what is less apparent is a
comparable realignment of energies within the human
psyche. The psychical forces presently released in the
postmodern consciousness open unlimited possibilities
for both destruction and liberation, for an absolute
loneliness or a rediscovery of community and
reconciliation. (MB 101, 112)

Such a novel explores nothing less than the very soul of
Western man in the troubled postmodern era--a soul that
finds itself at a cataclysmic crossroads. The proper subject
for so grave a theme is "a man who has very nearly come to
the end of the line" (MB 112). Dr. Tom More and Lancelot
Andrewes Lamar are both such men. We view the "worlds on the
brink" depicted in Love in the Ruins and Lancelot through
their psyches.

Given Percy's description of the "proper subject" for
novels such as these, we would not be terribly surprised to
find their protagonists suffering some unfortunate psychical
consequences for their "end of the line" states of being. In
other words, we might expect them to be crazy--not just
crazy in the lovable, dislocated sense in which Will Barrett
is crazy, but classifiably, institutionally insane. And, in
fact, this is precisely what we find in these two novels.
Will Barrett may have spent five years in psychoanalysis
(under his own volition), but Tom More and Lancelot Lamar
spend the majority of the time periods covered in their

respective novels officially institutionalized for mental illness.

Now it is important to note here what an extremely subjective and relativistic concept "sanity" is, and nowhere is it more relativistic than in Percy's fiction. Of _Love in the Ruins_ Percy succinctly states: "The only problem facing the reader is who is crazy, whether it's Dr. More or the rest of the world" (Lawson and Kramer 48). This question applies as well to the protagonist of _Lancelot_ and becomes, in fact, the central concern of both novels. After all, when every bit of information we have about a given situation comes from someone whom society has labelled "insane," we must settle this question for ourselves before we know how much of the information to believe. But how do we determine to our satisfaction the relative sanity or insanity of these narrators? Do we simply accept the opinions of the competent medical personnel who have examined these characters using the most up-to-date methods of behaviorism? Or do we go to the other extreme and, citing Percy's well-known criticism of behavioral psychology, throw these diagnoses out the window and pronounce the narrators perfectly sane?

Fortunately, we as readers are provided with a means of making such an assessment with a fairly high degree of confidence. The means is, of course, language. By carefully examining the verbal behavior of the narrator/protagonists of these two novels in relation both to us, the readers as

addressees, and to the fictional characters with whom Tom More and Lancelot Lamar interact, we can come to a fairly reliable solution to the question Percy poses concerning <u>Love in the Ruins</u>: "The only problem facing the reader is who is crazy."

This question has particular relevance to Percy's essay, "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning," which, after all, attempts to provide a foundation for a "basic science of listening-and-talking, as indispensable to psychiatrists as anatomy to surgeons" (159). In the list of postulates that Percy formulates in this essay, one is especially intriguing in its implications, but frustrating in its brevity and lack of elaboration. Postulate 1.54 states: "Every sentence has a <u>normative</u> dimension" (176). Possible variations in this dimension include "true-false, stale-fresh, appropriate-inappropriate, crazy-sane, etc" (179). After explaining briefly that "true-false" is only one prong of the normative dimension, Percy gives a few examples to demonstrate how the dimension actually works:

> <u>Clouds are fleece</u> is false as a literal statement, true in a sense as a metaphor, bad in the sense of being a trite metaphor.
> <u>That is a sparrow</u> may be a true assertion of class relationship but it may also be perfunctory, a bored assignment of a commonplace object (English sparrow) to a commonplace class.
> <u>That is a dusky seaside sparrow</u> may assert a similar relationship, yet it may be uttered with all the excitement and sense of discovery of a bird-watcher coming upon an occasional species. (177)

In addition to these examples of true-false, stale-fresh, etc., verbal behavior, Percy also gives us an example of what might be considered "crazy," or at least less than sane, verbal behavior:

> Patient says to therapist, "Don't you dare plot against me!" An imperative sentence and therefore neither true nor false but inappropriate because, let us stipulate, the therapist harbors no such plot. (177)

Based upon this one instance of his patient's verbal behavior, the doctor can fairly confidently assume that all is not right with his mind--that he is at least mildly paranoid and thus in need of help.

As interesting, albeit not all that original, as the postulate and examples may be, they leave us with a frustrated sense of incompletion, for after this brief discussion of an enormously complex issue, Percy moves on to the next postulate without further ado. He tells us that a person's verbal behavior can provide clues to the relative soundness of his mind, but he does not go on to develop an apparatus for making such an assessment. Certainly some verbal behavior self-evidently falls under the "insane" category of the normative dimension. The patient's command that his therapist not plot against him is clearly evidence of a paranoid state of mind. But even in such obvious cases as this we encounter difficulties with the articulation of the problem if we rely solely upon Percy's postulate as it

is discussed in the essay. If the essay is indeed intended to aid psychiatrists in the evaluation of the normalcy of their patients' verbal behavior, it falls short of its mark. If a psychiatrist can do no more than say that a patient's verbal behavior is crazy because, "quite frankly it just sounds crazy," he can provide no better help for his patient than an untrained layman might.

To be fair to Percy we must acknowledge that the essay is intended as nothing more than a starting point for an eventual "basic science of listening-and- talking, as indispensable to psychiatrists as anatomy to surgeons." It is titled, after all, "_Toward_ a Triadic Theory of Meaning." Still, we need more than Percy gives us if we are to examine the normative dimension of verbal behavior in his fiction. Fortunately, Percy is not the only linguist ever to show an interest in this aspect of language; indeed, it has become something of a specialized field of study in and of itself. Percy's study of language as a behavior (as opposed to a more purely formalistic study of language) allies him with the field of linguistics called "pragmatics," which "provides an account of how sentences are used in utterances to convey information in context" (Kempson 139). Probably the most important single figure in pragmatics is H. P. Grice, whose seminal work in the late 1960's and early 1970's "developed principles of language use that were rooted in general principles of human cooperation" (Newmeyer

175). Grice's conception of language as a cooperative human endeavor is quite similar to Percy's view of the role of "community" in all triadic behavior ("The community of discourse is a necessary and nontrivial parameter of triadic behavior"), and of the system of norms that logically follows such a view. Grice's work, however, has the advantage for our purposes here of going into much greater detail on the precise nature of this cooperative behavior. He can thus assist us greatly in our exploration of Percy's "normative dimension" of verbal behavior. His systematization of the principles governing conversation will allow us actually to articulate the conditions governing such normative dualities as "appropriate-inappropriate" and "sane-insane," and to examine the verbal behavior of Percy's characters in terms of these conditions. We will thus enlist his aid here in filling in some of the gaps in Percy's necessarily vague designation of the normative dimension of verbal behavior.

Grice's work grows out of the tradition of speech act theory, which views speech as a behavior bound by certain "felicity conditions" which can be defined as "a set of conditions that are necessary for the successful and felicitous performance of the act" (Searle 44), or more simply as "the appropriate circumstances" (Austin 13). In other words, there are certain criteria that a speech act must meet before it can be considered a successfully

completed act. Now as impressive as this sounds it is still rather general, and does not get us that much closer to an evaluative apparatus than does Percy's brief description of the normative dimension of language.

This is where Grice comes in. Dissatisfied by the limitations of Austin's "appropriateness conditions," Grice "attempts to clarify and correct the traditional Austinian view of appropriateness conditions by relating the ones which hold for a particular speech act in a particular context to general rules governing all verbal discourse and indeed all goal-directed cooperative human behavior" (Pratt 125). At the heart of Grice's system of rules is what he calls the Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 45). Grice identifies four categories of maxims, "the following of which will, in general, yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle." These categories, and their maxims, are as follows:

    I.   Quantity
        1.   Make you contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
        2.   Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
   II. Quality
        1.   Try to make your contribution one that is true.
        A.   Do not say what you believe to be false.

                    B.   Do not say that for which you lack
                          adequate evidence.
III. Relation
        1.   Be relevant.
IV. Manner
        1.   Be perspicuous.
              A.   Avoid obscurity of expression.
              B.   Avoid ambiguity.
              C.   Be brief (avoid unneccessary prolixity).
              D.   Be orderly.
                                        (Grice 45-6)

In normal conversation these maxims are regarded rather

loosely, but as long as the Cooperative Principle is being

recognized by all the participants in a conversation, an

intentional violation of one or more of the maxims remains

within the bounds of acceptable behavior and may, in fact,

result in the communication of more information than is

literally uttered, or what is called a conversational

implicature. For example, if one friend asks another,

"What's the new Pizza House like?" and he replies, "All the

cooks there are Italian," he violates the maxim of Relation

by not overtly commenting on the quality of the food there,

but rather on the nationality of its cooks. His friend,

however, understands him to mean by this that since pizza is

particularly associated with Italy, people who are from

Italy should be able to make especially good pizza. The

reference to the Italian origin of the cooks at the Pizza

House, then, implies without actually stating the fact that

they make good pizza (Kempson 140). Such intentional

violations of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, which

are an integral part of nearly every conversation, do not concern us here because they do not violate any behavioral norms and thus provide no insight into the mental well-being of a speaker. The speaker may be crazy, but he is verbally cooperative, so we may make no assessment one way or the other based upon his speech alone. Unintentional violations of the Cooperative Principle, on the other hand, are an entirely different matter. We will focus our attention on these violations in assessing the mental stability of the protagonist/narrators of _Love in the Ruins_ and _Lancelot_.

In a discussion of the various ways in which violations of the Cooperative Principle may be interpreted, Marilyn Cooper states that "those who do not know they have violated a maxim are taken to be psychologically or mentally deficient in some way" (180). Thus, while an intentional violation on the part of a speaker may be accepted by the other participant(s) in a conversation as perfectly normal verbal behavior, an unintentional violation is grounds for considering him to be mentally impaired. This predisposition of listeners to judge a speaker's mental health on the basis of his verbal behavior can be effectively manipulated by writers of fiction to provide insight into a fictional character's mind that would be impossible, or at least unconvincing, with mere description. In _Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse_ Mary Louise Pratt discusses the recognition of the Cooperative Principle by fictional

characters, stating that "unintentional failure [to adhere to the Cooperative Principle] can result from carelessness or ignorance or from some temporary or permanent perceptual limitation such as psychological trauma, obsession, insanity, or delirium" (182). Assuming that a writer of fiction is in full control of his characters, when we "hear" one of them violate a normative rule of verbal behavior, such as Grice's maxims, we the readers are alerted to the possible presence of clues concerning the character's mental well-being (and in works such as Love in the Ruins and Lancelot, in which the issue of sanity is so central a concern, we can use all of the authorial assistance that we can get). After we determine what rule or maxim has been violated, we must then decide whether the violation is intentional or unintentional. Depending upon the severity of the violation, and the degree to which the speaker is aware of his violation, we may very well be dealing with a madman. By applying the procedure outlined here to the verbal behavior of the central characters in Love in the Ruins and Lancelot, we should be able to solve, with a fair degree of certainty, the problem posed by Percy concerning Love in the Ruins: "The only problem facing the reader is who is crazy. Whether it's Dr. More [or Lancelot] or the rest of the world."

LOVE IN THE RUINS

The very first words uttered by Dr. Tom More, narrator/ protagonist of <u>Love in the Ruins</u>, invite us to examine the normative mode of his verbal behavior:

> Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last?
> Two more hours should tell the story. One way or the other. Either I am right and a catastrophe will occur, or it won't and I'm crazy. In either case, the outlook is not so good. (3)

More fears for the future of the U.S.A.--of the entire Western world, in fact. As he dictates his thoughts into a pocket recorder ("so that survivors poking around the ruins of Howard Johnson's a hundred years from now will have a chance of avoiding a repetition" 28), he goes on to explain the precise nature of his fears:

> These are bad times.
> Principalities and powers are everywhere victorious. Wickedness flourishes in high places.
> There is a clearer and more present danger, however. For I have reason to believe that within the next two hours an unprecedented fallout of noxious particles will settle hereabouts and perhaps in other places as well. It is a catastrophe whose causes and effects--and prevention--are known only to me. The effects of the evil particles are psychic rather than physical. They do not burn the skin and rot the marrow, rather do they inflame and worsen the secret ills of

> the spirit and rive the very self from itself. If a
> man is already prone to anger, he'll go mad with rage.
> If he lives affrighted, he will quake with terror. If
> he's already abstracted from himself, he'll be sundered
> from himself and roam the world like Ishmael. (5)

As dire as circumstances may be--and they are indeed dire ("'It's not even the U.S.A., it's the soul of Western man that is in the very act of flying apart HERE and NOW'" 115)--More has a little invention that could save the day: "In fact it could save the U.S.A. if we can get through the next hour or so" (20).

The speaker of the preceding passages is very clearly "a man who has very nearly come to the end of the line," a man of the sort Percy describes in his "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World." The resounding question here is whether he is at the end of this line by himself, or accompanied by the whole Western world. Or as Tom More puts it, "Either I am right and a catastrophe will occur, or it won't and I'm crazy." We the readers are inclined to agree with these alternatives--something dire had better happen, or we will have no choice but to conclude that this man is as mad as a hatter. Now while our extreme reaction to this man's extreme claim may be perfectly natural, it is likely highly subjective. We question his sanity because he simply sounds crazy to us. But how can we objectify our impression? Remember that the ostensible purpose of the parameters Percy sets up in "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning" is to

provide psychiatrists with a means of making objective evaluations of a patient's mental health on the basis of clues found in his verbal behavior. And our assertion that Dr. More simply sounds crazy would not provide a great deal of help to either the psychiatrist or his patient. By enlisting the services of H. P. Grice, we will be better equipped to make a more objective assessment of Tom More's mental health. If we do finally decide that he, and not the world, is crazy, at least we will be able to give solid evidence for our conclusion.

First of all, we should examine the particularly high stakes involved in the ultimate accuracy of Dr. More's prediction. People make predictions of one kind or another every day of their lives without fear of being called crazy should their predictions not come true. So what is so different about Dr. More's prediction? Why is his very sanity staked on its "successful" outcome? The basic distinction between More's prediction of the end of the Western world and someone else's prediction of, say, rain or a Red Sox World Series title, is simply one of statistical probability. Even in the middle of a drought or a shaky baseball season, a thunderstorm or a Red Sox World Series championship is far more likely than a global catastrophe of the sort predicted by Dr. More. Such predictions are thus not at all uncommon, and it is their very commonness that effectively detaches the speaker from his prediction, places

the prediction in the realm of public domain, so to speak, and absolves him of any direct responsibility for its outcome. By the same token, the unlikelihood, and hence the singularity, of More's prediction ties it to him in a way that these other predictions are not tied to their speakers. Consequently, even if we give More the benefit of the doubt and pay attention to his prediction, it had better come true or we will have no choice but to consider him mentally impaired. In other words, the far-fetched nature of his claim has placed him in a position where he is either a prophet or a lunatic. Either he is right, or he is crazy.

Clearly, then, the single most important normative feature of Tom More's verbal behavior is Grice's maxim of Quality:

1. Try to make your contribution one that is true.
   A. Do not say what you believe to be false.

Now there is always the possibility that More is simply lying, and such an intentional violation of the Cooperative Principle, while admittedly unethical, does not provide grounds for questioning a speaker's sanity. Only unintentional violations provide this sort of information. So, outlandish as it may seem, and false though it may prove, More's initial claim is not admissible as evidence of his mental health, one way or another, until we establish whether or not he actually believes in the truth of his

claim, which is a mere formality in this case, but important nonetheless in establishing a protocol for using Grice's Cooperative Principle to explore the normative dimension of the verbal behavior of Percy's characters.

Dr. More clearly believes what he says to be true, for his actions throughout the novel are totally consistent with such a belief. For instance, when we first encounter him he is seated, with a carbine in his lap, "against a young pine, broken out in hives and waiting for the end of the world" (3). A person does not arm himself in such a manner and hide in a grove of pine trees "on the southwest cusp of the interstate cloverleaf," unless he genuinely believes in the probability of imminent danger. The "ruined motel" that he observes from this vantage point provides further evidence of his belief in the truth of his prediction of the end of the world, for he has completely renovated one of the rooms there for his and his "girlfriend" Moira's safe habitation during the troubled times ahead. He has cleaned the moldy room from floor to ceiling, installed a generator and a makeshift shower, and stocked the closet with "cartons of Campell's chicken-and-rice, Underwood ham, Sunmaid raisins, cases of Early Times and Swiss Colony sherry (which Moira likes). And the Great Books stacked alongside" (258). More's careful apocalyptic preparations here, along with numerous other of his activities throughout the novel, show him to be a man fully convinced of the truth of his prediction. One of

our tasks, then, will be to examine the world in which More lives for signs of the kind of trouble that he anticipates. If this world proves to be as bad off as he claims, then perhaps he is not so crazy after all--perhaps he is, in fact, the only sane person left. Before attempting to make such a sweeping evaluation of More's world, however, we would benefit from a close look at some specific instances of "insane" or "inappropriate" verbal behavior among More and the other characters who inhabit it. Such instances show Percy to be acutely conscious of the connection between apparent mental health and overt language behavior in a way that he was not in his two previous novels. This is an important consideration because, from this point on in Percy's career, the connection becomes something of a preoccupation, reaching a climax in The Second Coming.

On several occasions throughout Love in the Ruins, characters simply talk wrong. Listening to them talking, we are very aware that what we are hearing is not "normal" in comparison with the sorts of language behavior we encounter in our daily lives. Even without a Cooperative Principle to tell us precisely why such speech is not normal, we know that it somehow just sounds funny, and we automatically make a note of a possible problem with the speaker's mental health. Frequently, we the readers are not alone in our suspicions concerning the mental well-being of the speakers; their fictional addressees are quick to interpret normative

deviations in verbal behavior as "mental illness," and are often in a position to take action on such an interpretation. More's own questionable "patient-staff status" on the mental ward, for instance, fluctuates throughout the novel largely on the basis of his verbal behavior alone. Other characters similarly suffer at the hand of their fellow man because of apparent deviations along the normative dimension of their verbal behavior. The precise "deviance" of each of these examples can be explained with the aid of the maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle.

Despite his many infelicitous (apparent or otherwise) speech acts in the novel, Tom More consistently exhibits an awareness of the normative dimension of verbal behavior, and of the possible consequences of violations of the norms. On one occasion, he returns to the psychiatric ward (where he is still officially on patient-staff status as a result of a Christmas Eve suicide attempt) to ask his colleague Max Gottlieb for help in getting N.I.M.H. funding for a crash program to develop and distribute his invention the MOQUOL, or More's Qualitative and Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer. Before More even mentions the purpose of his visit, Max and another colleague, Colley Wilkes, eye him with skepticism as a result of his past behavior. When he does begin to explain why he is back at the hospital, his verbal behavior does not put their minds at ease. The

conversation begins normally enough, with Max exclaiming

good-naturedly, "The prodigal returns. This time to stay, I

hope" (110). But then More states his business:

> "I've a favor to ask...."
> "Ask it."
> "You know what it is. I want you to speak to the Director about my article and my lapsometer before my appointment with him Monday."
> Colley straddles the chaise and rises.
> "Wait, Colley. I want to tell you something too."
> "Well, Max?"
> "Sure sure." Max swivels around to the gold-green gauze. "If--"
> "If what?"
> "If you'll come back."
> "You mean as a patient?"
> "Patient-staff. As you were."
> "Why?"
> "You're not well." (111)

The very mention of More's lapsometer causes his two

colleagues to suspect him of an unintentional violation of

the Cooperative Principle maxim of Quality: "Try to make

your contribution one that is true." Max and Colley do not

suspect More of lying to them--they give him credit for at

least believing what he says, no matter how far-fetched it

may sound. This very sincerity, however, gets him in

trouble, for a belief in something as unlikely as imminent

global catastrophe, and the related belief that this

catastrophe can be averted only with the aid of a device

called a "lapsometer" (after the fall of mankind) strike the

objective scientific mind as the delusions of a madman. What

distinguishes More's beliefs, or more importantly his verbal

expression of them, from the out and out ravings of a madman, however, is his awareness of how "crazy" he may sound to his listeners. In other words, he is fully aware of the normative dimension of language, and tries to get his point across with as little apparent deviation from the norm as possible.

After he is "invited" to come back to the psychiatric ward, More tries to explain that he cannot do so because "Something is afoot." One bit of evidence that convinces More himself of the truth of this statement is the fact that he spent the morning of this day trekking through a Louisiana swamp to escape from a sniper who was pursuing him. While he was in the swamp, he heard the voices of Max and Colley, who were there in search of the ivory-bill woodpecker. More decides to relate this evidence to his skeptical colleagues, and to verify his presence in the swamp by letting them know that he heard them there:

> I sit down slowly and close my eyes. "You were both out birding this morning, weren't you? Down by the Quarters...."
> Max is looking at me sharply. "Why do you ask? Did you see us? Why didn't you join us? It would be good—"
> "I couldn't. I was trapped."
> "Trapped?"
> Colley, I see, is wondering whether he should risk an exchange of glances with Max. His eyes stray. He doesn't.
> "Yes," I say and relate to them the events of the morning, beginning with the sniper and ending with my eavesdropping on the three conspirators in the pagoda. I don't tell it badly, using, in fact, Max's own low-keyed clinical style of reciting case histories on grand rounds. (112-13)

The very fact that he knows there is a "good" way and a "bad" way to relate this information indicates More's awareness of the normative dimension of verbal behavior. Even though he is satisfied that he does not "tell it badly," however, the actual content of the message is of such a nature that Max and Colley cannot help but suspect an unintentional violation of the maxim of Quality, no matter how well More relates it. No matter how clinical or objective he sounds, a belief in the reality of events such as those More describes must indicate mental instability:

> Silence falls. Colley, who has lit up again, screws up an eye against the maple-sugar smoke. Max's expression does not change. He listens attentively, unironically. Daylight glances interestingly from his forehead.
> "Let me be sure I understand you," says Max at last, swinging to and fro. "You are saying first that somebody tried to shoot you this morning; second, that there is a conspiracy planned for the Fourth of July, a conspiracy to kidnap the Paradise baton-twirlers as well as staff members here who participate in Audubon outings?"
> "Not exactly. The shooting is a fact. The other is what I heard."
> "And they're planning to run a school on Honey Island for the Bantus and Choctaws," says Colley, drumming his fingers on his helmet.
> "They said it."
> Silence. (113)

When his objective, level-headed description of a serious situation that must be dealt with immediately, is only met with further invitation to resume his former "patient-staff

status" in the hospital, a frustrated More lays all his

cards on the proverbial table:

> "Max, I don't seem to be getting across. You're
> talking about doing business at the same stand here.
> I'm talking about a crash program involving N.I.M.H.
> and twenty-five million dollars."
> "A crash program? You mean on a national scale?
> You think there is a national emergency?"
> "More than even that, Max! It's not even the
> U.S.A., it's the soul of Western man that is in the
> very act of flying apart HERE and NOW. Christ, Max, you
> read the paper. I can measure it, Max! Number one, I've
> got to get this thing mass-produced and in the hands of
> G.P.'s; number two, I've got to hit on a therapeutic
> equivalent of my diagnostic breakthrough. Don't you
> agree?" (114-15)

Max's scientific mind understandably reacts with some

skepticism to such metaphysical ravings, and More, realizing

the immediate futility of pursuing the matter further,

willingly changes the subject. Like the reader, Max must see

some tangible evidence to support More's apocalyptic claims

or he will have no choice but to regard these claims as

unintentional violations of the maxim of Quality, and to

view the speaker as a "patient."

Certainly, the maxim of Quality provides the most

important link between More's verbal behavior and his

apparent mental health, but it is not the only area in which

his adherence to the Cooperative Principle is in question.

In fact, on several occasions his violation of one of the

other maxims is clearly beyond question. Significant to our

ultimate appraisal of More's "sanity," however, is his

realization on these occasions that he has, in fact,
violated one of the maxims, even though the violation itself
may have been unintentional. Furthermore, his evaluation of
the significance of these violations indicates a clear
awareness on More's part, and a conscious manipulation on
Percy's part, of the relationship between overt language
behavior and apparent mental stability.

One rather trivial, but unquestionable, example of a
violation on More's part occurs when More takes Moira to
Howard Johnson's to show her how he has fixed "their" room
up. As the couple wanders through the ruined hotel, the
romantic specter of the "salesmen and flappers" who used to
visit this place back in the 1960's makes Moira passionate,
and she and More frequently pause from their explorations to
kiss one another. More's passion surges in return, so
powerfully, in fact, that it affects his ability to speak
normally:

> So we walked hand in hand and read the graffiti.
> Moira had taken a course in semantics and knew there
> was nothing in dirty words.
> Above the Gideon Bible: For a free suck call room
> 208.
> Moira shook her head sadly. "What an unhappy
> person must have written that."
> "Yea. That is, yes." Desire for her had blown my
> speech center. "Love, I, you," I said.   (136)

In her discussion of the Cooperative Principle in fiction
Pratt includes "temporary" as well as "permanent"
"perceptual limitation[s]" as possible interpretations of

unintentional violations of one or more of the maxims.
Clearly More suffers from the former here. A strong wave of
desire has temporarily "blown [his] speech center," although
there is no reason to doubt that it will be restored when
the wave has subsided. The temporary nature of his
linguistic affliction, however, does not make it any less
deviant in the normative dimension of verbal behavior. It is
abnormal language behavior, it is viewed as such by More
(and Percy), and it is interpreted as a perceptual
limitation on the part of the speaker (in this case by the
speaker). More's unorthodox response to Moira here violates
the maxim of Manner, or more specifically sub-maxims A
("Avoid obscurity of expression) and D ("Be orderly").
More's violation of the maxim of Manner is temporary, as is
the mental condition that gives rise to it, but its
impermanence does not make it any less relevant to our study
of the normative dimension of language.

Another example of a temporary perceptual limitation
manifesting itself in More's verbal behavior occurs after he
has consumed several gin fizzes, to which he is severely
allergic. He is on the golf course trying to do whatever he
can to stave off the catastrophe that he by now feels is
imminent. He is talking to Dr. Mark Habeeb, who wants to
slap electrodes on some of the golfers in order to study
their aggressive behavior. More can tell that things are
going from bad to worse, and knows he must do something

soon, but unfortunately he is in the early stages of anaphylaxis as a result of the gin fizzes. He accuses Dr. Habeeb of "abstracting and withholding judgment," behavior that is symptomatic of "angelism." Dr. Habeeb defends his behavior by stating, "I'm a scientist. We don't judge behavior, we observe it" (a claim, by the way, which verifies More's diagnosis of his angelism). More responds to this claim in a quite unusual manner: "'That's not enough.' I stagger a bit. 'Blow hold or cot'" (358). Shortly after this More lies passed out on the ground due to lack of oxygen. Like his unorthodox speech to Moira, his remark to Dr. Habeeb, "Blow hold or cot," clearly violates the maxim of Manner (specifically sub-maxims B: "Avoid ambiguity" and D: "Be orderly"). The violation is unintentional, because he quickly corrects himself after he realizes what he has said: "I mean blow hot or cold...." The violation accurately indicates a temporal perceptual limitation of the variety More experienced when his desire for Moira blew his speech center. And, whether we attribute it to the presence of alcohol in his blood, or to the absence of oxygen in his brain, or a combination of the two is finally irrelevant. The fact is that More is suffering from a perceptual limitation, and that one of the signs Percy uses to indicate this is a slip-up in the normative dimension of More's verbal behavior.

In addition to these two relatively unimportant violations of the maxim of Manner, More on another occasion experiences a violation of this particular maxim which is of direct relevance to our overall evaluation of his mental health. It takes place outside of The Pit, a "seriocomic clinic, an end-of-the-year hijinks put on by the doctors for the students" (111). More runs into Dr. Buddy Brown, his scheduled opponent in the day's "hijinks," who offers him a last minute opportunity to examine Mr. Ives, the elderly mute patient who will be the subject of More's and Brown's debate. More has just come from the Director's office, where he expected to find out that he had received full support for N.I.M.H. funding of his invention, but instead found out that the Director had no idea what he was talking about and, furthermore, still considered him a patient of the psychiatric ward. Understandably shaken, More shuffles out into the hall, his "hands groping for the pockets of [his] string robe" (207). It is in this psychologically vulnerable state that he encounters Buddy Brown:

> "You're just in time, Tom!"
> "In time for what?"
> "To give Mr. Ives the once-over. Be my guest."
> "No thanks."
> "Look at this." Taking a reflex hammer from his pocket, he taps Mr. Ives' knee tendon with quick deft taps.
> Mr. Ives dances a regular jig in his chair, all the while watching me with his mild blue gaze.
> "Isn't that upper-motor-neurone damage, Doctor?" Buddy asks me.
> "I don't think so."

> "Try it yourself." He hands me his hammer, a
> splendid affair with a glittering shaft a tomahawk head
> of red rubber.
> "No fanks."
> "What? Oh. Then I'll see you shortly."
> "Fime."
> I do not speak well. I've lost. I'm a patient. But
> Buddy doesn't notice. Like all enemies, he puts the
> best construction on his opponent. But Moira knows
> something is wrong. She hangs her head. (208-9)

Even though More is fully aware that his language behavior

is not normal, in his present mental state he is powerless

to take any corrective measures, and blunders right along:

> "Is something wrong?" [Moira] asks in a low voice.
> "I'm fime." I notice that they are waiting outside
> the tunnel that leads into The Pit from the lower
> level.
> "Don't forget Howard," says Moira.
> "Who? Oh." Howard Johnson. "Nopes."
> "Who is Howard?" Buddy asks.
> "We can go now," whispers Moira. She sees the
> abyss and is willing to save me.
> "When will you come in?" asks Buddy.
> "Eins upon a oncy," I reply.
> "O.K. Eins zwei drei," says Buddy, willing to give
> me the benefit of the doubt. "He's going to the men's
> room," he tells Moira, trying to make sense of me.
> "Rike," I say.
> "Rotsa ruck."

More here repeatedly and unintentionally violates the maxim

of Manner (submaxims A: "Avoid obscurity" and B: "Avoid

ambiguity"). And even though Buddy does not acknowledge the

abnormality of More's speech, preferring to continue

thinking of him as a worthy opponent, Moira notices, and so

does More, who interprets it as a sign of his own mental

illness ("I do not speak well. I've lost. I'm a patient").

As amusing as violations of the maxim of Manner may be (we are certainly not expected to view the preceding exchange with any degree of solemnity) amusement alone is not our reason for dealing at such great length with More's violations of this maxim. The importance of these particular violations to our current study lies in their uniqueness among Percy's works up to this point. In his previous two novels he has depicted inauthentic or empty speech (e.g. that of Eddie and Nell Lovell) and situationally inappropriate speech (e.g. Binx's Uncle Oscar "getting off on niggers, Mrs. Roosevelt, dagos and Jews" at the Bolling dinner table), but he has not yet shown anyone actually straying outside the bounds of what is at least recognizable as ordinary spoken language. More's violations of the maxim of Manner represent a new awareness on Percy's part of the normative dimension of verbal behavior as a correlative of a speaker's mental health. This new direction in Percy's thinking is particularly significant in its anticipation of what he will do with the normative dimension in The Second Coming, in which Allison Huger's apparent violations of the maxim of Manner, and their relation to her mental health, actually become one of the central concerns of the novel as a whole.

As prominent as More's "crazy" speech is in Love in the Ruins, he is not the only character whose verbal behavior causes other people to question his mental stability. One of

the most consequentially grave of these is the verbal behavior of Mr. Ives, the elderly patient being examined by Dr. More and Buddy Brown in The Pit. During his stay at the Golden Years Senior Citizen Settlement in Tampa, Florida, Mr. Ives has violated a wide variety of behavioral norms. He has refused to participate in "shuffleboard tournament, senior softball, Golden Years gymkhana, papa putt-putt, donkey baseball, Guys and Gals a go-go, the redfish rodeo, and grandaddy golf." He has twice "defecate[d] on Flirtation Walk during the Merry Widows promenade." During the period of well-wishing at the Ohio Day breakfast, when Mr. Ives' turn at the microphone arrived, he uttered "gross insults and obscenities to Ohioans, among the mildest of which was the expression, repeated many times, piss on all Ohioans," and later did, in fact, "urinate on Ohio in the Garden of the Fifty States" (223). The most damning of all his abnormal behavior, however, is his complete mutism following an alleged "stroke" a month before his appearance in The Pit. Buddy Brown attributes this mutism to "advanced atherosclerosis, senile psychosis...hemiplegia and aphasia following a cerebrovascular accident" (221). His recommendation for Mr. Ives' treatment is transferral to the "Happy Isles Separation Center," which is actually a euthanasia facility for no longer productive members of society. The old gentleman's very life, thus, depends upon his ability to abide by the Cooperative Principle.

With his prolonged silence Mr. Ives violates the maxim of Quantity (submaxim 1: "Make your contribution as informative as is required [for the current purposes of the exchange]). In Mr. Ives' case, this maxim can be simplified as: "Speak when you are spoken to," which he either cannot or will not do. As with many of More's violations, intention is the key here in determining Mr. Ives' mental health, and, in this case, even his survival. Buddy Brown believes that the problem is organic--that Mr. Ives is silent because he cannot speak. In other words, that his violation of the Cooperative Principle is unintentional. More has his doubt about this, however, and these doubts are confirmed when he examines Mr. Ives' brain activity with his lapsometer. More relates his findings to his nurse, Ellen Oglethorpe:

> "No wonder he won't talk," I say, flipping back through his stack of wave patterns.
> "Won't or can't," Ellen asks me.
> "Oh, he can. No organic lesion at all. Look at his cortical activity: humming away like a house afire. He's as sharp as you or I."
> "Then why--?"
> "And he's reading me right now, aren't you Mr. Ives?"
> "Ecccc," says Mr. Ives.
> "You asked me why he won't talk," I tell her loudly. "He's too damn mad to talk. His red nucleus is red indeed. Look at that."
> "You mean--"
> "I mean he doesn't trust you or me or anybody."
> (160)

Mr. Ives' violation of the maxim of Quantity is wholly intentional--he is silent because he chooses to be.

More later proves this fact in The Pit when, using the new therapeutic component of his MOQUOL, invented by Art Immelman, he "administer[s] a light chloride dampening to his red nucleus (whence his rage) and a moderate sodium massage to his speech area in the prefrontal gyrus" (229). This light ionic brain massage diminishes Mr. Ives' anger to a point where he is no longer "too damn mad to talk," and he explains his unusual behavior to The Pit audience. It turns out that Mr. Ives is a linguist who has for some time been trying to "decipher the Occala frieze," and it is his belief that an artifact that will enable him to do so is buried somewhere around Tampa, specifically in the area now occupied by the Golden Years Senior Citizens Settlement. As he himself explains: "why else would I hang around that nuthouse?" (230). His anger, and consequent anti-social behavior (including his mutism) are nothing more than an understandable reaction to incessant trivial interruptions to his important work:

> "Doctor," says Mr. Ives, hunkering down in his chair, monkey eyes glittering, "how would you like it if during the most critical time of your experiments with the Skinner box that won you the Nobel Prize, you had been pestered without letup by a bunch of chickenshit Ohioans? Let's play shuffleboard, let's play grandaddy golf, Guys and Gals a go-go. Let's jump in our Airstream trailers and drive two hundred miles to Key West to meet more Ohioans, and once we get there talk about--our Airstream trailers? Those fellows wouldn't let me alone." (231-2)

On being asked by the Director a few moments later why he has neither spoken nor walked in the past month, Mr. Ives further elaborates:

> Mr. Ives scratches his head and squints up the slope. "Well sir, I'll tell you." He lays on the cracker style a bit much to suit me. "There is only one kind of response to those who would control your responses by throwing you in a Skinner box."
> "And what would that be?" asks the Director sourly, knowing the answer.
> "To refuse to respond at all." (234)

Thus, instead of being hopelessly impaired and fit for nothing but the euthanasia facility at the Happy Isles Separation Center, as Buddy Brown considers him to be, Mr. Ives is every bit as mentally sound as Buddy Brown himself, and probably a good deal more intelligent. While unintentional violation of the maxim of Quantity may very well indicate mental problems, Mr. Ives' intentional violation of it indicates nothing more abnormal than a touch of orneriness, and perhaps some well-deserved righteous indignation.

The violations of the maxim of Quantity by Tom More's friend Father Rinaldo Smith are not so harmless, however. While Tom More was a patient in the acute wing of the mental ward, Father Smith, one of the few remaining Catholic priests in America, "turned up in the bed next to [More's]" as a result of an unintentional violation of the maxim of Quantity he committed while performing a mass:

> It seemed he had behaved oddly at the ten o'clock mass
> and created consternation among the faithful. This
> happened before the Schism, when hundreds of the
> faithful packed old Saint Michael's. When he mounted
> the pulpit to make the announcements and deliver his
> sermon, he had instead—fallen silent. The silence
> lasted perhaps thirty seconds. Thirty seconds is a very
> long silence. Nothing is more uncomfortable than
> silence when speech is expected. People began to cough
> and shift around in the pews. There was a kind of
> foreboding. Silence prolonged can produce terror.
> (183-4)

Father Smith finally broke this silence only to say, "Excuse

me...but the channels are jammed and the word is not getting

through," and then he "walked to the rectory in his

chausuble, sat down in the Monsignor's chair in a gray funk

and, according to the housekeeper, began to mutter something

about 'the news being jammed.'" After this incident he was

admitted to the acute ward and placed in the bed next to

More's, where he lay "stiff as a board, hands cloven to his

side, eyes looking neither right nor left."

Unlike Mr. Ives' prolonged silence, Father Smith's is

unintentional—he doesn't speak because he cannot speak,

believing as he does that "the channels are jammed." In

terms of the maxim of Quantity, this silence violates the

Cooperative Principle because the "current purpose" of the

gathering of the congregation requires of Smith, as a

minimum informational contribution, a sermon, which he does

not deliver. This violation creates "consternation among the

faithful" because it is outside of the bounds of what they

recognize as "normal" verbal behavior, and thus a sign of

mental impairment, or insanity. Furthermore, Smith has the extremely bad manners to exhibit this abnormal verbal behavior in such a highly public setting. To go insane in the privacy of one's own home is one thing, but to do it in front of hundreds of people, all of whom are made extremely uncomfortable as a result, is well-nigh unforgivable. The immediate consequence for Smith of this very public unintentional violation of the maxim of Quantity is a speedy admission to the acute psychiatric ward.

His hospitalization turns out to be much needed, for in the acute ward he lies in his bed stiff as a board, speaking of the victory of the "principalities and powers," and alternating between ecstasy and gloom, laughter and tears. His unintentional violation of the Cooperative Principle thus proves to be an accurate indicator of his unsound mental health.

The preceding examples indicate a natural tendency of people, fictional or otherwise, to interpret violations of the Cooperative Principle as evidence of a speaker's mental instability, whether permanent or merely temporary. The accuracy of such interpretations depends upon a combination of two factors: 1) the degree of actual violation (has a violation really occurred?) and 2) the speaker's intention (does he violate the Cooperative Principle on purpose or not, and to what end?). Only actual, rather than apparent, violations of the Cooperative Principle, that are

unintentional on the speaker's part, qualify as valid evidence of a speaker's mental impairment. More unintentionally violates the maxim of Manner, and Father Smith unintentionally violates the maxim of Quantity, and both violations are accurately interpreted by the other characters in the novel, including the narrator himself, as evidence of More's and Smith's temporary mental impairment. Mr. Ives, on the other hand, violates the maxim of Quantity, but does so intentionally and thus proves to be merely very angry, not mentally ill.

Having thus seen in these rather localized examples how the Cooperative Principle may be manipulated by an author to indicate a speaker's mental health, we are now ready to turn to the more general question we raised at the beginning of this chapter: in terms of the maxim of Quality, how sane/reliable is Tom More as the narrator of _Love in the Ruins_? We have already established that he genuinely believes in the truth of his dire pronouncements about the sorry state of the Western world, so the element of intention is present. Now all we need to establish is whether or not these pronouncements actually violate the maxim of Quality--is the world really as bad off as More says it is?

As the events of the novel unfold, they reveal that there is, indeed, some basis for More's fears about the danger of imminent catastrophe. Barricaded in Howard

Johnson's with his two lovers, Moira and Lola, and his nurse Ellen Oglethorpe, he delineates his fears for the benefit of his three companions: "'Three things are possible: a guerrilla attack [from the Bantus living in the outlying swamps], a chain reaction [of Heavy Sodium deposits lying underneath Louisiana, brought on by the diabolical Art Immelman's indiscriminate distribution of More's lapsometer], and a political disturbance at the speech-making [following the Pro-Am golf tournament being held at Paradise Estates this weekend" (263). Before the day is over, each of these fears has been realized--to a degree. The Bantus do, indeed, carry out a guerrilla attack on Paradise Estates, but it comes to nothing. Or as More puts it, looking back on the events of this day from a vantage point of "Five Years Later," "their revolution was a flop; they got beat in the Troubles five years ago and pulled back to the swamp" (385). A Heavy Sodium reaction does occur, but it is limited to a "burning" sandtrap on the Paradise Estates golf course, the vapors from which produce some isolated fisticuffs, but no epidemic "angelism" such as More fears. Finally, there is a "disturbance at the speechmaking," but it has more to do with ordinary bigotry than with politics. Watching TV reports of the Fourth of July celebration from the safety of their hotel room, More and his three female companions hear alarming accounts of

increasing restiveness among the crowd that threatens to erupt into violence at any moment:

> A reporter is interviewing a deputy sheriff, a good old boy named Junior Trosclair.
> "We cain't hold these folks much longer," Junior is telling the reporter.
> "Hold them from doing what?"
> "They talking about marching on the federal complex."

Another passerby, who is armed with an M-1 rifle, elaborates on the deputy's statement:

> "What? Oh, we're going over there and clean them out."
> "Over where?"
> "Over to Fedville."

When the reporter asks the man whom they intend to "clean out," the man replies: "'You know, commonists, atheistic scientists, Jews, perverts, dope fiends, coonasses--'" (322). Such bigotry is certainly disturbing, but it does not, on this occasion at least, result in any "disturbance" organized enough to be properly called "political."

So, More's predictions of widespread catastrophe are clearly not one hundred percent accurate. They are, however, just accurate enough to maintain his overall credibility. In terms of the maxim of Quality, all More is really guilty of is a predisposition for hyperbole, exacerbated by a fondness for alcohol. Or as Lewis Lawson sums up the case, More

"succeeds only in getting stumbling-down drunk and
exaggerating the mess the world is in" (508).

When we examine the normative dimension of More's
verbal behavior according to the parameters of Grice's
Cooperative Principle, we must finally conclude that,
although he is not without his problems, More's account of
his troubled world is generally trustworthy--if we do not
dwell too long on particulars. Even though he shares many of
its myriad pathologies, a fact of which he is all too aware
("It is my misfortune--and blessing--that I suffer from both
liberal and conservative complaints" 20), his diagnosis of
his world's sickness is fundamentally sound. Based upon his
extensive observations of his fellow man, More concludes
that modern man suffers from a "new plague,"

> ...the modern Black Death, the current hermaphroditism
> of the spirit, namely: More's syndrome, or: chronic
> angelism-bestialism that rives soul from body and sets
> it orbiting the great world as the spirit of
> abstraction whence it takes the form of beasts, swans
> and bulls, werewolves, blood-suckers, Mr. Hydes, or
> just poor lonesome ghost locked in its own machinery.
> (383)

We must look no further than the gross abstraction of the
Love Clinic, with its vaginal computers, orgasm circuits,
and interpersonal gynecologists, to see that he is clearly
onto something here. More's world is, indeed, in serious
spiritual and psychological trouble, even if not on the
verge of a global catastrophe such as he fears. And while

More himself is not without his own spiritual and psychological problems, he is better off than the vast majority of the inmates who inhabit the "nuthouse" he calls his world. As a resident of this world, More is no saner than he ought to be; as its diagnostician, he is just insane enough.

LANCELOT

Based upon his actions alone, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar
would seem to be far and away the most deranged of all of
Percy's protagonists. This narrator/protagonist of what is
has been called "unquestionably Percy's darkest work"
(Poteat, Walker Percy and... 139) suspects his wife's
fidelity, spies on her with the most advanced electronic
surveillance equipment to prove her infidelity, slashes the
throat of her current lover movie director Janos Jacoby,
then blows up his own house killing his wife and other
members of the movie company to which she belongs.
Disturbing behavior indeed, so disturbing, in fact, that
"After Lancelot was published, Percy spent many hours on the
phone reassuring Catholic friends all over the country that
no, he hadn't become a gnostic madman, he was not critical
of the Church, and he had not lost his faith" (Hobson 97).
As disturbing as Lancelot's actions are in and of
themselves, however, they are not nearly as disturbing as
the apparent sanity of his narrative exploration of their
significance. After finding out what Lancelot has done to
have himself placed in a "Center for Aberrant Behavior" (a
significantly ambiguous name), the reader expects to find
verbal behavior in his nearly three hundred page monologue

that is as "crazy" as his physical behavior, but as he makes his way through the novel he is first puzzled, then unsettled, and then deeply disturbed to find no obvious signs of insanity in his speech. In fact, the reader finds, in spite of himself, that he is somewhat impressed by this man's sober objectivity, and is ultimately inclined to agree with the Center for Aberrant Behavior's decision to declare him "psychiatrically fit" and discharge him after a year's confinement.

What is so troubling about Lancelot's apparent sanity is that it implies a sanctioning on Walker Percy's part of Lancelot's violent actions; it implies Percy's identification with his homicidal protagonist. Many critical interpretations, some positive, most negative, are founded on the assumption of this direct identification of the author with his character. Ralph Wood, who sees Lancelot, along with The Second Coming, as marking "a decline not only in Percy's literary mastery but in his theological discernment as well," states that the "vision of human life" that it presents "amounts to a moral rage that is nearly misanthropic" (1122). Less typical of such interpretations is Edward Cashin's claim that Lancelot's discovery that he does not have to "tolerate" this intolerable age represents "Percy's discovery that in his past there is an alternative life-style to that of the present." He even goes so far as to praise Lancelot/Percy's return to the past for a code of

behavior in the present, because the past, in the South at least, was a time "when men dared to greatness because they saw themselves as only a little less than the angels" (880). As personally biased and critically unsound as such extreme interpretations may be, their assumption of Percy's identification with Lancelot is understandable. There is little in Lancelot's verbal behavior to place much distance between himself and his creator--to disqualify himself as Percy's spokesman. And certainly many of Lancelot's criticisms of his age can be taken at face value as representative of Percy's own beliefs. In fact, Percy intentionally blurs the boundaries between himself and his protagonist so that the reader will find himself agreeing with Lancelot's basic assessment of the problem, even if he cannot swallow his solution to it. As with Tom More in _Love in the Ruins_ the ambiguity of Lancelot's sanity ("Here Percy particularly enjoys asking if it is the crazy man who is crazy" Tharpe 102) is no technical flaw on Percy's part. Neither is it, however, a whole-hearted endorsement of murder and mayhem of the sort Lance engages in. The apparent absence of craziness in Lance's verbal behavior is a carefully calculated means to an end. Lance's verbal behavior appears just sane enough to force the reader to look around himself and admit, uneasily, that he is on to something. But, to the careful reader at least, it exhibits just enough evidence of mental impairment to disqualify his

extreme behavior (i.e. murder and a planned Third
Revolution) as a viable alternative to the current state of
the Western world, sorry though it may be. Or as Tharpe sums
up Percy's (and the reader's) sense of identification with
this character: "Percy does not reject Lancelot. He writes
Lancelot's tirade. He rejects Lancelot's plan" (102). A
brief examination of the normative mode of Lance's verbal
behavior, with the aid of the Cooperative Principle, will
help to distinguish precisely where Percy draws the line
between acceptance and rejection of his protagonist.

As with our investigation of Tom More's verbal
behavior, a good place to start here is the maxim of
Quality, because Lance has some very clearly stated opinions
concerning the "moral wasteland" (Tharpe 88) in which he
lives. And he most definitely believes in the accuracy of
his opinions. He is willing, after all, to commit murder on
the basis of their accuracy. So, we should look at some of
his statements concerning the world around him, and then
examine this world for evidence to support his claims.

When we hear Lance's diagnoses of his world's
condition, we are reminded of many of Tom More's statements
concerning the ill health of his world; both characters are
millenialists at heart who believe that the Western world
has come to the end of its line--is played out, used up,
morally and spiritually bankrupt. Both believe that, as a
result of the sorry state of the world, some sort of global

catastrophe is imminent. Lance sums up his vision of the

Last Days in a general theory of human history, which he

outlines for his priest/friend auditor Percival:

> You're curious. I see I haven't told you my sexual
> theory of history? You smile. No, I'm serious. It
> applies both to the individual and mankind.
> First there was a Romantic Period when one "fell
> in love."
> Next follows a sexual period such as we live in
> now where men and women cohabit as indiscriminately as
> in a baboon colony--or in a soap opera.
> Next follows catastrophe of some sort. I can feel
> it in my bones. Perhaps it has already happened. Has
> it? Have you noticed anything unusual on the "outside"?
> I've noticed that the doctors and guards and attendants
> here who are supposed to be healthy--we're the sick
> ones--seem depressed, anxious, gloomy, as if something
> awful had already happened. Has it?
> Catastrophe then--yes, I am sure of it--whether it
> has happened or not; whether by war, bomb, fire, or
> just decline and fall. Most people will die or exist as
> the living dead. Everything will go back to the desert.
> (35-6)

Like Tom More, Lance is so sure that a catastrophe is coming

that the only question in his mind is whether or not it has

already occurred. Much later in the novel, he zeroes in on

the U.S.A. as the center of all the corruption and

degradation of the festering Western world:

> Washington, the country, is down the drain.
> Everyone knows it. The people have lost it to the
> politicians, bureaucrats, drunk Congressmen, lying
> Presidents, White House preachers, C.I.A., F.B.I.,
> Mafia, Pentagon, pornographers, muggers, buggers,
> bribers, bribe takers, rich crooked cowboys, sclerotic
> Southerners, rich crooked Yankees, dirty books, dirty
> movies, dirty plays, dirty talk shows, dirty soap
> operas, fags, lesbians, abortionists, Jesus shouters,
> anti-Jesus shouters, dying cities, dying schools,
> courses in how to fuck schoolchildren. (220)

The language here is perhaps a bit more vituperative than Tom More's, but Lance's diagnosis of his country's spiritual illness is virtually identical to More's—a diagnosis which proved to be pretty accurate on the whole. Unfortunately, we are not provided with the kind of external corroborating evidence that we are provided with in <u>Love in the Ruins</u>, with which we might judge the accuracy of Lance's sexual theory of human history, and the evaluation of modern Western culture that is based on it. Lance's confinement to a cell throughout the novel restricts the reader's immediate view of the world outside the cell to what he can see through a single narrow window. Even this tiny slice of Lance's outside world, however, hints at the sort of moral degeneracy that he feels permeates Western culture, for in addition to a cemetery it contains "two homosexuals holding hands," a coed-driven Volkswagen sporting a bumper sticker that reads "IF IT FEELS GOOD DO IT," and an adult cinema that plays such pictures as "The 69ers" and "Deep Throat." While these items are, indeed, in keeping with Lance's theory of human history, they are not sufficient by themselves to either prove or disprove such a theory. And even though we the readers recognize much of what he says as an accurate description of our own world outside the novel, we must resist the temptation to use this sense of recognition as the basis for a judgement of the accuracy of

his description of the fictional world _inside_ the novel. We

must confine our search for evidence of the accuracy of his

evaluation of modern culture to the representative sampling

of this culture assembled at Belle Isle exactly one year

before the time of his narration of the violent events that

took place there.

The common thread running throughout Lance's narration

of the myriad ills of the modern world is a pervasive sense

of this world's moral degeneracy. As Lance explains to

Percival:

> What I can't stand is the way things are now.
> Furthermore, I will not stand for it.
> Stand for what, you ask? Well, for that, to give
> an insignificant example. What you're looking at. You
> see the movie poster across the street? _The 69ers_? Man
> and woman yin-yanged, fellatioed, cunnilinged on the
> corner of Felicity and Annunciation Streets? What would
> I do about it? Quite simply it would be removed.   (155)

The sturdy moral fiber that made this country great has

slowly but surely eroded to the the point where its complete

dissolution is inevitable. The movie poster is a symbol for

this erosion, pornography being as it is the "gospel" for a

world in which the "secret of life is violence and rape"

(224). When we look at the cross section of humanity

assembled at Belle Isle--Margot and Lucy (Lance's wife and

daughter); Bob Merlin and Janos Jacoby (Hollywood movie

directors); and Troy Dana and Raine Robinette (movie stars),

we have little reason to wonder how Lance has arrived at

some of his conclusions. At the time described in Lance's
narration, Margot was just ending a lengthy affair with
Merlin (out of which was born Siobhan, the daughter that
Lance thought was his own), and beginning an affair with
Janos Jacoby. Lucy, Lance's daughter from his previous
marriage, had become starstruck with Dana and Raine and
entered into a _menage a trois_ affair with them. Lance, who
had kept himself heavily sedated with alcohol for the last
several years, sobered up at the accidental discovery of
Siobhan's true parentage, and set out on his quest for the
"Unholy Grail" (138). These events, soap opera-like as they
are, epitomize the sort of moral degeneracy that Lance sees
as pervasive in modern society, and whether or not they are
truly representative of modern society at large, they are
sufficiently degenerate to warrant a certain amount of moral
outrage on his part. Regardless of how accurate is his
inductive application of this outrage to modern society as a
whole, his interpretation of these events as indicative of
moral decay is clearly accurate enough to satisfy the maxim
of Quality (submaxim B: Do not say that for which you lack
adequate evidence).

Accompanying this decay of moral fiber is, as we have
seen throughout Percy's work, a devaluation of language--a
linguistic relativism to match the moral one. Rampant among
these fashionable people is an empty language the likes of
which it is difficult to find in any other Percy novel.

Various characters in all of Percy's novels engage in banal
conversation, but so completely vacuous is the talk of
Margot and company that the speakers themselves cannot bear
to pay attention to the meaningless drivel that streams from
their mouths. Raine, for instance, is involved in a
California cult called Ideo-Personal-Dynamics, which is
"more scientific than astrology, being based not merely on
the influence of the stars but on evidence of magnetic
fields surrounding people." She explains to Lance the
national, even global possibilities of I.P.D., as she calls
it:

> "Don't you see the possibilities?"
> "Possibilities?"
> "For the future, for mankind, for preventing
> wars."
> "How's that?"
> "Everyone could have his ideogram, which is a
> scientific reading of his magnetic field. Some
> ideograms are clearly stronger than others or
> incompatible with others. If the President of the
> United States has a weak ideogram, it would be stupid
> to send him to a summit meeting. It's the ultimate
> weapon against Communism." (111-12)

This is the same sort of immanence-parading-as-transcendence
that we observed in The Moviegoer, but here it is so
exremely banal that Raine herself does not pay attention to
what she is saying: "The trouble was that even when she was
on this, her favorite subject, her voice went flat and
trailed off. Her eyes were steady but unfocused. I had the
feeling that she wasn't listening to herself" (113). Lance

has the same feeling when listening to other members of the
movie company, even his own wife Margot, speak pseudo-
transcendently of cinema--"'cinematographic language,' 'the
semiotics of film,' 'Griffith as the master of denotative
language,' 'Metz as the only critic who understands the
connotative film;' and so forth" (110-11). Janos Jacoby
drones on about such things "with a slight gap of
inattention even to himself as if he weren't listening to
his voice" (166). Margot explains to Lance her decision to
go to England to play Nora in A Doll's House ("there are
other me's. One grows"), but even in the midst of this
momentous revelation, "She was not too attentive" (207). As
prone as these actors are to banal conversation, they are
not the only inhabitants of Belle Isle who find it difficult
to listen to themselves. Tex Reilly, Lance's father-in-law
who "made a million dollars in mud" and then "moved to New
Orleans to make still more in offshore rigs" (71), warns
Lance, as he has done on numerous occasions before, about
the necessity of cementing in an old gas well under Belle
Isle, but there is no urgency in his warning--to him it is
just noise: "On he went, poking me like poking Siobhan,
poking and not listening, not even listening to himself"
(54).

The inhabitants of Belle Isle are truly hollow men.
Like Raine, their "depths were vacant" (111). Their verbal
behavior, of course, reflects this vacancy, and leads Lance

to another inductive conclusion about the modern world, or more specifically about language in the modern world: "To make conversation in the old tongue, the old worn-out language. It can't be done" (85). Lance is not the first of Percy's protagonists to come to the conclusion that language is worn out, but he has perhaps the most impressive body of evidence to date upon which to base this conclusion. So worn out, and consequently relativistic, is the language of his world that the normative dimension of verbal behavior here is virtually non-existent. A bit of table talk will illustrate:

> One night at supper during a lull in conversation Lucy, my daughter, who had said little or nothing and, feeling the accumulating necessity of saying something suitable, saw her chance and piped up, frowning and ducking her dark brown head and saying it seriously: "It just occurred to me last night: here I am an adult human being, a person, and I have never seen my own cervix." (182)

Common sense tells us that Lucy's remark is ridiculous, and the Cooperative Principle tells us that it is ridiculous because it flagrantly violates the maxim of Relation: "Be relevant." Under normal circumstances, in a world that still recognized the normative dimension of verbal behavior, Lucy's violation of the Cooperative Principle would be viewed as inappropriate behavior and thus a cause for embarrassment. Indeed Lance, who still recognizes the normative dimension of language, sees the remark as

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inappropriate, and feels a great deal of embarrassment for his daughter: "There was a silence. I found myself worrying more about her worrying about her halting conversational entry than about her not seeing her cervix."

His worry is groundless, however, for in a world without a normative dimension it is impossible to say anything abnormal, or inappropriate, as both Lucy and Lance discover:

> But Raine and Dana nodded thoughtfully and even, I could see, with a certain courtesy and kindliness as if to encourage her timid foray into their lively talk. Raine put her arm around Lucy, gave her a hug, and said to me:
> "Think of it! A mature woman who has never even seen her own cervix!"
> I thought about it. (182)

Once again, the behavior of a few shallow, amoral people at Belle Isle might not be sufficient grounds for drawing a conclusion about the behavior of society as a whole. But based upon the evidence that he, and consequently we, have at hand, his conclusion that these people's verbal behavior is as empty and meaningless as their sexual behavior, that any sort of normative structure governing either language or sex is virtually non-existent, is the only logical conclusion that he can draw. After looking at, and listening to, the world in which he has lived, we find ourselves completely convinced of the truth of what he says about it.

Regarding the inhabitants of Belle Isle, at least, he in no way violates the maxim of Quality.

Moreover, in the very last pages of the novel we find evidence that even Lance's more generalized conclusions about modern society are accurate. This evidence comes in the form of a single word, but this word is sufficient to provide independent verification of Lance's assertion that the modern world is in a bad way. After remaining silent throughout the entire novel, Lance's auditor/friend finally pipes up in response to a series of Lance's questions about the significance of what he has been saying throughout the past week. After the two agree on the need for a "new beginning" of some sort, and that Lance's and Percival's plans for such a beginning are the only viable, though mutually exclusive, options, Lance concludes:

> All we can agree on is that it will not be their way. Out there.
> Yes.   (257)

Percival, whose sanity we have no reason to doubt, agrees with Lance that "their way," whatever that way may be, is unacceptable. Lance finds the age in which he lives intolerable, and so does Percival.

So, as far as the maxim of Quality is concerned, Lance's verbal behavior complies with the Cooperative Principle. Based upon this maxim alone, we have no choice but to reluctantly declare him "sane," as do the

psychiatrists at the Center for Aberrant Behavior.
Undeniably, he has murdered his wife and several other
people, and is planning a "Third Revolution" which will
produce a "new order" based, not "on Catholicism or
Communism or fascism or liberalism or capitalism or any ism
at all, but simply on that stern rectitude valued by the new
breed and marked by the violence which will attend its
breach" (157-8). The apocalyptic nature of his plans is
evident in his prophecy concerning the immediate future:

> This country is going to turn into a desert and it
> won't be a bad thing. Thirst and hunger are better than
> jungle rot. We will begin in the Wilderness where Lee
> lost. Deserts are clean places. Corpses turn quickly
> into simple pure chemicals.   (158)

Not content to let this process take its natural course,
Lance intends to help it along: "We shall not wait for it to
fester and rot any longer. We will kill it" (160). As
disturbing as these plans for the future sound to us, based
solely upon what we have seen so far we cannot simply
dismiss them as the ravings of a lunatic, which is what
accounts in large part for the unsettling effect of the
novel. Percy wants us, in spite of everything our moral and
ethical sensibilities tell us is right, to identify with
this sociopathic killer. As abhorrent as his solution to
the problem strikes us, we are forced to conclude that he
does have a good grasp of the problem itself.

Beyond this point, however, Percy withdraws from his protagonist, taking the perceptive reader with him. While Lance is sane enough to accurately perceive and describe a serious problem in modern culture, he exhibits in his verbal behavior sufficient mental impairment to disqualify his proposed remedy to the problem as being in any way representative of Percy's own beliefs. The signs of this mental impairment come in the form of subtle, but detectable, violations of the maxims of Quantity and Manner.

Given Percy's Catholicism, it is difficult not to view Lance's long narration to his priest/friend Percival as confessional in nature. Indeed, the entire novel can be viewed as one long confession (Hobson 93, Tharpe 88). By its very definition, a confession of this kind would be expected to include, in addition to the more quotidian transgressions such as swearing or coveting a neighbor's possessions, an account of those actions which the Church considers to be the most gravely sinful in nature. Certainly murder ranks rather highly on that list. Thus, in Lance's confession we should expect to hear a detailed account of his homicidal actions of that night a year ago. Indeed, Lance gives every indication that such an account is forthcoming. He tells Percival: "I've discovered that I can talk to you and get closer to _it_, the secret I know yet don't know. So I'll start behind it and work up to it, or I'll start ahead of it

and work back" (62), and later: "I have to tell you what
happened in my own way--so I can know what happened. I won't
know for sure until I say it" (106). In terms of the maxim
of Quantity (1: Make your contribution as informative as is
required [for the current purposes of the exchange]), Lance
must give a detailed account of the murders themselves
because such an account is the "current purpose" of this
particular exchange (Lance's confession). After circling
around these events for a majority of the novel, however,
casting backward to his first meeting with Margot, then
forward to his planned Revolution, and so forth, he suddenly
questions the necessity of discussing them:

> What do you mean? Do you mean what happened at
> Belle Isle?
> That's in the past. I don't see what difference it
> makes.
> You want to know what happened?
> Hm. It's hard to remember. Jesus, let me think. My
> head aches. I feel lousy. Let me lie down for a while.
> You don't look so hot either. You're pale as a ghost.
> Come back tomorrow. (160)

And the next day:

> Christ, what were we talking about? Oh yes,
> Percival, you wanted to know what happened? Jesus, what
> difference does it make? It is the future that matters.
> Yes, you're right. I did say there was something that
> still bothered me. What? Sin? The uncertainty that
> there is such a thing? I don't remember. Anyhow, it
> doesn't seem very interesting.   (163)

After nearly two hundred pages worth of preface, Lance
decides that the main event is not worth the trouble of

telling. Percival pushes him onward, however, but when Lance gets to the actual killing he once again evades it:

> The rest of it? What? Oh. Yes. Well, I'll be brief. Do you mind if I summarize? There is no pleasure in dwelling on it. Anyway it happened almost as an afterthought. The whole business took no more than fifteen minutes. (236)

The "whole business" to which he refers involved the deaths of at least four people, yet he dispenses of it with a mere summary of highlights, thus failing to provide all the information that is required of him in this exchange and violating the maxim of Quantity. And, since he has absolutely nothing to gain from intentionally annoying Percival, the one person he feels he can talk to, we can assume that the violation is unintentional.

Unintentional violations of the Cooperative Principle being, as they are, signs of "some temporary or permanent perceptual limitation such as psychological trauma, obsession, insanity, or delirium" (Pratt 182), Lance here displays a definite chink in his verbal/psychological armor. It takes no great psychologist to see that he is clearly repressing these violent events, about which his conscience is much less at rest than he lets on. This violation of the Cooperative Principle, subtle though it may be, and the repression that it indicates, place some important distance between Percy and his protagonist.

An even greater distance is placed between Percy and
Lancelot by Lancelot's recurrent violation of the maxim of
Manner. In _Love in the Ruins_, Tom More's violations of the
maxim of Manner (e.g. "Eins upon a oncy") were amusing, and
evidenced a mild, more or less harmless dislocation on the
speaker's part. In _Lancelot_, such violations are much less
amusing and indicate a much deeper disturbance. In several
instances throughout the novel, Lance violates the maxim of
Manner (sub-maxim D: Be orderly) with an inconsistency of
tone, oscillating between cold objectivity and violent,
emotional subjectivity, that indicates a fundamental split
in his psyche. It is this split that finally allows us to
see that, while Percy "does not reject Lancelot" (Tharpe
102), neither does he condone his past actions or future
plans.

Throughout the greater part of his narrative Lance
exhibits a detached, totally unemotional objectivity that is
quite shocking considering the extremely personal and
gruesomely violent nature of the story he tells. Time and
again we are amazed at the apparent emotional distance
between Lance and the events he describes. Early in the
novel he tries to explain to Percival his feelings upon
discovering his wife's infidelity:

> First, you must understand that the usual emotions
> which one might consider appropriate--shock, anger,
> shame--do not apply. True, there is a kind of dread at
> the discovery but there is also a curious sense of

> expectancy, a secret sweetness at the core of the
> dread.   (41)

We are doubly appalled here, first by the distance from which Lance is able to view his own emotions, and second by the nature of the emotions he views from this distance, or, more accurately, by their non-existence. The same tone prevails when Lance describes the actual act of adultery that led him to murder:

> But why? Why did it become the most important, the sole obsession of my very life, to determine whether or not Margot slept with Merlin when in fact I knew she had, or at least with somebody not me? You tell me, you being the doctor scientist and soul expert as well, merchant of guilt and getting rid of it and sorting out sins yet knowing as well as I that it, her fornication, anybody's fornication, amounts to no more than molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves--no different in kind from that housefly scrubbing his wings under my hair.   (89)

Not only is he capable of viewing the act of sexual intercourse itself with the detached objectivity of a scientist ("molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves"), but he observes violence which ensues from this act from a posture of objectivity as well:

> It is because the past, any past, is intolerable, not because it is violent or terrible or any such thing, but just because it is so goddamn banal and feckless and useless. And violence is the most banal and boring of all. It is horrible not because it is bloody but because it is meaningless. It does not signify.   (105)

Lance acknowledges here that violence in general is "horrible," but only because it is so "meaningless" as to be actually "banal and boring." Like sexual intercourse, a violent act such as his slashing Jacoby's throat involves nothing more significant than an encounter of molecules with molecules: "All it came down to was steel molecules entering skin molecules, artery molecules, blood cells" (254).

Given such a molecular view of human experience, it is no wonder that, as he finally admits to Percival, Lance feels "a certain coldness" in his life. From his objective perspective of the world, a plan to use motion-activated video cameras to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt his wife's infidelity is described by him as an attempt to discover precisely "Who moved, toward whom, with whom" (145). Lance's cold objectivity reigns even at the moment of the bloodiest event described in the novel--Jacoby's murder. With a hurricane raging outside the walls of Belle Isle, Lance discovers, in the flickering illumination of almost constant lightning, Margot and Jacoby engaged in sexual intercourse. Summoning the strength that made him a great college football player, Lance wraps his arms around the intertwined pair and begins to squeeze the life out of them. Rather than cursing them, however, or weeping in agony over this direct confrontation with his wife's infidelity, Lance's thoughts and words at this moment exhibit the same tone of objectivity as the majority of his narrative:

> It is possible that I said something aloud. I
> said: "How strange it is that there are no longer any
> great historical events." In fact, that was what I was
> musing over, that it seemed of no great moment whether
> I squeezed them or did not squeeze them.
> "How strange it is that there are no longer any
> great historical events," I said.
> At any rate, it is certain that after a while
> Janos gasped, "You're not killing me, you're killing
> her."
> "That's true," I said and let go.   (240)

From start to finish, then, whether he is discussing the

most trivial or the most momentous events, the prevailing

tone of Lance's narrative remains one of cold objectivity.

Were this tone completely uniform, unrelieved by any

traces whatsoever of emotion, we might simply say that Lance

has a flawed sense of his placement vis-a-vis the world

(Postulate 1.523), seeing himself as a transcendent being

orbiting life on earth rather than as an immanent being

residing within it. Such an assertion might provide grounds

for establishing a spiritual problem in Lance's life, but it

would provide no grounds, one way or another, for making an

assessment of his psychological condition. Nor would it help

to explain the shockingly violent actions, immanent in their

retributive nature, that this transcendent being engaged in

at Belle Isle a year ago.

The tone of Lance's narrative is not uniformly

objective and unemotional, however, but on several

occasions, particularly toward the end of the novel,

actually erupts into quite violent emotion, conveyed in a

language laced with profanity and dripping with anger and

sarcasm. While explaining to Percival that the Catholic

Church provides no alternative to the intolerable modern

age because it has become just another "part of the age," he

suddenly unleashes a surprising burst of violent language:

> I'll take war rather than what this age calls love.
> Which is a better world, this cocksucking cuntlapping
> assholelicking fornicating Happyland U.S.A., or a Roman
> legion under Marcus Aurelius Antoninus? Which is worse,
> to die with T.J. Jackson at Chancellorsville or live
> with Johnny Carson in Burbank?   (157-8)

A short time later he accuses Percival's God of playing a

dirty, irremediable trick on innocent and unsuspecting

teenagers, and the Church of not being equipped to handle

the consequences of this trick:

> One discovers there is a little secret that God didn't
> let us in on. One discovers your Christ never did tell
> us about it. Yet God himself so arranged it that you
> wake up one fine morning with a great thundering
> hard-on and wanting nothing more in life than a sweet
> hot cunt to put it in, drive some girl, any girl, into
> the ground, and where is the innocence of that? Is that
> part of the innocence? If so, he should have said so.
> From child to assailant through no doing of one's
> own--is that God's plan for us? Damn you and your God.
> Between the two of you, you should have got it straight
> and had it one way or the other. Either it's good or
> it's bad, but whichever it is, goddamn say so. Only you
> don't. You fuck off somewhere in between. You want to
> have it both ways: good, but--bad only if--and so
> forth. Well, you fucked up good and proper, fucked us
> all up, for sure fucked me up.   (176)

The Church's inability to address this problem in any

meaningful way has been in large part responsible for the

current moral wasteland and sexual inferno that America has

become:

> I won't have it your way and I won't have it their way,
> the new way. A generation stoned and pussy free and
> devalued, pricks after pussy, pricks after pricks,
> pussy after pussy. But most of all pussy after pricks.
> Christ what a country! A nation of 100 million
> voracious cunts. I will not have my son or daughter
> grow up in such a world. (177)

The coupling of violence and sex in these emotional

outbursts is completely in keeping with his discovery of

"the monstrous truth lying at the very center of life:"

> Ah, sweet mystery of life indeed, indeed yes,
> exactly, yes indeed that is what it is: to be rammed,
> jammed, stuck, stabbed, pinned, impaled, run through,
> in a word:
> Raped. (223)

And the emotional outbursts themselves are in keeping with

the intensely personal and violent nature of the events he

dscribes. They are not in keeping, however, with the

prevailing tone of the narrative as a whole. Within the

generally homogenous tone of objectivity of Lance's

narrative, these moments of intense subjectivity have a

markedly different texture, giving the narration as a whole

a somewhat lumpy quality. This lumpiness can be explained in

terms of the Cooperative Principle as a violation of the

maxim of Manner (sub-maxim D: Be orderly). Within the

unemotional framework that surrounds them, these emotional

displays are distinctly disorderly conduct, and thus violate

the maxim of Manner. Furthermore, these violations of the maxim of Manner are clearly unintentional, because Lance so consistently tries to come across to Percival as a sober, rational, totally objective observer of life (e.g. "Yet it dawned on me that suddenly, the solution is as clear and simple as an arithmetic problem. As a matter of fact, that is what it is: a matter of logic as simple as two plus two" 255). Therefore, we can interpret his verbal behavior as indicative of some sort of impairment of his mental faculties.

Within Lance's narration, then, we can hear two distinct voices--an objective one and a subjective one, what Oliver has called the equivocal and the univocal voices (8). Now the mere presence of these two voices within a single narrative, or within a single psyche, is not intrinsically abnormal. The spontaneous, involuntary intrusion of one voice into the other is, however, and indicates an unsuccessful attempt on the speaker's part to suppress a seething roiling mass of emotions that lurks just below the level of full consciousness. This internecine struggle, of course, manifests itelf in Lance's violation of the maxim of Manner which, along with his violation of the maxim of Quantity, invalidates much, but not all, of what he says. So, even though the Center for Aberrant Behavior may find Lance "psychiatrically fit and legally innocent" (249), we have enough evidence to conclude that there is some definite

mental impairment there--enough, at least, to disqualify him as Percy's unconditional spokesman. We can conclude, along with Tharpe, that "Percy does not reject Lancelot....He rejects Lancelot's plan" (102). Percy is one hundred percent behind Lancelot in the criticisms that he levels at the age in which he lives, but he in no way supports his proposed solution to the myriad problems of his age. His support, of course, goes behind the Christian solution represented by Percival. Lance has told his auditor, "There is no other way than yours or mine, true?" to which Percival responds simply "Yes." The reader clearly sees the unacceptability of Lance's plan, and Lance himself senses a flaw in all of his logic ("But there is one thing...There is a coldness...You know the feeling of numbness and coldness, no, not a feeling, but a lack of feeling, that I spoke of during the events at Belle Isle" 253). So our attention, along with Lance's, shifts to Percival in order to hear his solution to the age's problems:

> Very well. I've finished. Is there anything you wish to tell me before you leave?
> Yes.   (257)

Even though we can infer, based upon the theological bases of Percy's other novels, the general drift of what Percival wishes to tell Lance, and we can assume, based upon Lance's stated willingness to listen to Percival, that he will attend to what he has to say, we are not actually allowed to

hear Percival's message to Lance. As in his other novels, Percy stops just short of including the Christian message within the actual text of Lancelot because of his abiding mistrust of language, in its present "worn-out" form, to adequately convey concepts as profound and timeless as those at the heart of Christianity.

A quasi-romantic subplot in the novel specifically focuses on this worn out-ness of language, and shows Percy groping to find some way of freshening it up. In the room next door to Lance's cell is a woman named Anna who "was gang-raped by some sailors in the Quarter, forced to commit unnatural acts many times, then beaten up and thrown onto the batture" (12). Even though he has never seen Anna, and hears that she refuses to speak to anyone, Lance believes he is "falling in love" with her, and even plans to make her a part of his Third Revolution. As a "survivor of the catastrophe and the death of old worlds" (37) whose "defilement restores her to a kind of innocence" (12), Lance sees her as a possible "prototype of the New Woman" for the new order that will follow his Revolution. Because of her potential importance to the Revolution, Lance feels he must find some way of communicating with her, despite her refusal to talk. So, he tries tapping on the wall. At first, she ignores him, but eventually begins to respond by mimicking his knocking patterns: "She just repeats the one knock, two knocks" (84). Lance is encouraged that this is a

"communication of sorts," but he realizes that this type of simple repetition can only get them so far: "She has not yet caught on that we might invent a new language" (84). Using such rudimentary exchanges as taps on a wall, the two of them might come up with a fresh new way of conversing that will replace "the old tongue, the old worn-out language" (85). Then a man and a woman might have a simple, unambiguous relationship such as is currently impossible. A man would be able "to come close but keep a little distance between us, to ask the simplest questions in a new language—How are you—just to hear the sound of her voice, to touch the tips of her fingers" (86).

When Lance finally abandons his wall-tapping and initiates actual verbal communication with Anna, his description of the way she uses language closely resembles his description of the new, simplified, unambiguous language he seeks to establish:

> I went to see Anna this morning. We spoke. She sat in a chair. She's going to be all right. She speaks slowly and in a monotone, choosing her words carefully like someone recovering from a stroke.   (218)

Whatever potential her verbal behavior shows for being a model for Lance's new language, however, goes unrealized within the scope of this novel. Not long after this first conversation, Lance manages to offend Anna, presumably in the old language, by telling her his theory that because she

has suffered, and survived, "the worst violation a woman can
suffer, rape at the hands of several men, forced fellatio,
and so on," she qualifies to be his "new Eve" (251). Not
surprisingly, Lance's theory does not go over very well
with Anna:

> "Are you suggesting," she said to me, "that I, myself,
> me, my person, can be violated by a man? You goddamn
> men. Don't you know that there are more important
> things in this world" Next you'll be telling me that
> despite myself I liked it." (251)

Even though Lance finds out from Percival that Anna has put
Lance's remarks behind her and still plans to join him in
Virginia where she and he and Siobhan will "begin a new
life," nothing more is said about the new language which
will attend this new life.

Percy is clearly searching here for a new language
capable of expressing the currently inexpressible. He is
perhaps tired of reaching a point in each of his novels
beyond which, as he says in The Moviegoer, "It is impossible
to say." And even though he does not quite find what he is
looking for in Lancelot, he is at least one step closer to
it than he was in his previous novels. It will take only one
more novel, The Second Coming, for him to find the new
language he is looking for, and the speaker of that
language, Allison Hunnicutt Huger, will appropriately be a
patient just like Anna, and Lancelot, and Tom More.

Love in the Ruins demonstrates Percy's growing awareness of the normative dimension of language, particularly in relation to a speaker's apparent sanity or insanity. Tom More certainly has his problems in this area, and Percy uses his occasional forays to the outer reaches of the normative dimension of language to mark the depth and scope of his problems, which do not finally prove serious enough to disqualify his observations of the world around him as worthy of our attention. Like his verbal behavior, More's overt physical behavior, though quirky, is more or less harmless to the people around him. So, in Love in the Ruins we have an amusing story about a man who speaks and acts a little funny, but who points out even funnier things about the world around him, that make us wince a bit with their familiarity to us, even while we laugh at them.

Our winces turn to shudders in Lancelot, however, as Percy approaches his subject from an entirely different angle. The protagonist's overt physical behavior is far more "insane" in appearance, and harmful to the people around him, than is More's, but his verbal behavior appears disturbingly sane. And even though we can finally distinguish normative deviations in his verbal behavior, there is nothing at all funny about them. What Percy has done in these two novels is to create two distinct portraits, one shaded a little more darkly than the other, of the same world, which is in fact morally and spiritually

bankrupt, just as the narrator/protagonists of these two
novels describe them to be. Both narrator/protagonists view
this world from a stance of alienation, and both seek to
remedy this alienation, one through healing and one through
killing. Neither is successful. The protagonists of Percy's
next novel are similarly alienated, but as The Second
Coming, which Percy has called "the first unalienated novel
since War and Peace" (Lawson and Kramer 235), unfolds, Will
Barrett and Allison Huger together achieve an integration
that has eluded every Percy protagonist up to this point.
And it is Percy's awareness of the normative dimension of
language that makes this integration possible.

CHAPTER IV

"THE FIRST EDENIC WORLD OF THE SIGN USER":

THE SECOND COMING

Even though he would go on to write one more novel

after it, The Second Coming reads like it could, or perhaps

should, be Percy's last novel. Tharpe, writing about The

Second Coming long before the publication of Percy's final

novel The Thanatos Syndrome, speculated that Will Barrett's

"beautiful, simple words" on the last page "end the novel

and what may be Percy's work" (120). Even knowing of the

existence of The Thanatos Syndrome it is difficult for us

not to feel a sense of completion in the work--a tying up of

ends that have been hanging loose since The Moviegoer. Like

Allen, we "experience a sense of closure at the end of The

Second Coming, a feeling of the rounding off of an

imaginative world" (xii). Regarding the precise nature of

the loose ends tied up in it, Pearson has called the novel

"the philosophical love story toward which the first four

novels were building" (91), and Tharpe has similarly

commented that it "brings to a conclusion in unity the

puzzling matter of love that Percy began to study implicitly

in his first novel" (107).

Comments such as these indicate the undeniable importance of <u>The Second Coming</u> within the overall canon of Percy's fiction, but as a work of art the novel is not without its flaws. Many critics have rather justly faulted Percy for the way he handles the May-September love affair between Allie Huger and Will Barrett. Ralph Wood, for instance, sees the novel as marred by an "unfortunate romanticism" (1126), and criticizes Percy for exhibiting "a romantic hopefulness almost sloppily sentimental" (1122). While other critics, such as Hobson and Pearson, do not share Wood's negative opinion of this aspect of the novel, and even go so far as to single out for praise the "refreshing lack of sentimentality in the love scenes" (Hobson, "A Sign..." 56), all but the most sentimental readers have a hard time not being irritated by some of the more mawkish details of the relationship--the eyebrow smoothing and blackhead squeezing and such. This tendency of Percy's to lapse into excessive sentimentality in his treatment of Allie's and Will's romance, in addition to being merely irritating, actually somewhat undermines an otherwise completely satisfying resolution to the semiotic theme of the novel. In some of the most semiotically important scenes Allie's and Will's dialogue begins to sound like that of any other newly-in-love couple, rather than the fresh new language that makes their relationship possible in the first place. Another annoying aspect of the

novel is the rather obtrusive manner in which Percy injects
his philosophical concerns into the story line. Always a
little inclined to prosiness, Percy here gets his more
abstract notions into the novel through "the hero's long
interior monologues, which slow down the action" (Hobson,
Understanding... 109).

A testimony to the novel's overall strength is the fact
that, despite these flaws in its parts, the novel as a whole
has generally received favorable critical response. Pearson
sees The Second Coming as "one of Percy's most powerful and
affirmative metaphors for the nature of love" (99), and
Kennedy calls it "arguably Percy's best" (104). The single
most important factor in allowing the novel to rise above
its amply evident flaws is the sense of closure mentioned
earlier. For the first time in his career, Percy is able to
actually resolve the major conflicts of a novel within the
covers of the book itself. In each of his novels, Percy has
examined some of the major problems confronting man in the
modern world: alienation, moral and spiritual bankruptcy,
the devaluation of language that accompanies this
bankruptcy, and the ambiguous nature of" sanity" in a world
plagued by such problems. The protagonists respond to these
problems, usually ineffectually, and end up poised on the
brink of some sort of resolution, but not actually in
possession of it. We the readers then find ourselves as
frustrated Moseses on Binx's and Will's and Tom's and

Lance's Mt. Pisgah, overlooking a Promised Land we never reach. This irresolution, annoying as it may be, is not unintentional on Percy's part, and therefore cannot be considered a flaw in his work. Quite the contrary, it represents a courageous honesty on Percy's part—a commitment to portraying the world as it really is, and avoiding easy, inauthentic solutions to its problems. He would rather admit that, given the conditions that he has established within the world of the novel, such solutions as exist are inarticulable—they are "impossible to say."

In *The Second Coming*, Percy finally discovers a way to break through this barrier of inarticulation—to carry his protagonist, and reader, on into the Promised Land. Hobson has commented on this development:

> The endings of the first four novels are deliberately ambiguous because Percy himself didn't know whether his heroes would or could come to good endings. But *The Second Coming* has an unequivocal and satisfying ending. ("A Sign..." 56)

Percy himself was just as pleasantly surprised as his critics with the "happy ending" (Lawson and Kramer 184) of *The Second Coming*:

> I really surprised myself because I'd never done it before. This man actually figured out what to do with his life. He figured out a way to live, to love, and to work. My novels have been criticized—maybe justifiably—by saying that they nearly all end ambiguously: you never know what happened to Binx Bolling; it's sort of up in the air. He makes a separate peace and not a very good peace; it's

> compromised...But in this case I surprised myself and I
> was pleased that this man actually figured out that he
> could work with people, actually within the system.
> (Lawson and Kramer 234)

Percy's surprise at finding a way for his protagonist to
work with people actually within the system is genuine and
significant, for it is this very issue, man's relationship
with his fellow man and with the system at large, that has
been so problematical to his attempts to reach a "satisfying
ending" in his novels. Modern society is morally and
spiritually bankrupt. Most members of this society are
blissfully unaware of its bankruptcy, and lead lives of
happy, though empty, integration. Percy's protagonists,
though, are on to this bankruptcy and spend the greater part
of their novels trying to overcome it. Unfortunately, their
knowledge of society's bankruptcy, and of society's
ignorance of its own bankruptcy, inevitably alienates them
from this society. Now Percy does not advocate alienation in
and of itself, but in his first four novels it is the price
one must pay if he wishes to escape society's bankruptcy. In
these novels, "Percy's characters seem whole and healthy
exactly in proportion to their estrangement from society"
(Fowler 17). Not surprisingly, such estrangement is often
interpreted by society as mental illness, so Percy's most
perceptive characters are often found in mental institutions
or on the couches of psychoanalysts. And to complicate
matters, the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of society is

accompanied by a linguistic bankruptcy, so that whatever small separate peace Percy may find for his protagonists remains inarticulable because words such as love, faith, marriage, etc., which represent viable alternatives to bankruptcy or estrangement, are so worn out with use as to be virtually meaningless. Given this Gordian knot of modern existence, then, we can appreciate the difficulty Percy had in bringing his novels to an honestly happy ending. We can also appreciate the surprise he felt at finally untying this knot in The Second Coming.

The solution to this problem with which Percy has been dealing for four novels, when it finally did come to him, did not exactly come from an unexpected source. Throughout his career as a writer both of fiction and of philosophical essays, Percy's driving interest has been language, or more specifically, language as verbal behavior. Since all of Percy's reflections proceed from the assumption that language is synonymous with humanity (i.e. that verbal behavior is the one behavior that distinguishes man from all other creatures in the animal kingdom), it is only fitting that he would find the solution to the paradoxical predicament of modern man in language itself. Indeed, The Second Coming, whatever may be its secondary concerns, is primarily about language. It is Percy's "most densely semiotic narrative" (Kennedy 105), according to Percy's definition of semiotics as "a behavioral theory of language"

(Lawson and Kramer 139). In <u>Lancelot,</u> Lance saw the necessity for a "new language" as part of his final solution to the ills of Western Culture, but aside from a little wall-tapping exchanged with his neighbor Anna, nothing ever came of his proposal. In <u>The Second Coming,</u> however, Percy actually creates a new language of the sort hinted at by Lance. His vehicle for the creation of this language is Allison Hunnicutt Huger, yet another mental patient, but one whose verbal behavior is like none we have seen in Percy's, or any other novelist's, work.

Allie Huger has deservedly received more critical attention than any other female character in Percy's fiction. She has been called "the most fully realized of all of Percy's characters" (Pearson 90), and even "a new image for Percy of the whole self" (Hobson 129). In addition to expressing such general approval for her as a character, most critical attention has focused on her unique verbal behavior. Pearson has called her "the most serious of Percy's talkers to date" (96); Fowler sees her verbal behavior as "an act of revivification" (18); and Hardy writes of her "strange, beautiful and disturbing utterances" which represent "a way of speaking that seems at times almost a reinvention of language" (191). Percy echoes such sentiments in his comments on what he was trying to accomplish with his creation of this unusual character:

> It was an experiment; I wanted to see what could be
> done working on Will Barrett with a used-up
> language--and he was very much aware it was used
> up--and Allie, using schizophrenic language, which
> incidentally I took many liberties with...it's not
> clear she's schizophrenic, and she's probably not. I
> was interested in the linguistics of it, so that I was
> trying to get her to use schizophrenic speech in the
> same discovering way of metaphor as a two-year old
> child, so that she actually rediscovers language all
> over again. In a way she does that. I wanted to see
> what could be done by using pathological speech to
> recover a certain freshness, vividness, a way of
> looking at things. (Lawson and Kramer 228-9)

As "beautiful" and "fresh" as most critics may view Allie's

verbal behavior, the vast majority her fellow men and women

view it as simply strange. And in a society like ours, which

demands convention above all else--for which, as Kisor says

of the novel's highly conventional Reverend Jack Curl,

"trendiness is next to godliness" (Lawson and Kramer 196),

strange behavior of any kind is interpreted as a sign of

mental instablity. Allie is thus ruled "insane" and placed

in a mental institution, from which she escapes before the

novel's opening, and out of which she attempts to remain

throughout the entire novel.

In his previous two novels Percy has shown an

increasing awareness of the normative dimension of verbal

behavior, and of the relationship between this dimension and

the perceived sanity of a given speaker. In The Second

Coming, this somewhat inchoate awareness crystallizes into a

highly self-conscious scheme for providing an alternative to

the moral, spiritual, and verbal bankruptcy that has

troubled him from the beginning of his writing career. In terms of the postulates outlined in "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning," Percy uses Allie's unconventional verbal behavior to explore the relationship between postulate 1.54 (normative dimension) and 1.51 ("Every sentence is uttered in a community. The community is a necessary and nontrivial parameter of triadic behavior"), or more specifically, the normative dimension of verbal behavior as a function of community. Stanley Fish has coupled the two postulates in his designation of a "speech act community" (994), in which all meaningful discourse takes place, and to whose scrutiny the verbal behavior of each member of this community is subject. A speaker, such as Tom More on an occasional basis and Allie on a consistent basis, whose verbal behavior falls outside the normative bounds of the speech act community, finds himself or herself rejected by this community as a flawed creature. As we have seen throughout Percy's work, however, it may very well be the speech act community itself that is flawed, and not the offending member. Indeed, this question of who is sane and who insane has been a central concern to Percy's previous two novels, and he asks it yet again in The Second Coming. What is so different, and so significant, about this novel, is that in it Percy actually answers the question.

Percy's method for answering this vital question, and for solving his dilemma of inarticulability, is to place

Allie Huger, with her highly unconventional verbal behavior, in the midst of the highly conventional speech act community of Linwood, North Carolina, and to explore the inevitable clash of verbal worlds that results. The members of this community can be divided into two distinct groups: disinterested, or impartial, parties (the townspeople of Linwood with whom Allie "practices" speaking immediately after escaping from the mental hospital) and interested parties (Allie's parents, her psychiatrist, and Will Barrett). The latter group can be further subdivided into Will and everybody else. By confronting these divisions of the speech act community with Allie's flagrant violations of the Cooperative Principle, and marking their differing responses to these violations, Percy is able, not only to show the bankruptcy, staleness, and meaninglessness of the verbal behavior of the speech act community at large, as he has done on numerous occasions already, but for the first time to actually fill in the other half of the normative equation as well and show his readers a type of verbal behavior that is solvent, fresh, and meaningful.

After escaping from the mental hospital, in which she was placed by her parents, Allie's first verbal encounter with the speech act community comes in the form of a few random conversations with Linwood residents shortly after her arrival in the town. Back in the midst of "normal" people after so many years away, Allie wonders whether or

not she can still talk, and decides to "practice" on various strangers passing by "her" bench ("Could one 'save a place' on a public bench? She couldn't remember"). Her first speech act experiment is with a "good-natured and dumb-looking youth" wearing a Michigan State T-shirt. Throughout the course of this conversation, Allie violates a couple of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, but is for the most part pleased and encouraged by this first attempt at "normal" verbal behavior:

> "Michigan State," she said. It came out not quite as a question and not quite as a statement. "You--?" This sounded more like a question.
> "Oh no. Linwood High. I play for the Wolves."
> "The Wolves. Oh yes." She noticed the banner. "Yes, but is that permitted?"
> "Is what permitted?"
> "The Michigan State T-shirt."
> That was a slight blunder. For a moment she had imagined there might be regulations preventing unauthorized persons from wearing university T-shirts, perhaps a semi-official regulatory agency. In the next instant she saw that this was nonsense.
> But the youth did not see anything unusual. "You can get them for three and a half from Goode's Variety." (24)

Allie's opening half-question half-statement, "Michigan State," violates the maxim of Manner (sub-maxim B: Avoid ambiguity), and her uncompleted question, "You--?" violates the maxim of Quantity (1. Make your contribution as informative as is required). She violates the maxim of Quality (1. Try to make your contribution one that is true) in her question about the permissibility of wearing a

Michigan State T-shirt, which is based on the false
assumption of the existence of "regulations preventing
unauthorized persons from wearing university T-shirts." In
each of these cases, she is aware of the violations after
they occur, and is thus prepared to make adjustments in her
verbal behavior based upon what she learns about language in
these initial experiments. In this particular conversation
she learns an important lesson about the normative dimension
of language:

> "Are the Wolves--?" She paused. She was making two
> discoveries. One was that you didn't have to talk in
> complete sentences. People didn't seem to need more
> than a word or two to make their own sense of what you
> said. The other discovery was that she could talk as
> long as she asked questions. Making a statement was
> risky. (24-5)

In her brief verbal exchange with this youth, Allie has
discovered what Bach and Harnish call the Principle of
Charity, which requires of an addressee: "Other things being
equal, construe the speaker's remarks so as to violate as
few maxims as possible" (168). In this particular situation,
the Principle of Charity requires that the youth, a total
stranger to Allie with nothing except perhaps embarrassment
to gain from interpreting her remarks as abnormal, give
Allie the benefit of the doubt and interpret her verbal
behavior as complying with the Cooperative Principle. The
Principle of Charity continues to work throughout the
remainder of their conversation:

> "If we win this one, we'll be state champs,
> single A," he said.
> "That's--" she said and stopped. But he didn't
> notice. He must have been waiting for somebody, for
> suddenly he was up and on his way.
> "Have a nice--" he said, but he turned his face
> away.
> "What?" she asked in a very clear question. "Have
> a nice what?" But he was gone.   (25)

By asking him to complete his seemingly incomplete farewell,

Allie violates the maxim of Quantity by demanding more

information than is required for the purposes of his parting

statement. "Have a nice--" is simply another way of saying

"goodbye," "so long," "see you later," etc., and thus has no

literal meaning apart from this purely formal function.

Allie, who "took words seriously to mean more or less what

they said" (34), tries to find such a literal meaning,

however, and violates the Cooperative Principle, although

the Principle of Charity, and more pressing business

elsewhere, causes him to ignore her inappropriate question.

The Principle of Charity is also evident in her next

two encounters with the townspeople of Linwood. The first

occurs as she is walking down the crowded sidewalk wondering

how it is that all these people seem to know how to veer out

of each other's way, just at the right moment to avoid a

collision: "It must be a trick, an exchange of signals which

she must learn"(32). As she is mulling over this thought, a

woman approaches who does not veer out of her way:

> They stopped, facing each other. Oh my, she
> thought, this is it. But the woman was smiling, for all

the world as if she knew her. Oh my, she thought,
perhaps she does and I am supposed to know her. (32)

As it turns out, the woman is only a missionary of some sort

looking for new recruits to her cause:

The woman, still smiling, was handing her a pamphlet.
Anxious to make up for not being able to recognize the
woman, she began to read the pamphlet then and there.
The first three sentences were: <u>Are you lonely? Do you</u>
<u>want to make a new start? Have you ever had a personal</u>
<u>encounter with our Lord and Saviour?</u> While she was
reading, the woman was saying something to her. Was she
supposed to listen or read?....
     Facing the woman, she considered the first
sentences of the pamphlet. "Yes," she said,"there is a
sense in which I would like to make a new start.
However--"
         But the woman was saying something.
         "What?"
         "I said, are you alone? Do you feel lonely?"
         She considered the questions."I am alone but I do
not feel lonely."
         "Why don't you come to a little get together we're
having tonight? I have a feeling a person like yourself
might get a lot out of it."
         She considered that question."I'm not sure what
you mean by the expression 'a person like
yourself.'Does that mean you know what I am like?"
         But the woman's eyes were no longer looking
directly at her, rather were straying past her. The
smile was still radiant but in it she felt a pressure
like the slight but firm pressure of a hostess's hand
steering one along a receiving line.
         "Won't you come?" said the woman but steering her
along with her eyes. "The address is stamped on the
back. I promise you won't regret it." Her voice was
still cordial, but the question did not sound like a
question and the promise did not sound like a promise.
(33)

During this exchange, in spite of her best efforts to abide

by the rules of normal verbal behavior, cooperatively

starting to read her pamphlet the moment she gets it, then

struggling with the dilemma over whether to listen or read,
Allie repeatedly violates the maxium of Quantity. A verbal
exchange such as this, which we have all experienced at one
time or another, customarily requires on the part of the
listener a polite tolerance and then a brief, usually false,
statement of intention to come to this or that meeting or to
become more globally aware. After her own encounter with the
woman, Allie notices this rule at work in other people's
encounters with her:

> Later, from the bench, she observed that other
> people dealt with the woman differently. Some ignored
> her, veered around her. Others took the pamphlets
> politely and went their way. Still others stopped for a
> moment and listened (but did not read), heads down and
> nodding.   (33)

But Allie, however, for whom "questions asked were to be
answered, printed words to be read" (33), accepts the
woman's questions as literal questions rather than the
purely formal, content-free utterances that they really are,
and in attempting to answer them both gives and demands more
information than is required of the exchange. The woman, so
accustomed to the conventional brush off that she usually
receives, views Allies attempt to respond to the content of
what she says as inappropriate, and inconvenient, verbal
behavior, and she slickly disposes of her with a squeeze of
the hand and a glance of the eye.

Allie is treated with a little more courtesy in a verbal exchange with a Linwood policeman, in spite of making a couple of rather glaring violations of the Cooperative Principle during this exchange. Needing someone to give her directions to the estate she has just inherited, Allie decides to ask the policeman standing a short distance from her bench, and manages to violate the maxim of Manner with the first sound that comes out of her mouth:

> Drumming her fingers on her knees, she watched the ants carrying their little green sails toward the policeman. Rising suddenly, she took half a dozen steps and tapped him on the shoulder and in the same moment (this was wrong) asked him a question. He did not give a start but turned, his head already inclined and nodding as if he were prepared for her question. Many people must ask him questions. His eyes were darting around the concrete of the sidewalk.
> "What's that?" he said, putting his great hairy ear close to her mouth.   (41)

Sub-maxim D of the maxim of Manner (Be orderly) requires a speaker, when initiating a conversation, to first get the attention of the addressee and then begin speaking. Only the briefest of intervals is usually required between these two actions, but there must be an interval--the two actions must not occur simultaneously, as in Allie's case here. Her verbal behavior in this initial exchange is distinctly disorderly. The policeman, however, accustomed to having all sorts of people ask him all sorts of questions, and having nothing to gain personally by taking her verbal behavior amiss, prepares to address her question as if no

violation has occurred: "she had asked her question too soon and in too much of a rush. Yet before she could repeat it, it seemed to her that he was backtracking and listening to her first question again"(41).

The policeman follows her to her bench, where she has her map of the area spread out, and knowingly traces out trails until he finds the location of her inherited estate. After he explains to her that the house itself burned down long ago and that nothing but an old greenhouse remains intact, Allie tells him to show her how to get there:

> "Take this trail." The watch glass glided. Then hesitated, then stopped like a Ouija in a white space."It's just the other side of the golf course."
> "How far is it from here?"
> "Three, four miles."
> "Do you mind telling me how old you are?" It would help if she knew whether he was forty-five or sixty-five. But he went on nodding and didn't reply. Her question, she saw, was inappropriate, but he let it go. (42)

Allies' query into the man's age violates the maxim of Relation (Be relevant). Their immediate conversation is about trails and greenhouses, things with which the man's age have nothing to do. Her quantum leap from one subject to the other, then, is a flagrant violation of the Cooperative Principle, and Allie herself sees it as "inappropriate," but the policeman charitably ignores the inappropriate question and goes on to warn her about the "hippies and bums" who often stay on the abandoned estate.

These amusing but harmless encounters with the
disinterested people of Linwood serve two important
functions in the semiotic theme of the novel. First, they
illustrate what an extremely complicated, rule-ridden thing
everyday language actually is. In "The Delta Factor" Percy
explains how difficult it is for the average person to
actually view language as something separate from
himself--to "focus on the magic prism through which he sees
everything else":

> In order to see it, one must either be a Martian,
> or, if an earthling, suffficiently detached, marooned,
> bemused, wounded, crazy one-eyed, and lucky enough to
> catch a glimpse of it. (MB 29)

Allie's unique outsidedness provides her with the detachment
necessary to actually see language, to focus on the magic
prism. Through her, the reader is allowed to see that,
despite his own faith in the natural stability of language,
it is actually quite dynamic and relativistic, governed by a
body of rules that are intrinsically no more universal than
those governing any of the other games that human beings
play. His daily round of conversational exchanges, then, is
something like a football game, played on an enormous field
to be sure, but controlled by regulations just as artificial
and mutable as those in effect on the gridiron. In her few
verbal experiments with the townspeople of Linwood, Allie
quickly picks up on the relativism of this language game:

> 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. For example, the
> woman's questions and commands were evidently not to be
> considered as questions and commands, then answered
> accordingly with a yes, no, or maybe, but were rather
> to be considered like the many signboards in the
> street, such as Try Good Gulf for Better Mileage, then
> either ignored or acted upon, but even if acted upon,
> not as an immediate consequence of what the words
> commanded one to do.
>   Such a code, she reflected, may not be bad.
> Indeed, it seemed to cause people less trouble than
> words. At one time she must have known the code. It
> should not be hard to catch on to.   (34)

Allie's, and from over her shoulder our, awareness of the

relativism of language prepares us to view the verbal

behavior of other members of Allie's speech act community

with a little more skepticism, and a little less reverence,

than we might view it without this awareness. We are thus

prepared to question, and ultimately to reject, the speech

act community's interpretation of Allie's aberrant verbal

behavior as inferior to its own "normal" verbal behavior.

The second semiotic function of Allie's verbal

encounters in downtown Linwood follows from her awareness of

this linguistic relativism. As we have just seen in Allie's

reflections on the success of her language experiments, she

is quite aware of the existence of a set of rules, or a

code, governing conversational exchanges between members of

the speech act community, and, more importantly, knows when

she violates one or more of the rules. The implications of

this knowledge to our assessment of the question of

intention are obvious. If she realizes that she is violating the rules, and yet continues to violate them, then, according to the guidelines established by Pratt, something more complicated than mere insanity is going on. What is actually occurring is nothing less significant than the creation of a fresh new language to counteract the deadening effect of the old worn out language in which the speech act community at large traffics.

Because of their impartiality regarding Allie, the townspeople with whom she speaks on her first day in Linwood extend the Principle of Charity to her unusual verbal behavior. Having nothing to gain by viewing her speech as abnormal, they give her the benefit of the doubt and interpret it in the most normal manner possible. The other segment of Allie's speech act community, that composed of interested parties, is not so quick to ignore her deviations from the norm. This group perceives her violations _as_ violations, recognizes that she is, indeed, breaking the rules. The different reactions on the part of the members of this group to Allie's violations further divide it into two groups, namely: those who think she is crazy, and those who do not. The former sub-group is composed of Allie's parents and her psychiatrist, Dr. Duk, and the latter is composed of Will Barrett. A large part of the novel's plot line concerns the attempt of the first sub-group to get Allie back into the mental institution and of Will Barrett to keep her out

of it. Will's efforts, of course, win out in the end, but not without a struggle. The Hugers and Dr. Duk are formidable opponents, having, as they do, the bulk of the speech act community in their corner.

When we first encounter Allie, she has just escaped from the mental hospital where she was placed, for her own good, by her parents. Her initial institutionalization resulted from abnormal physical behavior (crouching in closets and such) and abnormal verbal behavior. After her admission to the hospital, however, her prolonged involuntary stay there primarily resulted from her verbal behavior alone. Dr. Duk interprets Allie's verbal behavior as unintentionally aberrant, and hence crazy. Her parents agree with his diagnosis, and to the electroshock treatments he prescribes for her, and she remains hospitalized until finally taking matters into her own hands and escaping.

As cruel and insensitive as we may consider Allie's parents for keeping her locked up in a second-rate mental institution, and as incompetent and unprofessional as we may consider Dr. Duk, we must admit that the few examples we see of her verbal behavior in their presence are unusual to say the least. In fact, her use of language around them is actually one continuous violation of the Cooperative Principle. In the note she writes to remind herself to escape after a session of electroshock therapy, she explains why the doctors think she is still sick:

> I don't feel bad. To tell you the truth, I'm not even
> sure I'm sick. But they think I'm worse because I
> refuse to talk in group (because there is nothing to
> say) and won't eat with the others, preferring to sit
> under the table (because a circle of knees is more
> interesting than a circle of faces). (27)

Allie's refusal to talk is a clear violation of the maxim of

Quantity (sub-maxim 1. Make your contribution as informative

as is required), and the doctors interpret this violation as

evidence that her mental condition is getting worse. Her

silent violations in group therapy, however, are not nearly

so impressive as the violations she commits when she

actually speaks. During a session with Dr. Duk, in which he

explains why she "might do with a light massage of your

neurones. A small refresher course," she replies, "No buzzin

cousin" (88). When he tells her simply that it will make her

feel much better, she responds in an even more curious

fashion:

> I feel bad? Which I? It was the lilt at the end of
> a question that let her say it, freed her up. She did
> not want to go down yet the way a statement goes down
> flat and hard, ends. Isn't there a difference between
> the outside-I, the me you see, the meow-I and the
> inside deep-I-defy? Back to the old meow-I. (89)

Dr. Duk's nonplussed reaction to these flagrant violations

of the maxims of Manner (submaxims A. Avoid obscurity of

expression, and B. Avoid ambiguity) and Relation (Be

relevant) indicates on his part, first, a familiarity with

this sort of verbal behavior from her, and second, an

attempt, as her doctor, to derive from her unconventional question a central conventional meaning: "I'm talking to the deep-I or the I-defy--only I thought we had agreed it became the I-define. Your I as you want to define it" (89). As we shall see shortly, such attempts to distil from ambiguous speech acts such as this one a single unambiguous meaning are completely misguided when the speech acts are coming from Allie. Misguided or not, as her doctor, and as a representative of the conventional speech act community, Dr. Duk has little choice but to try to find some glimmer of conventionality in her highly unconventional speech. The session ends with a brief conversation about stars, the meaning of which he believes he understands completely, but actually does not even begin to grasp:

I have to go down first. You're trying to keep me up.
Down?
I have to go down down down before I go up. Down down in me to it. You shouldn't try to keep me up by buzzing me up.
Down and down I go, round and round I go. He twirled around, keeping his hands in his pockets. God, she thought, if I were him I'd be crazier than me.
Tacky-tacky, she said. I need to go down to my white dwarf.
White dwarf?
You know stars? He did know stars, often spoke of the constellations. To stay sane, learn about wrens, mums, Orion.
What about stars?
A red giant collapses into a white dwarf. Hard and bright as a diamond. That's what I was trying to do when my mother found me in the closet going down to my white dwarf.
Ah. Quite a speech, although I suspect you meant going down to become my white dwarf, I think.

> I have to get down to it, to me. And you won't let
> me. You want me up before going down.
> Ah, but what if the star collapses all the way
> into a black hole? (This pleased him) How will we find
> you in a black hole? (The more he thought about it, the
> more pleased he was.) I'm not up to a time warp. (90)

Regardless of what he thinks she actually means by this sort of talk, the bottom line is that he thinks that the way in which she expresses her meaning indicates a high degree of mental impairment. In this brief conversation alone, she violates three of Grice's four maxims. The abrupt introduction of stellar evolution into the conversation violates the maxim of Relation; the overall obscurity and ambiguity of her end of the exchange violates the maxim of Manner; and finally the silence into which she withdraws after he tells her that her parents are coming tomorrow ("Now she wanted him to leave. One advantage to being crazy is that one is given leave to be rude....She turned her face into the wing of the chair until he left") violates the maxim of Quantity. Even the reader must admit that, with no more evidence to go on than exchanges such as this one, it would be difficult to consider her unequivocally sane.

Allie exhibits the same sort of verbal aberration in a visit with her parents the day after the above conversation with Dr. Duk. Allie's father and mother (Kitty Huger, nee Vaught from The Last Gentleman), have come to the hospital to talk with Dr. Duk about plans for Allie's future, which is suddenly of great interest to them now that an old woman

has died and left Allie two very valuable pieces of real estate. The parents, who intend ultimately to have Allie declared mentally incompetent to handle her own finances, and to take control of the property themselves, explain to her how they have arranged for her to move into a lovely little carriage house back home and become music director of the new community art center there. Kitty assures her daughter that, despite appearances to the contrary, this latter idea was not her own idea but rather that of "the board": Allie replies, ambiguously, irrelevantly: "The Board or Aurora bora?" (100). The doctor kindly attempts to clarify: "Boring or beautiful? said Dr. Duk, looking at her with a smile (they were after all two of a kind, she and Docky, compared with these exotic outsiders) I think beautiful" (100). Kitty elaborates on her benevolent motives behind this plan to take Allie back home and get control over her property ("she'll be at home among family and friends, she'll have her own lovely little place") and then asks Allie what she thinks of the plan. To which Allie replies: "Nnnnaaaahrgh." Just as nonplussed as Dr. Duk by such verbal behavior, Kitty makes her own unambiguous sense of Allie's "remark" and goes blithely on: "Yes. Well, I agree, honey, it must come as quite a shock. But think about it. What do you think, dear?" (101). The remainder of the interview is punctuated by similar violations of the Cooperative Principle (most commonly the maxim of Manner),

and by subsequent attempts on the part of Allie's parents
and Dr. Duk to translate these violations into simple,
unambiguous statements or questions.

In these attempts at translation, Allie's parents and
Dr. Duk are engaging in a process that Bach and Harnish call
"disambiguation." This is a common practice in verbal
discourse, and is in fact often necessary just to keep a
conversation from breaking down. Two subsequent verbal
exchanges in this session between Allie, her parents, and
Dr. Duk, illustrate the process particularly clearly. When
Allie's father tells her how much she will like her new
chalet apartment because it has, among other attractive
features, "the damndest view you ever saw," Allie replies:
"Wif you? Wiv view?" These are strikingly ambiguous
questions, which Allie's father and Dr. Duk immediately
attempt to disambiguate:

> A view! said her father. You wouldn't believe the
> view!
> Interesting, said Dr. Duk, safe behind his thigh
> and therefore more able to conceal himself. You thought
> she said with view, meaning room with view. But thought
> I heard with you, meaning praps she might have some
> reservations about living with you. With you both. With
> y'all. (102)

When Dr. Duk speculates that Allison "knows a great deal
more than she lets on. Right Allison?" she responds,
""Wraing," which Dr. Duk disambiguates for Allie's parents:

> You see, said Dr. Duk. What she said was halfway
> between _right_ and _wrong_. She's afraid to commit
> herself. My own wish is that she have a final little
> refresher course of treatment. (103)

Disambiguation is often helpful in conversation, but it is
not always accurate, especially when the addressee stands to
gain something from a particular interpretation of an
ambiguous statement. An ambiguous statement can thus
function as something of a Rorschack blot which each
individual filters through his own personal biases and
interprets according to his own best interests. This is
precisely what is going on here with Allison, whose
ambiguous verbal behavior is far more complex than ordinary,
accidental ambiguity. Her parents and Dr. Duk, as would in
fact most people in their situation, fail to recognize this
complexity, and they each settle on the single
interpretation that best suits their own respective
interests, which happen to be quite considerable in this
case, now that Allison has inherited property that is valued
in the millions. Her parents obviously have a lot to gain by
a legal declaration of Allie's mental incompetence, and so
does Dr. Duk, since he is in charge of the strings that must
be pulled for such a declaration to be made. So, in spite of
the differences in their specific interpretations of Allie's
individual ambiguous utterances, they all agree on the
interpretation of the overall pattern that these utterances
make up: she is crazy. In their presence, Allie repeatedly

violates the maxim of Manner, speaking obscurely and ambiguously by turns. Assuming, as most people in their position would, that these violations are unintentional, they interpret her behavior as a simple manifestation of mental illness. In terms of the speech act community, Allie's verbal behavior strays outside of what the community considers "normal" behavior, so it automatically expels her from its midst, until such time as she can learn to conform to its rigid guidelines.

Or is it the other way around? In his speech act analysis of <u>Coriolanus</u> Fish demonstrates that it is actually Coriolanus who effectively banishes the people of Rome, and not they him. Such relativism is very much in keeping with Percy's general view of society, and is, in fact, very similar to what is going on with Allie's consistently abnormal verbal behavior. Her deviations from the community's verbal norms result in an exile every bit as complete as Coriolanus' exile from Rome.

As we have seen repeatedly in Percy's work, because of the moral, spiritual, and verbal bankruptcy of society at large, such isolation is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is quite often a necessary thing, if a person wishes to escape this bankruptcy himself. Allie's chronic violations of the Cooperative Principle serve as something of a declaration of independence from a speech act community in which convention is more important than meaning--in which

abiding by the purely formal normative rules governing verbal behavior is more important than actually saying anything worthwhile with this verbal behavior.

The general speech act community from which Allie's verbal behavior isolates her has been divided into two distinct categories: "Those who reveal themselves through language and those who use it to disguise their true motives" (Allen 141). The latter of these categories, by far the more populous of the two, is made up of people like Allie's parents and Dr. Duk who "talk a bastardized blend of down-home southernness, terms from pop psychology, and contemporary slang that is a parody of honest communication." This use of language as a disguise, which must be regarded as the statistical norm for verbal behavior throughout The Second Coming, is clearly illustrated in the interview between Dr. Duk and Allie's parents. Kitty, whom Dr. Duk views as a "dashing exotic person" who is nevertheless so effusive toward him that he almost dares to consider her his "buddy," speaks of the party to which she and her husband are headed after this meeting is over:

> I'll tell you whose party it is, Alistair, said her mother.
> It's Will Barrett, said her mother. You know the Barretts of Linwood-Asheville?
> She could tell by the way her mother hung fire ever so slightly, eyes flicking, that she was waiting for Dr. Duk's reaction.
> You mean--! said Dr. Duk, straining forward another inch.

> Yes, Will married a Peabody. They own the joint.
> She died. Now he owns the joint.
> The joint? said Dr. Duk. All the grass, eh?
> (Jesus, don't try to make jokes, Docky Duck.
> You're much better in your listening-doctor position,
> legs crossed, thigh hiked up as a kind of barricade,
> gazing down at your unlit Marlboro as if it were a Dead
> Sea scroll.)
> Yeah, all the grass Alistair. They own the whole
> joint, half the country, the mills, the hotels. And
> that rascal Will! Not only did he marry a Peabody, he
> also made it on his own, from editor of the Law Review,
> straight into the top Wall Street firm, one of the Ten
> Most Promising Young Attorneys, early retirement, man-
> of-the-year here--I mean, he did it all! I should have
> known better--but he was always out of it when I knew
> him--little did I know what was going on behind that
> absent-minded expression. Just wait till I get my hands
> on that rascal! So who do I end up with? Old blue-eyes
> here. But he's cute. Aintcha, hon?   (98-99)

What Kitty is actually saying here is that a man she used to

know quite well, Will Barrett, unexpectedly went on after

their brief acquaintance to become a successful Wall Street

attorney. Now, after all these years, she is here in the

mountains of North Carolina to press this old acquaintance

into doing her a favor--namely, to use his famed legal

prowess to cut through whatever red tape exists between

herself and her daughter's newly acquired fortune. So

heavily cloaked is this message in good ol' boy southern

jargon (e.g. "that rascal Will," "Aintcha hon") that her

true meaning is virtually impossible to discern. Poor Dr.

Duk, who is "straining every nerve" to follow the general

drift of her remarks to see if perhaps there is something in

all of this for him as well, peppers his speech with stupid

jokes (like that about the "grass") and Southernisms ("With

you both. With yall") so that his own less than professional

interests in Allie will not be quite so obvious either.

The fundamental emptiness of all this language flying

around her head is abundantly clear to Allie. Her

reflections on one of Dr, Duk's customarily lame responses

apply just as well to the language of her parents, and to

that of the greater majority of the speech act community, in

fact. Allie's father benevolently explains that, despite

disagreements on particulars, there is

> ...one thing we can sure as hell agree on and that's
> Allison's well-being. It's her happiness and health
> which comes first, now and always, right?
> Right on, said Dr. Duk.
> (No, dumb Docky Duk. Not right on. Like Kelso
> says, when you try to sound like something, you don't
> sound like nothing.)   (116)

Most of the people who make up Allie's speech act community

similarly try so hard to "sound like something" that, along

with Dr. Duk, they wind up sounding "like nothing." Such

non-signifying sound and fury is certainly nothing new in

Percy's fictional world; in fact, it represents the

linguistic "norm" for all of his novels. Neither is Allie's

perception of this emptiness a novelty; Binx Bolling's

bowels were set to rumbling by it, and Lancelot Lamar

plotted a Third Revolution to wipe it out and start afresh

with a brand new language. Indeed, all of Percy's

protagonists are aware of the bankruptcy of language in

modern society, and experience a strong sense of alienation

from this society as a result, forced as they are to choose between a meaningless integrated existence, and a meaningful alienated existence. What is entirely new in Allie's situation, however, is the addition of a third alternative to these two choices. Like other of Percy's protagonists, Allie senses the emptiness of her community's language, and will have no part of it. Her unique language is the most tangible sign of this rejection. Initially, like other Percy characters, Allie finds herself alienated from the community whose empty language she has rejected. Her emotional and spiritual alienation from the community is accompanied by a literal physical isolation from it, first in a mental hospital, and then in a greenhouse on a ruined estate in the North Carolina mountains. Now, Allie might be content to live out the rest of her days in this state of happy isolation, but neither Percy nor the speech act community that Allie has rejected is content to let her. The speech act community, represented by Allie's parents and Dr. Duk, wants to take away all her possessions and place her in a controlled environment where it can keep an eye on her. Percy, less selfishly, wants more for her than either the meaningless controlled integration offered Allie by the speech act community, or the meaningful alienation offered her by life alone in the woods. He wants Allie to have the best of both worlds--a meaningful <u>and</u> integrated existence-- and for the first time in any of his novels he finds a means

of making this possible. The vehicle through which Allie is able to find both meaning and integration is none other than Will Barrett, whom we last saw chasing after Sutter Vaught's Edsel in the New Mexico desert at the conclusion of The Last Gentleman.

When we first see Will Barrett after all these years, he is, not surprisingly, "more funked out and nuttier than ever" (180). Even though he went on after The Last Gentleman to become a very successful man by society's standards-- making a name for himself on Wall Street, marrying a millionaire who died and left him a fortune, and retiring in his forties to play golf and enjoy the finer things in life --he nonetheless cannot feel himself to be a part of the society by whose standards he carved out an enviable life for himself. Like Allie and so many other of Percy's characters, Will feels alienated from this society. This alienation manifests itself in a sort of free-floating depression, which he spends a good portion of the novel trying to figure out. As with Tom More, and Lancelot, and Allie, Will Barrett's alienation and subsequent depression inevitably lead to a question that is by now very familiar in Percy's work: who is crazier, society, or the individual who feels alienated from this society? In The Second Coming, Will ponders this question again and again. Looking around himself at the "farcical" lives that most people live, he speculates:

>Was he crazy or was it rather the case that other
>people went to any length to disguise from themselves
>that their lives were farcical? He couldn't decide.
>>What is one to make of such a person?
>>To begin with: though it was probably the case
>that he was ill and that it was his illness--
>depression--which made the world seem farcical, it is
>impossible to prove the case.
>>On the one hand, he was depressed.
>>On the other hand, the world is in fact farcical.
>(4)

Statistically speaking, he realizes that his attitude toward
society certainly places him in the minority. But what if
the majority is really deluded rather than happy, as it
appears to be, and in fact believes itself to be? Isn't it
true that "Most Romans played as usual while Rome fell about
their ears"?:

>>If one person is depressed for every ninety-nine
>who are not or who say they are not, who is to say that
>the depressed person is right and the ninety-nine
>wrong, that they are deceiveing themselves? Even if
>this were true, what good would it do to undeceive the
>ninety-nine who have diverted themselves with a busy
>round of work and play and so imagine themselves happy.
>>The argument is abstract and useless.   (5)

A large part of Will's problem with society revolves
around modern, or more accurately post-modern, Christianity.
It is not surprising that Christianity should figure
significantly in his problem with society, living as he does
in "the most Christian nation in the world, the U.S.A., in
the most Christian part of that nation, the South, in the
most Christian state in the South, North Carolina, in the
most Christian town in North Carolina" (13). He finds the

lives of these Christians to be virtually meaningless and their company to be unbearable. Unfortunately, their non-Christian counterparts, few though they may be, are not any better off. In a letter to Sutter Vaught, in which he describes his plan to conclusively prove or disprove God's existence, Will sums up the situation in terms very reminiscent of Lancelot's description of the unacceptable world in which he lived:

> So much for you. My quarrel with the others can be summed up as a growing disgust with two classes of people. These two classes between them exhaust the class of people in general. That is to say, there are only two classes of people, the believers and the unbelievers. The only difficulty is deciding which is the more feckless.
> My belated discovery of the bankruptcy of both classes has made it possible for me to take action. Better late than never. (188)

A similar misanthropic conclusion led Lancelot to murder and a plot for a Third Revolution. The more mild-mannered Will takes to a cave in solitary pursuit of God. In both cases, however, the result of this rejection of society is a profound physical and spiritual isolation from the world of humankind. When the narration of Lancelot finally runs out, the mad/sane patient/narrator Lance remained isolated from his fellow man. Unlike Will, however, Lance did not have Allie's greenhouse to fall into.

From Allie's point of view, Will is just another member of that speech act community from which her abnormal verbal

behavior isolates her. He dresses like the others, plays golf like the others, and is wealthier than most of the others. Externally at least, he is a rule-abiding citizen of the normative community that Allie observes from the outside. Will's superficial integration with the community is very important, because it will ultimately provide an alienated character, Allie, with a means of becoming reintegrated with the community, while at the same time rejecting those aspects of it that caused her to flee in the first place. His alienation from the community, on a much deeper level, is of course also very important, for it will allow him to view her and her language independently of the purely conventional normative structures that cause the rest of the community to see her as an outcast. Like the "earthling" in Percy's essay "The Delta Factor," who is "sufficiently detached, marooned, bemused, wounded, crazy, one-eyed, and lucky enough to become a Martian for a second and catch a glimpse of [language]" (MB 29), Will is just enough of an outsider to actually listen to Allie without automatically assessing her verbal behavior as either normal or abnormal, terms which have absolutely no meaning beyond the confines of the normative speech act community.

Like Allie, Will's fundamental alienation from the speech act community shows up in his verbal behavior, a fact that does not go unnoticed by the other members of the community. In fact, he is just as capable as Allie of

violating the Cooperative Principle. For instance, while he is playing golf with his doctor/friend Vance Battle, Vance expresses some concern for Will's health. When Will asks him the reasons for his concern, Vance immediately zeroes in on Will's abnormal verbal behavior--his violations of the Cooperative Principle:

> "You haven't been with us for some time,"
> "Us?"
> "Us. Your family, your friends."
> "How's that?"
> "You don't say anything. And what you do say is strange."
> "Such as?"
> "You asked me if I remembered a movie actor named Ross Alexander. I said no. You let it go at that. Then you asked me if Groucho Marx was dead. Then you asked me if the tendency to suicide is inherited. Do you remember?"
> "Yes. You didn't answer."
> "I didn't know. Are you feeling depressed?" (10)

In his review of Will's abnormal verbal behavior, Vance points out two distinct violations of the Cooperative Principle. His silence with his family and friends ("'You don't say anything'") violates the maxim of Quantity, and his mention of Ross Alexander, Groucho Marx, and suicide, independently of any context to which these subjects would have relevance, violates the maxim of Relation. After Will ends the conversation by suggesting that they just putt out and and head on, he violates the maxim of Relation yet again:

"No, wait." Again he went into one of his spells,
a "petty-mall trance" his doctor friend called them.
They were sitting in the cart. He sat perfectly still
for perhaps five seconds, which was long enough for the
doctor to smile uneasily, then frown and lean over the
seat to touch him.
"What is it, Will?"
"I just realized a strange thing."
"What's that?"
"There are no Jews up here."
"Jews?"
"I've been living here for two years and have
never seen a Jew. Arabs, but no Jews. When I used to
come up here in the summer years ago, there used to be
Jews here. Isn't that strange?"
"I hadn't thought about it. Hm." Dr. Vance knitted
his brow and pretended to think but his eyes never
left the other's face. "Interesting! Maybe they've all
gone to Washington, ha ha." (11)

When confronted with Will's irrelevant remarks about the

Jews, Vance tries to provide a context by accepting the

remarks as a joke. The Principle of Charity kicks in and

Vance seeks about for a way to make Will's speech conform to

normative guidelines. Will will not be stopped, however, and

turns his violation of the maxim of Relation into a

violation of the maxim of Quality by suggesting that the

Jews are leaving North Carolina, a suggestion which the

narrator explains is patently absurd ("Needless to say, the

Jews were and are not leaving North Carolina"). This

undeniably abnormal verbal behavior makes Vance very

uncomfortable: "'Is that so?' Vance's eyes strayed to his

wristwatch. He pretended to brush off a fly" (12). During

this exchange Will has done nothing to reassure Vance about

his mental health, nor to make him rethink his suggestion

that Will come by his office for a check-up. Will's eagle
putt on eighteen, however, shifts the attention elsewhere,
and the subject is dropped.

Verbal exchanges such as this one clearly indicate that
Will's emotional and spiritual alienation from his community
include a linguistic component as well. His depression, his
intolerance for the bankruptcy of the modern world, and his
occasional violations of the Cooperative Principle, place
him at the metaphysical fringes of the speech act community.
Allie lives out here as well, but the more extreme nature of
her violations, combined with her fundamental powerlessness
in the face of a speech act community that has so much to
gain from interpreting these violations as symptomatic of
mental illness, add a literal physical isolation to this
metaphorical one. First in the mental hospital, and then in
the greenhouse in the woods, Allie lives apart from society,
and content to be apart from it. Then one day while playing
golf, Will slices "out-of-bounds" (i.e. outside the area
marked off and agreed upon by the community as a place where
the rules of golf will be observed), and finds himself face
to face with Allie.

In this first encounter between Will and Allie, Allie's
verbal behavior is, true to form, markedly unconventional.
She hands Will the two balls he knocked out of bounds, one
of which broke a window in the greenhouse, and he offers her

a dollar for retrieving them. Instead of taking the money, however, she speaks:

>"This one woke me up."
>"What?"
>"Hogan woke me up."
>"Hogan woke you up?"
>"It broke my window." She nodded toward the greenhouse.
>"Which one?"
>"Not those. At the end of my house, where I was sleeping. The surprise of it was instigating to me."
>"Okay okay. Will five dollars do it?" He fumbled in his pocket.   (75)

Allie violates the maxim of Manner here with her ambiguous reference to Hogan (the name stamped on the golf ball) and her obscure use of "instigating" as an adjective. Will, however, significantly ignores the strangeness of her speech and tries to extract the message embedded in it. Even though he misinterprets the meaning of her utterance, his response to it is untainted by any hint of normative judgement. He simply accepts her remark as an attempt to communicate, and tries to reciprocate.

Now on the surface, Will's refusal to acknowledge Allie's violations of the Cooperative Principle might seem to result from the Principle of Charity--Will is simply interpreting her speech in such a manner as to make it conform to the Cooperative Principle. His subsequent reflections on her language, however, clearly show this not to be the case. He is in fact quite aware of the unconventionality of her speech:

> "It was peculiar. I was lying in my house in the
> sun reading this book." She had taken a book from the
> deep pocket of the jacket and handed it to him, as if
> to prove--prove what?--and as he examined it, a rained-
> on-dried-out 1922 <u>Captain Blood</u>, he was thinking not
> about Captain Blood but about the oddness of the girl.
> There was something odd about her speech and, now that
> he looked at her, about her. For one thing, she spoke
> slowly and carefully as if she were reading the words
> on his face. The sentence "I was lying in my house" was
> strange. "The surprise of it was instigating." (75-6)

Will perceives the strangeness of Allie's speech. According

to the terms of the Principle of Charity, an addressee will

go out of his way to do just the opposite; he will interpret

the utterance, no matter how strange it may sound, as

conforming to the Cooperative Principle. As a full-fledged

member of the speech act community, the average addressee is

more concerned with upholding the rules of cooperative

verbal behavior than he is with understanding what a given

individual is actually saying. He is preeminently concerned

with preserving form, even if content must be sacrificed.

Will's mental acknowledgement of the "oddness" of Allie's

speech indicates that something far more significant, and

meaningful, than the Principle of Charity is at work here.

As the conversation proceeds, Will speculates on the

nature and origin of her verbal unconventionality:

> "I was lying in my house in the sun reading that
> book. Then plink, tinkle, the glass breaks and this
> little ball rolls up and touches me. I felt concealed
> and revealed." Her voice was flat and measured. She
> sounded like a wolf child who had learned to speak from
> old Victrola records. Her lips trembled slightly, not

> quite smiling, her eyes not quite meeting his yet
> attentive, sweeping his face like a blind person's.
>   Oh well. She was one of the thousands who blow in
> and out every summer like the blackbirds, nest where
> they can, in flocks or alone. Sleep in the woods. At
> least she had found a greenhouse.   (76)

He eventually concludes, mistakenly, that drugs must be the

cause of her unusual speech: "Oh well. She was on something

and couldn't focus her eyes" (77). Unlike the disinterested

townspeople of Linwood, however, whose exercise of the

Principle of Charity causes them to deny the

unconventionality of her speech, and the self-interested

group composed of Dr. Duk and Allie's parents, who recognize

the unconventionality of her speech, but cannot see anything

beyond it, Will both acknowledges the uniqueness of Allie's

speech, and accepts it as meaningful communication. By

denying, on the one hand, the uniqueness of Allie's speech,

and denying, on the other, the existence of anything beyond

this uniqueness, the townspeople of Linwood, and Dr. Duk and

Allie's parents essentially deny Allie's true self. She

does, in fact, speak unconventionally, but she also has

meaningful thoughts which she communicates through her

unconventional speech. Both of these are essential parts to

a single whole--Allie Hunicutt Huger. Will's nonjudgemental,

yet non-denying, approach to Allie's language, then,

exhibits nothing less significant than a respect for, and an

acceptance of, Allie's very selfhood.

The extent to which Will heeds what Allie has to say is evident in the fact that she is able to anger him during this first conversation. She asks him:

> "Are You--?"
>   "What?" He cocked the club for a short chip shot and hung fire.
>   "Are you still climbing on your anger?"....
>   "Angry? No, I'm not angry. What did you mean by still angry?"
>   "I mean over there." She pointed to the chesnut fall. "Where you were standing."
>   She had been watching him.
>   "Why did you think I was angry?"
>   "You were holding your golf stick in the thicket. I wanted to give you back your little golf balls but I was instigated by fear. I thought you were going to hit someone. Or shoot."
>   "You were watching me."
>   "Yes."
>   He looked down at his hands gripping the club. He became aware that he was nodding.
>   "You look angry again."
>   "I didn't know anyone was watching me."
>   "Why did that make you angry? I wasn't spying or denying. I was afraid." (76-77)

In spite of a couple of violations of the maxim of Manner by Allie here, Will follows the substance rather than the style of what she is saying to him, and is angered by her accurate assessment of his mental state while she was watching him. He feels exposed or vulnerable to her in a way that Dr. Duk or Allie's parents never could feel. For them, the violations would mask the very accurate observations expressed in the midst of these violations. Will's acknowledgement of Allie's perceptiveness and his self-conscious anger at being the object of it indicate that,

even though she is as yet a stranger, he values her opinion, where Dr. Duk and Allie's parents do not even recognize that she has one. After this exchange, the conversation ends and Will wanders back toward the golf course, but the groundwork has already been laid for an eventual union between these two alienated characters that is unlike anything we have seen in Percy's fiction.

Their next encounter builds upon this groundwork and establishes the unique compatibility between Will and Allie that will eventually turn into love. Will actually seeks Allie out this time, to deliver some avocados and olive oil, and to see if he can help her in any way. Allie's end of the conversation is, of course, strewn with violations of the Cooperative Principle, but Will shows a remarkable intuitive feel for her verbal behavior--an ability to understand exactly what she is trying to communicate with her unusual language. The conversation begins with a brief exchange about the dog that has taken up with Allie. As Will approaches the greenhouse, the dog rushes toward him to attack. Allie yells at the dog to get him to stop, but not before noticing in Will a sort of mental dislocation that is quite familiar to her as her own customary mental state:

> Perhaps she had opened her mouth to say something or perhaps she had moved, but before she could do anything else and just as the man's hand touched the house the dog charged. The man had time to turn, it seemed to her slowly, the sunlight striking a different plane of his forehead, and held out his hand palm down

> to the dog. Too slowly it seemed to her: was this too
> part of his studied Northern nonchalance? No, because
> even now his eyes could not or would not focus on the
> dog. He didn't care whether the dog bit him or not!
>   It was not courage, not even inattention but
> rather, she saw, a kind of indifference yet a curiosity
> with it. Would the dog attack? Would tooth enter flesh?
> If it did, would it matter?   (107)

This little episode has two important functions. First, it

shows Allie's intuitive, almost unconscious recognition of a

kindred spirit (she cannot focus her eyes, and neither can

he). Second, it shows in Will a habitual passively receptive

state of mind--an "indifference yet a curiosity with it"--

that will be of crucial importance in his verbal

relationship with Allie. This state of mind accounts for his

ability to understand her language.

The dog halts a split second before sinking his teeth

into Will's hand, and Allie initiates the conversation with

a violation of the maxim of Manner: "'Did he stop because of

my saying or because of your not saying?' asked the girl."

Now Dr. Duk or Allie's parents would be compelled to

disambiguate Allie's ambiguous use of the gerund "saying"

(i.e. "because of my command for the dog to stop, or your

calm silence, which indicated a lack of fear on your part").

Will, however, simply accepts it as a valid form of

communication, and goes on to more important matters: "I'm

not sure. Probably because of your saying. Would you give me

a drink of water. I've had a long walk." Throughout the

conversation that ensues, Will continues to exhibit this

curious indifference, and as a result is actually able to communicate with Allie--to exchange information and ideas-- as no one else in the novel is capable of doing.

The conversation between Will and Allie here is rather long, but must be viewed at some length in order for the crucial pattern of mutual understanding between the two characters to be fully apparent. After his encounter with the dog, Will follows Allie into the greenhouse:

> "It still smells like a greenhouse. Once I was in
> Cincinnati. I liked the smell of a greenhouse there so
> much I worked in it for six months."
> "Doing which and how and was it for a
> consideration? How much?" she asked, eyes widening with
> interest. "Would you--" She stopped. Would he what?
> "Work for you?" he said. "How much do you pay?"
> "Never mind." She gave him the Clorox bottle. He
> drank a long time.
> "Thank you. Is this where you have to get your
> water?"
> "Yes. How thirsty. It's been a long time."
> "Since what? Since seeing anybody thirsty?"
> "Something--something is up front but not all the
> way."
> "You mean you're having difficulty remembering
> things and that you almost remembered something?"
> "Yes, that's--"
> "I had that once. In my case it was a question of
> not wanting to remember. In fact, I remembered
> something here in this spot that I hadn't thought of
> for years."
> "Was it for a gladness or the same old Sunday
> coming down?"
> "No, it wasn't the same old Sunday coming down. I
> can't say it was a happy memory but I was glad I
> remembered. I feel much better. You will too. Thank you
> for the water."
> "You are--Are you?"
> "I brought you something."
> "What?" She noticed the brown bag. "Oh, I don't
> need. I am fine. Though I was in the hospital for--it
> is the time I can't remember."
> "I know."

> "I was somewhat suspended above me but I am
> getting down to me."
> "Good."
> She was about to say something but she saw in his
> eyes that he had drifted away.
> They stood in silence. It was not for her like a
> silence with another person, a silence in which
> something horrid takes root and grows. What if nobody
> says anything, what then? Sometimes she thought she had
> gone crazy rather than have to talk to people. Which
> was worse, their talk or their silences? Perhaps there
> was no unease with him because he managed to be both
> there and not there as one required. Is it possible to
> stand next to a stranger at a bus stop and know that he
> is a friend? Was he someone she had known well and
> forgotten? (107-9)

A few important features of the conversation up to this

point need to be pointed out here. As he did in their

previous chance encounter, Will here simply accepts Allie's

speech acts, strange though they may sound, as legitimate

attempts at communication, and responds accordingly. Rather

than tuning in to her violations of the Cooperative

Principle (as we can easily imagine him doing in his Last

Gentleman days) and assessing her mental condition on the

basis of these violations, Will passes beyond them and

concentrates on the substance of what she is saying. His

lack of concern for what Allie's violations indicate about

her mental health is evident in his willingness to interrupt

her with comments about himself ("Yes, that's--"/"I had that

once.") If he did not believe in the presence of a sound

mind behind that unusual speech, he would never make such

private personal disclosures about himself. When one is

speaking with a madman, or with a person whom one considers

to be mad, one humors him or her with polite formalities, giving the appearance of assent and concern, rather than wasting substantive information on a mind that is too twisted to heed it. In other words, Will's eagerness to tell Allie about himself indicates his acknowledgement and acceptance of her as a person rather than as a patient, which is doubly significant, because Will by now knows from Kitty that Allie has been a patient in, and escaped from, a mental hospital. In his conversation with Allie, Will holds the fact of her hospitalization, as well as the normative structures of society which are largely responsible for this hospitalization, in abeyance, and lets her start off with a clean slate.

The comfortable silence into which the conversation lapses, "not like a silence with another person," further illustrates Will's capacity for holding the rules of the speech act community in abeyance. With other members of the speech act community, when the actual talking stops, the Cooperative Principle is still in effect, demanding that someone say something before an inappropriate amount of time passes (maxim of Quantity). To Will, however, such rules have no intrinsic importance, being as they are merely an artificial fabrication of that community from which he feels alienated, and a silence is merely silence--a cessation in a dialogue that can be resumed, or not, whenever either party feels moved to do so.

After a few moments of this silence, it is Allie who decides to resume the conversation:

> "Are you—?"
> "Am I what?"
> "Are you my—?"
> "Am I your what?"
> For a moment she wondered if she had considered saying something crazy like "Are you my lover?" Or "Are you my father?"
> She sighed. "You said the bag."
> "What? Oh yes. I brought this for you." He gave her the bag.
> She opened it. "Avocadoes? I think. And—what? A little square can of—" She read: "Plagniol."
> He watched her.
> "What a consideration! But more than a consideration. The communication is climbing to the exchange level and above. And the Plagna is not bologna." (109)

Will's reflections on this latter extended violation of the maxim of Manner once again illustrate that he is not deaf to the unconventionality of her speech. He does not, like the townspeople of Linwood, try to hear her utterances in such a way that the form of her speech accords with the Cooperative Principle. He acknowledges the strangeness, but does not go to the opposite extreme, like Dr. Duk and Allie's parents, and conclude that this strangeness means that she is crazy. Instead, he approaches her language with the assumption that she is actually saying something meaningful, albeit in her own way, and that he can understand her if he just listens closely enough:

> Gazing at her, he almost smiled. In her odd words he seemed to hear echoes of other voices in other

years. One hundred years ago Judge Kemp might have said
on this very spot: "How considerate of you!" with the
same exclamatory lilt. But there was another voice,
something new and not quite formed. Did she mean that
his consideration (being considerate) was more than
just a consideration (a small amount), more than
exchange (market value of the plagnioll, which was
after all baloney? (109)

The conversation continues in the same vein, she

speaking strangely, he responding to her meaning and

understanding more and more as the conversation proceeds.

She asks him why the avocadoes are "here," to which he

responds:

>"Why did I bring them? I thought you might like
them. For another thing--"
>"Yes?"
>"They are the most nourishing of all vegetables."
>"What is entailed with you?"
>"Nothing. Why?"
>"You seem somewhat pale and in travail. Is the
abomination at home or in the hemispheres?"
>"I don't know. Maybe both. You mean my brain. I
don't feel well, to tell the truth." (110)

Before he leaves, Allie asks Will how it is that he seems to

know so much about her:

>"Do you have my dossier?"
>"Your what? Oh, you mean how do I know about you?"
>"You look like you know about me."
>"I know something about you."
>Her eyes fell. Forehead muscles pushed her
eyebrows down into a shelf. Then he had come from her
parents.
>"Then the word came from the bloard."
>"Bloard?" He didn't know what she meant. From the
board? the broad? blood? blood kin? bloody broad? All
these?

> What she meant was board and bored, meeting of her
> father's board which was boring because it bored into
> you. (111)

This particular exchange indicates somewhat the kind of
thought processes on Will's part that make him capable of
understanding Allie. He approaches Allie's language, as he
does everything else, with a "kind of indifference yet a
curiosity with it." This "indifference," which can be
likened to Keats' Negative Capability, is far more creative
an approach to Allie's language than is that of either the
townspeople of Linwood or Dr. Duk and Allie's parents, for
it proceeds independently of the sorts of personal biases
that prevent these two other groups from grasping the actual
meaning of her speech. When Will is confronted with an
ambiguous utterance such as "bloard," he not only scans his
mental dictionary for possible conventional matches with the
different elements of the utterance, but is also willing to
accept the possibility that more than just one of these
matches might very well hold true for the utterance. In
other words, Allie may very well mean by "bloard" not just
"board" or "blood" or "blood kin," but rather "All these."
While everyone else is compelled by convention to
disambiguate such an utterance, Will accepts the fact that
Allie's ambiguous speech is actually intentional, and thus
not subject to disambiguation. When she says something like
"The Board or Aurora bora," she does not mean either "Boring

or beautiful," as Dr. Duk assumes ("I think beautiful"), but rather both of these, or even more for that matter. When she says "Wraing," she does not mean either right or wrong, but rather both right <u>and</u> wrong. And, when she says "bloard" she does not mean any one thing, but rather several things at the same time ("board and bored, meeting of her father's board which was boring because it bored into you"). Will's ability to refrain from disambiguation, then, makes it possible for him to understand her language in a way that no one else can. In fact, it enables him to understand her language more clearly than he understands the more conventional language of the majority of the speech act community.

For instance, during a conversation with Jack Curl, to whom "trendiness is next to godliness" (Kisor 196), Will listens to Jack explain his plan for putting Will's widow's fortune into a trust to be used for "love and faith communities" and the like. When he asks the Reverend who will administer the trust, Jack replies that it can be himself, or Will's daughter Leslie, or the two of them together: "Take your pick. Then we'll run it up the flagpole and sees who salutes it," to which Will responds simply, "What does that mean?" (309). The expression "run it up the flagpole and see who salutes it," quite representative of the cliche-ridden language of the speech act community, is far more conventional than most of Allie's utterances, yet

Will cannot discern the meaning of it, while he has little trouble understanding Allie. The problem with Jack Curl's language, as with the language of the speech act communities in all of Percy's fiction, is that it is *so* conventional that it has ceased to have any but a purely formal meaning. It is all shell and no substance; it is bankrupt.

We have, of course, already seen bankrupt language in great abundance throughout Percy's fiction. We have also seen people who were aware of this bankruptcy, and who lived lives of alienation from the speech act community rather than traffic in this bankrupt language. We have not, however, seen anything like Allie's language before. So very unconventional is it that it can more appropriately be described as anti-conventional. Through Allie's numerous violations of the Cooperative Principle, Percy constructs a solid lingustic alternative to the bankrupt language that his protagonists have been fighting ever since The Moviegoer. It is the kind of language that Lancelot dreamed, in vain, of creating for his New Order. It is a vehicle for expressing all those meaningful things that were "impossible to say" in Percy's other novels.

Unfortunately, there is one drawback to Allie's new language. As we have seen, violations of the Cooperative Principle are viewed by the speech act community as behavioral deviations, and often interpreted as symptomatic of mental illness. Allie's verbal behavior clearly violates

the Cooperative Principle (as it must if it is to provide an alternative to the norm), and this chronic state of violation is interpreted by the speech act community as indicating severe mental illness; her bizarre utterances are clearly the ravings of a madwoman. As fresh and meaningful as Allie's language may strike the reader, her perceived madness would result in an alienation as profound as that of any other Percy protagonist, without the introduction of a second party who can see her language for what it really is. Without Will Barrett in her life, Allie would be no more than a lone voice crying in Percy's fictional wilderness, and Percy would be no closer to solving the bankruptcy/ silence paradox than he was in Lancelot. Will Barrett does enter her life, however, and by the end of this, their second, conversation, the seeds are sown for the love affair that will make The Second Coming "the first unalienated novel since War and Peace." Will's intuitive understanding of Allie's language, evident in their first meeting and more or less fully developed in the second, is, unbeknownst to Will, romance in its embryonic stage. Or, as Allen describes the understanding that Will exhibits in these early meetings: "Will's ear for Allie's poetry is the beginning of their love affair" (143).

Before this relationship of mutual understanding can blossom into actual love, however, Will has a few personal demons that he must confront and exorcise. Recall that he

began the novel feeling depressed, and alienated as well, since his depression put him in a small minority of the happy Christian speech act community of western North Carolina. His depression eventually manifests itself in a suicidal obsession with proving, once and for all, the existence or non-existence of God. Now, Will comes by his suicidal tendencies naturally, for his father had killed himself when Will was a boy, and had in fact tried to take Will with him, so that he would not have to grow up and discover the same unbearable facts of life that for him had made suicide preferable to living. Will, who is very much his father's son, is offended by the waste of his father's death. He is therefore determined to make his own suicide count; he is going to use it to prove or disprove God's existence. To this end, he collects enough sleeping pills to keep him unconscious for several days, writes Sutter Vaught a long and rather tedious explanation of what he intends to do, and crawls deep into a cave, positioning himself comfortably in a remote corner to wait for God to make his presence known. If God fails to show, Will will die, just as his father did, but his death will prove beyond the shadow of a doubt God's non-existence.

In typical Percy fashion, of course, no such simple conclusion ensues from the experiment. Will develops a toothache after several days, tries to climb out of the cave, falls as a result of hunger-induced weakness and

injures himself rather badly, gets lost, struggles toward a dim source of light (which is actually an air vent leading into Allie's greenhouse), pushes through the vegetation covering the vent, and falls onto a potting table inside the greenhouse. This egress into Allie's greenhouse, a bit over-obvious in its obstetrical imagery (he struggles through a narrow channel toward a small opening covered with tangled vines, and pops out "smeared head to toe with a whitish grease" 233), is Will's rebirth--his "second coming." Allie's traumatic stay in the mental hospital, with its repeated electroshock treatments, has served something of the same function for her, so it is as a new Adam and Eve that the two come together, and their previously established mutual understanding is free to blossom into love.

Throughout Will's recuperation in the greenhouse, Will and Allie build their relationship on the foundation already laid in their first two encounters. The progress of the relationship is marked linguistically by a further deepening of mutual understanding; Will follows Allie's speech with even less difficulty than before. When he explains to her that Judge Kemp [the man who built the greenhouse] backed the greenhouse up against the cave vent through which Will fell, so that he could take advantage of the cave's constant sixty degree temperature, Allie responds:

> "So the natural air-conditioning [the vent from the cave] was for fruition."

> "Yes," he said, closing his eyes. "He made a lot
> of money." (228)

Allie's understanding of Will deepens as well during this
period. As she nurses him back to health, she examines the
very strong feelings she has for Will, speculating that they
might just be what other people call "love," although she is
as distrustful of such overused terms as Will is. She knows
there is something there, just as he does, but the two never
actually discuss their relationship as a relationship until
they are lying naked together on his cot. He has had one of
his "spells" outside on the trail, and she has stripped both
of their clothes off and twined her naked body around his to
warm him up. As they lie here on the cot, their physical
nakedness is accompanied by a linguistic nakedness, and
their words intertwine just as their bodies do. She becomes
aroused by the physical contact with Will's body, but
discovers that his words have a similar palpable effect on
her :

> When he began to talk she found that she could not
> hear his words for listening to the way he said them.
> She cast about for his drift. Was he saying the words
> for the words themselves, for what they meant, or for
> what they could do to her? There was something about
> the way he talked that reminded her of her own
> rehearsed sentences. Was she a jury he was addressing?
> Though he hardly touched her, his words seemed to flow
> across all parts of her body. Were they meant to? A
> pleasure she had never known before bloomed deep in her
> body. Was this a way of making love?
> He was using words like "my shameful secret of
> success as a lawyer," "phony," "radar," "our new
> language," "this gift of yours and mine," "ours" (this

was her favorite), "being above things," "not being able to get back down to things," (!),"how to reenter the world" (?), "by God?" "by her?" (!!!!!), "your forgetting and my remembering".... (262)

Despite the deep mutual feelings evident between them at this point, Will and Allie cannot physically consummate their relationship until Will takes care of some things back in the speech act community. Neither can they linguistically consummate this relationship, by verbally declaring their love for one another. Both of these things will take place in time, but for now Will must leave. As he bids Allie farewell, a comment by Will linguistically marks the progression that has occurred since their first meeting:

"Why do you sound so tired?"
"Me? It is not an interesting subject. At least not to me. The subject is closed, if not disclosed," he said, smiling. (266)

The ambiguous wordplay here is typical of Allie. Will's adoption of her speech patterns illustrates the depths of his understanding of her mind. No longer is he merely understanding her language, and then responding to it in his own, but he is now capable of actually speaking her language. This is the same sort of scenario dreamed of by Lancelot for his future life with the New Woman Anna, but here it is actually realized.

As far as they have come in their relationship by this point, and as promising as their future seems, Will and

Allie are not quite out of danger just yet. The speech act community will make one final assault on the unacceptable deviance of these two of its members. Kitty intensifies her efforts to have Allie declared legally incompetent and institutionalized for the rest of her life, and Jack Curl and Leslie arrange to have Will live out his days in one of Jack's love and faith communities (i.e. rest homes) where his "Hausmann's Syndrome" can be kept under control. Incidentally, his entire fortune will go into the Peabody Trust, which will be supervised by Jack and Leslie. The self-interest involved in both of these cases is obvious.

After a brief round of treatments at St. Mark's convalescent center, during which his delusions about Jews and such disappear and his golf game returns to normal, Will realizes that his feelings for Allie have absolutely nothing to do with his illness. So, faced with a choice between living a "healthy" life, punctuated by Kojak and the Morning Movie and devoid of Allie, or a "sick" life, in which he might have delusions but he would also have Allie, he takes his chances and escapes from the hospital.

When he returns to Allie, he finds that she has lost a little weight during his absence, but is otherwise fine. Her verbal response at seeing him again is characteristically unconventional; it also illustrates once again the linguistic loophole with which Percy dodges the necessity for disambiguation:

"It's you irregardless of who," she said.
He laughed. "Irregardless of who what?"
"Of who I thought you were."
"Who did you think I was?"
"That you were an Atlantean but taller, yet I also knew you by the glancing way, you know, of your face here." She touched her temple.
"Atlantean or Atlantan?"
"Both. Atlantan businesswise with your suit, as I once saw Sarge come down the bullet in the Hyatt with attache case and suit like that. But Atlantean also because of the way you came through the woods like you were coming from elsewhere not there." (326-7)

Here, we once again see a violation of the maxim of Manner that is clearly intentional and thus cannot be construed as evidence of mental illness. When Allie utters an ambiguous word like "Atlantean," or "bloard" or "wraing," she means both or all of its possible interpretations. Through such intentional violations, then, Allie is able to say far more with a given number of words than are those members of the speech act community who slavishly adhere to the Cooperative Principle. It is this reinvigoration of language, this return to what Percy has called "the first Edenic world of the sign user" (LC 90) that will make such worn-out words as love and marriage meaningful once again.

Within the context of Will's and Allie's "new language," however, such words must not be uttered prematurely. There must first be created a solid objective correlative for them to designate. Will kisses Allie, and together they attempt to articulate their feelings for one another:

> "Is it possible that there is such a life?"
> "As what?"
> "As a life of smiling ease with someone else and
> the sweetness for you deep in me and play and frolic
> and dear sweet love the livelong day, even at four
> o'clock in the afternoon turning the old yellow green-
> glade lonesomeness into a being with you at ease not a
> being with you at unease?"
> "Yes, it's possible."
> "Could such a thing be? What a miracle, and we
> haven't even mentioned the night."
> "No, we haven't."
> "Imagine ten hours of darkness every night."
> "Yes, imagine."
> "What will we do?"
> "Whatever you like."
> "Then you are fond of me?"
> "Yes."
> "Let us not speak of love yet. I'm not sure of the
> word."
> "No, we won't speak of love, though I feel that in
> the future we might." (328-9)

For all of their suspicion of the word "love," it is

abundantly clear that Will and Allie do love each other by

this point. They also need each other, and the precise

nature of the need is central to Percy's "unalienated"

conclusion to the novel:

> "Something else is also clear to me."
> "Over and beyond."
> "Yes, over and beyond. It is this. We need each
> other for different things."
> "What is the manifestation of the difference?"
> "I need you for hoisting and you need me for
> interpretation."
> "Say what?"
> "I fall down from time to time and you are very
> good at hoisting. It would be pleasant to have you
> around to give me a hand," he said.
> "The pleasure would be mine. In short, I'll do it.
> I am so happy about your pH."
> "By the same token, I remember everything and you
> forget most things. I'll be your memory. Then too, your
> language is somewhat unusual. But I understand it. In

fact, it means more than other people's. Thus, I could
both remember for you and interpret for you."
"Our lapses are not due to synapses."
"No, they are as they should be."
"The implication of your consideration is that
people think I'm crazy."
"That is correct. Moreover, for this very reason
they are coming for you this very afternoon." (329-30)

Will here articulates both the unique value of Allie's

unconventional language, and the realization that this

unconventionality is likely to continue to get her into

trouble with the speech act community. For even though we,

the readers, and Will Barrett sense the superiority of

Allie's language to that of the speech act community, the

community itself will never sense anything but its

difference, and will thus regard its speaker as different,

hence crazy, if Will does not interpret for her. Will's

acknowledgement of Allie's need for an interpreter paves the

way for the ultimate reintegration of this new Adam and Eve

with post-lapsarian society at large. Their new life will

not be like that envisioned by Lancelot--a sort of

institutionalized alienation in which people either live

within the New Order or die outside it. Will and Allie will

enjoy a fellowship with the speech act community, flawed and

bankrupt though it may be, and their new language will

presumably allow them to escape its more pernicious

influences. They will thus have the best of both worlds. The

social element of their future life together is evident in

Will's response to Allie's suggestion that they live in the

cave where Will conducted his cosmic experiment:

> He laughed. "No. We don't have to go in the cave.
> The cave is over and done with. We can live up here.
> How would you like to begin your life?"
> "It is time. How would you like to begin yours?"
> "I would like to."   (331)

Life together in the cave, idyllic though it may be, would

still involve alienation from society at large.

As a first step toward an acceptable reintegration with

society, Will decides to resume practicing the law, although

not at the materialistic corporate level where he was so

successful in his old life. He visits his lawyer/friend

Slocum and, after verifying Allie's legal rights protecting

her from further involuntary hospitalization, he offers his

services as a clerk while he is studying for the North

Carolina bar. Having thus taken steps toward reintegration

with society, Will has removed the last barrier standing

between him and his life with Allie. He returns to the hotel

where he has left her and they finally consummate their

relationship:

> When she came against him from the side, it was
> with the effect of flying up to him from below like a
> little cave bat and clinging to him with every part of
> her.
> They were lying on their sides facing each other.
> "Come here," he said.
> "I'm here."
> "Now."
> "Yes."

> There was an angle but it did not make trouble.
> Entering her was like coming home.
> "Oh my," she said.
> "Yes."
> "That's you for true." (339)

Having finally consummated their love relationship, though
not yet uttering the word "love," Will and Allie speak of
their future together. With his two lovers lying abed,
twined in each other's arms, Percy attempts to demonstrate a
spiritual/linguistic consummation to match the physical one.
To this end, he will have them converse in their new,
revivified language—to engage in a verbal intercourse that
is every bit as satisfying as their physical lovemaking.
Unfortunately, Percy is not altogether successful at this,
for at the very moment of their greatest intimacy, and
presumably of their greatest freedom from the stultifying
conventions of the speech act community, they slip into a
sort of adolescent love chatter that is largely devoid of
the very freshness that it is supposed to epitomize:

> "I'll tell you what let's do," he said.
> "What?"
> Let's get a house and live in it."
> "Okay. Can we make love like that much of the
> time?"
> "As much as you like."
> "For true?"
> "For true. Would you like to marry?"
> "Uh, to marry might be to miscarry."
> "Not necessarily. I'll practice law. You grow
> things in your greenhouse. We can meet after work. We
> can walk the Long Trail or go to the beach on your
> island. Then go to bed irregardless." (341)

Having supposedly rejuvenated language to the degree
that some of the old worn-out words actually mean something
once again, Will and Allie are now prepared to approach two
of the most worn-out words of all: marriage and love. After
admitting to Allie that "marriage in these times seems to be
a troubled, often fatal, arrangement," Will proposes to her
on the hope that together they might "not only survive it
but revive it" (343). And finally, six pages from the end of
the novel, they tackle the most troubling word of all; they
actually "speak of love" as they hoped they one day might
do:

> "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...."
> "Tell me the single truth, not two or more
> separate truths, unless separate truths are subtruths
> of the single truths. Is there one truth or several
> separate truths?"
> "Both."
> "How both?"
> "The single truth is I love you. The several
> subtruths are: I love your dearest heart. I also love
> your dear ass, which is the loveliest in all of
> Carolina. I want your ass, it and no other, and you for
> the rest of my life, you and no other. I also love to
> see you by firelight. I will always come to see you at
> four o'clock every afternoon if only to sit with you if
> it does not please you to make love--"
> "It pleases me. How about now?"
> "--because I love to sit by you and watch your
> eyes, which see everything exactly as it is. And to
> watch the line of your cheek. These are separate truths
> but are also subtruths of the single truth, I love
> you."   (355)

There is a certain sense of propriety, and even inevitability, about Will's declaration of "love" here. Certainly nowhere else in Percy's fiction up to this point would such a declaration have been possible. Will and Allie, and Percy, have worked very hard to pave the way for such a declaration, and have in a very real way earned the right to utter it. It is just unfortunate that when the climactic moment arrives, Percy does not handle it more effectively than he does. Will's and Allie's dialogue in the latter portions of the novel becomes progressively trite and at times just plain silly, sounding in places like a combination of Hemingway and a very bad romance novelist.

This difficulty that Percy has in preserving to the end of the novel the initial freshness of Will's and Allie's dialogue, while certainly distracting and even disappointing, does not seriously mar the novel as a whole; nor does it in any way nullify the "happy ending" of the novel. If anything, this semiotically problematic ending simply validates what Percy has been saying all along about the uneasy alliance between language and meaning in the postmodern world. It also serves as a warning to Will and Allie to be suspicious of too complete an integration with the speech act community, and to avoid overusing those words that they have just now earned the right to use.

Despite the linguistic problems with the novel's ending, The Second Coming does mark a definite advance, both

thematically and semiotically, over Percy's previous work.
The two lovers, Will and Allie, are unambiguously happy at
the novel's end, and it is through language, specifically
Allie's all-out assault on the Cooperative Principle, that
this happiness has been made possible. As for Allie's
recreation of language automatically rendering "possible"
all of those concepts that have been "impossible to say"
since The Moviegoer, however, no such optimistic claim can
reasonably be made for The Second Coming. About the most
that can be claimed for it is that it renders such profound
concepts as that represented by the word "love" merely
"improbable to say," and in the semiotic wasteland portrayed
throughout Percy's fiction, this is no small claim. It is,
in fact, about the best that we can hope for.

CHAPTER V

CENTURY OF DEATH:

THE THANATOS SYNDROME

Having effectively exhausted the fictional possibilities of manipulating his characters' verbal behavior within the parameters outlined in "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning," and achieved to his satisfaction the "refreshment" of language he has sought throughout his writing career, Percy shifts his attention from the spiritual/psychological implications of this or that character's verbal behavior within the human community at large to the much broader questions of whether or not this or that character actually belongs to the human community. From the beginning of his writing career, all of Percy's explorations of language, both fictional and expository, have been based upon the assumption that language itself is what distinguishes man from the lower animals--is what makes humankind "human." Man is, after all, most appropriately defined as "Homo loquens, man the talker" (MB 17). If, then, man loses this innate capacity for language, barring of course organic dysfunction in the speech producing area of the brain, does he not cease to qualify as a human being?

This question lies at the semiotic center of Percy's final novel _The Thanatos Syndrome_.

Despite its importance to the semiotic component of this book, this question does not receive nearly the amount of attention that other semiotic questions, say that of a speaker's sanity or insanity, receive in Percy's other novels. If _The Second Coming_ is Percy's "most densely semiotic novel," _The Thanatos Syndrome_ would have to be considered his least densely semiotic novel. In this suspenseful tale of conspiracy and intrigue, character takes a back seat to plot (Hobson _Understanding..._ 151), and the linguist in Percy gives way to the novelist, which makes for much easier reading than do the theory-laden narratives of some of his other novels. The semiotic question at hand, then, while certainly not unimportant, is important only as it relates to the conspiracy plot of the novel. In other words, while _The Second Coming_ is in a very real way "about" language, _The Thanatos Syndrome_ is about a scientific conspiracy that, among other things, robs its victims of their distinctly human capacity for language.

The title of this last of Percy's novels refers to the death-filled century that is now coming to a close--a one hundred year period in which "God agreed to let the Great Prince Satan have his way with men" (365). During this century, Satan has been very successful at getting his work done here on earth. Satan can take little direct credit for

this great success, however, for man has done most of the
work for him. As Father Smith explains to Tom More toward
the end of the novel, quoting the words of the Virgin Mary
as she spoke to six Yugoslavian boys during a recent
apparition:

> How did he do it? No great evil scenes, no demons--he's
> too smart for that. All he had to do was leave us
> alone. We did it. Reason warred with faith. Science
> triumphed. The upshot? One hundred million dead.   (365)

As in this novel's precursor, Love in the Ruins, science is
portrayed here as Satan's great tool for wreaking his havoc
upon earth, because science, for all the benefits it has
brought mankind as a whole, is based upon a very dangerous
premise--namely, that its ultimate goal is "the greatest
good, the highest quality of life for the greatest number"
(346). This premise, benign though it may be in theory, in
practice too often justifies a denial of the worth and
rights of the individual as a necessary means to its worthy
end. This destructive tendency of science is most succinctly
articulated by Father Smith, first to Tom More and then
later to a group of "local notables" gathered to celebrate
the reopening of the hospice of which he is to be in charge.
On both occasions he asks his auditors, "Do you know where
tenderness leads?" and then answers his own question,
"Tenderness leads to the gas chamber" (360), referring of
course to the most notorious instance of scientific

Benthamism in the twentieth century, the Nazi persecution of
the Jews. The benevolence of science toward mankind as a
whole all too often leads to the destruction of the
individual man. An age such as ours in which Reason and its
handmaiden science triumph over emotion and faith inevitably
ends in a massive cultural drift toward death, or a Thanatos
Syndrome. It is this syndrome onto which Tom More stumbles
at the beginning of this novel that is named for it.

The Thanatos Syndrome has of course manifested itself
in a variety of ways throughout the twentieth century. In
The Thanatos Syndrome, it takes the form of Project Blue
Boy, hatched in the minds of the scientists over at Fedville
as a solution to a wide array of social ills. In this
project, Heavy Sodium from the Grand Mer nuclear plant is
covertly being released into the water supply of Feliciana
Parish. The subjects of this experiment in social
engineering are participating without their consent or
knowledge, but so great are the potential benefits of this
project for society at large that these insignificant civil
rights violations can be simply overlooked; in other words,
the worthy end justifies not so worthy means. The project is
likened by its proponents to a "magic wand" that can
virtually eliminate crime in an affected area, and greatly
improve the intelligence of its residents in the process.
Bob Comeaux, co-director of Project Blue Boy, reels off some
of the impressive statistics to Tom More, in an effort to

make this potential trouble maker a part of the Fedville

team:

> "What would you say if I gave you a magic wand you
> could wave over there"--he nods over his shoulder
> toward Baton Rouge and New Orleans--"and overnight you
> could reduce crime in the streets by eighty-five
> percent?"
>> I wait, knowing there is more.
>> "Child abuse by eighty-seven percent?"
>> "You mean you've done it by--"
>> He waves me off. "We've done it--the numbers will
> be out next month--but let me finish. Teenage suicide
> by ninety-five percent. Ninety-five percent Tom."
>> "Yes?"
>> "Teenage pregnancy by eighty-five percent."
>> "Yes?"
>> "And here's some bad news for us shrinks." He
> winks at me. "Hospital admissions for depression,
> chemical dependence, anxiety reduced by seventy-nine
> percent."
>> "Yes?"
>> "And get this." He leans close. "AIDS by seventy-
> six percent." (191)

To this impressive list of statistics, Bob adds a couple

more noteworthy items:

> "New item: LSU has not lost a football game in three
> years, has not had a point scored against them, and get
> this, old Tom, has not given up a single first down
> this season. As you well know, nobody talks in
> Louisiana about anything else." A final poke. "News
> item, Tom--not as well known but quite as significant:
> L.S.U. engineering students no longer use calculators.
> They're as obsolete as slide rules. They've got their
> own built-in calculators." (155)

These and more societal benefits result from the addition of

minute quantities of Heavy Sodium to the community water

source--a process that is every bit as simple as the

addition of fluoride to the water, which, by the way, was

also implemented "without the permission or knowledge of the treated" (194).

Given these undeniably beneficial results of Project Blue Boy, what possible objection could anyone bring against it? Or, why would a Tom More risk his freedom and even his life to expose the project with the intention of putting an end to it? The drawbacks of Project Blue Boy have to do with the way in which its astounding results are produced, for it actually reaches into the brains of its subjects in order to alter their behavior patterns. Bob Comeaux explains the process to Tom:

> "The hypothesis, Tom, says Bob, speaking slowly, "is that at least a segment of the human neocortex and of consciousness itself is not only an aberration of evolution but also is the scourge and curse of life on this earth, the source of wars, insanities, perversions--in short, those very pathologies which are peculiar to Homo sapiens. As Vonnegut put it"--his arm is on the back of the seat; I feel his pointy, jokey finger sticking into my shoulder--"the only trouble with Homo sapiens is that parts of our brains are too fucking big. What do you say to that?"
> I don't say anything. He has gone elegaic. We're in the golden woods of old Vienna.
> "Homo sapiens sapiens," he murmurs, lilting." Or Homo sap sap." Reviving, he pokes me again. "We're not zapping the big brain, Tom. To put it in your terms, what we're doing is cooling the superego which, as you of all people know, can make you pretty miserable, and strengthening the ego by increasing endorphine production. No drugs, Tom--except our own--we're talking natural highs. Energies are freed up instead of being inhibited." (195)

One rather obvious drawback to the way in which the process is carried out involves the violation of the civil rights of

the program's subjects. As Tom More points out: "You're assaulting the cortex of an individual without the knowledge or consent of the assaultee" (193). Another less readily apparent, but far more insidious drawback involves the rather intangible question of the "selfhood" of the test subjects. In addition to ridding these subjects of the "pathologies which are peculiar to Homo sapiens," might not the project also be ridding them of other, less negative, features which are peculiar to Homo sapiens--in short, of all those features that distinguish man from other animals?

This is precisely the question that occurs to Dr. More as he begins to notice that many of his patients have lost all of the anxiety and depression that brought them to him in the first place, but seem to have lost something else in the bargain:

> Then are they, my patients, not better rather than worse? The answer is unclear. They're not on medication. They are not hurting, they are not worrying the same old bone, but there is something missing, not merely the old terrors, but a sense in each of her--her what? her self? (21)

Indeed, the self is exactly what is missing in each of these cases, and as Dr. More will quickly discover, it is Blue Boy that took it away.

Comparing cases to determine what sort of syndrome, if any, he is dealing with, Dr. More notes some similarities in "signs and symptoms." These similarities include: change of

personality, change in sexuality, language behavior, context

loss, and idiot-savant response (69). Among the most

significant of these shared symptoms are the changes in

language behavior:

> Change from ordinary talk in more or less complete
> sentences--"I feel awful today," "I am plain and simply
> terrified," "The truth is, Doc, I can't stand that
> woman"--to two- or three-word fragments--"Feel good,"
> "Come by me," "Over here," "Donna like Doc"--
> reminiscent of the early fragmentary telepathic
> sentences of a three-year-old, or perhaps the two-word
> chimp utterances described by primatologists--"Tickle
> Washoe," "More bananas." (69)

This change in language behavior proves to be common to all

subjects exposed to the Heavy Sodium, and provides More with

his most conclusive evidence that nothing less pernicious

than a loss of self is the end result of Project Blue Boy.

Along with their fears and anxieties, typically human

traits, the subjects of Blue Boy lose their capacity for

language, another typically human trait. They thus cease to

be any more "human" than is a chimp that has learned that a

given stimulus on its part (e.g. making the sign "banana")

will produce a desirable response from its environment (e.g.

the appearance of an actual piece of fruit).

When Tom accuses Bob Comeaux and his colleagues at

Fedville of "zapping" the test subjects and "regressing them

to lower primates," Bob dismisses the accusation as absurd

on the basis that "these same test subjects have an average

twenty percent increase in I.Q.--plus an almost total memory

recall which makes you and me look like dummies. We ain't
talking chimps, Tom" (192). So incredible, in fact, is the
memory recall of the test subjects that their thought
processes are more like those of a computer than of a human
brain. Tom has already noticed the impressive recall of his
Heavy Sodium-poisoned patients, and he has also noticed a
down side to their computer-like brain functions. One of his
patients recently complained to him about a co-worker of
hers who was out to get her. She called the co-worker "Fat
Alice," and when Dr. More talked to the woman's supervisor
about this Alice, he found out that she was not a person but
a "rather low-grade robot which vacuums the floor and
monitors the room air for particles" (79). Even though Fat
Alice was programmed to "speak," she was a long way from
being human, but for some reason this patient seemed not to
be able to make the distinction: "My impression: though Fat
Alice was programmed to 'speak,' Ella couldn't tell that she
was not human. She was responding to Fat Alice's speech like
another robot" (151). This patient was no more able to
distinguish a "speaking" computer from a speaking human
being than a computer would be. Thus she, like Blue Boy's
other test subjects, has paid a high price for her
superhuman recall and computational skills. It is true that
these test subjects now "think" like computers. For all
their many amazing and useful functions, however, computers

are not human beings, and neither are the unwitting subjects of Project Blue Boy.

Thus, the Utopia envisioned by the scientists over at Fedville has the one major flaw that it is achieved at the expense of its citizens' humanity. Though they lose their uniquely human fears, anxieties, and agressions, they must become as animals to do so. And though they gain the ability to recall any bit of information that has ever entered their brains, and to figure out complex mathematical equations without the aid of a calculator, they must become as machines to do so. Whether one views them as subhuman or as superhuman, the implication is the same in either case--the subjects are no longer human. It is this truth that Dr. More, with the help of his cousin/colleague/lover Dr. Lucy Lipscomb, brings to light just in time to prevent the program from being implemented on a national scale.

Project Blue Boy is, in the final analysis, just another scheme that would improve the lot of mankind in general at the expense of the individual man. The humanistic "tenderness" that motivates its creators is fundamentally no different from that which motivated the Nazis in their scheme to purify society of its unclean members. It is the same sort of tenderness that, as Father Smith points out, inevitably "leads to the gas chamber"--to genocide. The Nazis, however, only killed the Jews; this latest scheme is targeted at every man, woman, and child in America,

regardless of race or creed. And while it is true that
Project Blue Boy's victims would not cease to "live,"
according to a strictly organic definition of life, they
would cease to live as human beings. The end result of
Project Blue Boy then, were it to be carried out to the
extent envisioned by its creators, would be nothing less
catastrophic than a national genocide of the self.

Tom More's discovery of the true diabolical nature of
this governmental conspiracy, and his successful efforts to
expose and dismantle it before it can get beyond the
experimental stage, are assisted by clues hidden in the
verbal behavior of its victims. The subjects' verbal
behavior is not the only clue to their loss of self, nor is
it even the most prominent, as for instance Allie's verbal
behavior is the most prominent clue that she is "different"
from other people. The subjects' verbal behavior is merely
one symptom among many symptoms. The consideration of
language as a behavior, then, is far less important to the
thematic concerns of this novel than it is of Percy's other
novels, particularly The Second Coming. Furthermore, what
importance it does have is of such a general nature as not
to be readily explicable within the parameters set forth in
"Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning." In terms of postulate
1.52 ("A signal is received by an organism in an
environment. A sentence is received and uttered in a
world"), we can say that Project Blue Boy reduces human

beings in a world to organisms in an environment, but beyond
this most general of assertions, the parameters have very
little help to offer us. The reason for the overall
irrelevance of the parameters to the linguistic concerns of
the novel is quite simple. These parameters are designed to
describe, or elucidate, language behavior, and what we are
dealing with in the victims of Project Blue Boy simply does
not qualify as "language," any more than do the two-word
utterances of a trained chimp such as Washoe. And this is
precisely the point Percy is trying to make. The capacity
for language use is virtually synonymous with "humanity."
Project Blue Boy robs its subjects of this capacity.
Therefore, it robs them of their humanity. And this is
pretty nearly the extent of the semiotic theme of The
Thanatos Syndrome.

The inability of this last of Percy's novels to support
any but the most superficial semiotic reading certainly does
not reflect negatively upon its overall importance within
the Percy canon. It is a well-constructed novel, much easier
to read in fact than most of his other novels, and addresses
issues that are every bit as philosophically and
theologically profound as those addressed in his other
novels. It is just not as semiotically self-conscious as
some of his other novels. And after the densely semiotic The
Second Coming, a shift in primary focus on Percy's part is
certainly understandable. Having in his penultimate novel

taken his semiotic concerns as far as they were capable of being taken in a work of fiction, Percy uses this last novel to address more directly the very general question that has lurked in the heart of every one of his novels: Why is it that the human condition in the twentieth century, for all its physical advantages over preceding eras, is in a very fundamental way inferior to that of any other age in which man has lived? Percy's answer to this question involves, but transcends, the semiotic questions that have occupied so much of his attention up to this point. The Thanatos Syndrome, hatched in the mind of Satan and sanctioned by God himself, is a century-long cultural love affair with, and drift toward, death. This syndrome is at the root of virtually all of the problems that we think of as peculiar to "modern" existence, including those with language. The twentieth century, the century of death, however, is rapidly drawing to a close, and in his last novel Percy invites us to speculate on mankind's chances of, first, surviving to the end of this century, and then carving out a meaningful existence for himself in the century to come. Whatever may be the numerous variables involved in man's physical survival to the year 2000 and beyond, the relative meaningfulness or meaninglessness of his existence will largely be contingent upon a single factor: what he does with the magic prism through which he views his world, and his world views him in return--language.

CONCLUSION

On several occasions throughout his career, Percy indicated that he considered his work in semiotics to be fundamentally more important than his fiction (e.g Lawson and Kramer 221, Abadi-Nagy 54). This opinion, while understandable (Percy was publishing essays on language theory long before he published his first novel), could not be farther from the truth. For all the time and effort he devoted to linguistic theory, he accomplished very little in this field that could be considered original. Percy contributed to linguistics primarily by synthesizing already existing ideas, and presenting them in a coherent, fairly accessible form, although even some of his syntheses are flawed by oversimplification or inaccuracy.

Regardless of how he viewed his own career, then, we cannot objectively agree with his summation of it. Percy's fiction is far and away more important than his linguistic work, and will undoubtedly outlast it--it is what he will be remembered for. Insignificant and unhailed as Percy may be in the highly specialized field of linguistics, however, Percy has the advantage over his peers of a second medium, in addition to expository prose, through which to present and even work out his theories on language. His linguistic

interests really come to life in his fiction rather than his essays. Certainly his novels are about more than just linguistics, but they are far richer for their creator's abiding interest in language.

Percy's linguistic interests, evident to some degree in all of his novels, contribute in a variety of ways to the development of their more overt thematic concerns. One of the more interesting aspects of this symbiotic relationship between linguistics and fiction is what Percy does with the language behavior of his characters, which he uses both to illustrate and embody important characteristics of the characters and the world in which they live, and to actually work out linguistic problems that have in many cases eluded solution in his essays on language. Percy's thematic use of his characters' language behavior, along with his awareness of their language as a behavior, becomes more pronounced with each succeeding novel. This finally reaches a climax in The Second Coming, where he uses Allison Huger's highly unconventional language to resolve a dilemma that has troubled him from the beginning of his fictional career: Given the "worn-out" condition of language in the postmodern world, and the consequent incapacity of this language to communicate meaningful concepts such as "religion" and "love," how can a person experience such meaningful, though inarticulable, concepts without withdrawing into silent isolation from his fellow man?

Percy's growing awareness of the fictional possibilities inherent in his characters' verbal behavior, and the solution to the articulability dilemma that this awareness makes possible, can be traced with the aid of Peirce-Percyan semiotic theory, particularly as it is distilled into the "loose list of postulates" in "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning." By viewing the characters' verbal behavior in light of these postulates, we can, first, absolve Percy of the frequently levelled charge of willful and needless ambiguity in the endings of his first four novels. Given the worn out state of the medium he was dealing with, he ended them as unambiguously as he in good conscience could. We can also follow Percy as he gropes toward his resolution of the dilemma of articulability. In The Moviegoer, he throws up his hands and declares simply: "It is impossible to say." He does not show much more hope in The Last Gentleman, in which signs of meaning impinge upon Will Barrett from all sides but are invisible to him because of his inability to penetrate the veil of language in which these signs are embedded. In his next two novels, Love in the Ruins and Lancelot, however, he discovers the glimmer of a solution in the relationship between the normative dimension of language and the way in which a community views the adherence or nonadherence of its members to the norms. Finally, in The Second Coming, Percy realizes the full thematic potentialities of this relationship. He

uses the linguistic deviance, that in <u>Love in the Ruins</u> and
<u>Lancelot</u> served only to isolate speakers from their speech
act communities, to bring about a spiritual and even social
rebirth--a second coming. Through Allie's "crazy" language,
one man and one woman are taken back to what Percy has
called "the first edenic world of the sign user," and in
this new Eden they can live and love and, even more
importantly, speak of love. So completely does <u>The Second
Coming</u> resolve Percy's language dilemma, at least to the
extent that it is capable of being resolved in the bankrupt
postmodern world, that in his final novel <u>The Thanatos
Syndrome</u>, he simply leaves it behind, and in fact abandons
language itself as a primary thematic concern, using it only
to illustrate a much larger point.

A major thematic interest of Percy's can thus be traced
through his fiction with the aid of his linguistic theory,
and, likewise, a major linguistic interest can be
illuminated through an analysis of his more overt thematic
concerns. So, while it is difficult to agree with Percy's
belief in the superiority of his linguistic work over his
fiction, it it is even more difficult to imagine what his
fiction would have been like had he not engaged in his
linguistic work. As with few other writers, save his icons
Sartre, Camus, and Marcel, Percy's novels combine ideas and
concrete details--theory and plot line--in a way that
enriches each for the other's presence. This combination in

his work finally makes Percy both an important linguist and
an important novelist, where without it he might be neither.

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