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A "Kierkegaardian landscape" in Walker Percy's *The second coming*

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**A "KIERKEGAARDIAN LANDSCAPE" IN
WALKER PERCY'S THE SECOND COMING**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Melvin Donald Hartwell-Berry

May 2000

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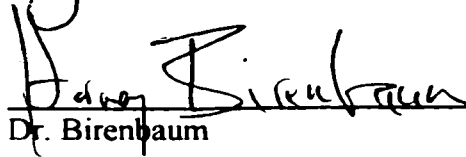
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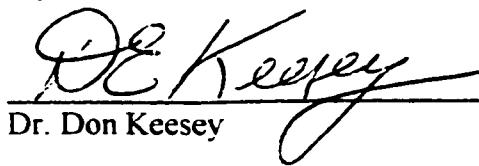
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ABSTRACT

A “KIERKEGAARDIAN LANDSCAPE” IN WALKER PERCY’S THE SECOND COMING

by Melvin Donald Hartwell-Berry

This thesis addresses the topic of Walker Percy’s use of Soren Kierkegaard’s theory of the “Stages of Existence” within The Second Coming. It examines how Percy appropriated Kierkegaard’s concept of the self’s progression through these three stages: Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious by creating a metaphorical landscape that corresponded to each stage. Lastly, it asserts that the protagonist in The Second Coming, Will Barrett, travels through each stage and arrives at a deeper knowledge of himself and his place in the world.

Research on this subject revealed that though the Percy and Kierkegaard connection had been critically examined, it had been limited to Percy’s early fiction. By applying Kierkegaardian concepts to a later work, there is evidence that Kierkegaard’s influence continued well into Percy’s later career. In light of such knowledge, it is important for scholars to reexamine Percy’s later works to uncover this connection.

IN DEDICATION

To my mother and father, Leonard and Rose Berry, whose wisdom and integrity, love of learning, and creative imagination have been my constant inspiration.

This would have been impossible without you.

Thank you.

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And he was rich—yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night
Went home and put a bullet in his head.

“Richard Cory”
—Edward Arlington Robinson

But surely it is fair to say that when a man becomes depressed,
falls down in a sand trap, and decides to shoot himself,
something has gone wrong with the man, not the world.

The Second Coming
—Walker Percy

He has not chosen himself, like Narcissus he has fallen
in love with himself. Such a situation has not infrequently
ended in suicide.

Fear and Trembling
—Soren Kierkegaard

Introduction

On a fine October Sunday morning in North Carolina, on a golf course’s winding emerald fairway, deep in the shady woods of the Appalachian mountains, Will Barrett, the protagonist of Walker Percy’s fifth novel, The Second Coming, is contemplating putting a bullet in his brain.

The problem posed by Percy in the novel is complex, for it attempts to clarify why a wealthy, recently widowed, retired lawyer from a prestigious Wall Street law firm, recently returned home to North Carolina, would want to kill himself. For Percy, this problem is not an illustration of dementia, or an isolated instance of depression; rather, Percy uses it to picture the plight inherent in the experiences of modern man. Barrett's problem is important because, in more than simply a symbolic manner, it is our problem too. What Barrett confronts in The Second Coming is not really death, or even how some might commit suicide. Instead, Barrett's confrontation is with life—with "living," and discovering a reason to go on living when all the stable supports of life have seemingly been kicked out from beneath him. Thus, the problem that Barrett faces is a choice, either to find a reason to continue living in a world full of vague frustration and broken promises, or to choose the only alternative to life—the end of life—death.

In another way Percy's novel is about a journey; a pilgrimage that Barrett makes in search of himself. In following Barrett in this search, we are more than mere spectators. We make a journey of our own. By following in Barrett's footsteps, we, too, must ask probing questions and experience the same ambiguous denials. In the end, we realize with reluctance that life's meanings are complicated matters that will require our utmost attention. By taking this journey with Barrett, we come to know both Barrett's subjectivity and ours. In many ways, Barrett's search is like Dante's circular descent into Hell and eventual ascent into Heaven; it is progressive, though it too must descend before ascending. This "self" that Barrett is searching for has, according to Percy and other Existentialist writers, been lost. It is a self that has become hidden under a suffocating

coat of social conformity—a fine veneer of social expectation and materialism—that conceals the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of the individual.

Will Barrett has fallen down while playing golf. It is a game at which he has formerly excelled, but he now finds himself unable to play with any degree of competence. Barrett's life has become like his golf game—just as his shots are flying off in all directions, so too, are his thoughts, perceptions, and desires. What he finds as he pursues these “errant drives” is something he did not anticipate—he finds himself. By recalling significant memories and episodes from his past, and by confronting and questioning his present companions' beliefs and assumptions, Barrett discovers that his life can be more than a game and that existence is no trivial matter.

Before embarking on the rest of this thesis, I want to lay out its organizational framework. First of all, in the introduction, I wish to substantiate Percy's theoretical indebtedness to Existentialism and how this movement became a touchstone in both his personal life and within his fiction. Second, I want to clarify Percy's debt to—Soren Kierkegaard—and how his ideas have influenced Percy's fiction. Third, I want to address why I believe this connection between Percy and Kierkegaard is important by explaining how the ideas and beliefs of these two men remain relevant in today's world. Indeed, I want to show why our society is more in need of these ideas than ever before.

Percy's Existentialism: A Personal and Fictional Reality

As most readers of his fiction know, Percy was greatly influenced by Existentialism. All of his novels deal with “human values” and humankind's quest for

“ultimate meaning.” This quest for meaning and value is a fundamental concept in Existentialism—as well as other philosophies. As humans, our understanding of these pivotal concepts of “value” and “meaning” will directly influence how we view ourselves, each other, our place in time, and the cosmos itself. Because he admitted an existential orientation, Percy has been labeled an Existentialist writer. It is a label that Percy came to dislike later in his career because it was too often either misapplied or misunderstood and thus obscured his true views. Nevertheless, when rightly understood, the ideas and concepts that are inherently a part of an Existential understanding to life are the same ideas and concepts that we find everywhere in Percy’s fiction. Thus, though Percy disliked being labeled an Existentialist writer, it is a term that fits his presentation of the world of human problems and solutions.

A host of Existentialist writers have influenced Percy’s thought and development. Gabriel Marcel’s concept of “intersubjectivity” was an important philosophical revelation to Percy, and one that inspired Percy to contribute to the debate by offering his own views on the subject in a nonfiction essay called “The Man on the Train.” Another writer whose work interested and influenced Percy was Jaques Maritain. His firm Catholicism and staunch belief in the necessity of a moral philosophy appealed to Percy, for Maritain criticized the relativistic attitudes and actions of the world and provided a more stable compass by which to chart one’s life. However, the person most responsible for Percy’s gradual shift in world view, and whose philosophy most infuses his fiction, is the writer and theologian Soren Kierkegaard (Tolson 208). In an interview with B.R. Dewey, which was conducted with the explicit intent of determining the Kierkegaardian

influences in Percy's fiction, Percy admitted that though he was a Catholic writer living in Louisiana, "the man to whom I owe the greatest debt is this Protestant theologian" (Dewey 297). Who was, of course, Danish. So, it's important that we closely examine the "debt" Percy believed he owed to Kierkegaard and how, within his fiction, Percy attempted to repay his debt.

Percy's Debt to Kierkegaard: A Reason to Live and Write

Percy's indebtedness to Kierkegaard can be felt on two related levels. The first level is in Percy's personal life, the second within his fictional creations. Kierkegaard's ideas helped transform Percy's perspectives on humanity, on the importance of the individual, and on how society attempts to confine the individual within a selected sphere of existence. Kierkegaard's concept of the "stages of existence" also provided Percy with a schema with which to view the progressive nature of both the individual and the collective evolution of humanity. However, according to Kierkegaard, this "evolutionary" progression is by no means inevitable on either the individual or collective level. Kierkegaard's ideas were also instrumental in helping Percy understand the significance of living responsibly, making commitments, and understanding the decisiveness that is inherent in making choices. This personal indebtedness to Kierkegaard becomes even more apparent when we look specifically at the situations and problems the young Percy encountered. Thus, what I wish to do now is examine a time in Percy's personal life when Kierkegaard's ideas became more than philosophical speculation, but rather,

became the means to examine his personal sense of angst, and anxiety, and his need for self-questioning.

The various uncertainties within Percy's life when he first encountered Kierkegaard's works undoubtedly contributed to the impact that these works had upon him. In his illuminating biography of Percy, Pilgrim in the Ruins, Jay Tolson suggests that Percy may have begun to read Kierkegaard while he was recuperating from his first bout with tuberculosis at Lake Saranac in upstate New York (174). For several reasons, this was a time of deep personal crisis in Percy's life. First, his health was in dire jeopardy. He had contracted tuberculosis while working as an intern in pathology at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. As a result he was sent, with other interns from the same hospital, to a sanitarium to begin his treatments.

Besides his concern with his own physical health at this time, Percy was continually ruminating on the "appropriateness" of his chosen vocation—he was distinctly worried that he was not "truly cut out to practice medicine" (Tolson 161, 177). He had gone to Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons upon graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While still an undergraduate, he had become interested in the precision that the scientific model extolled. He was attracted to the rigorous and demonstrable proofs that science required in proving its hypotheses. For Percy medical science was an elegant system that used a consistent methodology to dissect humanity's problems, it then prescribed various cures according to these demonstrable assumptions founded on reason. However, probably before, but definitely by the time Percy arrived at Lake Saranac, he became increasingly

less convinced that “science” could adequately cure, or answer, humanity’s deeper ills and questionings. Instead, he began to believe that there was much that medicine and science had left out in their neatly deterministic explanation of man and reality (Tolson 148). These doubts, along with his concerns regarding his deteriorating health, contributed greatly to Percy’s general sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

It was also at this time that Percy’s surrogate father—Uncle Will (his father’s brother) died. William Alexander Percy, author of Lanterns on the Levee, had been a lawyer, a published poet, and a father-figure to Will since the day Will’s biological father had committed suicide in Alabama. Thus, Percy for the first time in his adult life was without a significant “paternal” influence. Since we know that many of Percy’s male characters within his novels have troubled relationships with their fathers, this sudden lack of a father-figure in his own life must have reiterated Percy’s sense of isolation at Lake Saranac.

Thus, with these concerns it is no wonder that Percy was brooding and pensive. He was surrounded on every side with the ghostly specter of death. It is not surprising then, given the circumstances, that Percy’s reading of various Existential writers was a moving and influential experience—since they too were concerned with issues of life and death, and the various “meanings” we construct out of our existence.

Since Percy was engaged in this life and death struggle with tuberculosis, it was only natural that he should ask various questions that explored these matters: questions like, “What meaning does life have?” “Is there a purpose to existence?” “Does the individual matter?” “What is an authentic kind of existence?” All of these questions are

related to the fundamental crisis that Percy was undergoing during his convalescence at Lake Saranac. Essentially, it was an epistemological crisis. Percy was trying to determine what he could believe in, where he could place his “faith” and “trust.” He was looking an answer to the age-old question, “How should I live my life?” His “anxiety” is easily documented. Tolson, speaking of Percy’s reading at Trudeau Sanatorium says:

[He] found consolation in the fiction that featured lonely, cut-off, and even somewhat aberrant types. And ... at Saranac Lake all he knew was that he found himself reading Kafka’s bleak parables and Dostoevsky’s novels of tormented spiritual seekers with something close to joy—as well as a kindred sympathy. (168)

When Shelby Foote came to see Percy at Smithwick’s, a cottage where he stayed while awaiting an opening at Trudeau, Foote says he arrived and found “Walker flat on his back and holding onto those books for dear life” (Tolson 307). Foote’s description is a clear depiction of a man in a state of agitation and inner turmoil. Percy had begun to realize that the essence and root of his current faith—“science”—could not provide adequate answers for the more subjective and individualistic problems that humanity experiences. Percy himself refers to Kierkegaard’s early influence on his life. He says:

... what was important about Kierkegaard to me was that he was a man who was trying to open up a whole new area of knowledge to me in the most serious way, in the most precise way, and quite as serious as any science, or more serious! And, of course, it was religious, too. This was a far cry from the other alternative that I had always read about, that the alternative to science is art, play, emotion. I saw for the first time through Kierkegaard how to take the alternative system seriously, how to treat it as a serious thinker, as a serious writer. Before that I would have simply seen it as just religion or emotion. I hadn’t seen any way to think about it. Kierkegaard gave me a way to think about it. (Tolson 282)

Percy's comment that Kierkegaard's influence was religious is important because it signals the beginning of a profound shift in Percy's philosophical and ideological world view. It is the beginning of his break with the scientific materialism that he had embraced since his early high school days in Greenville, South Carolina (Tolson, 98). It indicates a movement towards a more integrated and holistic picture of man—and one that included a “transcendent,” or spiritual, perspective.

A book of seminal importance to Percy, and also one that helped codify his new thinking, was Kierkegaard's A Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Here Kierkegaard sums up his most important theory, one that many philosophers credit with forming the beginning of Existentialism. Kierkegaard called this theory the “Stages of Existence.” The first two of his three stages, the Aesthetic and the Ethical, were described in a prior book called The Stages on Life's Way. However, in his later book, A Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard introduces the aspects of the final stage, the Religious, and also fleshes out in more detail the prior two stages. Percy admits that he did not have an easy time reading Kierkegaard—not many people do—but he persisted because he felt that the Danish philosopher had something essential to say—a message as valid today as it was over two hundred years ago. In his interview with Dewey, Percy describes the persistence he exhibited in his reading of Kierkegaard. He says:

The whole history of my reading of Kierkegaard consists of repeated attempts of reading then frustration, leaving it alone and then coming back to it and reading it again. I'd read Postscript then go back and try to read Repetition, because in Postscript he would sum up all the works and the different stages. I would read about the stages and then go back and try to read Kierkegaard's book, Stages on Life's Way—which I never did like as well as the description of the stages in Postscript. So really Postscript was

a kind of oasis. I'd go back there to get straight on things, gather more energy and get up the nerve—[to]then take out into the desert to try and figure out Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings. (279)

For Percy, then, Kierkegaard became a touchstone; his ideological framework, both philosophically and theologically, became an oasis from which he could survey both himself and the modern world. Within this framework, Percy looked anew at man's innate and inherent individuality, examining what it meant to be a person, what it meant to choose and decide, and what was meant by the human predicament. All of these things provided a frame that Percy could build upon within his fiction (Dewey 288). In his interview with Percy, Dewey concluded that, "when the stages [aesthetic, ethical, and religious] are applied to the novels they fit like a glove" (297).

Kierkegaard's influence in Percy's Fiction

This brings us to the second level of Percy's indebtedness to Kierkegaard. Namely, how Percy integrates Kierkegaard's Philosophy into his fiction. Dewey's assertion that the "stages" fit Percy's fiction like a "glove" is important for two reasons. First, it affirms Percy's overt willingness to point us to the "source" of much of his inspiration. Many authors are secretive about the foundations of their creative endeavors, not wanting to be seen as the mouthpieces for someone else's cause or theory. However, Percy has willingly admitted the influence of Kierkegaard's philosophy on his own creative work. Why? I believe it is because he did not want us to miss the correlation that his work shares with Kierkegaard. This connection is fundamental to the entire corpus of Percy's fiction, and Percy's comments to Dewey lend this view ample

credibility. If it is true that Kierkegaard's ideas have played a pivotal role in Percy's novels, as Dewey states, then there should be plenty of critical attention being paid to this important connection. However, that's not the case, most of the scholarly articles commenting on the connection between Percy and Kierkegaard have focused either on Percy's first novel, The Moviegoer, or his fourth, Lancelot. This attention to the Kierkegaardian connection does not extend to all of his works. Thus, the material within Percy's later novels deserves a closer analysis regarding how he used Kierkegaard as a "frame to build on" (Dewey 288).

I therefore want to investigate how Percy incorporates Kierkegaard's Philosophy into what is arguably his greatest novel, The Second Coming, by asking which concepts he uses, where, and how? I assert that Percy has created a "landscape paradigm" in The Second Coming that corresponds to Kierkegaard's concept of the three stages of existence. Each of the three stages is a hierarchical way station on the journey to self-actualization, which if followed diligently results in full person-hood and a healthy understanding of one's position in the community and cosmos. Percy has crafted The Second Coming to explore these three stages, beginning with the Aesthetic, moving next to the Ethical, and finally ending with the Religious. It is through the person of Will Barrett that we experience these various stages. Through his eyes we gain an awareness of the world—its various deceptions and disillusionment—and the despair which seems such a dominant part of the human experience. However, as we journey with Barrett into and through the "stages of existence," we are exposed to the "trials" that life presents and the "revelations" it offers, both to him and to us. And, in the end, like Will, we too must

accept the fragility of our human condition with the knowledge that there are no “unambiguous revelations.” Faith, in all its wonderful obscurity, remains our only foundation. In coming to this realization, there is an acceptance of life’s mysterious ways, and though our lives may be bound by limitations, there is the hope that our lives will never be determined by them.

Based on Kierkegaard’s ideas, I will organize this study in three parts. Each part will correspond to one of Kierkegaard’s three stages: the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. At the beginning of each part, I will briefly explain the key aspects within that stage and show how Kierkegaard sought to use them as a basis for explaining human behavior. I will also explain the role of “gaming” within our culture and show why it has become such a pervasive activity. Finally, I will explain why Percy sought to use the game of golf as a metaphor for a spiritual journey.

An Overview of Kierkegaard’s Three Stages of Existence

Since we will be looking at each of the three stages of existence only as we encounter them in The Second Coming, let me introduce their basic themes here as a way of previewing their dominant characteristics and how these traits take particular form in The Second Coming. The first stage, the Aesthetic, corresponds to the “playing surface” of the golf course—the fairways, the bunkers, and the greens. In this stage playing games is the dominant activity, and there are all sorts of games being played—mental, verbal, and social--as well as the game of golf. In the first section of my thesis I will attempt to explain the philosophical connections between Kierkegaard’s concept of aestheticism

and Percy's evocation and use of it by examining how Barrett and other players conduct themselves on the golf course. In the second section, the Ethical, we will travel off the course and into what is known in golf as the "out-of-bounds." Within The Second Coming, and the game of golf, this is the area off the course and over the fence that separates the manicured surface of the fairways from the wild growth and underbrush found in the out-of-bounds. Using the golf course's landscape as a visual metaphor, this area corresponds to Kierkegaard's idea of the Ethical stage, a place where "games" cease to matter and life suddenly takes on new meanings and significance. The third and final stage is the Religious. In the novel The Second Coming this stage corresponds metaphorically to the "cave" that runs under both the out-of-bounds and the golf course. It is a place into which Barrett descends in order to confront and question God, and if God chooses to be silent, then to await his own death. Later in the novel, the characteristics associated with the cave—the values and understanding of the religious stage—begin to infuse and influence the whole environment. This is accomplished through Will's own transformed perspectives and attitudes. Thus the Religious stage, at the end of the novel, is less a "place" than a "state of mind" integrated into Will's personality and the actions he decides to take.

Essentially, I believe that Percy has used the three Kierkegaardian stages as a way to illustrate the personal pilgrimage of one fictional individual, Will Barrett. In this way, Percy is using Barrett as an "everyman." Barrett is the guide who must lead the way, who must blaze the trail for others to follow. We are meant to read the "signs" that he leaves along the way. His questions, perplexities, and concern with the strange world

around him provide us with a model for how to proceed along the “stages of life’s way.” Though no single journey is ever exactly like the one that will follow, the destination is the same. The place that both Percy and Kierkegaard are pointing to is a place where the individual matters more than a system, a place where humanity’s relatedness is both horizontal and vertical—to man and to God. And finally, this place is, in many ways, a return to that which we were created to be—both flesh and spirit.

Why Ideas Matter: Kierkegaard vs. Hegel—the Individual vs. the Crowd

Before launching into a full-scale investigation of the three Kierkegaardian stages as illustrated in The Second Coming, I must address two topics of concern regarding Kierkegaard’s position and reputation as a philosopher. If we are to understand Percy’s use of Kierkegaard’s concepts, we must be aware of Kierkegaard’s particular philosophical views and how these views have been perceived by others.

Kierkegaard’s ideas have, at times, been criticized for promoting what some detractors have called an unhealthy “irrationalism.” However, if one accepts Kierkegaard’s theological and philosophical presuppositions, then his so-called irrationalism becomes the logical root and outgrowth of his first principles. Namely, there is a transcendent reality behind the screen of human action and thought. Naturally, this transcendent reality behind our supposed “objective” (i.e. scientific and materialistic) reality cannot be proven. If one refuses to accept the notion of a reality beyond scientific detection, but instead affirms a reality that is only what our senses can perceive, or our inventions can detect, then there will be a wide gulf of disagreement between

Kierkegaard's views and those of the materialist. However, the claim that Kierkegaard's ideas are irrational is applicable only within a closed universal system where nothing is admitted that does not have materialist cause or basis. Only within such a strictly defined and deterministic universe, where one assumes that nothing exists outside our five senses or within the purview of our technology to detect, can the claim of irrationalism be made against Kierkegaard. The disagreement between Kierkegaard and his critics is one based on their different presuppositions—those underlying assumptions which we call “first principles” that guide and restrict our perceptions and ultimately form the basis of our world views.

The second aspect of Kierkegaard's philosophical reputation I wish to address is related to the first—Kierkegaard's attack on G.W. Hegel and his theory of dialectical materialism as the basis for explaining human history and societal evolution. Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegel's ideology that reality is a synthesis of two opposing, though related, forces—“thesis” and “antithesis”—is grounded in his own theological assumptions. For Hegel, human reason is the engine of human progress. Hegel does postulate a “divine involvement” in humanity's affairs; however, it is an ephemeral and vacuous involvement, one that requires little active involvement on God's part, and in the end does little to aid or impede humanity's majestic march toward supremacy or even deification. For Hegel, the goal of history is “absolute knowledge” (Taylor, Journeys to Selfhood 186). Humanity, as it progresses, has within its own power the ability to fulfill or annul this “progressive knowledge.” In Hegel's dialectical system, the tensions of human existence, which are only mental constructions that human minds have created,

are harmonized by reconciling these apparent contradictions and tensions. This is done through attaining more and more knowledge, which is made possible by an ever more efficient system of specialization. It is only through reconciling these fictitious dualities that humankind can be delivered from the bondage of internal divisiveness. This, of course, is absolute anathema to Kierkegaard—nothing could be more diametrically opposed to his own first principles and philosophical position. Kierkegaard believed that since man was both flesh and spirit—an innate duality—our internal divisiveness is inevitable and as such it is an inherent characteristic of our primal existence. If we reduce this tension in man’s being, we do actual harm to the process that God has established, which He put in place to aid in the shaping and constructing of an individual into a living spirit. For Kierkegaard, the duality of existence between the is/ought, flesh/spirit, and God/man are perverse though necessary polarities that provide people with the intrinsic motivation to contemplate and reflect upon their own existence. Kierkegaard believed these polarities would eventually bring humanity to a place of existential choice—the either/or of human existence. The division between these two great thinkers comes down to this: Kierkegaard believed that humanity was dualistic in nature—spirit and flesh—made of both earthen clay and heavenly ether (admittedly a dangerous mixture producing both “demonic” and “angelic” results); whereas, Hegel believed that humanity was monistic—a material singularity—self-contained and thus able to effect its own salvation by the proper application of its reason.

The differences inherent in these views are dramatic. This becomes especially apparent when each thinker’s views are extended into the realms of human conduct: self-

interest, and decision-making (i.e. into human history). It is then that their intrinsic “differences” are amplified and the consequences of their views made plain. Percy believed, as I do, that today we are living in a “Hegelian age.” Our world places much more emphasis on the ideas of objective and dispassionate analysis, synthesis, progress, evolution, reason, materialism, and the collective, than on the Kierkegaardian qualities that promote inwardness, the subjective, the intuitional, and the spiritual. Our world works hard to marginalize the idea that the subjective can also be true, and that the crowd (majority) can be wrong. We have deified the very notion of “fitting in” to such an extent that it is marketed every day all over the world. There is a systematic effort on the part of large and influential corporations and the mass media to totalize our cultural experience, to make it so seamless and interwoven that all cultural experiences will seem the same. Thus, the system—not the individual—has become the organism that defines what is real, and subsequently, what is true. Even our democratic and American society, which has since its inception prided itself on promoting freedom for the individual, is now, on the surface, essentially Hegelian; the subjective is submerged in the objective, and the distinctiveness of the individual is lost in a sea of clamoring voices all wanting the same thing—“satisfaction.” Yet, they all seem to be saying that satisfaction is found in being like everyone else, or in achieving a materialistic success. Kierkegaard’s claim is different; he affirms that knowledge of the truth comes from the inside and that only through reflection and inwardness can we arrive at an awareness of our privilege and responsibility as true selves. Only by listening to and responding to the inner voice of our spiritual nature can we reach a level of individual wholeness.

Percy's Critique of America's Gaming Culture

Before proceeding to Kierkegaard's Aesthetic stage and explaining some of its salient points in relation to The Second Coming, I want to discuss the issue of "gaming" within our culture and specifically the game of golf and why Percy chose it as a central metaphor. Western society is now in the grip of a "game playing" frenzy. Everything has been turned into a game—politics, religion, education, and even human relationships. Everyone strategizes to improve his or her respective position in the hope of beating the opposition, coming out ahead, and thus insuring themselves a place in the winner's circle. There is perhaps no more comprehensive or totalizing metaphor in our postmodern world than the one affirming that "life is a game." This metaphor emphasizes the competitive nature of existence, and the ephemeral quality of life—that, after all, in the end it is all just a game. In consequence, this metaphor challenges the notion that there are any ideals binding upon the individual or worth extolling as virtues. Gaming has become a dominant way in which to see and understand both individual human behavior and the collective actions of institutions.

In The Master Game, Robert S. DeRopp explains how the gaming impulse can be either "high" or "low." He illuminates this division by emphasizing the "aim" for which games are played. This "aim" determines whether the game is "high" or "low." In low games a particular object is sought. For example, the aim in the game "Hog in a Trough" is material accumulation. In this game the virtues are greed, selfishness, ruthlessness, and cunning. Another low game is the "Moloch game." This is a game played for power.

DeRopp says that this is the most dangerous of all games because it is pathological, for it knows no bounds or limits and is thus never satisfied (14). In contrast to these low games are the high games, and these are played with a completely different aim. They have as their object a personal “awareness” or “insight.” DeRopp prefers to call them meta-games, for they emphasize the interaction of the inner-self with the outer world. The kinds of games that DeRopp classifies as high games include, the “Art game,” which he describes as a search for self-expression and truth. Also, the “Science game,” which DeRopp explains as a search for knowledge. Finally, what he considers the highest of all games is the “Religion game.” In this game the quest is to gain self-enlightenment, the maximization of one’s inherent potential, and a sense of full integration with all that is known or that exists. DeRopp defines the Religion game in this way:

The basic idea underlying all the great religions is that man is asleep, that he lives amid dreams and delusions, that he cuts himself off from the universal consciousness (the only meaningful definition of God) to crawl into the narrow shell of his own personal ego. To emerge from this shell, to regain the union with the universal consciousness, to pass from the darkness of the ego-centered illusion into the light of the non-ego, this was the real aim of the Religion Game as defined by the great teachers. (19)

Like DeRopp, Percy emphasizes the attitude or aim with which the game is played. In this way Percy’s description of golf within The Second Coming is both a high game and a low game—it all depends on who is playing and for what reason.

However, the game of golf is also unique and since Percy was a life long player of the game it is reasonable to assume that he was aware of its finer qualities. Tolson states that “Walker himself was a member of the Southern Club, the Roebuck Club, and a variety of other athletic clubs” and also that he “would later explore the peculiar moral

dimensions of the game” (27). In Michael Murphy’s book Golf in the Kingdom he quotes in the introduction an old Scottish golf proverb which accentuates golf’s uniqueness by asking a question, “the game was invented a billion years ago, don’t you remember?” (ix). Such a question conflates human existence and the game’s existence—and implies the “eternality” of both. Though many recent books have been written on golf’s “spirituality,” one of the first was written Arnold Haultain in 1908 called The Mystery of Golf. In it Haultain details some of the unique traits that golf possess:

Golf is a test, not so much of the muscle, or even of the brain and nerves of a man, as it is a test of his inmost veriest self; of his soul and spirit; of his whole character and disposition; of his temperament; of his habit of mind; of the entire content of his mental and moral nature. (45)

Later in the same chapter, he details other traits required to play the game,

Even it might be said that Tennyson’s trinity of excellences, self-knowledge, self-reverence, self-control, are nowhere so worthily sought, or so efficacious when found, as on the links... Golf requires the most concentrated mental attention. It requires also just as concentrated a moral attention. The moral factors in the game are as important as the physical. He who succumbs to temptation will have to succumb to defeat. *Satis imperat, says an old adage, qui sibi est imperiosus: he rules enough who rules himself.* This should be the motto of every golfer. [author’s italics] (52-3)

For these reasons and others that I will detail in a later section, I believe Percy explicitly chose the game of golf and the location of a golf course to symbolize the various complexities and attributes of humanity—its penchant for self-delusion, as well as its openness to reflection, revelation, insight, and change.

Since it is my contention that Percy has constructed the narrative of The Second Coming to focus on Will Barrett's progression through the three Kierkegaardian stages of existence, it is now time to explain the first of these three—the Aesthetic stage. In the following pages I will briefly discuss the central concepts of the Aesthetic stage and the way these concepts are relevant to all of the sub-stages within Aestheticism—including the last sub-stage, despair, which is a transition to the following stage, the Ethical. After doing this I will apply these insights to the narrative of The Second Coming and explain how the individual characters of Percy's novel exhibit the various traits of aestheticism and how these traits are impediments to the actualizing process of the self.

PART ONE

In the Realm of the Game: Will Barrett's Journey through the Aesthetic Stage

The safest road to hell is the gradual one,
the gentle slope, soft under foot,
without sudden turnings, without milestones,
without signposts.

—C.S. Lewis

Each of us, for instance, carries around inside himself, I believe, a certain emptiness—a sense that something is missing, a restlessness, the deep feeling that somehow all is not right inside his skin.

--Frederick Buechner

The truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering the more you suffer because smaller and more insignificant things torture you in proportion to your fear of being hurt.

--Thomas Merton

Introduction:

The Aesthetic stage, as Kierkegaard conceived it, is an apt description of much of what we consider today as life in the “modern world.” And yet, his description of this stage was and is as relevant a description of nineteenth century Copenhagen, as it is of our own day and time. There is an element of universalism in Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of

humanity's predicament. I believe that this is so because he deals with issues that are fundamental to the individual and how "selfhood" is either aided or hindered by the institutions and culture that surround it. So, along with his critique of the self, he includes a critique of the crowd. In this way Kierkegaard's analysis fits within the age-old philosophical conundrum—how to understand and relate the "one" to the "many," or in other terms, the "subject" to the "object." Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, understood this dilemma in terms he called the "I" and the "thou." Other philosophical traditions, such as the Chinese, have a related the "yin" and "yang" of existence. However, by whatever name it is called, it is a problem that has perplexed humanity for countless ages. For that reason—its universal applicability—I believe Kierkegaard made it a touchstone of his philosophy.

SECTION ONE:

Kierkegaard's Theory of the Aesthetic Stage

Kierkegaard's analysis of human development within the Aesthetic stage is based upon his anthropological understanding and interpretation of humanity's core "problem"—the task of becoming a "self." The problem involved in this process is how the individual chooses to respond to his or her selfish appetites, and to society's persuasions to locate individual identity in the crowd. When this happens, the self fragments. In Life, Death, and Walker Percy, Jerome Taylor describes Kierkegaard's awareness of this problem:

He [Kierkegaard] was intuitively aware of the relevance of the threat of technology, which was only beginning to take form in his day. The various kinds of depersonalization we experience daily—resulting from the bigness of business, government, mass media and the like—are taking their toll and making the central human task of self-becoming more problematic than ever. (2)

Mark C. Taylor has spent much of his early career writing about Kierkegaard's philosophy, and he concurs with the above observation. In Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard, he states that mankind has become "enslaved by his own creations," and thus "man's experience is fragmented, his self dissipated" (7). It is precisely this "fragmentation" that Kierkegaard sought to analyze in the Aesthetic stage. For Kierkegaard, fragmentation is essentially an issue of spiritlessness. A spiritless existence is one dominated by passivity, an inability to make commitments, and a concentration on externals (Taylor Journeys 117). Humanity, or an individual, when dwelling in the realm of the Aesthetic stage, defines itself according to the various elements of its environment. When this occurs, there is, logically, a lack of deep or sustained reflection, and, to such a degree, the individual has yet to become a fully developed person. However, Kierkegaard and Percy are not content to diagnose the problem, but rather each proceeds to offer specific and concrete details describing what it means to live a whole and integrated existence. It is an existence that is complicated because it cannot fit neatly within a system—just as individuals, when they are truly themselves in all their idiosyncratic behavior, desires, predilections, and obtuseness, defy all means to define conclusively. John Mullen, author of Kierkegaard's Philosophy, describes this kind of "complicated" existence advocated by Kierkegaard:

The idea of an existential paradox is crucial for understanding Kierkegaard... A person must be detached about his life, his values, and opposing values, while at the same time committed to his own values. To be committed is to be “subjective,” to be detached is to be “objective.” A person must be both a subject (a center of commitment) and an object (a center of analysis) to himself. Yet, these are opposing tendencies. They can never be made to live harmoniously together. They will always cause you trouble (anxiety) insofar as you attempt to satisfy them both, and yet this is exactly what you must do. This is therefore a problem that is built into the requirements of being a person. That is what an “existential paradox” is, a problem (source of anxiety) which goes away only when you cease to be a complete person—in death, insanity, in self-deception. (46)

As I stated in my introduction, Kierkegaard believed in an inherent dualism at the core of each human being, and it is because of humanity’s dualism that there is an irreconcilable tension to existence. It is this tension that the above quotation attempts to explain. The two opposing poles of existence are what make humans strangely different from all other creatures. Percy highlights this fact when he has Barrett hit upon mankind’s problem in the beginning of The Second Coming. The narrator explains how this revelation comes upon Will:

But first his “revelation.” As he sat gazing at the cat, he saw all at once what had gone wrong, wrong with people, with him, not with the cat... the cat was exactly a hundred percent cat, no more, no less. As for Will Barrett, as for people nowadays—they were never a hundred percent themselves. (18)

This inner division that is humanity’s experience is a problem that must be solved, but how? This is the task that Kierkegaard set for himself, and which Percy understood and incorporated within his novels. Both writers provide their readers with stories through which they attempt to illustrate both the problem and the possible solution. However, neither believes that a didactic approach is effective since man is an individual, and his

coming to the solution must also be, intrinsically, an individual decision. Thus Kierkegaard illustrates the various places in Aestheticism where an individual might find himself, might recognize his own being and attitudes. It is this kind of “self-reflective mirror” that ultimately leads the individual out of the Aesthetic stage and into a deeper understanding of the self and the world.

Kierkegaard’s answer to this problem of fragmentation in the self can be summarized by saying that Kierkegaard’s philosophy advocates a kind of reflective progression that is self-directed. This progression, however, is not simply isolated to the individual, although that is where Kierkegaard placed its emphasis. The stages, according to Mark C. Taylor, “are not only to be understood as the phases through which the developing self passes, but also should be interpreted as ideal personality types, or descriptive of different life views” (Journeys 141). This idea of the “ideal personality type” is an inherent component within the stages, and is thus an important narrative and character construct in The Second Coming. Percy uses the stages in precisely this way. He populates the novel with representatives of the various sub-stages within Aestheticism as a way to illustrate the choice that Barrett must finally confront. In the following section we are going to examine these people and places within Aestheticism, and the various degrees of reflection, self-awareness, and choice they exhibit.

The Internal Structure of the Aesthetic Stage

The Aesthetic stage is defined by its two poles—the “immediate” and the “reflective.” However, it is the crucial aspect of “decision” that links these two poles

inseparably together. In both Aesthetic categories, the immediate and the reflective, the lack of an ability to make a decisive and individualized choice is the defining characteristic of the personality at this stage of development. Mark C. Taylor helps us to understand the Aesthetic stage by summing up this element of “decision.” He says:

It is, therefore, the absence of decision that links the two seemingly contradictory poles of the aesthetic stage. However, as the names of the poles indicate, there are different ways in which one can forego decision: either through the immersion in sensuous inclination, immediate identification with the social/natural environment, or through the evaporation of the either/or of the decision in infinite reflection. (Pseudonymous, 130)

Taylor rightly points out the ways in which both poles effectively negate the crucial aspect of decision. To explain further, the individual existing at the immediate pole has so identified him or herself with his or her environment (be that “sensual” or “social”), that an awareness of oneself outside the confines or definitions of that environment is effectively eliminated. The second way an individual evades “decision,” (though there is a level of “awareness” within the individual at this second pole of “immediacy” i.e. within Reflective Aestheticism), is by forever deferring decision and by endlessly reflecting on all the various and possible options available before coming to a decision. However, it is at this stage of “reflective aestheticism” that reflection never actually ends. Because of this “indecisiveness,” a decision is always put off. And thus the individual comes to believe that no decision can be made without an infinite reflection on each and every possibility, which, in the end, renders a person incapable of choosing one thing over another.

The First Pole of the Aestheticism: Sensual & Social Immediacy

Mark C. Taylor says, “all selves begin their development at the immediate pole of the Aesthetic stage,” and that “It is possible for one to never advance beyond this point, but to live his [one’s] entire life within the categories that characterize immediacy” (Pseudonymous 131). If that is so, then it is here where we must begin—at the immediate stage, by examining the various traits, characteristics, and motivations that define this stage of existence. Within the general category of immediacy there are two sub-stages, “sensual immediacy” and “social immediacy.” Both of these categories manifest two similar characteristics: they focus attention on “externals,” and on “momentary desires” in time. The other aspect that they share is that neither sub-stage is truly “reflective,” as is the case when one gets to the reflective aesthetic position which is the second pole in Aestheticism, and which indicates a further development of the self. Therefore, in the next section I want first to focus our attention on “sensual immediacy” and how Kierkegaard sought to illustrate this particular position within the aesthetic stage. To do this I will concentrate on two common aspects within both the “sensual” and “social” realms of immediacy. The first is the penchant of an individual within this stage to use “externals” in defining the self, the second the desire of an individual is to live his or her life in the “moment” without reflecting upon the long-term consequences of this attitude.

Sensual Immediacy

In Sickness Unto Death Kierkegaard uses the self's "external definitions" as a way to highlight how the self is caught in the web of its own sensual immediacy. He says:

For the immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress, he recognizes (and here again appears the infinitely comic trait) that he has a self only by externals. There is no more ludicrous confusion, for a self is just infinitely different from externals. (187)

There may be no more telling observation about our own "consumer" culture than this statement expounded by Kierkegaard. Western capitalistic culture is dominated by this very sense of the "external." In our own day we have seen the concept of "surface" supplant the idea of "depth" as the defining picture of the human personality. In essence, what we "are" becomes what others "see." It is for this reason that so many people today find their purpose in things—a physical "look," material possessions, and or occupations—all these "things" emphasize something external to the self. The self that used to be taken for granted as a foundational construct of the human personality has become lost in the "consumer shuffle." The catch phrases disseminated by Madison Avenue, "you are what you... eat, drive, wear," etc., ad infinitum, have all promulgated this idea that the self can be adequately defined such externals. Besides being asked to identify ourselves with an array of various products (i.e. things), we are also being bombarded with pictures of the kind of "thing" we should be—a particular body shape, size, or style of attractiveness. This, too, is a way of defining the self according to something external. In doing so we are defining ourselves by only one side of ourselves, the surface area (i.e. body) that people recognize as "us." This, of course, is a paltry

substitute for that which is the “real” self, that which can never be conceptualized by anything “external” but only “known” through the process of one “self” relating to another “self.”

The second characteristic of the immediate sub-stage within the Aesthetic is that of living in the “moment.” At first glance this may not seem such a bad idea. We have all experienced, to one degree or another, the wonderful feelings of being intimately connected to an intense experience at a specific moment of time—an incredible sunset, the birth of a baby, or the death of a loved one. At a time such as this, something seems to crystallize inside the self. And yet, however good these experiences are, they are not what Kierkegaard is referring to when he explains how individuals in “immediacy” live within the “moment.” Instead, he means that individuals in this stage of existence live according to their “desires.” In his first book on Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Writings, Mark C. Taylor elaborates on the specifics of this principle: “In immediacy, one is fully determined by desire, or by sensuous inclination. There is, in fact, no exercise of freedom, for the infant is the reflex of desire. Pleasure and pain are the dominant categories in this mode of life” (134). “Desire,” as Taylor indicates, contributes to a level of “arbitrary behavior” within an individual to such a degree that if a particular moment is pleasurable, then the individual is happy. If, however, there is any “pain,” “boredom,” or other deterrent to the individual’s pleasure, then that moment is quickly jettisoned and the individual goes in search of another particular place or time that will make him or her happy again. It is in this manner that the individual within immediacy defines his or her self, by whether a desire for pleasure is being met. Taylor’s

comparison of the “child” with the person in “immediacy” is apt, for it clearly distinguishes this important characteristic within immediacy—that as individuals living for the moment, people are unable to defer their “desires.” Because of this predicament, individuals at this stage of existence are generally demanding, self-centered, and blindly driven by their appetites. It takes a certain level of maturity and reflection to be willing to delay gratification, and it is this very maturity that is lacking in individuals at the immediate pole of the Aesthetic stage.

Social Immediacy

The second realm within the first pole of immediacy is called “social immediacy.” This sub-stage shares many of the same attributes and characteristics with its counterpart, “sensual immediacy.” Both are captivated by an emphasis on externals as measurements of individual worth, and by emphasizing the moment in a never-ending attempt to gratify desires. And, thirdly, both sub-stages exhibit the continual deferral of decision as a way of putting off any concerted push towards a definite commitment to some position in life. However, what is unique in this realm is that the person rigidly identifies his or herself with other members of his or her clan, group, congregation, or social sphere. This attitude is best summarized in the phrase that Kierkegaard used to describe this kind of person, “the crowd man.”

Three things define the crowd man as a person within social immediacy. First, he or she lacks “courage.” These individuals find it difficult to establish their own beliefs or convictions and are continually referring their decisions to others to find out what they

believe before establishing their own ideas. Secondly, the crowd man is concerned with “social status” and “prestige” as a way of marking one’s position in society. This attitude is an offshoot of the idea that the individual within “immediacy” will use “externals” to define the self, and so, in this case, the external is the “group,” and the specific things the group endorses or believes. Thirdly, the crowd man desires a “leveling” within the social arena. This is a result of one’s tendency to define oneself by the status of other members in the group. Thus, when one member attempts to rise above the others, to act independently or without the consent and affirmation of the group, there is a desire within the crowd to bring him or her down. If this were not done, then the crowd, or “group,” would begin to think worse of themselves because they would be forced to compare themselves to the person who has risen above them. Therefore, this attitude of “leveling,” that the group implicitly endorses, ultimately has a very detrimental effect on the group itself. It encourages people to measure themselves by the group’s lowest “common” denominator, rather than encouraging people to aspire to higher levels of achievement. Merold Westphal, author of Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society, lists the ways in which Kierkegaard saw the “crowd men” affecting society. He states:

When Kierkegaard speaks of the herd that typifies the modern age that is the decadent society—or in his words the crude society—which he has in mind. Because of its double loss of contact with the idea, he views it as 1. a subhuman society, 2. an amoral society, 3. a diabolical society, and 4. a society of glittering vices. (48)

Though we do not have time to pursue each of these specific critiques of the “crowd,” they do serve, nevertheless, to illustrate Kierkegaard’s generally negative attitude towards the “crowd.” Kierkegaard, more than once, directed some of his most vivid and vilifying

attacks upon this particular aspect of society at large. He considered the “herd” mentality particularly detrimental to the individual who is attempting to come to a sense of himself, (Either/Or, 24).

So, by way of review, within the first pole of aestheticism we have two realms of immediacy, “sensual” and “social.” Each is essentially non-reflective and is captivated, by varying degrees, with “externals” as a means to measure selfhood and identity, and also with “desire” as demonstrated in individual’s inability to defer pleasure, and his or her utter avoidance of pain. Also, neither sub-stage has any real connection to “decision,” since to decide upon a specific course of action or commitment would effectively limit one’s possibilities for maximizing pleasure and avoiding pain. However, there is a second pole within the Aesthetic Stage, and that is “Reflective Aestheticism.” It is within this realm that “reflection” within the individual begins to stir. Here the individual becomes aware of his or her “identity” as an emerging “self” and realizes that the “sensual” and “social” definitions of existence have not adequately defined who he or she is. It is to this second pole of the aesthetic stage that we now turn.

The Second Pole of the Aestheticism: Reflective Aestheticism and Despair

Within the second pole of the Aesthetic stage there is an increasing differentiation between “desire” and the “object” desired. Because of this, the stage of Reflective Aestheticism resides at a higher level on the scale of potential person-hood. However, this does not mean that Reflective Aestheticism is an advanced stage—it is merely one

step above the sensual and social stages of immediacy, which are often compared to either animal or infant-like stages of development.

Like Immediacy, Reflective Aestheticism also has two sub-stages. The first is called by the same title as is this pole within the Aesthetic stage, “reflective aestheticism.” The second sub-stage within Reflective Aestheticism is “despair.” Both of these sub-stages are different from those of Immediacy. They represent a movement upward on the scale of personal awareness and understanding. There is a significant increase in “reflective” abilities and understanding within the individual who continues to “grow” through this realm. But, there is the equal possibility that with the deeper sense of “reflection” there will also come a deeper degree of self-deception through denying the findings that this “reflection” has uncovered and exposed. Besides intimating a sense of personal growth, “Reflective Aestheticism” may also represent an “ending” for the individual. For it is through “reflection” that the individual gains a greater sense of self-awareness, and it is through this same self-awareness that that stage of “blissful ignorance” is finally lost forever.

Reflective Aestheticism

What distinguishes the stage of reflective aestheticism, once again, like both realms within immediacy, is that it cannot effect a true and lasting “decision.” As I said earlier within the introduction to the Aesthetic stage, this lack of “decision” is a characteristic of both poles within the Aesthetic stage—“immediacy” and “reflective aestheticism”. And, as in the preceding pole of immediacy, there is still the penchant to

try to live in the “moment” by gratifying “desire.” However, what makes this latter sub-stage different from “immediacy,” is that for the person in “reflective aestheticism” it becomes increasingly difficult to live “unconsciously.” For the same “reflection” that has provided a greater degree of self awareness has now, with its advent, cut off the person from the “unconsciousness” that was the defining characteristic of “immediacy.”

Yet, there are also characteristics that are distinctive to this stage of “reflective aestheticism.” Since the person at this stage of development is finding it increasingly difficult to find the usual satisfaction in familiar activities, there is a desire to “rotate” one’s pleasures. This means that the person consciously attempts to “alter” experience so as to increase the sense of “novelty” of each experience. The “reflective aesthete” lives in the world of “possibility,” always believing that just around the corner is that “new” experience, possession, or feeling that will finally bring lasting contentment, happiness, and joy. These “experiences” or “things” may be of a high cultural caliber. They may be things like: art, literature, law, or music, or things associated with learning, education, and refinement. However, without a fully developed “self,” a self that has the ability to commit decisively to any of these things, they become “ends” in themselves (i.e., other “external possibilities” with which to be “entertained”). As Kierkegaard has pointed out, “possibility [within “reflective aestheticism”] is higher than actuality... possibility is sought and actuality feared, for it can only limit one’s possibilities” (Sickness Unto Death 164). With this penchant for living life in the flow of a myriad of “possibilities,” there is also the connected idea that the “reflective aesthete” avoids any kind of definite or limiting commitment, as Kierkegaard notes in the quotation above.

What we must remember, however, is that in resisting “commitments,” the individual’s sense of “fragmentation” increases, and this in turn leads to a more emphatic form of isolation, so much so that the individual begins to jeopardize his or her burgeoning identity. Kierkegaard describes this in Sickness Unto Death. He says:

At the instant that something appears possible, a new possibility makes its appearance, at last this phantasmagoria moves so rapidly that it is as if everything were possible and this is precisely the last moment, when the individual becomes for himself a mirage[.]... (63)

Thus, within the “reflective aesthete” there is a growing sense of frustration with life, and an acknowledgment that life is growing “old” and “stale.” This brings us to the second distinctive element of reflective aestheticism—“boredom.” Because rotating one’s pleasures can work effectively for only so long, boredom sets in and becomes the experience that the reflective aesthete fears above all else and works night and day to keep at bay. Therefore the “reflective aesthete” must keep up a never-ending vigilance against boredom. Though this heroic act may stave off boredom for a while, the “vigilance” of keeping experiences new eventually wanes, and when it does boredom appears. In the end, boredom is alleviated only by sinking into a deeper degree of self-deception, and when this happens, that same self-deception threatens to fragment further the identity of the individual. The result is one of two things: a person may doggedly persist in his or her desire to create novel situations to experience—going so far as constantly to reinvent the self. However, in doing so, one gradually loses one’s core identity. Or, secondly, the individual may admit that living purely in the moment, without any commitments, is, indeed, farcical and that “life” is not as carefree and entertaining as

the individual first supposed. In other words, the self admits to a “truth” about life that up till this moment it had not considered. Life has become something of a mess, full of great ideals, hopes, and desires, but empty in the end. When one makes this leap of understanding, and finally comes to see oneself for what one is, without illusions or pretensions, then one is ready to take the next step into the final sub-stage within Aestheticism—“despair.”

Despair

“Despair” is the final place, or stage, within the broader realm of the Aesthetic. It is here, in despair, that the machinations of the reflective aesthete founder. For there is the acute realization that no matter how he or she may “rotate” experiences, pleasures, or possibilities, boredom is always waiting. There is no escape, no going back to the undifferentiated oneness of the immediate stage; that kind of “innocence” has been lost forever. In Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard provides the best interpretation of this final place in the Aesthetic stage when he explains the qualitative uniqueness of this form of “despair.”

Principally... despair must be viewed under the category of consciousness: the question whether the despaired is conscious or not, determines the qualitative difference between despair and despair. (64)

Later in the same book, Kierkegaard further clarifies the issue of despair when he asks the question:

Is despair an advantage or a drawback? Regarded in a purely dialectical way it is both... the possibility of this sickness is man’s advantage over the beast... so then it is an infinite advantage to be in despair; and yet, it is

not only the great misfortune and misery to be in despair... it is perdition.
(148)

As Kierkegaard points out, “despair” has degrees of consciousness. The fact is that the more conscious one is of one’s despair, the more potent that despair is. In Percy’s The Second Coming, two characters inhabit this last realm within the Aesthetic stage—one is alive and the other is dead. The first person is Will Barrett, and the second is his father, Ed Barrett. Both characters deal differently with their despair, and it is precisely this difference that sets them apart from one another. It is also a clear and decisive marker indicating the different directions each takes in his progression through the stages of existence.

There are two responses to despair—the “passive” response and the “active” response. The passive response resembles in action and thought the position of the “reflective aesthetic,” where there is still the attempt to create for one’s self an existence that is “entertaining,” “novel,” and “meaningful.” However, there is the ever-present realization that this too is folly, that the whole “show” has been rigged and that the only truly entertaining aspect is its end—“death.” Indeed, death becomes a consuming fascination for one who has reached this cynical and bitter stage within despair.

Finally, at the very end of the Aesthetic stage, the individual confronts what has been lacking in sensual and social “immediacy,” and within the first realm of the second pole, “reflective aestheticism,” namely, a “choice.” With the appearance of this “choice” also comes a demand that a clear and decisive “decision” be made, one that leads to incontrovertible “action.” Thus, what has defined Aestheticism so far—its lack of

“decision,” has, at this latter stage, become an unavoidable crescendo demanding a drastic and irrevocable alteration in one’s status in life. The active form of “despair” is defined precisely by this choice and decision. The active form of “despair” says that things cannot go on as they have; something must be done, and it cannot wait. What often happens here, at this final stage, is that the individual will commit suicide. The despair has become too pronounced and there seems to be no possible change available. This is the alternative that Ed Barrett, Will’s father, chose. For him there seemed to be no other reason to live, nothing to know, no questions to ask, or problems to ponder—the “ordinary days” were all the same. However, besides suicide there is one other alternative, the alternative that Ed Barrett never considered—a life of “belief.” In this kind of “life” the individual has decided to commit himself or herself to something bigger, deeper, or broader than the mere aggrandizement of “pleasure.” This “belief” in the face of “despair” effectively cancels “despair,” for it fills the “emptiness” that the Aesthetic stage has unearthed within the individual and made conscious to the self. It gives life a meaning that is larger than any one individual; one that is connected to others in a way that subjugates the “selfishness” of the individual by transforming it and emphasizing an “ideal” that supersedes the self. When an individual finds his or her self here—actively, knowingly, and willingly, choosing a particular “belief”—he or she has taken the first step into a new and different region—the Ethical stage.

In the next section we will examine the narrative of The Second Coming and see how it supports, and elaborates on, the category of Aestheticism within Kierkegaard’s philosophy of the Stages of Existence. We will begin on the lowest rung of the ladder—

the stage of “sensual immediacy” within Aestheticism and move upward through all four realms: “sensual immediacy,” “social immediacy,” “reflective aestheticism,” and finally “despair.” If we are to begin at this lowest level of “sensual immediacy”—we must go back to a place and time within Aestheticism that Will Barrett has left behind. Thus, we must begin with Barrett’s golf buddies, for it is they who exhibit all the trademark characteristics of the earliest stage of Aestheticism.

SECTION TWO:

The Game and the Players: Percy’s Depiction of the Aesthetic Stage in *The Second Coming*

In Pilgrim in the Ruins, Tolson states that “Percy, like Faulkner, loved games,” and that, “he took... games... seriously” (185). Thus, it is with this idea of the “seriousness” of gaming that we begin our investigation of the Aesthetic stage in The Second Coming. But how are we to understand the seriousness of this game in order to make sense of it? Perhaps the best way to do so is to remember what Aristotle said regarding the mystery of metaphor and meaning: “But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others; and it also a sign of original genius since a good metaphor implies [a] similarity in dissimilars” (Shibles 28). Percy’s use of the game of golf, and the landscape that surrounds the course, is an extended metaphor—a “magical tool”—through which we may see the spiritual progression of one man, Will Barrett, who is beginning a search that will take him

through Kierkegaard's stages of Existence. To begin this journey we must go back to the beginning, back beyond the stage where Barrett currently resides, to a place where, according to Kierkegaard's theories, we all begin—in Aesthetic immediacy. For our purposes, then, we will begin with Will Barrett's friends, his golf buddies, that group of individuals with whom Will plays three rounds of golf over the course of three days in the middle of October, and whose ideas and perspectives he finally rejects as he continues searching a more integrated existence.

In order to do the above, I will focus on four central characters. Each represents a separate stage within Aestheticism. The first two characters are representatives of the first pole of Aestheticism, “immediacy” and specifically, “sensual immediacy,” and “social immediacy.” Therefore, the first character I will profile is Dr. Vance Battle, whose attitudes are representative of the particular concepts associated with “sensual immediacy.” The second character, Jimmy Rogers, is the character who exhibits the greatest number of traits of an individual within the realm of “social immediacy.” Percy, I believe, purposely aligned these two characters so that both would be “partners” with Will on the first and third days that they play golf together. (The second day of playing golf is only summarized within the novel and receives no dramatic description.) Thus, as “partners” they provide a kind of “bookend” evaluation of the “sensual” and “social” realms of “immediacy.” In the next realm, “Reflective Aestheticism,” once again two characters predominate; Lewis Peckham, who embodies the respective traits of the “reflective aesthetic,” and Ed Barrett, who, though not physically present in the novel, is nevertheless a specific “presence” (memory/spirit) encountered by Will, and who is the

representative of “despair,” which is also the stage Will initially occupies within the novel. Thus, both “father” and “son” are one in this regard—joined in their “despair”—and because of this there takes place a “confrontation” between the two over what the proper response to “despair” actually is.

The First Pole of the Aesthetic Stage: The Games & Players of Immediacy

The golf course in The Second Coming is an arena for “pleasure” and “play,” making it a powerful metaphor for the Aesthetic stage. The choice of “golf” is an exact one, for it combines elements of the “individual” and “society” consistent with Kierkegaard’s evocation of these issues in his discussion of Aestheticism. This is why I believe that Percy has chosen a “golf course” to symbolize the particular plights, maladies, and concerns of Twentieth Century humanity. Within this arena devoted to “play,” Will Barrett, is becoming “deadly serious,” and his questions and observations provokes responses in the players around him that force them to reveal their own assumptions about life and reality.

Two things about the golf course in The Second Coming support my view that Percy is using it as metaphor of Will Barrett’s existential progression. First, Percy has at various times referred to the “metaphysical nature” of the golf course and has noted in various interviews how the “clubhouse” is an attempt to create a modern “utopia.” In both of these ways the “clubhouse,” in Percy’s view, becomes the place where the gods of this age—money, power, and prestige—all dwell in absolute security. There is an important incident within The Second Coming, at the end of section three in part one,

that parodies the elevation of the clubhouse to an almost “sacred” status. In this episode the players are in the clubhouse enjoying their drinks, reliving their shots on the course, smoking, and rolling dice. They are the epitome of “contented cats” (15), who without a care in the world, dwell within the sanctuary of their approved and appointed realm. This idea is further reinforced by the iconic imagery within this “new” cathedral. Above the players and on the far wall is a giant mural. It shows Jack Nicklaus blasting “out of a sand trap, his good Ohio face as grim as a crusader, each air-born grain of sand sparkling like a jewel in the night” (91). The placement and description of the mural parallel the placement and description of a cross and crucifixion scene in a Christian church. However, instead of a “suffering” savior dying an agonizing death, the “god” of this new “cathedral” is a “success.” Jack Nicklaus is described as “a grim crusader” who “blasts out of sand traps” (91). This description gives us a hint of Nicklaus’s “divine” stature within this “secularized” realm. Percy makes a point to describe the grains of sand as sparkling like “jewels in the night” (91). And, since in the mural Nicklaus is below shooting out of the sand bunker, the grains of sand are above him—forming a golden “halo” over his head. The theological implications of this scene are obvious. Within this revised cathedral, the “god” wears a distinctly “human face.” In this way God has become like us—showing us the way to strive for success—and thus ennobling our own quest for success, prestige, and social stature. However, what may not be at first apparent is the logical inverse, that we, too, can become gods. However, unlike the Christ of “former” cathedrals, whose only “success” was suffering and sacrifice, these latter Christs, concern themselves with only “success”—the “sacrifices” have been lost

along the way. Such is the basic and fundamental “nature” of Aestheticism; it is a “pleasure-oriented” society that cannot admit “pain” into its pantheon.

The Players of Immediacy: Vance Battle and Jimmy Rogers

I believe that the best way to begin examining the illustration of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence in The Second Coming is to look closely at the characters in this part of the novel who are with Barrett while he too is in the Aesthetic stage. On Saturday, the first day that Barrett begins to feel as if something is wrong, he plays golf with his regular foursome. The first player in the foursome is Dr. Vance Battle, Barrett’s “partner” on the first of the three days he plays golf. While these men make up the “foursome” on Saturday, it changes on Monday, the third and last day that Will plays a round of golf. On Monday the regular foursome is interrupted by the addition of two new players, Bertie, Will’s former brother-in-law, and Jimmy Rogers, an old classmate of Will’s at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. All of these players manifest the characteristics of immediacy in either its “sensual” or “social” forms.

Vance Battle: The Man of Sensual Immediacy

Dr. Vance Battle is Will’s golf partner on the first day of Will’s three-day pilgrimage through Aestheticism. This pairing of Will and Dr. Battle makes perfect sense because the “good doctor” is a true disciple of the first stage of Aestheticism’s immediate pole. His position at this pole of immediacy is confirmed in three different ways. First, he is infatuated with “externals” as the base measure of individual health.

Second, he has a unreflective and unquestioning attitude toward Will's perplexities, observations, and questions. And lastly, Battle elevates "gaming" (i.e., the ability to play a good round of golf) to the status of a cure.

In the beginning of the novel, as Will is just becoming aware that "something is wrong," he "falls down" on the golf course. Vance notices this and comes to Will's aid. He says to Will,

"I think something is wrong with you."

"Why?"

"People don't fall down in the middle of the fairway." (11)

Later in the same exchange, Vance elaborates on this observation by exposing his own biases and assumptions. He says to Will,

"You've been acting a little off your feed. You worried about something?"

"No."

"Did those sleeping pills I gave you help?" (11)

Vance's observations of Will's condition, his word choice, and his prescription to "cure" Will, all contain elements of what Kierkegaard called, "sensual immediacy." Dr. Battle's underlying assumptions are a clear indication of his own position within Aestheticism. His comment that Will has been "acting off his feed" leaves us with the impression that he regards Will as something akin to a "brute beast" who is happiest at a trough. Though it may be argued that Dr. Battle's choice of words was simply a figure of speech, the next comment that he makes reinforces the prior "animalistic" impression. He asks Will if the "sleeping pills" he had given him had helped. Though this, too, at first glance, may seem like a perfectly genuine concern on the doctor's part, it also emphasizes a "sensory" solution to Will's problem that bypasses the existential nature of Will's predicament. Dr.

Battle prescribes sleep for Will as a way of helping him with his problem. In other words, “go to sleep” and “forget about it.” This “doctorly” recommendation seems to postulate that “eating” and “sleeping” are viable and healthy solutions for Will’s “falling” problems and the “strange questions” that he keeps asking. However, Dr. Battle’s prescription only emphasizes the doctor’s own reliance on surface details—“externals”—as a way to determine true health. The doctor’s prescription is reductionistic and materialistic, and it cannot cure the existential ills that Will is currently experiencing. The doctor’s reliance on the “physical” and “sensory is reinforced by Will’s description of him.

Dr. Vance Battle, [was] the happiest man he knew, a young, husky, competent G.P. who liked to get his hands on you, happy as a vet with his fist up a cow, mend bones, take your liver from the front and back, stick a finger up your anus paying no attention to your groans, talking N.C. Basketball all the while, pausing only to frown and shake his head at the state of one’s prostate: “it feels like an Idaho potato.” (53-4)

Battle is the “happiest man” Will knows because he is “100%” himself. He is like a “cat dozing in the sun”(The Second Coming 15) which exists completely “unaware” of itself. Battle indulges in no inner reflection, or meditation on things that are not external. Instead, he sees only the “surface” reality of the immediate world. In this kind of existence the surface reality of the senses dominates one’s perspectives and beliefs, and this is why Vance cannot fathom Will’s questions regarding the Jews and their place in God’s plan. For Vance, it is sheer lunacy to consider such questions worthy of serious reflection. However, Percy’s novel, as well as Kierkegaard’s theories, asks whether the “lunacy” lies with the one who seeks to know and understand the nature of the world, or

whether such lunacy lies with the one who avoids these questions, and indeed, reflection of any kind.

It is Dr. Battle's perspective on "gaming," particularly how "others" play the game of golf which confirms his position at the first pole of immediacy. An incident in the novel explains how Dr. Battle understands gaming. Describing Dr. Battle and the players inside the clubhouse after they have finished playing, the narrator tells us how Dr. Battle has come to see Will's problems.

In all respects he [Will] seemed quite himself, though a bit absentminded, but smiling and nodding as usual—so normal indeed that his doctor friend gave no further thought to his "petty-mall trances." After all, a golfer who cards a seventy-six can't be too sick. (13-4)

Dr. Battle's attitude elevates success at a game to a reliable determinant of one's general health. So, not only is one's health a purely physical thing, determined by external characteristics and divorced from all internal ambiguities, but it becomes something that can be confirmed by the "success" one has at "playing a game." If one's "identity" is so constructed by external configurations and considerations, then game playing will take on an exaggerated importance, for it is the perfect vehicle to estimate the capabilities of any one person on a purely superficial level. Game playing asks nothing other than that the player perform well; everything else is secondary. In this kind of game the external becomes the rule of life, and one's appearance the summation of existence.

There is a second side to the pole of "immediacy." It is a natural complement to "sensual immediacy" and is governed by some of the same general characteristics, but it also has another focus—the public, the crowd, the social grouping that an individual

joins in order to establish his or her identity. This second segment of “immediacy” is called “social immediacy,” and within The Second Coming Jimmy Rogers best represents its particularities.

Jimmy Rogers: The Man of Social Immediacy

Jimmy Rogers is Will’s golf partner on the third day—Monday, when the foursome has bulged into an unbalanced “five-some.” This pairing of partners during this final round of golf creates a clear contrast between Jimmy’s “social immediacy” and Barrett’s “reflections” upon it. This subsequent “pairing” also complements the prior one between Will and Dr. Battle. In this manner Percy has provided a natural “frame” through which we can examine Will Barrett’s attitudes towards Aesthetic Immediacy.

Will’s descriptions of Jimmy reveal his sense of disgust with who Jimmy is; however, these same feelings are also a “self-indictment” of Will’s own past, for Jimmy is a very present reminder to Will of what he too once was. In acknowledging Jimmy’s presence, Will must confront his own “past” as a card-carrying member in the club of “social immediacy.” Will recognizes Jimmy’s similarity to himself. He states that, “He, Jimmy, knew about [Will’s] old girlfriend, his wife’s death, his money, his wife’s money, his brother-in-law’s money, his honorary degree, [and] his man-of-the-year award,” (77) and that, though “they were not exactly old friends,... Jimmy seemed to know more about him [Will] than he knew himself” (77). Essentially, the things that Will dislikes in Jimmy, his love of money, fitting in, and desire for pleasure, are the same things he

dislikes in himself. Will admits that when he sees Jimmy, “it was as if he caught a glimpse of himself, a narrow keener cannier self, in a mirror” (77).

Three characteristics define Jimmy as the representative of social immediacy. First is his penchant for telling jokes, and the logical extension of what “joking” implies; second, his love of money and how he attempts to use it; and third, his “envy” of others—particularly Will. All of these characteristics are also a part of the general portrait that Kierkegaard paints of a person within at this stage of existence.

Jimmy Rogers is consistently described as one who is “telling jokes.” He is anxious to make people “laugh,” for in doing so he hopes to make people like him. His ability to provoke laughter provides a way for Jimmy to gauge whether he is a part of the same “inner circle.” During the course of the golf game, he tells Will a joke about three women who have died and gone to Heaven. At Heaven’s gate Peter asks each of the women how they died before he will let them enter. The first two women are white, but the third is a young African-American girl. When Peter asks her how she died, she tells him from Gonorrhea. When Peter tells her that people don’t “die” of Gonorrhea, the girl replies, “they does when they gives it to Leroy” (74). Besides its obvious racist intent, the joke illustrates Jimmy’s compulsion to be accepted. This is indicated by how Jimmy acts toward Will after he has told him the joke. In describing the scene, the narrator suggests that Jimmy is using the “joke” as a gauge to see whether Will “gets it.” The narrator explains the process of the joke: “As the joke approached its end, Jimmy’s grip on [Will’s] arm tightened and Jimmy’s gaze seemed to dart deep into his eye like the ray of a doctor’s examining scope” (74). What is Jimmy looking for in Will? I believe he is

looking for confirmation. He wants to know if he and Will share the same attitudes and beliefs, and by telling Will this particular joke he can get a general understanding of Will's position and therefore know whether he, too, will be accepted in this particular group. In many ways the telling of a joke and its reception by a certain audience can suggest more about people than an extended statement about their respective beliefs. A joke is disarming; it comes with a smile and a wink, but it, too, has an inherent "belief system." By using this joke Jimmy takes a short cut to determine the attitudes of the group, and so that he can judge whether he will be accepted. "Joke-telling" also emphasizes an attitude toward life that stresses entertainment, laughter, and levity. It is by nature, antithetical to "seriousness," and because of this natural orientation towards the "pleasurable," it fits neatly within Kierkegaard's description of social immediacy. So, not only does Jimmy's joke-telling provide a means for him to gauge his listener's reception of him and the values they may share, but it also becomes a means to emphasize "pleasure" as a defining characteristic of life itself.

Besides joke-telling, Jimmy is also consumed with money as a determination of one's success and social status. Will remembers that even in college Jimmy had a way of focusing on the "monetary" aspects of events:

He [Jimmy] had gotten to manager of this and that, manager of the stadium concessions, manager of the yearbook, of the cap and gown business, manager in charge of decorating the dance hall and hiring an orchestra. Jimmy was making money long before the Arabs. (80)

Jimmy is consumed with being a part of the social scene at college; however, he also construes his participation in college events in such a way that he could both participate

and receive a monetary compensation. This consciousness of “money” implies a certain focus on Jimmy’s part—a focus on the “external” effects that money can make possible—but one which also implies a lack of consciousness of the internal qualities of the self.

Because Jimmy is caught up in being a part of the group, and because he uses the external of “money” to validate and justify that belonging, he is necessarily forced to compare himself to others. In doing so he must confront the fact that some others are “accepted” even though they do not share his value-structure, which consists of the need to belong and the need for money. Such a situation is intolerable for Jimmy, for it demolishes his conceptual framework regarding how the world operates. The person that Jimmy envies most is Will Barrett.

Jimmy is very conscious of Barrett’s success, and it is a consciousness that makes him feel inadequate. Jimmy has known Will for years and has followed the trajectory of Will’s success—from college, to law school, to his marriage to a New York socialite, and finally to his early retirement. All the things that Jimmy equates with “making it” Will has accomplished—and with seemingly little effort. Toward the end of the group’s last day of golf Jimmy pulls Will aside to congratulate him on a few things. However, his gracious congratulation isn’t as free as his words might, at first glance, indicate. He says to Will,

“You old rascal, you did it, didn’t you?”

“Did what?”...

“You made it in the big apple, you married a nice Yankee lady who owns half of Washau County, you retired young, you came down here and you helped folks, poor folks, old folks, even built them a home,

helped the church, built a new church, did good. Now your lovely daughter is getting married. Joy and sorrow, that's life. But yours seems mostly joy. You know what you did."

"No, what?"

"You won. That's what you did, you old—" The eye glittered and the thumbnail screwed into his back. "You won it all, you son of a bitch, and I love you for it."

The thumbnail signified love and hatred. (80-1)

Jimmy has been competing with Will all of his life, and he has never quite lived up to what he believes have been Will's "successes." He thinks that because he sees the "external" realities of Will's life, he understands Will's existence. As Jimmy puts it, Will's life has been "mostly joy," and there is more than a little envy in his saying so. However, such a view only underscores Jimmy's skewed vision of reality. His attention is so focused on the superficial externals of Will's life that he fails to notice at all the "falling sickness" that Will is currently experiencing. And this is precisely the sort of thing that "envy" does—it blinds one to issues and circumstances that do not emphatically support one's distorted and biased conceptions. Before moving on to the next character, Lewis Peckham, who is at the opposite pole within "immediacy"—"Reflective Aestheticism"—we must take a closer look at how Kierkegaard defines the "crowd man" and examine the correlation that exists between Percy's portrait of Jimmy Rogers and Kierkegaard's description of an individual at this juncture in the Aesthetic stage.

Jimmy Rogers feels both envy and resentment toward Will, and the thing he seems to resent the most is how Will has outgrown the herd instinct. Will no longer caters to the desires, predilections, and whims of those around him. This is what Jimmy

must do, but he does not fully understand how Will has escaped this necessity.

Kierkegaard's critique of the "herd" clarifies this issue. In Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society, Merold Westphal comments on the attitude of "envy" that the "herd" by its very nature exhibits. He states,

This envy that insists that everyone be just like the others is essential to the leveling process by which the herd is born. It presents itself under the honorific label of equality, but Kierkegaard sees it as a form of escapism [...] Thus, the slogans of equality serve not so much to elevate individuals to the dignity of being human as to free them from the responsibility of rising to this vocation. (48-9)

Jimmy Rogers is one of the herd. He has identified himself with all the things—materialism, money, fame, and social status—that he believes will guarantee him a position of "equality" with those around him. However, Barrett, throughout the story, fails to adhere to the values of the herd, and this evokes the envy that Jimmy feels. Jimmy believes he is just as "good" as Will, and perhaps he is. This is precisely the point Kierkegaard and Percy want us to notice—"real existence" isn't about comparing yourself to anyone else. But Barrett doesn't care. Jimmy cares so much about what others think of him that he constructs his own identity around their beliefs and desires. Will, unlike Jimmy, is on a journey away from "Aestheticism" and the "herd" mentality. He is ceasing to care how the members of his group perceive him. At an earlier stage in Will's life, comparing himself with Jimmy might have captured his attention, but it does not anymore. Barrett's individuality is not wrapped up in what others may say, believe, or think about him. In this way his growing self is giving birth to a new and dangerous freedom.

With both Vance Battle and Jimmy Rogers, Percy illustrates the position in Aestheticism that Will has occupied, and the pilgrimage he is making in leaving this stage. These two men, I believe, form a gauntlet through which Will must pass if he is to extricate himself from the bounds of Aestheticism. Both of these individuals offer to Will their alternative way to live. Though Will refers to Vance as the “happiest man I know” (53), it is a happiness that is innocent and naïve. Dr. Battle lacks all awareness of life’s inner tensions, and the strife that comes with living a reflective life in the real world. In Jimmy Rogers, Percy illustrates how an individual can simply get lost in the “them” of society. By being so concerned with fitting in, Jimmy has lost the distinctiveness of his own self and has become a mere echo of the “herd’s” desires. To summarize the claims made within “immediacy,” I quote James Douglas Mullen, from his book, Kierkegaard’s Philosophy, in which he states:

They [the people of immediacy] center their lives on something external to the self and something by and large outside the realm of freedom. If one gives oneself to the physical, (beauty/health), the other gives himself (or herself) to the material (wealth/fame). To own the world is to be owned by the world. (86)

Mullen correctly points out the “ownership” that the world exercises over the individual who lives in the Aesthetic realm. Dr. Battle is owned by the flesh and its senses—for him nothing exists outside that defined and limited perimeter. Jimmy Rogers is owned by the “social groups” that he desires to be a part of; his identity, desires, and beliefs are constructed by the dictates of these groups.

In the next section I begin look at the second pole of the Aesthetic stage—Reflective Aestheticism--which contains the two sub-stages known as “reflective

aestheticism” and “despair.” This stage, like “immediacy,” is dominated by two characters, Lewis Peckham and Ed Barrett, who illustrate Kierkegaard’s conceptual framework. In this stage the individual begins to awaken. However, it is not a full awakening, for at this stage there is still too much darkness and deceit to enable one to escape the self absorption of aesthetic reflection.

The Second Pole of the Aesthetic Stage: Refined Gaming and the Path to Despair

Lewis Peckham best exemplifies the first sub-stage of the second pole of the Aesthetic stage, “reflective aestheticism.” Peckham is unlike the other characters we have seen so far, but is far more like Will Barrett in his understanding and awareness of life’s complexities and ambiguities. However, though he is unlike the characters living in sensual and social immediacy, Peckham is still trapped within the Aesthetic stage of existence. In the second sub-stage of Reflective Aestheticism, “despair,” we will look at an individual who has left this stage of existence altogether—through suicide—Mr. Ed Barrett, Will Barrett’s father. His position at the end of the “Aesthetic stage” is important because he represents the gulf (the “Either/Or”) that Will must pass over if he is to continue his own development. Both Peckham and Ed Barrett try to persuade Will to relinquish his search and to join them at their stage of existence. It is at the end of this section, within “despair,” that we find Will Barrett finally confronting his own mortality, his own choice of existence, and the demand to make a clear and fateful decision.

Lewis Peckham: The Disguises of Reflective Aestheticism

Several factors in The Second Coming signify Lewis Peckham as more evolved, in terms of Kierkegaard's hierarchy of stages, than the characters we have examined thus far. The prime characteristic Will notices about Lewis is his awareness that something is wrong. Whereas Jimmy Rogers fails to notice anything is wrong with Will, and Vance Battle notices only the superficial abnormality of falling down, Lewis seems to look "deeper" into Will. Lewis possesses the ability to see below the surface "externals" and into the core reasons for Will's current predicament. While Will is on the golf course, there is an exchange between Will and Lewis that hints at Lewis' understanding of Will's predicament. The narrator is speaking of Will when he says,

It was as if the game had fallen away from him and he was trying to play it from a great height. He felt like a clown on stilts. Lewis Peckham cleared his throat, and now Lewis was looking at him and his eyes were veiled and ironic (as if he not only knew that something was happening to him but even knew what it was). [Author's parenthesis] (55)

This is the first reference in the novel to any character other than Will having an "awareness" of the deeper significance of Will's problem. Peckham, like Barrett, seems both conscious and reflective. This is precisely the characteristic that Kierkegaard says distinguishes an individual at the reflectively aesthetic stage of existence. When an individual leaves immediacy, he or she becomes able to distinguish themselves from their immediate surroundings—i.e., their environment. M.C. Taylor sums up well this transition from "immediacy" to "reflective aestheticism." He says,

The major reason for the annulment of immediacy by language and reflection is that through the exercise of these capacities self-consciousness develops. Self-consciousness involves two fundamental aspects: the distinction of the self from its surroundings [social immediacy] and the distinction of the self from itself [sensual immediacy]. [brackets mine] (Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous 158)

Besides a burgeoning “self-consciousness,” which marks the transition from “immediacy” to “reflective aestheticism,” and which is also an important ingredient in the development of the self at this higher stage of existence (i.e. aesthetic reflection), there are other attributes that are equally important in defining this stage. In crafting the novel, Percy seems to have included in his portrait of Lewis Peckham some of these fundamental characteristics of “aesthetic reflection.” They may seem at first glance very similar to the characteristics of those individuals still in “immediacy,” and in many ways this observation would be correct. In fact, the characteristics at both poles of the Aesthetic stage are similar; however, there are some important differences, and these differences distinguish which pole within “aestheticism” an individual may represent.

Three attributes exhibited by Lewis Peckham throughout the novel place him at this second stage of “Aestheticism.” The first is an unequivocal commitment to the “pleasure principle.” However, unlike the individuals we examined earlier, Lewis’ pleasures are more rarefied and mental. Lewis’ pleasures incorporate a level of culture and sophistication that the pleasures of immediacy never ascend to. Secondly, Lewis remains committed to a life of possibility instead of actuality. This trait is also consistent with individuals in “immediacy.” However, what distinguishes it here is the fact that Lewis is aware of this predisposition within himself and has chosen to live with it. The

third characteristic that Lewis Peckham manifests is a life devoid of commitments. In order to construct this kind of life, Lewis must employ what Kierkegaard has called the “Rotation Method.” This is a method of living that places a premium on putting off or limiting “decisions” indefinitely, and thereby remaining perpetually open to various external situations or stimuli, all in the hope that they will create even more pleasures in the future. Let us now examine the narrative of The Second Coming and see firsthand how Percy has crafted this character, Lewis Peckham. In doing so, I want to demonstrate the connection between the depiction of Lewis and Kierkegaard’s description of the reflective aesthete.

In chapter four of section five in The Second Coming, Will and Lewis are upstairs in Will’s house—a house that sits adjacent to the golf course. Will has climbed the stairs to the upstairs bedroom and has gone to the closet to find his grandfather’s double-barreled shotgun, the “Greener.” He has removed it from the closet and is cleaning it when Lewis appears in the doorway. After some time he asks Will a question, “What’s the matter?” (173) and the conversation proceeds for several pages as Lewis continues probing Will for an answer. However, as the narrative unravels it becomes apparent that it is Lewis who is being “investigated” by Will, and not the other way around. Lewis’ “aesthetic posturing” is on full display, and Will, in the interior of his thoughts, confronts Lewis’ alternative of a refined “aesthetic reflection” and compares it with his own sense of growing despair.

Lewis acknowledges to Will that gaming and the life of immediacy are inherently limited, but this knowledge of life’s farcical nature is short-circuited by his substitution

of one form of “pleasure” for another. He says to Barrett, “I could tell you how to correct your slice, but that’s not it, is it?” and Will replies, “No” (173). In contrast to Dr. Battle, who believes that Will is fine as long as he shoots a round of seventy-six, Lewis understands that there is something other than his “slice” troubling Will. Lewis says to him, “You and I know that golf is not enough” (177). And, in this particular instance, Lewis is right. However, instead of proceeding along this line of inquiry and continuing the discussion on what is enough, Lewis simply proposes another kind of “game”—a substitute for golf, that, in the end, is his own elevated version of the pleasure principle. Lewis says to Will, “Tell you what, Will, they don’t need the father of the bride around here. Let’s me and you cut out, go down to my spread, crack a bottle and put on the Ninth Symphony”(177). Lewis refers to, “good music” and “good whisky,” as the “finer things of life,” (177) and it is these things that Lewis believes give life a sufficient and lasting meaning. The importance Lewis attributes to these “finer things” is made even clearer when he says to Will, “You couldn’t do without them anymore than I could, Will” (177). Essentially then, Lewis is in no “better” position than his compatriots on the golf course—the individuals of “immediacy”—who live to gratify their fundamental appetites and desires. Lewis, however, does believe he is better than they are because he sees things that they are blind to. He believes that his own substitution of the “finer things”—classical music, literature, and good Kentucky bourbon—instead of the triumvirate of golf, sex, and money has an inherently higher status. What he does not realize is that these “finer things” are also externals that have no power to transform the inner reality of the self.

Because Lewis understands this reality of existence, he deserves a level of credit exceeding that allotted to individuals in “immediacy.” And yet, because Lewis is aware of these important facts and still does nothing but substitute Beethoven for a round of golf, he is worse off and more to be pitied. He is like a young man with potential, an individual who could do so much more with his life, yet squanders it in games and vacuous pleasures that will amount to nothing. I believe this is why Barrett prefers the company of Dr. Vance Battle to that of Lewis Peckham. The good doctor is more naïve and less aware of himself, but he is also more honest. Though Lewis also believes he is above the herd, that he has seen through the vagaries of life and the inequities of human existence, in the supremacy of his knowledge he simply trades one kind of “pleasure” for another. Essentially, then, Lewis Peckham, remains unchanged—it is only his “pleasures” that are different. He has chosen nothing and committed to nothing. Thus, vacillation defines his existence, and this feature which Lewis manifests will be our second issue of concern in this stage of “reflective aestheticism.”

In Either/Or Kierkegaard has his representative of “Aestheticism,” “A,” make the following comment. It exposes the priority that individuals within Aestheticism, and particularly, “reflective aestheticism,” give to the notion of “possibility.” “A,” makes the following statement,

If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth or power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye, which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. (35)

In many ways this statement is a mirror of Lewis Peckham’s existence. Lewis has conducted his life as if he were an actor trying on various parts in a series of plays. His

life has been an enactment of potentials or possibilities but never any firm actuality.

Remembering this fact about his friend. Will says,

Lewis knew a great many things, could read signs like an Indian, but unlike an Indian he did not know what he could not do. He thought he was a good poet, he was not, he thought books could tell him how to live but they couldn't... he had taken a degree in English, taught English, fought in a war, returned to teach English, couldn't, decided to farm, bought a goat farm, managed a Confederate Museum in a cave on his property, wrote poetry, went broke, became a golf pro. (174)

Lewis' life has an ethereal quality. He avoids all types of commitments by going from pleasure to pleasure, and from possibility to possibility, all in the hope of finding the one thing that will satisfy him. However, he will never find satisfaction because no one external thing can help him to achieve a level of internal coherence and provide a satisfying level of internal contentment.

Lewis Peckham has remained in the Aesthetic stage of existence because he cannot decide to choose the one thing he must make a "commitment" to—himself. This is the third characteristic that Lewis exhibits in the novel, and one that confirms his position at the second pole of the Aesthetic stage, "reflective aestheticism." As Percy has pointed out in his essay, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," in his collection of essays, Signposts in a Strange Land, the decision to choose ourselves is of the utmost importance. Percy states;

"... the catch is that each of us is always and inescapably, an individual... and to the degree that we allow ourselves to perceive ourselves as a type of, example of, instance of, such and such, a class of Homo-sapiens—even the most creative Homo-sapiens imaginable—to this same degree do we come short of being ourselves. (212)

Lewis Peckham has never chosen himself. Instead, in his continual search to find that genuine and lasting pleasure, he is forced to pursue happiness down every possible byway until he eventually exhausts himself. Lewis' search for the finer things in life has led him into an ever-wider range of possibilities, none of which has been enough to inspire a commitment. So, by rotating his desires, by varying his pursuits, and by believing that this is the way life is meant to be, Lewis avoids facing himself and the emptiness he would find there. Lewis' life is summed up by Will's trenchant observation, he is "a discontent golf pro" (173).

There is another important incident in the novel which further establishes Lewis in "reflective aestheticism," but also confirms what I contend is Percy's "landscape metaphor" of Kierkegaard's stages of existence. As I explained earlier, Will's golf buddies inhabit the golf course as a place of gaming that is consistent with the attitudes and compulsions of immediacy. Battle and Rogers represent the first two stages of Aestheticism: "sensual immediacy" and "social immediacy." However, since Lewis Peckham is not in immediacy, he plays no significant role in the golf playing part of the story—one that emphasizes these qualities of immediacy. Instead, we see him interact with Will, in a major way, only when he has left the golf course.

On Monday morning, the third and last day of playing golf with these men, Will is consistently slicing his golf ball into the out-of-bounds. As he does so, he thinks to himself, "it was not a regular foursome. It was not an ordinary golf game" (56), which I believe sets up and foreshadows the discoveries to come. As I stated in my introduction, the region of the out-of-bounds is off the course of play, in a place where game-playing

both literally and metaphorically recedes. As one enters this sphere, one must leave a manicured arena devoted to humanity's personal enjoyment, and reenter an out-of-bounds where nature dominates. There we are not the center of things. Instead, we are forced to relinquish our sense of control and power and accept the truth that we are a small and somewhat insignificant part of a much greater design.

Will tees-off on the 17th hole and promptly slices out-of-bounds. Lewis Peckham, "the discontented golf pro" (173), decides to help Will find his ball by going with him into the out-of-bounds. However, as he does so, he ends up doing much more than simply helping Will find a lost ball—he guides Will into an area where Will might possibly find himself. As Will leaves the fairways on both the 17th and 18th holes, (the final two holes on the golf course) he encounters two things that dramatically affect his life. We will deal with what Will encounters on the 17th hole here and save his encounter on the 18th hole for our last section in the Aesthetic realm—"despair."

As a representative of "reflective aestheticism," Lewis is the right person to leave the course with Will. As someone who has seen through certain of the games of existence, and who has become aware of both their lure and ridiculousness, he is the only one among the various players who can leave the course with Will and journey into a place near the game but not of it. In the out-of-bounds Lewis shows Will something odd.

At the base of a low ridge, they were halfheartedly poking at weeds, hoping to turn the new Spading Pro Flite, when Lewis stopped and stood still.

"You notice anything unusual about that tree?" asked Lewis nodding toward the flaming sassafras, not a tree really but a large shrub. The red three-fingered leaves caught a ray of sunlight and turned fluorescent in the somber laurels.

“No.”

“Put your face to it.”

Lewis held a branch aside as if it were a drape at a window[.]...

“You still don’t notice anything?”

“No.”

“Come closer.”

There was nothing to come closer to except a shallow recess in the rock of the ridge.

“Now?”

Something stirred against his cheek, a breath of air from the rock itself, then as he leaned in closer a steady current blew in his face and open mouth, not like the hot summer breeze of the fairway, but a cool wet exhalation smelling of rocks and roots[.]...

“Where does that come from, a cave? I don’t see an opening.”

“Yeah, my cave”

“Your cave?”

“Lost Cove”

“Lost Cove Cave? But that’s down below”

“I know, but it is the same cave.” (56-7)

What Lewis shows Will is an old limestone cave that runs beneath both the golf course and the out-of-bounds, which then opens up on his property some miles away. This cave becomes an important symbol in both the narrative of the story, and in the symbolic way it corresponds to the final phase of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence—the Religious stage. The religious symbolism of this particular incident becomes apparent when one notices that the “flaming sassafras,” which Percy has described as not really a “tree” but more like a “shrub,” is very similar to the “burning bush” described in Exodus; “And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning but it was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2 RSV). As the “flaming sassafras” marks the entrance to the “cave” where Barrett will go to confront and question God, so, too, does the “burning bush” mark the place that Moses

received his revelation from God. As Lewis and Will are readying to leave, Lewis shows Will one more thing about the cave:

As he watched, Lewis seemed to vanish into the rock—and reappear magically.

“How’d you do that?”

“Look. It is a slot behind this rock. One step sideways and you’re in the cave.

“It looks like a trick”

Lewis said it was, that the Confederates had used it as an escape hatch. (58)

The final revelation that Lewis shows Will is the escape hatch that is hidden in the cleft of the rock. For Barrett, as we will see when exploring the Ethical stage, it will become a kind of “exit” as well. As for now, however, it is enough to know that it is Lewis who shows him the way—an escape that Lewis will not take because it is a choice he cannot make—to leave the world’s meandering course of “games.”

The last realm in the broader stage of “Reflective Aestheticism” is “despair.” Only a severe and unavoidable discontentment with life leads one to this final realm within the “Aesthetic stage.” It is in despair that we find Will Barrett. He is fully conscious that “something is wrong” with himself and with the world. He thinks at the very beginning of the novel that “People seemed more farcical than ever. More than once he shook his head, and smiling ironically, said to himself: this is not for me” (4). Thus, unlike Lewis, Will has grown tired of the games that the Aesthetic stage promotes. He is no longer in immediacy, deluded by the attractions and hungers of the flesh, or blinded by the binding allegiances of the herd. Neither is he in “reflective aestheticism,” where Lewis still resides rotating his pleasures and possibilities in the hope of staving off the

final killer—boredom. Both kinds of life, “immediacy” and “reflective aestheticism,” are a kind of “game-playing” which, ultimately, functions as—self-deception. And thus, this is where Will Barrett has chosen to disembark. He wants out—some how, some way; however, he does not know quite yet which way is out. But in “despair,” Will Barrett will confront one more person, the last in his series of confrontations in his journey through the Aesthetic stage. The final confrontation is not with anyone living. Instead, it is with someone who has already made his choice about life and the reasons for existing and not existing. In the final section of the Aesthetic stage, Will confronts the second-coming of his deceased father, the ghost of Ed Barrett.

Ed Barrett: The Despair at the End of Reflective Aestheticism

Ed Barrett, like the other characters in the novel, and particularly those at the two poles of Aestheticism, “immediacy” and “reflective aestheticism,” exhibits a strong tendency toward a specific Kierkegaardian category, “despair.” This category is the last stop in the stage of Aestheticism which is devoted to the pleasure principle. Such a pursuit of pleasure must logically end in despair, for the pursuit of pleasure is by nature ephemeral and ever-changing, and therefore cannot provide the long-lasting contentment that that individual in search of pleasure craves.

Alistair McIntyre, author of the section on “Existentialism” in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, concurs with this point when he states, “In the end, the search for novelty leads to the threshold of despair” (338). This search for novelty has been a defining characteristic of the individuals during the Aesthetic stage of existence, from Dr. Vance

Battle to Lewis Peckham. And, though various characters have altered their “choices” of what to pursue (the difference in “immediacy” and “reflective aestheticism”), this characteristic of seeking change, and through it sensual or social gratification never wanes. Likewise, along with the search for “novelty,” another characteristic has dominated individuals at this stage of existence—the lack of “decision.” However, in the final stage of “Aestheticism,” these two qualities are reversed. Instead of a consuming desire for “novelty” and “change,” individuals believe that “nothing changes,” that all reality is essentially the same and that the world is meaningless in all its guises and forms. Of course, such a realization is depressing—especially for those individuals used to playing the game of “change” by “rotating” their pleasures and possibilities. What finally emerges from this recognition of life’s illusory nature is—“decision.” Decision has been the one attribute that all individuals within Aestheticism lacked, for it is “alien” to the realm of Aestheticism. “Decision,” as a concept, makes demands, sets limits, defines the boundaries of possibility, and restricts the horizon of novelty. It implies a commitment to a specific course of action and devotion to duty. When one finally awakens to the fact that the pleasure-principle, with all its myriad possibilities, is a false and debilitating myth, then one must make a decision. The question one must answer is, “how do I go on living with this knowledge?” This is the question that Ed Barrett faced and “answered” for himself. We will look at this “answer” as we examine the kind of man Ed Barrett was, and how his life influenced Will’s search for something beyond the pleasures of aestheticism.

Just as, on the 17th hole, Will sliced his tee-shot into the out-of-bounds and he and Lewis went there retrieve it, so the slice happens again on the 18th hole. However, on this last hole the slice has gotten even worse. Will takes three tee-shots in his attempt to hit a single shot onto the fairway, and instead, he slices all three shots into the out-of-bounds. In reflecting on why it is happening, Will thinks, “The slice, which had become worrisome lately, had gotten worse. He had come to see it as an emblem of his life, a small failure at living, a minor deceit, perhaps even a sin” (53). When Will slices out-of-bounds “three consecutive times,” we should recognize that as the number “three” is a symbol completion, so too has Will’s journey in aestheticism been completed—he has reached the end of the gaming life, and it no longer holds any allure for him. Will’s tenure at this stage is complete. Therefore, after the third slice, Will tells his “gaming” companions on the golf course, “I’m picking up, it is the eighteenth anyhow, I’ll see you in the clubhouse” (53). By “picking up” Will indicates that he’s giving up. He does not want to finish the game—that is why he quits before putting out on the 18th hole. By doing this, Will emphatically divides himself from his friends within “Aestheticism.” I believe Will’s leaving the course is a symbolic and literal departure from the Aesthetic stage of existence. The narrator describes this change in environment:

Once he was in the pine forest the air changed. Silence pressed in like soft hands clapped over his ears. Not merely faint but gone, blotted out, were the shouts of the golfers, the clink of irons, the sociable hum of the electric carts. He listened. There was nothing but the sound of the silence, the seashell roar which could be the eeing and ohing of his own blood[.]... (58-9)

Instead of the great variety of external noises attributable to the world of pleasure and possibility within “Aestheticism,” Will now hears only silence. And, within this quietude the only sound he notices is that made by his blood pumping and coursing through his veins. Essentially, then, the focus of Will’s concern shifts from the various outward and external configurations that promise pleasures to a concern that is inward and self-referential in its devotion to reflection.

As Will crosses into what Percy has termed the “out-of-bounds,” he begins to hold his golf club as he would a shotgun, “with the golf club head tucked up high between his chest and underarm and the shaft resting lightly on his forearm” (51). As Will does this he notices the change, and the narrator in speaking for Will says, “He did not at first know why he did this, then he did know why” (52). Will’s repressed memories are returning and this change in posture signals both the changes in Will’s environment and the nature of the memories he will encounter and confront. Will is re-entering a world that he left long ago, a world full of painful recollections and hard realizations. It is these realizations (the meaning within the recollection) that trigger a further awareness in him: that “for the first time in his life he knew that something of immense importance was going to happen to him and that he would soon find out what it was” (51).

As Will moves through the underbrush and into an open glade, he sees a short distance away a great poplar tree. The poplar, with the sun shining on its leaves, is full of shimmering light. As Will stands in the glade looking at this tree, he begins to think back to an earlier time when he was with his father, in a not-so-different place, and when he

was not carrying a golf club like a shotgun but was carrying an actual shotgun. The fact that tree is called a “poplar” echoes in sound the term that Will’s daughter, Leslie, uses to convey her affection for her father when she calls him, “poppy” (331). As Will gazes at the poplar tree, he begins to think of his own father and pieces together the memory of the time when his father had taken him on a hunt in Thomasville, Georgia. This was the place where Ed’s own father had gone on a “great hunt” with him many years before. In taking Will back to the same place at this same time of the year, Ed trying to repeat this experience with him. The narrator explains:

He had given the boy the new shotgun for Christmas and he’d just finished trying an important lawsuit in Thomasville close by and this was the very place, the very woods where he, the man, once had had a great hunt, even a fabled hunt, with his own father (61)

Kierkegaard would identify the above event as an attempt to rotate one’s experience by manipulating present circumstances in such a way as to create the illusion of reliving the prior experience. In this case, Ed Barrett tries to relive a “great hunt” by taking Will to the exact same place and at exactly the same time. The “Rotation Method” is employed by a person at the second pole of the Aesthetic stage, “reflective aestheticism,” to create “novelty” or to “re-experience” a prior event that was particularly enjoyable. In this attempt at reliving the past, Ed Barrett has, in a symbolic manner, committed a crime against the present. By idealizing the past, and by attempting to repeat it, he hopes to elevate it into the present—however, this is exactly the place where it cannot come and where it does not belong. The past, in all its exactness, cannot be repeated, and if one persists in an attempt to do so, it only means that the individual is more interested in the

“dead” than the “living.” To live in the past—especially a reconstituted past rife with idealism and romanticized events, is to lose a vital and necessary connection to the present and to the kinds of choices that must be confronted in the present.

For Ed, as Will remembers the experience, the attempt at repeating the hunt was a disappointment. It only reinforced his awareness and opinion about life, that it was ultimately trivial and meaningless. Therefore, the only novelty left to experience is “death.” During the night at the hotel, Ed Barrett had awakened and sat up in bed, all the while looking at his son who was lying in the bed beside him. Will remembers that his father had told him of this exact happening, even though he himself had been asleep at the time. There, in that pine forest, thirty years before today, Will’s father confided in him.

“You’re like me. We are two of a kind. I saw that last night.” Here come the pats again, hard, regular, slow, like the tolling of a bell.

“Saw what?”

“I saw the way you lay in bed last night and slept or didn’t sleep. You’re one of us, I’m afraid. You already know too much. It is too bad in a way.” (63-4)

Later, in the same conversation, Ed tells his son that he’d be “better off” if he were one of “them... the ignorant armies that clash by night” (64). Ed Barrett’s reflectiveness has led him into despair, just as Kierkegaard’s philosophy indicates it would, and now Ed sees this same reflectiveness in his son, Will. Ed recognizes himself in his son, and knows that it is only a matter of time before Will too begins to see through life’s packaged and marketed illusions. For Ed Barrett, such an existence within this kind of reality is a life-in-death existence without hope. In this kind of world all joys are tinged

with sadness, all happiness is the precursor to pain, and all achievements are the refuse that will soon be blown away.

As Will's memory of the event continues to become clearer, he remembers that his father sent him one way around an old tree while he himself went the other way, the two of them circling around the tree toward each other. When Will rounds the tree all he sees is the "muzzle burst and flame spurting from the gun" (65). Before he realizes what has happened, he finds himself down in the leaves at the base of the tree. As he lies there feeling "the hot wetness on his face" (64), he hears the breech of the Greener open and close and another shot ring out in the forest. Ed Barrett has shot himself in the chest. Will finds his father propped up against the tree. "He pulled the man's cap off. He was not smiling and his eyes were closed but his face looked all right. His cheeks were still ruddy" (66). Ed does not manage to kill himself or his son, but hurts himself severely enough that Will is forced to get help. The story that got around was that Ed had been drinking, and that, while hunting with Will, he had tripped and fallen, and in falling, had discharged the double-barreled Greener, "which wounded the boy and nearly killed the man" (68). In hearing his grandmother tell this version of the story, Will remembers that, "he almost came to believe her..." (68).

Now Will recognizes that there were "two accounts of what had happened, and if one (true) was false the other (that circulated) must be true" (67). However, back in the present, as Will stands there in the glade, within the out-of-bounds, and adjacent to the wonderfully groomed fairways of the golf course, he feels as if the intervening years have passed and that nothing has changed (70). He now remembers the event as it really

happened, and not in the version that had been passed around and diluted of its significance. Will is now at a place in his life where he is ready to deal with the reality that his father had wanted to kill him, and that, in a pine forest not unlike the one where Will currently stands, his father actually acted on that desire. What Will confronts in this moment of remembering is the question of whether his father had been “right.” What if he had? What if the world is of such stuff that self-murder is the only rational alternative? In the following section we will look at how Will’s father appears to Will and beckons him to choose his alternative—“suicide”—and how Will counters this offer with an unexpected action of his own, and by doing so, experiences a “revelation” of grace and hope.

Will Barrett: A Confrontation with Suicidal Despair

While standing in the glade remembering his father’s attempt to murder him and commit suicide, Will sees a figure move in the forest. “He gazed at the figure that seemed to come and go in the trembling dappled light of the poplar” (85). As we saw earlier, there is a connection between this particular tree and Ed Barrett. This idea can be further supported by the cultural idea that one’s lineage or “stock” can be traced through one’s “family tree.” The tree becomes a symbol of Will’s father. This connection becomes clearer when we see Will carry on a mental dialogue with it. The dialogue captures the essence of Will’s final choice within the Aesthetic stage, and sets the stage for his continued development as he leaves Aestheticism and journeys towards the Ethical stage of existence.

The final temptation that Will undergoes at this time is the most formidable confrontation he has yet encountered in the Aesthetic stage. For he understands the choices and the motivations that brought it about. And, although Will has not yet made up his mind whether he agrees with what his father did, he feels sympathy towards his father. This is the ambiguous lure—for it promises connection with a long-lost father, but only through self-annihilation:

You were trying to tell me something; weren't you?

Yes.

That day in the swamp you were trying to tell me that this was what it was going to come to, not only for you but in the end for me, weren't you?

Yes.

You did it because you hoped that by having me with you when you did it you would show me what I was up against and that if I knew about it that early, I might be able to win over it instead of it winning over me, didn't you?

Yes.

Then it is not your fault. It is not your fault that after all this time here I am back where we started and you ended, that there is after all no escaping it for us. At least I know that, thanks to you, you tried, and now for the first time since that day you cursed me by the fence and grabbed my gun, I don't hate you. We're together after all.

Silence.

Very well. At least I know why I feel better holding a shotgun than a three-iron. (85)

At this point the conversation ends. As the narration makes clear, Will is reconciled with his father and no longer hates him. The allure of the “gaming” life has come to an end. Instead, and in its place, there is the shotgun with its attendant images of seriousness, destruction, and death. What happens next is that Will approaches the poplar tree and seems about to join it in some symbolic union. The text states that, “He [Will] walked through the Chestnut fall to the poplar” (85). And though, Will has no shotgun with him, there is, nevertheless, the distinct impression, strengthened by both action and dialogue in

this section, that as his father had tried to commit suicide in a similar pine forest at the base of another large tree, so Will too is now resolved to do the same. He understands his father, he has forgiven his father, and now he knows the things that his father had tried to tell him. There is a bond now between father and son that did not exist prior to this point. Both father and son have come to the same conclusion, life is not worth living. Yet, when when Will approaches the poplar something happens that alters the situation, something out of the ordinary and contrary to the “death” scene just symbolically enacted. If we pick up the narrative where we left it at the last quotation, we see what this “surprise” is.

The figure [Ed Barrett] changed in shape, disappeared, returned as a solid of darkness bounded by gold leaves, then vanished altogether. Glass winked in the sunlight. The leaf shook violently as he went under it. (85)

As Will approaches the tree, the shape that had been so communicative and clear a minute before suddenly disappears. The sense of his father’s presence in the glade fades as Will comes closer to it, and as a result Will is left with the hard reality that perhaps the whole episode was a figment of his imagination. However, as Will comes through the tree’s “screen of leaves the sun behind him suddenly went down and came up in front.” (85-6) This “blazing” light (which is a counter-light to that of the poplar tree) is something that distracts Will from the present, and causes him to look beyond the dire circumstances in which he finds himself. His curiosity gets the better of him, the narrator notes, and as he passes under the tree that a certain “leaf shook violently as he went under it” (85). What Will encounters beyond the poplar tree is something that his father had patently and forthrightly rejected—a meaning to life that is not dominated by sensual

desires, social ties, or infinite reflection without action. By passing beyond the tree, Will turns his back on the entire realm of “Aestheticism” and on his father who represents the final stage of Aestheticism—the “active despair” which leads to suicide. When Will goes beyond the tree, he is exposed to a kind of “grace” that up till now he has not believed in. The twinkle of light Will originally perceives through the leaves of the tree now becomes a radiance of light so bright it blinds him. Percy says of Will, “Once he cleared the screen of leaves the sun behind him suddenly went down and came up in front, blazing into his eyes” (85). This surreal sequence in the narrative contributes to the sense of enlightenment that Will is currently undergoing. He has pushed through the poplar’s screen of leaves whose purpose was to shroud and obscure, and is now coming face to face with a kind of “light” that will push back the darkness and despair of the Aesthetic stage, and that will lead Will in a different direction—towards the Ethical stage of existence.

Barrett’s Decision: The Grace that Goes Beyond Despair

What Will discovers in the deeper reaches of the out-of-bounds, where the forest in all its self-sufficiency reasserts its primal importance, is “a greenhouse, such as he’d never seen before” (86). Will notes that it “looked as big as an ark,” (86) and that “a steep copper hood, verdigrised green-brown, shaded the front door like a cathedral porch” (86). The ethical and spiritual overtones in this passage are obvious. All the images that Will encounters have a connection to a kind of salvation that reinvigorates life. The Ark, of course, is an Old Testament Biblical symbol standing for hope and life

in the face of imminent destruction. The greenhouse, laden with images of growth, fecundity, and new birth, accentuates the life metaphor. And finally, the cathedral porch, which has historically been a place of safety, comfort, and asylum completes these images of renewal and protection. Thus, taken together these images emphasize that the greenhouse is a place of refuge for Will. However, in the midst of encountering this unexpected image of hope deep within the forest, Will has yet another meeting, and this meeting, within this context, provides him with the impetus for an even deeper reflection. For it is here, in the ark/cathedral/greenhouse, that Will meets Allison.

Allison Huger, unknown to Will, is the daughter of one of his old girlfriends, Kitty Huger—a woman he had dated before he moved to New York, became a lawyer, and married Marion Peabody. However, in many ways Allison is similar to Will. She too is recovering her memories. She has come to take possession of what is hers—willed to her as part of her late Aunt's estate—the beautiful greenhouse. Until recently her parents had had her committed to an asylum where she had been undergoing electroshock therapy as a way to “cure” her sense of despair and withdrawal. Now she has escaped from the asylum, reasserting her own identity and the willfulness to exist on her own terms. She is no longer willing to hand over her decision-making power to others—be they doctors or her parents. Thus, like Will, she is ready to take responsibility for herself, her life, her choices, and her existence. She is, like him, choosing the self as the best basis for defining who she is and becoming who she wants to be.

As Will comes closer to the greenhouse, trying quietly to get a closer look at it, Allison surprises him by coming up behind him. She offers him two of the three golf

balls that he has sliced out-of-bounds. In an earlier reflection on the nature of golf, at the 18th tee and after Will had sliced out of bounds three times, Will had thought of the golf ball as a picture of one's self. He also thought of a golf swing as the action that the self commits. Therefore, since he was slicing consistently out-of-bounds, his swing had become an emblem of his own "deceit, failure in living, and sin" (53). Will's symbolic equating of the self with the golf ball is especially important within the context of Allison returning his golf balls to him. His conflation of the golf ball with the self gives us an insight into how he thinks of his own self. He says, regarding golf and the self, that

One cringes past the ball, hands mashing through ahead of the club in a show of form, rather than snapping the clubhead through in an act of faith. Unlike sin in life, retribution is instantaneous. The ball, one's very self launched into its little life, gives offense from the very outset, is judged, condemned, and sent screaming away and, banished from the elicited fairways and the sunny irenic greens, goes wrong and ever wronger, past the rough, past even the barbed wire fence, and into the dark fens and thickets and briars of out-of-bounds. One is punished on the spot. (53)

If for Will the golf ball is a symbolic picture of his own self, then when Allison returns these objects to him it is as if he is getting another chance at being a self. And, this is precisely what Kierkegaard says happens in the next stage of existence—the Ethical stage. The individual gets another chance at life. Granted, it is a different kind of life, one determined in many ways by the mistakes and excesses of the Aesthetic stage. However, because of these prior infatuations—with the sensual, the crowd, and possibility—the individual now finds him or herself with a new resolve to remake the self, and to rely on one's own sense of right behavior instead of deferring that responsibility to others.

After Allison returns the golf balls to Will, he tries to pay her for finding them by holding out a dollar bill. She ignores this gesture, and instead tells Will how “this one woke me up” (87). She had been reading in her greenhouse when the “Hogan four” had broken a pane in the glass of the greenhouse and rolled up beside her and touched her. Her story gives Will a chance to observe Allison. She is dressed in “oversize men’s clothes, man’s shirt, man’s jacket,... her hair was cut short and brushed carefully, and as old fashioned as the book she was reading” (88). However, what Will does not know is that Allison has been observing him as well. It is this observation by someone like himself that begins to show Will something new about his life.

As Will turns away and begins to leave, Allison asks him a question that causes him to stop. “Are you still climbing on your anger?” (88). The question that Allison asks cuts through all the layers of social decorum that dominate Aestheticism. Allison’s blunt honesty forces Will to confront himself in a way he has not anticipated. When he turns around to face Allison he notices that

She was closer, her eyes full on him. Large gray eyes set far apart... her gaze steady and unfocused. Either she was not seeing him (Was she blind? No, she’d have never found the Hogan let alone the Spalding Pro Flite) or else she was seeing all of him. (88-9)

Now Will begins to see himself differently. What he had thought was normal and expected because that was the way everyone did it, now in a split-second observation is called into question. Will becomes aware of himself in a way that contradicts his assumptions:

He became aware of himself as she saw him, of his golf clothes, beltless slacks, blue nylon shirt with the club crest, gold cap with club crest, two-

tone golf shoes with the fringed forward-falling tongues, and suddenly it was he not she who was odd in this silent forest, he with his little iron club and nifty fingerless glove. (89)

Not only does Allison see Will's internal anger and forthrightly ask about it, but she is also the impetus for Will to see how odd his external dress is—within this new and different environment—“this silent forest” (89). When Will attempts to answer Allison's question he denies that he is angry. But he is curious, too, about how she knows he was angry. So he asks her, “What did you mean by still angry?” (89). Allison answers:

“I mean over there.” She pointed to the chestnut 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.” (89)

Allison is exactly right. The chestnut thicket is where Will was standing during his mental dialogue with his father, and the place where he might have shot himself if he had had a gun instead of a “golf stick.” However, instead of dying beside the poplar tree, Will is drawn forward by a twinkling light beyond the tree to a place where his oddities are exposed and his anger at life's despair honestly questioned.

Will is not sure what to make of Allison. Her speech is strangely slow and deliberate, almost “scanning” (90) in its ability to probe his thoughts. He believes she might be “on something,” and that perhaps her “drugged existence” might in fact be better after all. As Will observes Allison he says, “At least they [young people taking drugs] are unburdened by the past. They don't remember anything because there's nothing to remember” (90). Such an existence is similar to the first stage of

Aestheticism, within “immediacy,” where one is so immersed in the environment that there is no conception of the self apart from that environment. As Will notes:

They [young people taking drugs] crawl under the nearest bush when they’re tired, they eat seeds when they’re hungry, they pop a pill when they feel bad. Maybe it does come down to chemistry after all. (90)

Will’s response to this possibility is perhaps the best example yet of his decision to be done with the aesthetic mode of existence. He knows what this kind of life has to offer—he has lived it far too long. And so, in a clear and unequivocal declaration, he affirms that he is through with it. In responding to this “possible existence”—the one Will assumes these “young people” live—he says:

But if it does, [come down to chemistry] then *he* [Will’s father] was right. He wouldn’t have it, the way they [young people] are, and though I wouldn’t have him, I won’t have it [drugs] either. (brackets mine, author’s italics) (90)

In this small sentence, Will affirms that he has decided that he will no longer live an existence of game-playing and illusion based upon external situations. He has rejected that existence just as his father had done before him. However, he is also “rejecting” his father’s alternative—suicide. In affirming that he will not have either aestheticism or despair and suicide (90), Will decides to choose another way.

We are not yet privy to what that “way” will be—not exactly, at least. We do not know the specific course that he will take in life—but we know the terrain. Will has chosen himself over the crowd, he has chosen inwardness over externals; he has chosen truth over falsehood. In “deciding” to reject the aesthetic way of living, Will is now ready to take action. His life no longer will be controlled by seeking pleasure, but by a

search for “truth.” In fact, there is a real sense that this search for truth will be defined not by its resultant pleasures but by its resultant pains. However, as his name seems to hint, a question does remain: “will he bear it?” Can Will bear the truth? Can he continue to search for truth? And, is there more despair ahead? What if he does not find this “third way” between the mindless immediacy of his friends on the golf course and his father’s world-rejecting and suicidal despair? In following Will into the next section, the Ethical stage, the second of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence, an uncertainty remains and our quest continues. Essentially, Will must find a truth in which he can “believe.” The next section in the novel, as well as the pilgrimage that Will takes, is best understood as a search for “beliefs.”

PART TWO

In Search of Belief: Will Barrett's Journey Through the Ethical Stage

**But what is it I choose? Is it this thing or that? No, for I choose
absolutely, and the absoluteness of my choice is expressed
precisely by the fact that I have not chosen to choose this or that.
I choose the absolute. And what is the absolute?
It is I myself in my eternal validity.**

Either/Or
--Soren Kierkegaard

**Self-realization remains the ethicist's primary interest,
and God is subordinated to that self as the means by which one insures
the permanence of one's intention, and thereby establishes
the continuity of the self. The ethicist remains self-reliant.
He believes himself able to understand his duty, and thinks
that he has the capacity to fulfill it.
From an ethical perspective, there is not an adequate
sense of one's evil, and therefore no awareness of the need for a mediator
through whom one might become related to God.**

Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship
--Mark C. Taylor

**His real challenge, as it always is with the artist, is somehow to humanize
the life around him, to formulate it for someone else, to render the interstices,
to tell the truth, to show how life is lived, and therefore to affirm life, not
only the lives of poor white people and poor black people in the Georgia
countryside and in Mississippi towns and hamlets, in Faulkner country,
in Welty country, but even life in a condo on a golf course.**

Signposts in a Strange Land
--Walker Percy

Introduction

The ethical stage of The Second Coming begins when Will Barrett leaves Allison in the out-of-bounds near the cathedral/greenhouse. At this moment Will has chosen himself, and by doing so he exhibits the necessary character development to indicate a fundamental change in the orientation of his self. As Will leaves Allison and heads back to the clubhouse, he is aware that a distinctive life-change is taking place: “[a]s he [Will] climbed through the fence and walked toward the clubhouse, it occurred to him that for the first time in years, perhaps his life, he knew exactly what was what and what he intended to do” (90). Will Barrett has lived the past twenty plus years in a state of “forgetfulness.” He has avoided the truth about himself, his father, and their relationship by immersing himself in the things of this world: its sensual pleasures, its material possessions, its social activities, and finally, its despair. By all the standards with which the world measures success—money, power, influence, and prestige—Will Barrett has been a “success.” What Will has not been able to do is “integrate” the disconnected facets of his life. Will’s past, present and future are fragmented because he has not incorporated the reality that his father had wanted to murder him nor his father’s eventual suicide into his present awareness. As long as Will is unable to do this, his future is imperiled. However, all of this begins to change when Will confronts his father in the silent forest, off the golf course, and near the cathedral. What changes at this juncture in the novel is that Will begins to “remember everything” (91). By remembering, Will gains the opportunity to change his present and his future. He no longer has to choose his father’s option—suicide—he can choose himself and alter the outcome of his life. By

proceeding beyond the chestnut tree, which is equated with his father, Will symbolizes his rejection of his father's alternative—suicide—and his willingness to investigate other possibilities.

As my thesis states, what I intend to prove is that Percy designed the landscape of The Second Coming as a metaphor for the journey of Will Barrett through Kierkegaard's three stages of existence; thus, in the second section of the novel, which begins in the "out-of-bounds" near the golf course but off the actual playing surface, I believe there is a fundamental shift in Will Barrett's orientation and perspective. This shift in viewpoint is consistent with the change in perspective and attitude that the individual experiences when going from the aesthetic mode of existence to the ethical. However, to understand this "shift" and its importance in the novel, we must first examine the characteristics of the ethical stage and how these traits manifest themselves, relate to each other, and influence the development of the individual self.

SECTION ONE:

Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage of Existence

Unlike the Aesthetic stage, the Ethical contains no neat polarity to describe the progress of the individual. Whereas the aesthetic sphere includes two complementary stages, immediacy and reflective aestheticism, to chart the individual's journey, the Ethical stage is itself primarily a "transition" stage because it either prepares one to enter

the religious stage, or it shows that one cannot live a truly ethical existence indefinitely without resorting to self-deception.

The ethical stage of existence differs from the aesthetic by emphasizing the very characteristics most lacking in the aesthetic. Essentially, it is a corrective to the excesses and problems that the individual has experienced in aestheticism. Though many of the problems that the individual faces are the same in either stage of existence—understanding the self, integrating the self society, and coordinating the various aspects of the self—the solutions to these “problems” are radically different. Whereas the aesthetic offers sensual and social indulgence, the ethical offers beliefs, commitments and responsibility. In Becoming a Self, Merold Westphal states how all three stages are related to each other. He says, “The identity and integrity of each stage—its essence, if you like—is the criterion it offers for successful living. Each stage is an answer to the question, ‘what is the good life?’” (22) Therefore, let us look more closely at this “good life” as it is defined within the ethical mode of existence.

In Kierkegaard’s writings the chief text concerning the characteristics of the ethical stage is Either/Or, volume II. Here the spokesman for the Ethical stage is Judge William. Judge William attempts to answer and refute the assertions of another character to whom we were introduced in the first volume of Either/Or, “A,” the representative of “aestheticism.” Judge William attempts his refutation by examining the nature of aestheticism as presented by “A,” then contrasting it with his own version of how an individual should live his life. By doing this, the Judge hopes to persuade “A” that his version of the “good life” is more fulfilling on both an individual and social level. In

Kierkegaard's Philosophy, J.D. Mullen writes of the importance of establishing Judge William as a significant representative of the ethical, saying that, "Kierkegaard knew that a criticism of bourgeois life had to be directed at the best it had to offer" (121). Thus, both "A" and the judge are models who not only advocate their respective modes of existence, but exemplify activities and pre-occupations to which each life leads.

I wish now to examine two fundamental aspects of the ethical life that have a direct and provable thematic correlation to The Second Coming. I will call these two aspects "Ethical Grounding: How the Self Gains Itself" and "Ethical Ossification: How the Self Loses Itself." Both aspects include other sub-topics that I will examine. "Ethical Grounding" suggests how the ethical stage represents an improvement on the deficiencies of the aesthetic stage, while "Ethical Ossification" is best understood as explaining how the Ethical stage falls short of representing the good life. Though neither of these terms is Kierkegaardian in origin, I believe that they do not distort the essential message of the Ethical stage that Kierkegaard sought to portray in the life of Judge William. My intention in using these two terms as reference points is to provide first of all a schematic by which we might better understand aspects of the Ethical stage and secondly, to provide greater insight into the meanings and relevance of The Second Coming as it relates to Kierkegaard's Ethical stage.

Ethical Grounding: How an Individual Gains a Self

The ethical existence of the self begins in a moment of intense decision, and this decision is of crucial import in the overall development of the self. It signifies the time

and place where the individual has ceased to live according to his appetites and desires. At this pivotal moment of time the individual will either enter the ethical realm of existence and accept responsibility for himself, or he will fall back into an even deeper sense of despair. As we have seen, Will has avoided his father's alternative, suicide. By leaving the golf course—the arena of gaming—and entering the out-of-bounds, he has taken the first step toward integrating his past into his present in an atmosphere of honest understanding and genuine acceptance.

Under the umbrella concept of the self's grounding, three terms define and describe how this grounding takes place. I will use these terms to mark our progression through the ethical grounding stage. The first I will call "The Decisions of the Self, the second, "The Concretization of the Self," and the third, "The Correlation of the Self." Each term describes a particular episode in the development of the self within the ethical stage.

Decisions: How the Self Chooses Itself

After one has left the aesthetic stage by realizing that one's pleasures are only temporary and its promises of fulfillment vacuous, and after he or she has decided to forego the life of possibility, change, and novelty, there is still much work to do. The individual I has taken but the first step toward integrating his existence in time—he has "chosen himself." Thus, the individual has begun a process that will lead to other, equally important, choices. The three other choices that choosing the self leads to are "accepting yourself"—who you are, warts and all—second, "accepting the past"—what

cannot be changed in your history—and third, “accepting responsibility,” for not only one’s past but the present and future as well.

Accepting the Self

The idea of choosing oneself is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the ethical stage. It conditions every other choice that the individual makes at this stage regarding personal development. Kierkegaard’s conception of choosing is not limited to a particular choice—when he speaks of choosing the self, he is referring to an existential priority, something that conditions all other choices, options, or possibilities. In Either/Or, vol. II, Judge William, the proponent of the ethical life, describes the nature and importance of this kind of choice:

But what is it I choose? Is it this thing or that? No, for I choose absolutely, and the absoluteness of my choice is expressed precisely by the fact that I have not chosen to choose this or that. I choose the absolute. And what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity. (218)

When the individual enters the ethical realm, he or she must first confront the serious notion of “being.” Every individual must ask how seriously he or she will regard his or her “eternal validity?” Through this choice, the I becomes the “crux” and “crucible” for its own being. The I will no longer allow the self to be determined by anything external. The I will recognize “influences,” but will reserve wholly the right to choose who, what, and why it will become. For the ethicist, there is no other way. Only by consciously determining what one’s choices are, and through deliberate means directing the will in that chosen direction, can the self control its progression. Thus, the ethical life becomes

a more “inward” life, and in this way it is in complete contrast to the existence of the self in aestheticism. When the individual chooses a self, the other steps that accompany this stage of development fall naturally into place. Let us look briefly at some of these other choices.

Accepting the Past

The second part of the larger aspect of choosing the self is what I call “accepting the past.” Once an individual has decided to accept his or her being, with all its weaknesses, strengths, and inherent limitations, then one must, as a corollary, accept those things that have shaped the self in this process of becoming—i.e. the “past.” As Anthony Rudd notes in, Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical:

In ethical choice, I do not reject all that has gone on before in order to make a fresh start; on the contrary, I take responsibility for what I am, for all that complexity of my personality, all the conflicting elements in it, and all the guilt that I have acquired; I choose myself in the sense that I have acquired; I choose myself in the sense that I choose to make of this raw material a coherent, stable, disciplined self. (76)

This coherent, stable, and disciplined self is possible only if one accepts one’s past as a necessary and integral part of one’s identity. Notice also the dramatic shift in orientation between the aesthetic individual and the ethical individual—the former is concerned, first and foremost, with the present and the future, because in these two realms novelty and possibility are potential realities to be experienced. But in the ethical stage of existence, the past begins to assume equal importance. Instead of focusing on issues of possibility, the individual who has chosen to live in the ethical stage has chosen to

emphasize what is, not what could be. Thus, the ethical individual is fixed on the inward realities of his or her present existence in time. Instead of perpetually searching for the next pleasure, the ethical individual accepts life's inherent limitations. Thus, the ethical stage is, on a practical level, more stable and predictable. It is no wonder then that Kierkegaard relates this stage of existence to the bourgeois class, for they most value order and stability in order to strengthen their position in society.

Accepting Responsibility

The third aspect of choosing the self is learning to accept responsibility. This stage, like the other two, grows out of the individual's willingness to put away the gaming life of aestheticism and accept the limitations of existence. In Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship, Mark C. Taylor understands the movement of the self at this stage of existence. He says:

When the self becomes aware of and appropriates its concreteness, the possibility of further development is established. Apart from the choice of oneself, every thing appears to be possible, because nothing is actual. However, with the acknowledgment of the self's facticity, live options and dead options can be distinguished. (202)

In accepting responsibility, the self assumes liability for its actions, both those accomplished and those intended but never finalized. In this way the emphasis is placed not on external achievements, but on the intentional motivation that underlies all action. Responsibility, then, anchors the ethical life. To act irresponsibly is to invalidate the essence of the ethical life. The individual who honestly embarks on an ethical life will, by necessity, place himself under intense self-scrutiny. This is unavoidable, for only by

remaining honest with one's self can the one continue to grow. John Douglas Mullen, while comparing the deceptive qualities of the aesthetic and the ethical, affirms the legitimacy of this particular point. He says, "In self-deception I am maneuvering to escape a truth about myself. I am a self divided against itself. This is the meaning of Kierkegaard's double-mindedness." (71). Mullen then compares the double-mindedness of the aesthete's self-deception, with the transparency of the ethicist. He continues:

The opposite of self-deception, of willing obscurity about oneself, is to be transparent to one's self. It is to will one thing. To be transparent to oneself requires insight and courage. Not to will transparency is to be a fool and a coward. (71)

Thus, when honesty ceases to define the individual's existence, the ethical stage calcifies into a set of external and regimented rules that, with the individual's willing self-deception, become the means to discontinue the individual's growth and validation.

The individual who has decided upon an ethical existence, must not only accept responsibility theoretically but also recognize the practical effects that his decision to live responsibly will entail. He will be expected to represent and assume a host of conventional social obligations—such as being a loving husband, a good father, an involved citizen, and a diligent employee. In these ways the ethicist establishes that he is dependable and that he is willing to live responsibly. Kierkegaard spoke of this practical end of accepting responsibility when he outlined how the universal is concretized in the specifics of everyday tasks. He says, speaking of the ethical individual,

He who regards life ethically sees the universal, and he who lives ethically expresses the universal in his life; he makes himself the universal man, not by divesting himself of his concretion, for then he becomes nothing,

**but by clothing himself with it and permeating it with the universal.
(Either/Or, 260, S. V., II, 229)**

When Kierkegaard refers to the individual permeating his life with the universal, he refers to the desire to live according to certain ideals. The practical and everyday consequences of these ideals alter one's existence. For the Marxist this alteration may entail subordinating the desire for private property and personal wealth and desiring instead the greater good of establishing a more equitable collective ownership. The Christian believer may alter his or her existence by a willingness to give up house and home to journey to a far away place as a missionary in order to spread the good news. Kierkegaard has in mind such choices when he refers to the universal permeating the life of the individual or: for the individual's existence is defined by a relationship to the universal; in essence, the self takes on eternal validity. This validity remains valid only when one remains consciously committed to the absolute of eternity.

Thus, accepting the self, accepting the past, and accepting responsibility are all part of what Kierkegaard refers to as "choosing the self." However, other issues are involved in the choice of the ethical mode of existence. In the next section I will examine two issues that are part of the ethicist's intention to live a decisive existence.

Decisiveness: The Beliefs and Goals of the Ethical Life

When the individual decides to choose the self, he is deciding on a way to live. In choosing an ethical existence, the individual rejects the amorality of the aesthetic and in its place decides to live according to a universal of moral weight and significance. This

new moral dimension is codified in a system of beliefs that is, for each individual believer, compulsory. Thus, the ethical stage, as Kierkegaard conceives it, is a place of intensely felt beliefs and practical commitments. I now wish to examine belief and goals as a means to choosing the self.

A Life of Belief

In choosing the self, the cognitive apparatus that the individual uses to interpret both self and world changes dramatically. For this reason the individual's life, with its practical relationships, will also change. For instead of living according to the desires of the moment, the ethical person lives according to principles and moral convictions. Usually these new convictions correspond to a particular belief system that another group has endorsed as being valid. However, the individual must decide whether this new belief best exemplifies the moral order of the universe. Thus, becoming a true believer in a creed—the particular creed does not matter at this stage of individual progression—defines the ethical individual. In Kierkegaard's Philosophy, John Mullen elaborates on this point:

First, to believe an idea is different from merely entertaining that idea, rather like getting married is different from casual dating... when you get married you bring the other person into your life. When you believe an idea that you have previously only entertained, you are saying that you are the kind of person who would espouse this idea[;] therefore, depending upon the kind of belief involved, to decide to believe something is more or less to affirm who and what you are. (67)

Mullen's point is exactly right. We are what we believe we are—especially when those “beliefs” are held in absolute conviction. When this happens, the individual interprets

everything through the screen of their “universal”—an all encompassing system of beliefs.

A Life of Goals

Once one has settled on a specific belief system, one must ask: “how do I live out this new truth?” As Mullen indicates, a belief that has yet to be lived out in daily actions has yet to be realized. Thus, the ethical individual must create specific goals and agendas to concretize his or her beliefs. Anthony Rudd, in *The Limits of the Ethical*, stresses how the ethical individual’s orientation is affected by this change in belief. He says, “The ethical individual, trying to build up a coherent and stable personality, accepts his social background... he consciously chooses to take on projects—as a matter of long-term commitment rather than short-term whim” (98). This kind of commitment to a belief structure creates continuity in the life of the individual (Taylor, *Pseudonymous*, 226), which is exactly the intent of an ethical existence.

The specific goals that the ethical individual endorses are of primary interest only insofar as they contain and express the ideals that the ethical individual has accepted as true. Therefore, an ethical individual could be a Marxist, a religious Jew, an orthodox Muslim, a believer in Scientology. What matters at this stage is the intensity and conviction that the individual believer brings to a creed and its relationship to the universal that they have accepted as the grounding order of the universe.

A Life of Marriage

Within Kierkegaard's ethical stage, marriage plays a central role, and includes three important aspects: first, marriage as the ideal representation of the ethical life; second, marriage as personal fulfillment; and third, marriage and the conception of time. James Collins has said, regarding the Judge's attitude towards marriage, that "he [Judge William] regards the married state as the concretization of the whole ethical ideal and as the human condition within which alone legitimate claims can be honored and brought to fulfillment" (Mind of Kierkegaard 76). What is unique to the married state is that it is both freeing and binding. In this way it aptly illustrates the nature of the ethical stage of existence—which is freeing in the sense that it allows the individual a way to escape from a life of incessant and conflicting desires, and yet is binding because it replaces the cacophony of desires with an established order of firm commitments. In marriage neither individual is completely free to do as he or she pleases. However, this does not mean that the each individual is held against his or her will. Marriage as an institution is a unique representation of the duality that exists for the married person. Marriage suggests a willing suspension of freedom, which may alter the variety that an individual can experience in relationships but which promises a depth of knowledge and intimacy that other relationships cannot provide. Through the pen of Judge William, Kierkegaard has written extensively on the subject of marriage and its unique position in human society. His description is not only a good summary of the importance of marriage in the ethical realm but also a poetic statement about the nature of love,

Love is the unfathomable bottom hidden in obscurity, but resolution is the victor which like Orpheus fetches love out to the light of day, for resolution is love's true form, its true transfiguration, hence marriage is holy and blessed by God. It is civic, for thereby the lovers belong to the state and the fatherland and the concerns of their fellow-citizens. It is poetic, ineffably poetic, as love is, but resolution is the conscientious translator who translates enthusiasm into reality, and it is so precise. Love's voice "sounds like that of the fairies from the grottoes of the midsummer night," but resolution has the earnestness of perseverance which resounds through the fleeting and transitory. Love's gait is light as the feet which dance upon the meadow, but resolution holds the tired one till the dance begins again. Such is marriage. (Stages Upon Life's Way, 121, S.V., VI, 113)

Thus, in marriage the virtues of the ethical stage are brought to light and emphasized.

The marriage represents pact duty, obligation, and commitment, and these characteristics are in complete contrast to those in the aesthetic stage of existence. Though Kierkegaard doesn't slight the necessity of feeling and passion in the married state, for him resolution distinguishes the state of married commitment from other forms of passion and feeling.

Percy too understood this aspect of the married life. He had been quite a cavalier bachelor in his twenties. In his biography of Percy, Pilgrim in the Ruins, Tolson notes both Percy's "womanizing" and at which time this behavior began to change. He says:

Percy, who was now reading his Kierkegaard more carefully, believed that marriage signaled the passage from the aesthetic realm to the ethical; a passage he was willing to attempt, however a defective a moral being he thought he was. (193)

Thus, Percy accepted Kierkegaard's conception that marriage signals a shift in one's orientation to the stages of existence. This shift also occurs in The Second Coming as we follow Will Barrett's pilgrimage into the ethical realm.

Indeed, through marriage the individual's concretization, or unity, coalesces. By devoting the self to certain tasks, by having definite goals, and thus living within the limits of actual existence, the individual is capable of gaining a history. Whereas aesthetic existence is haphazard and chaotic—driven by the individual's clamorous desires—the ethical stage is founded upon the acceptance of one's facticity, and the desire to build a new and integrated life upon attainable goals.

In the third and final section of my analysis of the ethical stage, I suggest we examine where and how the ethical stage goes wrong. What began in a moment of decisive choice—the decision to choose the self, to engage the realities of existence, and commit to a life of beliefs, duties, and obligations—in the end ossifies into a life of conventions, traditions devoid of real meaning, and a devotion to an external form of existence.

Ethical Ossification: How One Loses the Self

Father Taciturnus, a character in Kierkegaard's Stages Upon Life's Way, states that "the poetic is glorious, the religious is still more glorious, but whatever falls between them is prattle" (204). The ethical stage is precisely what which falls between the "poetic," or aesthetic, and religious stages of existence. In the following section I hope to demonstrate the truth of Father Taciturnus' opinion—namely, that when drawn completely out, the ethical stage is in fact, "prattle."

The first category within Ethical Ossification is "dreadfulness," the second is "guilt." In the first, the individual's awareness of his or her freedom leads inevitably to

both a subjective questioning regarding what he or she has chosen to center the self around, and an objective questioning that calls into doubt the decision-making process used by the rest of the world. In the second category the individual becomes incapable of consistently adhering to the standards he has previously endorsed. Taken together, these two forms of ossification undermine the foundations of the ethical realm.

Dreadfulness: The Subjective and Objective Forms

Mark C. Taylor suggests that “dread is associated with three closely related issues... the future, the self’s possibilities, and the self’s freedom” (Pseudonymous 219). He affirms that dread is related to the individual’s conscious awareness of his own freedom and possibilities, and the ways in which these might be actualized. Thus, the individual’s awareness of freedom in time, and of the possibilities open to him, undermine the security that choosing the self had sought to correct.

Subjective Dread

Once an individual is committed to an ethical ideal, he encounters both the bedrock of subjectivity and the towering and absolute demands of the universal in which he has chosen to believe. The beliefs that the ethicist has chosen are themselves abstract concepts that place an absolute necessity upon the individual. If one inwardness takes seriously the injunctions of the universal, then one must seek to actualize these demands in both private and public life. But life, in all its vagaries and complexities, does not lend itself to neat and tidy dichotomies. The clean and clear oppositions between good and

evil may exist within an abstract ideological system, but they are much more difficult to determine in the messy everyday world. Thus, when an individual encounters a situation in which there is no easy way to determine a correct choice, and yet a decision is required, the individual's choosing, itself, becomes a burden. As a result, there arises the direct knowledge that though one may choose one thing, one could have chosen another alternative. The more aware the individual becomes of life's complexity, the more difficult it becomes to choose both wisely and securely. When the individual has reached this stage of thought, he or she has reached the point of "subjective dread." In his explanation of the ethical, John Douglas Mullen notes that Judge William fails to consider this quandry:

In its most general, he [Judge William] has overlooked (repressed perhaps) the fact that human life as the existing individual lives it is riddled with paradox, with double-bind situations, with ambiguity. This means in practice that on the one hand life will present situations which will passionately demand that one of many actions be chosen and on the other hand there will not be and never could be a clear role, program, or guideline to follow which will provide the solution. (128)

In the chaotic and confusing landscape of time, the ethicist must confront the inherent ambiguity of existence and the inability to concretize the absolute within his or her life. This realization is both subjective and objective. It is "subjective" because of the individual's awareness of his own freedom, but it objective in another way.

Objective Dread

Objective dread is the natural extension and result of subjective dread. Once the individual realizes the inherent nature of his or her finitude, and the fact that this finitude

applies to everyone, then he or she must conclude that no one else possesses absolute or infinite knowledge or experience. Therefore, all absolute pronouncements, decrees, or affirmations without a solid evidential basis in fact will lead the individual to objective dread, a fear that affirmations or commitments are complicated and morally and may therefore be wrong! In dread there is fear, and the fear is the result of not having any clear and unequivocal assurance. Knowledge—even spurious knowledge—leads to a kind of security, but living in a state of uncertainty undermines the confidence and trust the self has put in the absolute.

Thus, the ethical stage begins to deteriorate when the individual recognizes that he or she can no longer depend on a particular ethical life-view that was chosen to supply the right answers to life. One cannot determine with certainty what is right or wrong, nor can one trust anyone else to do it. However, there is another level to the breakdown in the ethical system, and this further breakdown is evidence against the entire structure of the ethical—its core of ideality and how this system is essentially artificial.

Guilt: The Individual's Inability to Actualize the Ideal

Kierkegaard states that in the ethical sin becomes “a deeper presupposition” (Concept of Dread 17, S.V., IV, 292). As the individual attempts to align his or her life with the ideals that define the ethicist's code of behavior there arises a greater awareness of sin's inextricable nature. Once the self focuses on living up to the ideals of an ethical system, one realizes how it fails to achieve this lofty enterprise. Kierkegaard's conception of guilt and sin is consistent with the doctrinal teachings of Christianity. In

chapter three of the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul attempts to define a new kind of Christian ethic—one based on grace. He makes this explanation clearer by comparing the new system to the one that preceded it—a system of law—the Mosaic and Talmudic code in Judaism. Paul explains that justification cannot come by the law because it was through the law that sin was revealed. Indeed, the whole purpose of the law has been to demonstrate the intractable nature of sin within the human heart. The law, Paul states, was sent as a “taskmaster;” it offered a set of guidelines to live a good life, then demanded that these guidelines be obeyed. However, the law has an inherent weakness—it has no power to enable an individual to obey its commands. Thus, the individual, sooner or later, finds that he or she is naked and impotent before the ideal standards of the law. When this happens, one individual experiences guilt.

The dynamic that Paul explains between the demands of the Mosaic system of law and the individual’s ability to adhere to these demands is the same dynamic found in Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical. This correlation of perspective substantiates the second way that the ethical begins to fall apart. As Taylor notes in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship, “the second important reason for the breakdown of the ethical stage is the fact that the ethicist’s optimism about his ability to achieve imagined ideals proves to be ill-founded” (233).

Thus, whatever system the ethical individual commits him or herself to, whether religious, ideological or humanitarian, it reveals to each individual the inability of the self to concretize absolutely the abstract ideals of the system. When this realization takes place, the individual falls into despair and must confront an immense decision. In the

next section I'll explore the two alternatives open to the individual who has come to this painful realization. For this individual it is impossible to know, with absolute certainty, what is the right thing to do, and even if the self did know, it could not always do the right thing. Such is the predicament of the ethical stage.

Ethical Religiousness and Beyond: the Self's Regression or Transcendence

To prevent the further fragmentation of the ethical stage, brought on by the individual's growing awareness of freedom and finitude, and of the inability to actualize the ideals of an ethical system, the individual concludes that one of two options are available. Either the individual must retreat from the ideality of the ethical demands that he or she has placed upon the self or the individual must find some way to supersede those demands while remaining loyal to them by finding a place where freedom and guilt can be harmonized with the finitude of human knowledge and the ambiguities" of daily existence. I deal first with the initial option—the retreat from "inwardness" and the assumption of ethical religiosity.

Ethical Formalism: Regression through the Loss of Inwardness

The first way that an individual may reduce the tensions of an ethical existence is by retreating from the demands of that particular ethical system. This retreat can take many forms. For example, the ethical-Marxist who is disenchanted with the lack of coherence in his ideology may decide to jettison the whole system and return to an aesthetic mode of existence. This kind of solution is really no solution at all. It is simply

a return to aestheticism—the same aestheticism that the individual had seen through and left behind. To return to this plane is to admit defeat and to accept despair. Such an acceptance leads to a bitter and angry cynicism and, as both Kierkegaard and Percy have noted, a kind of death in life.

What is true for the committed Marxist may be just as true of the committed Christian, Muslim, Hindu. Because each of these systems emphasizes individual moral rectitude and adherence to obligations, the self must relieve itself of the tensions of trying to live up to its ideals by either a wholesale rejection of the entire system, which does not solve the problem of existence, or by an internal modification of it. In the following section I explore this issue of ethical formalism and how belief degenerates into an external devoid of its former motivation, power, and internal convictions.

The individual ethicist begins the journey into the ethical by demanding of him or herself a new kind of honesty; however, such a devotion to truth does not come cheaply. When the ethicist wakes to the dual realization that the self cannot determine what “truth” is, and thus cannot follow the truth then that individual must decide how to “live” with this new and contradictory knowledge. If such an individual continues in devotion to the truth, without being able to live up to it, then guilt results. If this inward and serious realization can be reduced, or forgotten, then “guilt” decreases. Thus, instead of retreating into the aesthetic mode and living according to sensual dictates, the ethicist removes the central component of the ethical life—a devotion to inwardness and unequivocal honesty.

When this decision is made, the individual is free to adhere to the external forms of his or her belief, but without the corresponding internal devotion to them. This means that the individual will have to keep up the rituals, practices, and patterns that identify him or her as a part of a particular group. By doing this, the ethical formalist substitutes for an inward reality its the external form which makes the transition complete. However, the trick is to stick with forms, the external symbols of a debunked yet deeper reality. If the self should return to inwardness, honesty will once again become an issue and a source of guilt. For the ethical formalist, the greatest danger lies in confronting the validity of choice—and what that choice says about the self. John D. Mullen has noted what the result of such a life is: “[t]o live in the everyday, ground smooth as a pebble, diligently worrying over the particulars of one’s own life, is the most common tactic to avoid oneself” (73).

The ethicist, by stressing external definitions and outward forms as evidence of his or her ethical existence, has in effect, redefined his or her ethical system. By rejecting inwardness and honesty, the ethical formalist disconnects himself from a genuine ethical foundation, one that had formerly provided a foundation for the self’s emerging identity. This new ethical relativism relegates the transcendent to something external to belief. Leading a guilt-free existence by reducing the demands of an absolutist ethic, the ethical relativist takes on the mantle of divinity. Ethical “salvation” appears to become attainable through ordinary human means, human institutions, and human power. This was Kierkegaard’s chief criticism of Hegel; he replaced a divinely ordered ethical system with one configured to be conveniently compatible with human

frailties, follies, and foibles. Such a system does not call the individual's shortcomings into account, and, therefore, does not produce feelings of guilt and conviction in the believer.

Thus, at the end of the ethical stage, the individual is once again thrown into a conundrum. What began as a life of commitments and attaining a history through a personal integration of the self within the community, becomes, in the end, a life of dread. Once one has lived long in the ethical arena, one's finitude and freedom become a burden. Having the freedom to act rightly, yet not knowing which is the right thing to do, is debilitating. Likewise, when the self realizes that this is the case, it confronts not only its finitude, but also the finitude of all supposed "authorities" who claim they do know what is "right." This is the essence of the conundrum—wanting to do what is right and either not knowing what that is, or not having the personal power to realize this heartfelt desire.

But the self in the ethical stage has a third way. One that involves the ethical, but seeks to go beyond it. In this next realm ethical behavior is not dependent on human power or socially defined norms. In Existentialism and Religious Belief, David Roberts summarizes the territory we have covered in the Aesthetic and Ethical.

The Aesthetic, taken by itself, means an immediate continuity with nature and feeling before any moral distinctions are attempted. A man cannot succeed in remaining at this level, and he becomes demonic if he tries to, because a break with innocence must occur if he is to grow up morally. But he cannot remain in the ethical stage either, for, taken by itself, this implies that he is able to be self-sufficient. Thus, it cruelly holds the individual responsible for the things he literally cannot help, and at the same time treats man as the maker of his own destiny. Hence, the third stage, the religious, alone holds the possibility of a solution. (67)

The problems that surface in the Aesthetic and Ethical stages of existence can be solved only by entering the third and final stage of existence—the Religious. By moving into this stage the individual admits that he or she is incapable of maintaining an equilibrium between the “absolute ideals” of a particular ethical system and one’s private behavior. As Mark Taylor points out, “Sin makes the ideality for which those at the ethical strive, and upon which all depends for the ethicist, impossible to accomplish” (Pseudonymous 235). At the very end of the ethical stage there occurs a situation that Kierkegaard calls the “teleological suspension of the ethical” (Fear and Trembling 64). Here the individual comes face to face with the inherent limitations of his or her ethical system, his or her inability to live up to its flawed ideas. Here the individual must eschew devotion to a system and become instead devoted to the originator of the system—the “Absolute,” or God. Here the individual must willingly sacrifice his or her place in society, and it is here that the reasoning and logic of the ethical system breaks down, for the individual is defined by his or her connection to the divine—a connection with no earthly measure because it is wholly internal by excluding all external definitions. As Kierkegaard notes, “truth is subjectivity;” so, too, is the relationship of the individual to God in Kierkegaard’s conception of the Religious stage.

Ethical Transcendence: A Teleological Suspension

Kierkegaard uses the Old Testament story of Abraham being called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac as the perfect narrative to explain the difference between the

ethical life and the religious life. I cannot go into all Kierkegaard's details to explain why this story supports his belief that the Ethical must be superseded by the Religious; however, I do wish to cover the story in a general way because I believe it has significant relevance to the "choice" that Will Barrett confronts at the end of the ethical section in The Second Coming. Like Abraham, Will has to decide if he is willing to make the "ultimate sacrifice."

The account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is related in Genesis 22: 1-24. God calls Abraham to take Isaac, his only son, the one promised to him as his rightful heir, through whom God will spread his descendants throughout the earth, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. This request challenges everything Abraham believes about God, while contradicting the explicit promises that God had already made to Abraham and on which Abraham has staked his life. Clearly, God's request violates the "ethical norms" of Hebraic society. How can Abraham be true to the ethical expectations of his society, through which he maintains his position at the head of that society, while at the same time being true to the request of an infinite God who he loves, worships and obeys? Since God has promised Abraham in a solemn covenant that his "seed would have dominion" (Genesis 17), and that his descendants would someday "outnumber the sands upon the seashore or the stars in the heavens" (Genesis 17). God's subsequent request that Abraham sacrifice his only male heir appears to violate the validity of the former covenant itself.

Knowing all this, Abraham could conclude that it is not God's voice asking him to sacrifice Isaac. After all, how can a loving God make such a request? It contradicts

every ethical norm we associate with God. That he who is life sanctions an innocent's death is absurd. But this is precisely Kierkegaard's point, and the point at which the ethically sensitive self must eventually arrive at. The ethical self realizes that God's ways are not the ways of men—and must choose which way to go. The religious individual, in order to maintain his connection to the divine, must follow God's way—even if it is not the way that a human culture endorse. For the religiously existing individual there is no other way. In essence, then, the ethical individual's ethics are self-referential; they support society's opinions and his own understanding of what is right and wrong. However, the ethics of the religiously existing individual exist in the dark interior of the will of God, where no human intelligence can peer, or human understanding can unravel. Thus, Abraham is known as the “father of the faithful” because he believed and he obeyed. In the face of all that looked ridiculous, wrong, and even immoral, Abraham followed, in faith, what he believed to be the voice of God.

This concludes my discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the Ethical stage. Next I look at how Walker Percy has incorporated these concepts of Kierkegaard's into his description of Will Barrett's journey through the Ethical realm within The Second Coming.

SECTION TWO:

A Day of Decision: Percy's Depiction of Will Barrett's Journey through the Ethical Stage

When Will Barrett confronts his father's ghost, personified symbolically in the form of the poplar tree in the out-of-bounds area, he is at the very end of the aesthetic stage in The Second Coming. Holding his three iron like a shotgun and seriously contemplating taking his father's way out—suicide, Will Barrett is in complete despair. However, some "trick of light" (82) distracts Barrett and causes him to approach the poplar tree. As Percy describes the scene:

He walked through the chestnut fall to the poplar. The figure [the ghost of Barrett's father] changed in shape, disappeared, returned as a solid of darkness bounded by gold leaves, then vanished altogether. Glass winked in the sunlight. The leaf shook violently as he went under it. (85)

The trick of light is the glass greenhouse that Allison Huger, the daughter of Barrett's old girlfriend, Kitty Vaught Huger, has taken possession of and is restoring. However, for Barrett, at this moment, it is far more than a greenhouse. For him it is a symbol of hope that the quest he has begun might continue. He has gone beyond his father's option—having passed under his "father's tree," he is now venturing into uncharted territory. In this next section of the novel, after Barrett's long sojourn in aestheticism, he investigates the possibilities of an ethical existence.

Just as he observed practitioners of the aesthetic stage, Barrett will investigate the ethical stage of existence by watching and questioning its adherents. Thus, I will follow a similar path in my investigation of how Percy has crafted the Kierkegaardian ethical stage of existence into The Second Coming. When Barrett encounters a particular individual who evokes an ethical stance or position, I will connect this narrative incident to the theoretical underpinnings of Kierkegaard's theory. In this way I hope to

support my claim that Percy's appropriation of Kierkegaardian terms and concepts is much wider and more ingrained than is at first glance apparent.

Elements of the Ethical Life: Decision, Choice and Action

The ethical realm is distinguished from the aesthetic by decision. In the aesthetic the individual is controlled by external pressures—: sensuality, money, social acceptance, or an insatiable desire for something new. However, in the ethical, the individual relinquishes the merry-go-round of desires and possibilities for the firmer ground of a committed and self-created life. This new decision, in life includes distinctive qualities manifested in the lives of its adherents. As Alistair McIntyre points out regarding the ethical stage: "What the individual does depends not upon what he understands, but upon what he wills" (337). Thus, whereas the aesthetic realm contains ever-alternating possibilities, or infinite reflection--which results in the paralysis of the individual's will—the ethical is a place of decisive choices leading to practical actions and particular consequences.

However, the ethical, by the very nature of its choices and decisions, is a more solitary kind of life. In the aesthetic the individual has the comfort and benefit of the crowd. In the ethical this kind of unreflective participation disappears. By choosing themselves ethical individuals make themselves the focus and foundation of their lives. They no longer lead lives of desperation—ever searching for the next pleasure—but lead lives of deliberation and consciousness, where each action or event is the result of a

conscious choice. Such a life cannot help but be isolating. Jerome Taylor in his book *In Search of Self* describes the solitary nature of the ethical path:

For Kierkegaard, the journey to selfhood winds along a solitary path, narrow and steep, “where the individual wanders without meeting a single traveler.” To follow the way is to embark on an extra-ordinary (u-almandelig) pilgrimage, a venture that suspends one “above seventy thousand fathoms of water, many, many, miles from all human help.” And yet Kierkegaard is convinced that only such a journey holds the promise of a radical cure for spiritlessness—the sickness unto death. (261-2)

This radical cure forces individual to choose him or herself in an absolute and existential sense. There is no mediation from the crowd, no adherence or loyalty to the baser instincts of the flesh. Only by making the self the priority can an individual journey forward into a higher level of personhood. This is where we find Will Barrett—when he chooses himself over his father’s alternative, which as Barrett puts it, “[Ed Barrett] never even looked” at the other “possibilities” (155). Now Barrett discovers that there is more to this life. He must subsequently explore whether the ethical can provide a solution to the spiritlessness that Kierkegaard’s analysis of the human condition has uncovered.

Discovering an Alternative: Barrett's Entrance into the Ethical

Percy’s contrived use of Kierkegaard’s theories is illustrated through the characters who inhabit the ethical realm. In the ethical section of *The Second Coming*, certain characters manifest in their attitudes and actions the attributes of the ethical. When we first encounter Allison Hunnicutt Huger she is sitting dazed on a park bench in Linwood, North Carolina, recovering from her latest electro-shock therapy session. She has just escaped from Valleyhead Sanatorium and come to Linwood to take possession of

a piece of property that she has inherited in a will—a tract of land that borders the Linwood golf course and upon which rests an old and abandoned greenhouse. For Percy's purposes, Allison is an excellent example of someone just entering the ethical stage of existence.

In the following section I will examine how Will manifests the characteristics of the ethical. However, before beginning that examination I want to address an important first step for anyone who wishes to live an ethical existence. Both Allison and Barrett exhibit this characteristic, and it distinguishes them as fellow-searchers living in the ethical mode of existence; the trait is memory. Percy uses it to illustrate the individual's initial movement into the ethical, and in so doing emphasizes its importance as a stepping stone toward learning to live an ethical existence.

Memory: The Beginning of Ethical Intergration

A key element of aesthetic existence is the ability of an individual to “forget” willingly those things that detract from his or her sense of pleasure. After leaving the aesthetic stage, Will admits that until that time he did not remember the past. The past was locked away so as not to impinge upon the possible pleasures of the present. However, by remembering the past the self begins to make sense of the present. Thus memory plays an integral role in developing within the individual an ethical frame of mind. The narrator says,

[In] remembering the distant past, the meaning of [Will's] present life became clear to him, instantly and without the least surprise as if he'd

known it all along but had not until now taken the trouble to know that he knew. (83)

Later in a conversation with Allison about her own memories returning, Barrett states that it "...was a question of not wanting to remember" (125). This indicates that while in the aesthetic realm of existence, the self is in a state of self-deception. The uncomfortable or disturbing truth is conveniently forgotten or repressed. The aesthetic individual must forget if he or she is to continue to live in the realm of pleasure, change, and self-satisfaction. However, when Will finally leaves the Aesthetic stage, the last thing the narrator says about him is, "he remembered everything" (91). To "remember" is to move into the Ethical.

Allison too is regaining her memories; however, unlike Barrett her lack of memory is a byproduct of the electro-shock therapy she has undergone while at the sanatorium. Yet, like Will, she has been on a search. Allison symbolizes her search as "going down to her white dwarf" (104). In a conversation with Dr. Duk, her psychiatrist, and the man responsible for prescribing her electro-shock regimen at Valleyhead Sanatorium, Allison tries to explain to him why she does not need the "refresher course" (102) that he is recommending. She says, "I have to go down down before I go up. Down down in me to it. You shouldn't try to keep me up by buzzing me" (103-4). When Dr. Duk looks puzzled and skeptical, she tries to explain further:

"You know stars?" He did know stars, often spoke of constellations...
"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." (104)

Like Will, Allison is trying to find herself—a hard and bright diamond that is distinctive and unique. The electro-shock therapy has interrupted this process of discovery. So, when Allison escapes from the sanatorium, she is able to begin the process of regaining her memories. The process is long and difficult with each step along the way, and as her memory returns, she furthers the process self discovery and individuation. Without the honest acceptance of one's past— the memories of both "good" and "bad" deeds done— there can be no integration of the personality within the ethical realm.

Barrett's Movement into the Ethical: Encountering the Other

Barrett's experience in the ethical realm is partly conditioned by what he sees and experiences while in the out-of-bounds with Allison. We have already been introduced to their initial encounter which occurred after Barrett sliced out-of-bounds three times at the 18th tee, then decided to pick up, or quit the game before finishing. He goes into the out-of-bounds area to look for his lost golf balls, encounters his father's ghost, and is tempted to follow his father's example and commit suicide as a way to end his farcical existence. However, something—a twinkle of light—draws him further on and deeper into the out-of-bounds where he finds the greenhouse, as big as an ark, and Allison, who Barrett states, "spoke slowly and carefully as if she were reading the words on his face" (87-8). This encounter in the out-of-bounds startles Barrett into a realization. The narrator relates this:

As he climbed through the fence and walked toward the clubhouse, it occurred to him that for the first time in years, perhaps in his life, he knew exactly what was what and what he intended to do. (90)

When Barrett returns to the out-of-bounds the next day, we better understand what has changed and what he now intends to do.

In the next section I apply the three characteristics of ethical existence as experienced by Will and demonstrate how Percy has incorporated these Kierkegaardian concepts into the narrative. The three characteristics are first, Will's choosing himself, secondly, Will's choosing to act, and third, Will's choice of a responsible life.

Barrett's Decision: Choosing the Self

In Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society, Merold Westphal defines what it means to choose oneself. He says, quoting Kierkegaard, "By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power which constituted it" (30, Sickness Unto Death 131). Barrett's willingness to be himself grounds him in an ontological position of security. Power comes with making the decision to choose oneself. This power resides in the relationship established between the choosing agent—the self—and that which has created the self and constituted it as a unique and distinctive being. Will experiences this power as he is leaving the out-of-bounds after meeting Allison the first time. He knows that it is something new because the first word he uses to describe it is "strange." He thinks:

Strange: he was slicing his drives from a proper tee with a proper fairway before him and hitting his irons like Hogan from the rough, in the woods, behind trees. He shot better in a fen than a fairway. (90)

Will here uses the language of golf to describe the revitalization of his mood and attitude, just as he had used the language of golf in the aesthetic section to describe his melancholia and despair. Will's revitalization occurs because he has stumbled upon part of the answer to the predicament of living, for he has found out two things. First, he learns how his initial search will end, he says to himself, "It did not end quite as I expected, but it did end, and I did find out how it will end" (91). Second, Will realizes what the next step is, he says, "I know what I must do" (91). Both revelations provide Will with a significant insight into his past, present, and future. They give him confidence that he can begin to make sense of his life. This discovery gives Will the power to forge ahead in his quest to find further answers, which is only accomplished by taking specific and concrete actions.

Barrett's Actions: Living the Ethical Life

After Will departs from Allison and returns to the clubhouse to meet his friends we never again see him playing golf. The gaming life for Will has come to an end. We notice this change in many small ways. First, Will is described differently. Allison notices that "instead of golf clothes, he wore an ordinary white shirt and ordinary pants" (123). The change of clothes indicates a movement into a more ordinary kind of life, an ethical existence that values stability and faithfulness over novelty, experimentation, and game playing.

Barrett's first action in this new section of the novel—that is founded on Kierkegaard's idea of the ethical—is to return to this "ethical location"—the out-of-

bounds and find Allison in order to give her some avocados and olive oil, which Barrett declares are "the most nourishing of all vegetables" (127). Why is Barrett concerned about a girl in a greenhouse? Because he sees something in Allison that he recognizes, and he believes that she feels the same way about him as well. The narrator tells us something of Allison's thoughts, stating, "Is it possible to stand next to a stranger at a bus stop and know that he is a friend? Was [Will] someone she had known well and forgotten?" (126). Later, during the same conversation with Allison, Will asks Allison how she is going to move a heavy porcelain stove over-ground to the greenhouse. Will wishes to help Allison because he knows she cannot move it with the ropes and pulleys she had used to get it out of the cellar. When he acts as if he is going to go get a golf cart and some men to help him move the stove for her, she stops him abruptly. Will is initially confused, but he comes to see the situation from Allison's point of view when she informs him why she can't accept his help: "Because there I'll be with people having put the stove where I want it. And that's the old home fix-up, which is being in a fix. Then what? The helping is not helping me" (129). When Barrett understands that his help is not helping, he pulls back and does not press the issue, recognizing in Allison a fellow "individual" who wants to be responsible for her life and not dependent on others.

As Will leaves, he pauses to sit and think on an old log near the chestnut fall where yesterday he had encountered his father's ghost. He gets up and begins to walk toward the fence but falls down before he gets there (131). Allison sees this and rushes over to help. She asks, "what happened?" (131) Will tries to explain:

"I fell down."

"I know, but why?"
"I don't know. Lately I tend to fall down."
"That's all right. I tend to pick things up. I'm a hoister."
"We'd make a twosome." (131)

Thus, both Will and Allison recognize that some kind of "affinity" is building between them. At one point, after the above conversation, Allison cryptically mentions the phrase, " I love--" (132), which she does not finish and which seems pregnant with meaning and purpose. Though the narrator tries to clarify her meaning by telling us that she is referring to Will's hand, the one the dog bit (132), Will's question, "you love what?" (132) focuses our attention on an unexpressed emotion between them.

Thus, as Barrett begins to depart the out-of-bounds the second time, he gives Allison the kind of help she can accept. He gives her access to words and tools so that she can do the job of moving the stove on her own. He tells her, "go to Washau Motors in town," and "ask for Jerry, the parts man. Through an error, probably Jerry's, we have on hand one hundred creepers... he would be glad to lend or give you an old one" (132). Will informs Allison that the creeper (what auto mechanics use to slide themselves under a car), together with crescent wrenches and a can of WD-40, will help her to do the job on her own.

Barrett's actions throughout this section have been kind and generous, but they have also been sensitive and aware. The ethical realm is a place of giving, of acting together when there's need, of serving a common or higher purpose. Barrett's actions now indicate a different kind of attitude than those projected in the aesthetic stage of the novel. In choosing himself, Will is now free to give because he is no longer worried

about what people may want. Indeed, since he has chosen himself, no one can take more than he himself is willing to give.

Barrett's acceptance of himself and his past also enables him to accept Allison, whose speech, clothing, and presence in the old greenhouse seem, at first glance, strange. Whereas Barrett's golf buddies would undoubtedly dismiss her as some "whacked-out kid on drugs," Barrett listens to her, noticing things about her that a superficial estimation would miss. In Kierkegaard's Philosophy, John Douglas Mullen speaks to this issue of accepting yourself emphasizing the way it naturally influences the self's attitudes towards others:

To be an individual before the eternal is to avoid wanting to apply to others the rules which do not apply to yourself or your group. This means also to avoid judging others on the basis of worldly associations; that is, to avoid clannishness. (143)

Barrett has known clannishness his whole life—first with his father's law firm buddies, then during his schooling at Princeton, after that his job on Wall Street, and finally in a comfortable clubhouse retirement in North Carolina. Barrett has always been a part of the in crowd—Allison has not. As she says about herself, she "flunked ordinary living" (108). However, Barrett's actions in leaving the golf course, giving up on the game, venturing into the out-of-bounds where nature's laws thrive and humankind must fit in, and helping someone whom others would dismiss, indicates that he has changed in a fundamental way. Will Barrett has left the clan behind.

Barrett's Beliefs: Investigating Ethical Options

The final characteristic setting Will apart from the traits common to the aesthetic stage is his willingness to investigate the possible answers that an ethical life presents. This is a course of action that his father had rejected out of hand, believing that he already knew what the answers would be. Will is not willing to make the same assumption. Thus, Will manifests a level of maturity and responsible living that his father ignored.

Yet when an individual moves from one stage of life to the next, the prior stage may be overturned but it is never canceled out. Rather, the priority of the stage is dethroned. However, it continues to exist in the life of the individual but only in a new and relativized status. Mark C. Taylor clarifies this with his idea of the displacement of a stage.

Kierkegaard argues that the stages of existence are dialectically related, in so far as each succeeding stage displaces its predecessor from a position of centrality, while at the same time taking it up into itself, giving the former stage a relativized status. (Pseudonymous 204)

The relativized status of a former stage is illustrated in Percy's narrative when Barrett crosses back over the fence that separates the golf course, or aestheticism, from the out-of-bounds, or ethical. Allison is watching Barrett as he leaves. The narrator explains her point of view:

She watched him as he stepped through the fence, paused, and then went quickly through. Now, standing and facing her from the golf links, he seemed to feel freer, as if the fence allowed neighborliness. (132)

Now that Barrett has become aware of the ethical, and is here in this new realm committed to seriousness, not play, he is more comfortable with the aesthetic. The position of centrality that the aesthetic formerly had in Barrett's life has been relativized, and he finds that being a neighbor to that dethroned realm is much easier than being one of its subjects.

When Barrett finally leaves the out-of-bounds, he goes directly to St. Mark's Episcopal Church and the nursing home on its grounds. His period of serious investigation has begun, for he has chosen himself in his eternal validity. But the question remains, to what is this eternal validity attached? If there are answers that his father never considered, then Barrett must find them and investigate them. This kind of action is an example of responsible living. In the next section Will questions the ideas and beliefs of those who claim to have found the answers that give life true and lasting meaning.

Discovering an Ethical Ground: Barrett's Search for Ideas and Beliefs

Though Will has made the first step of an ethical existence—by choosing himself over the external desires and sensual compulsions of the aestheticism, his journey into the Ethical doesn't end there; physical appetites have been dethroned, but what has been erected in their place? For just as the Aesthetic is dominated by desires, the Ethical is dominated by the idea of decision. But what kind of decision? and what to do? Merold Westphal provides an adequate answer to these questions. He affirms that the ethical individual must align his life with an "idea." The individual must make a mental and

willful appropriation of a particular belief system that is endorsed by both one's mind and one's heart. Westphal states:

The animal lives out of instinct; we, as spirit, can live for an idea. The animal dies out of necessity; we, as spirit, can give our life because there is something worth dying for. To live, not out of habit but because one knows why life is worth living, and to die, not out of necessity but because one values something more than life itself, that is to be related to an idea. The idea is a truth that claims me for its own in life and in death and in claiming me, gives meaning to both life and death. (Kierkegaard's Critique 46)

Thus, in the ethical realm beliefs are central. For, as Westphal points out, one's beliefs give both life and death their meaning. Therefore, when Barrett leaves the out-of-bounds, he is beginning a great search for an idea that can pull together the loose strands of his existence and weave them together in a unified tapestry that will provide a foundation for his decisions, actions, and commitments.

Therefore, in the following section I examine beliefs and ideas from two perspectives. First, I look at the issue of ethics from a religiously motivated perspective. This is the first area that Barrett examines and one that posits a transcendental foundation for ethical behavior. Second, I investigate an ethical perspective based solely on the materialistic foundation of society's inherent need for cooperation and stability.

Ethical Behavior: Its Religious Motivations

Barrett begins his search in the arena of religious belief by examining the contrasting attitudes and actions of two individuals--Jack Curl, an Episcopalian priest, who is the Rector of St Mark's parish and the director of the nursing home attached to the

church, and Marion Peabody, Will's deceased wife. It may seem strange at first to compare the living with the dead, but Marion's life is re-examined by both Jack and Will until she becomes a living presence in the novel. Marion and Jack relate their ethical lives to a transcendental perspective. Therefore, I will call the section involving Marion "Ethical Sincerity" and the section detailing Jack's position, "Ethical Relativity."

Ethical Sincerity: Marion Peabody and Leslie Barrett

The two individuals in The Second Coming who take their ethical lives very seriously are Marion Peabody and her daughter, Leslie Barrett. Both are committed ethicists who believe in a "right and wrong" and in the obligation to exemplify the right through their lives. But since Marion is deceased we must determine her ethical position through the memories of those who knew her. Therefore, I examine Marion's ethical devotion through the perceptions of two men who knew her best—her husband, Will, and her priest, Jack Curl.

Marion is revered by almost all those who knew her as almost saint. Because she exuded an exceptional sense of ethical goodness, she is spoken of in glowing terms. On a social level, Marion did do more than most. In section five of Part One (142) in The Second Coming, we learn that Marion was financially responsible for the building of the nursing home at St. Mark's. She also insisted on visiting each one of the patients, getting to know their names and their histories, and even inviting them to the Barrett's home for Sunday dinner (143). Such actions exemplify Marion's code of right conduct.

Marion never wavered in her devotion to the external ideals that incorporated the Christian creed. The narrator tells us that she used to terrify Jack Curl, her priest, "with her raging sarcastic attacks on the new liturgy and his own social gospel" (160). Though this may not sound like good and gentle Christianity, it is a Christianity that is passionately held. The new liturgies and the social gospels have, for many seriously thinking Christians, diluted the demands and sacrifices that Christ's call to discipleship requires. Thus, for Marion to attack these things suggests her position as a sincere believer in the Christian creed. If she were willing to sit idly by while the foundations of her religious orientation (i.e., her "reality") were attacked and undermined by those who claimed to be Christians themselves, she would not be committed or invested in her beliefs. In Existential Thinkers and Thought Thomas Gallagher expresses this notion of intense commitment to one's ideals.

Kierkegaard characterizes the ethical sphere as one where duty and obedience predominate [...] Life is separated from personal whim, and anchored in an objective norm, which is possessed of absolute validity. (79)

In the ethical stage, once one has found an anchor to stabilize one's life, commitment to this belief follows. Marion demonstrates in her words and deeds that she is in fact a committed ethicist. Will, at one point, compares his wife's ethical religiosity to that of his daughter. He says, "both Marion and Leslie, his daughter, were religious in ways, which were both admirable and daunting" (183). However, after this initial comparison, Will then goes on to tick off the differences in their versions of "ethical sincerity." He says:

Marion had been an old-style Episcopalian who believed that one's duty lay with God, church, the Book of Common Prayer, family, country, and

doing good works. Leslie, his daughter, was a new-style Christian who believed in giving her life to the Lord through a personal encounter with Him and who accordingly had no use for church, priests, or ritual. She believed this and Jason [her fiancé] believed a California version of this. They got along well together, did good works, and seemed to be happy. How could we find fault with Leslie? (Second Coming 183)

Leslie's ethical sincerity is motivated by her belief in a transcendent God and an inherently moral order. If she is to follow the God in whom she believes, she must be obedient to Him. That is why she disagrees with her mother regarding the church, priests, and rituals. Unlike her mother, Leslie is not steeped in the traditional representations of Christianity, but revels in her personal and emotional connection to God. Both mother and daughter are sincere in their beliefs. But the many disagreements between true believers are what worries Barrett. He admits that it is hard to disagree with them, but he voices his doubts when he states:

He could not disagree with them or allow himself the slightest distance of irony. How could he disagree with them? Both seemed to be right or at least triumphantly well intentioned. It was odd only that though he had no quarrel with them they quarreled with each other. (183)

This, then, is the source of Barrett's quandary. Sincere as they are, can Marion and Leslie each be different and at the same time, correct? If Will Barrett is searching for an ethical position that he can stand, then he might have to continue looking. As we shall see in the following section, Will continues to respect the beliefs of his wife and daughter; however, he cannot at this time join either of them. Instead, he continues his investigation, questioning the beliefs of various people, beginning with Jack Curl.

Ethical Relativism: Jack Curl

In his interactions with Barrett and others, Jack Curl fits the pattern that Kierkegaard describes when he outlines the excesses of ethical religiosity within his book, Stages on Life's Way. Jack Curl is no longer a sincere ethicist. Rather, in The Second Coming I believe Curl represents a corrupted ethical position because he has relinquished his commitment to "inwardness" and its logical root and result, "honesty before God" and to one's self. Instead, Curl is committed to a formulaic and ritualistic Christianity that is disconnected from its founder—the Absolute. Jack has ceased to internalize the reality of his beliefs in a personal way. In Percy's description of Jack Curl, we see a man who has ceased to live transparently before the ethical telos. In his interview with Dewey, Percy says that "the only way to be yourself is to be yourself transparently before God" (282). Curl chose himself at one time, settled upon a belief and a life, but now he is trying to re-make himself according to people's opinions and ideas of what is acceptable or agreeable. He is moving away from the fundamental characteristic of the ethical—transparency before god.

Barrett's description of Jack Curl in the opening pages of section five focuses on the way Jack's outer dress and appearance deflects people's perception of him as a priest. Barrett notices that Jack is trying to convey an attitude about himself that he believes will be well received by others. Seeing this, Barrett says:

Today for some reason it was possible to observe the smallest detail about Jack Curl, for example, the way he was letting his side-burns grow longer by shaving a little below them. The short new hair did not match the long hair of the side-burns. But more than that: he suddenly saw the purpose of the jumpsuit and Jack's shambling way of walking and his not quite clean

hands and the pliers in his hip-pocket and the way he moved his shoulders in the jumpsuit. Jack Curl was saying: I am more than a clergyman going about clerical things. I am also a handyman, a super, something of a tough really. (143-44)

As Barrett aptly describes, Curl is busy trying to create an image of himself that counters his role as a clergyman. This refusal to be himself is a by-product of his lack of inwardness. He has relinquished his interest in living transparently before God and is therefore re-experiencing an existential disjunctive in the self. Whereas Allison has chosen herself, and thus accepted herself, including her past, which has led her to take responsibility for being herself; Jack Curl no longer knows himself—is he the "clergyman" or the "tough"? Jack's reflective self-scrutiny has atrophied. Because Jack questions his identity, he experiences confusion about the certainty of his beliefs. Jack's uncertainty about the ethical destabilizes his commitment to a universal that would provide a secure identity. All this is manifested in Jack's conversation with Will in the parking lot outside of St. Mark's parish.

In this initial encounter between Will and Jack, after they have made their rounds to the patient's rooms at St. Mark's Convalescent home, Jack proposes that Will go to a retreat with him. The organization of the retreat tells us much about the nature of Jack's ethical base. He says, "I'm giving a retreat at Montreat next week. It crossed my mind that you might come along" (156). After introducing the idea to Will, Jack describes the fun, food, and ecumenical flavor of the gathering. Jack's emphasis on the "ecumenicism" of the retreat distinguishes his ethical belief system as one that is essentially relativistic. He describes to Will the people who will be going:

We've got all kinds in our gang--Protestants, Catholics, Anglicans, unbelievers, Jews--all wonderful guys, the kind of guys you'd like to spend a weekend with or fishing or just shooting the breeze. We call ourselves the Montreat Mafia. (157)

Whereas Marion and Leslie hold beliefs that are firm, Jack's ethical value is so watered down that it can accept literally anybody and everybody. The "Montreat Mafia" is made up of individual's whose beliefs should, naturally, conflict. What then is the glue that binds these discordant beliefs and believers? It is their joint acceptance of each other, and their mutual recognition that they not take their beliefs too seriously. Thus, instead of allowing serious ethical positions to divide them, they have decided that their unity is more important than the truth or falsity of their respective beliefs. As a result, their ethical belief system must be relativized in order to admit others who don't share their ethico-religious position.

Subsequently, and on a more personal level, we glimpse Jack Curl's relativized ethical position when Will questions the priest regarding his belief in God. While Will is sitting in his Mercedes in the parking lot of St. Mark's with his father's German Luger tucked under his thigh, he finds Jack's head at his window. Will takes this moment to zero in on Jack's beliefs. In a pointed and personal manner, Will asks Jack if he believes in God. The chaplain's response tells us much about his position within the ethical stage.

**"Do you believe in God?" Will Barrett asked [.].
"How's that?" Jack asked quickly.
"You know, God." (158)**

Curl is discomfited by the intensity and seriousness of Will's question. The priest eyes Will "uneasily to see if he was joking" (158). Will must ask his question three times

before Jack acquiesces to answer it and even then he simply attempts to get Will to join the church. Again, Jack is more concerned with an external form than with the reality of a personal belief. Will asks one last time, "Do you believe God exists?" (160), and finally, Jack replies with no equivocations or evasions, "Yes" (160). However his affirmative answer seems to spring from a frame of mind that sees such questions as invasive and inappropriate. In *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, James Collins makes a comment that connects Jack Curl's attitudes to those that Kierkegaard describes in his depiction of ethical religiosity. "Ethical universality itself becomes the divine, and a man is forbidden to enter into any private and direct relation to God" (93). A private and personal relationship with God is viewed by the ethical universalist with suspicion and concern because it is not absolutized on a social level—it supersedes the social and the values of the crowd. Curl's ethics are merely socially acceptable; Will's questions indict this smug social belief and move the debate into a zone of individuality, subjectivity, and personal responsibility that Jack finds irritating. John Douglas Mullen clarifies the way that the "bourgeois life" excludes the personally transcendent. He states:

This then is the truth about Judge William's life [Kierkegaard's pseudonymous proponent of ethical religiosity]. For all his talk of God, and of the ethical—religion is, after all, essential to bourgeois life - it is a purely secular doctrine excluding any concept of the transcendent religious. (133)

When Will Barrett watches Jack Curl enter the glass doors of St. Mark's, the narrator exposes the inner workings of Barrett's thoughts:

The glass doors of St. Mark's closed behind the chaplain. Closing the door for the last time. That was it. That's why everything looked so clear. He knew he would not come here again. (161)

There is an element of finality in this description of Will's thinking. Neither the sincerity of Marion or Leslie, nor the relativistic and open-ended ethicism of Jack Curl is attractive to Will. He sees inherent weaknesses in both positions. On the one hand, Marion and Leslie are so sure they are right that they can not agree on anything; on the other hand, Jack Curl is so relativistic that right and wrong have no relevance. Thus, Barrett is left with no other option than to proceed with his search. Out of necessity, therefore, Barrett's investigation moves from an ethics based upon belief to an ethics that is overtly secular, an ethics where right and wrong cease to be a transcendental concept, and become instead a socially constructed idea. In summary then, the "ethical" life is beginning to crumble under Barrett's feet. The question becomes, can a "secularized" ethic provide a more secure foundation?

Ethical Socialization: The Conflation of the Individual and the Crowd

When the ethical stage loses connection to a transcendent purpose or an overarching commitment to inwardness, it may still be maintained through a reliance on the social conventions that these ethical forms have created. Individuals who understand that some things are better than others and thus more desirable may substantiate that belief by their dependence on a particular tradition. Thus, after Will Barrett leaves Jack Curl, we see him next at a meeting called to hammer out the details of the upcoming marriage of Leslie Barrett and Jason Cupp. Marriage is the very topic that Kierkegaard's spokesman for the ethical, Judge William, uses as his illustration of the ethical life. In

Existential Thinkers and Thought, Thomas Gallagher refers to the way marriage provides a kind of socialized ethical position. "The goal of the ethical life, its end and culmination in moral perfection, is to be found in a happy married life" (83). Mark C. Taylor clarifies the issue further when he explains how marriage and time are related, providing a kind of social continuity similar to that of religious commitments, but only on a surface level:

Through the marriage vow, the self achieves a unification. Kierkegaard comments that marriage "brings melody into a man's eccentric movements" [Either/Or, II., P. 65, S.V., II 59]. The self is no longer resolved into a multiplicity of moods and possibilities: "By duty the way is cleared for the lovers, and I believe it is for this reason that duty is expressed by the future tense, to suggest its historical implication." [Either/Or, II, p.152, S.V., II, 136]. The historical implication of duty is that it states an intention of a person that must be worked out over a period of time. This decision bestows continuity on the self. (Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous 207)

Thus, on a purely social level, marriage becomes a stand-in for the whole of the ethical life. Understanding the importance of marriage within the ethical stage, Percy uses it in this section of the novel to frame the concerns and issues faced by the social ethicist. Marriage is commitment to another individual that establishes a limit upon desire. In essence, then, marriage—and other social acts that require an intense commitment as well as a subordination of the will—become, in the ethical realm, a kind of religion.

Marriage: Fissures between the Ideal and the Real

After Barrett leaves the golf course and enters the out-of-bounds of the ethical world, the issue of marriage comes up again and again. The major event in this section of the novel concerning marriage is the meeting that takes place in the Barrett's

condominium to discuss Jason and Leslie's marriage plans. However, the issue of marriage arises in other places as well. Barrett ruminates on the motivations of his own marriage to Marion years ago; Kitty, Barrett's old flame, makes allusions to her disintegrating marriage to her dentist-husband and the possibility of uniting with Will; Lewis Peckham acknowledges the distance between him and his wife, noting that she has not grown; and finally, Allison and Will begin to think of themselves as potential marriage partners. The emphasis on marriage talk within this section of The Second Coming is no accident, for Percy was aware of the ethical nature of marriage from his own personal experience. Tolson reminds us of the complicated situation that Percy went through when he decided to ask Bunt Townsend to marry him. He says, "Percy was torn. His 'experiments' [i.e., "game-playing"] with other women had convinced him that Bunt Townsend was the only woman he wanted to be with" (190). Later Tolson adds:

Marriage to Bunt Townsend was not the only thing Percy was thinking about. He was brooding about another important decision—whether to take the message of Christianity seriously. Percy, who was now reading his Kierkegaard more carefully, believed that marriage signaled the passage from the aesthetic to the ethical, a passage he was willing to accept, however defective a moral being he thought he was. (193)

Thus, Percy agreed with Kierkegaard that marriage signaled the passage from the aesthetic to the ethical. However, as marriage is presented in this section of the novel, it is not a blessed sacrament or a holy union, but an institution and form of external commitment that lacks the foundational ethics and ultimate security attributed to it. Percy highlights the defective nature of marriage as a means to form and secure an ethical

existence. Therefore, marriage in this part of the novel, like beliefs in the prior section, begins to fragment and fall apart.

In this middle section of the novel, marriages are being planned and other marriages are also coming apart. As Will Barrett progresses through the terrain of the ethical, he evaluates these stages of marital connection and disconnection. None of the marriages Will examines, provides an ethical commitment or personal contentment. It is as if Will is exposed to the ending before the beginning. Will's wife is dead, and he must now interact with several individuals whose marriages are in a state of deterioration or disarray. In this atmosphere, Will participates in the planning of his daughter's wedding.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have chosen to look at only two marriages in this section. I believe these two adequately represent Barrett's discoveries about marriage and provide the signposts by which to mark Barrett's final progress through the ethical.

Tod and Tannie: A picture of rote togetherness

The first couple Will meets in the ethical section of the novel is Tod and Tannie Levitt who live in a small room at St. Mark's convalescent center where Jack Curl and his staff care for them. Jack notes to Will, "They're the oldest couple...they're eighty-five and eighty-seven. In the same room!...They're as cute as can be, you'll love them" (148). However, since Jack is trying to con Will out of more than a million dollars to build his "couples' community," a retirement village, his description of Tod and Tannie leave out some significant details:

Tod and Tannie were sitting slumped in their wheelchairs between two beds. The television was mounted on a steel elbow high above them, too high to see. Crosswits was on without sound. Tod was nodding and both hands were in his lap rolling invisible pills. Tannie was no bigger than a child. Her back was bowed into a semi-circle so that she faced her knees. (149)

Jack seems oblivious to the pathetic scene. He describes Tod and Tannie as the perfect couple, they give Will a little "performance" which Jack thinks of as "an ongoing couple's relationship" (149). Jack sets up the scene for Will and then gives the command for the show to start.

Tannie's head flew up, her eyes opened, showing milky blue, and she began to sing in a high-pitched girlish voice. Tod's hand conducted and his head tilted from side to side instead of nodding. He came in on every third word or so.

"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true.

I'm half-crazy all for the love of you.

It won't be a stylish marriage,

I can't afford a carriage,

But you'll look sweet upon the seat

Of a bicycle built for two."

"For two," said Tod. The instant the song was finished, Tannie's head sank to her chest and she began to snore. Tod stopped conducting and went back to nodding and pill rolling. (150)

The picture of marriage that this scene paints is anything but attractive. Thus, if Barrett is to continue in his progression through the stages of existence, he must see through the claims of ethicists, like Jack, just as he has overcome the inclinations of desire and sensual gratification at the aesthetic level. However, the claims of the ethicists are harder to dispute, for they represent one's own choices and conclusions. Moreover, in leaving the aesthetic, one has already chosen the ethical, so to choose against the ethical is to renege on a prior commitment, and thus experience the doubts and insecurities that arise when one violates a chosen belief. Such an action leads to an even greater sense of

despair than the self experiences at the end of the aesthetic, for there the self can move into the ethical hoping for a better life. However, at the end of the ethical, this hope-filled commitment and inner resolution has begun to fragment. Thus, when the self discovers that it cannot live according to its cherished beliefs or asserted commitments, where can the self turn? For Barrett, the answer is to plow ahead for now, to continue the investigation of the ethical until the bitter end is unavoidable. In this context Barrett turns to his own marriage to Marion and tries to understand the nature of their commitment to each other.

Will and Marion: A Passionless Existence

Will's marriage to Marion Peabody seems to fit Kierkegaard's concept of an ethical marriage. Neither Marion nor Will seemed to be greatly in love when they married. Leslie, Will's daughter, tells her father that neither he nor her mother were very honest with each other. Will, perplexed, asks:

"How were we dishonest?"

"You never once admitted to each other or to yourselves why you married."

"Why did we marry?"

"You married mom to get the Peabody future. Mom married you - I would like to say you were a catch and I guess you were - mainly to get married. Now that's not a bad basis for a relationship - the French have been doing it for years - as long as you do admit it." (254)

Though Leslie's speech is blunt, it is not far off the mark. Will has questions and reservations regarding his marriage to Marion and what gave rise to it. However, after

going through a list of possible motivations for marrying Marion (180-181), Will accounts for them all without conceding that any single motivation was primary.

No, he married her for none of these reasons and for all of them. Marry her for money and the firm? Yes and no. Marry her because he could marry her? Yes and no. Marry her because she was as far away as he could get from Mississippi? Yes and no. And from you old mole [Ed Barrett, Will's father]? Yes. And get Jesus Christ in the bargain? Why not? (181)

Because Will excuses himself from the crass motivations that influenced his decision to marry, he seems to believe that by marrying he performed an ethical task. His marriage to Marion was an attempt at choosing a life and settling upon a committed existence. In Kierkegaard, Peter Vardy notes that "Married love, in the ethical stage, is a high calling and is to be contrasted with the fickleness of love in the aesthetic stage where there is no commitment. Marriage is not fickle as it is based on duty" (47). Thus, Will's marriage was based more on duty than romantic attachment. In fact, Will likens his decision to marry to that of Blaise Pascal, who thought it a better "bet" to decide for God and believe in Him, than to bet against God and find out He exists. Partnership and cooperation are what Kierkegaard's character, Judge William, has in mind when he presents the ethical nature of the married life in his essay, "*The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage*" in Either/Or, Vol. II. But for Kierkegaard, the question readers are meant to ask when they have finished reading having William's treatise, is whether marriage is enough? The same issue is at the heart of Percy's novel. Can marriage—an ethical commitment to a single individual—be the founding idea and essential grounding of a person's identity? The answer, in both Kierkegaard's and Percy's accounts, is an unequivocal "no." Percy shows us this when he has Will contemplate his marriage to

Marion just before she dies. Will is in the hospital room with Marion, listening to her final requests:

She spoke with the quietness of people after a storm which had drowned out their voices. What struck him was not sadness, or remorse, or pity but the wonder of it. How can it be? How can it happen that one day you are young, you marry, and then another day you come to yourself and your life has passed like a dream? They looked at each other curiously and wondered how they could have missed each other, lived in the same house all those years and passed in the hall like ghosts. (145)

Here Will's reaction reveals the essential void within his ethical marriage. He and Marion lived with each other but they did not know one another. Each was a ghost to the other, and this ghostliness demonstrates the inherent limitations of an ethical marriage. If the self marries out of a sense of duty, tradition, or convention it misses intimacy and vulnerability. The passion is missing. Without these fundamental aspects, there is little chance that the barriers between two people can be breached—even within a socially acceptable marriage. Instead, as Will describes, two individuals drift apart until they are no more than ghosts to each other. Thus, the ethical stage, exemplified by a marriage of duty, cannot in the final analysis fulfill the self's search for meaning.

Before moving into the religious stage of existence in both Kierkegaard's theoretical description and in Percy's narrative presentation in The Second Coming, one final aspect of the ethical deserves attention, because it is here—at the very end of the ethical—that we gain a glimpse of how and why the individual must relinquish the ethical life to gain a full and actualized self. The aspect involves that which makes the journey into the ethical attractive in the first place—freedom, choice, commitment, and

history. However, at the end of the ethical, what began with hope and freedom has become a source of dread. I now examine the dread that resides at the end of the ethical.

Discovering the End of the Ethical: Barrett's Subjective & Objective Dread

As I attempted to explain in the survey of the ethical stage that began the second part of this thesis, the individual's tenure in this stage ends when the self begins to understand its own inability to keep to the rules that its own choices have established. Kierkegaard has called this reaction "dread." Later commentators have defined two separate categories, subjective and objective dread. I now examine the dual nature of dread and how Will Barrett experiences both.

Barrett's Subjective Dread: Impotence and Rage

Barrett's investigation of the ethical stage comes to an abrupt end when he announces to the wedding party gathered at the rehearsal dinner that he is leaving. Will has done one good thing by settling the dispute over where to have the rehearsal dinner and now intends to do one more good thing. He has noticed that Mr. Arnold, the old stroke victim whose turn it is to come to dinner (143), has been pointing at his mouth. Barrett, in an act of kindness, wishes to get him some food, but what happens as a result becomes a metaphor for the disintegration of the ethical stage:

Mr. Arnold tried to say something but his lips blew out. He pointed a finger straight into his mouth. Across the room Yamaiuchi was leaving fast with a tray of empty bloody mary glasses. Will Barrett called to him and made a motion. It was possible for Yamaiuchi, whose eye had not quite met his, to pretend he hadn't heard him. He called to him again. He

knew that Yamaiuchi heard him because his ears flattened even closer to his head, but he didn't turn around. (197)

As the narrator continues the account, we find that Yamaiuchi, Barrett's cook, who had formerly taken his orders from Marion, would now prefer to follow Leslie's directions, not Will's. (198). However, it is Will who is attempting to direct him to get Mr. Arnold a plate of food. It is interesting to note that in this room of believers—those who claim to have a significant interest in doing the right thing—not one has noticed that Mr. Arnold has gone hungry. By ignoring Will, Yamaiuchi is playing a game with Will. He is pretending on an external level to be respectful and subservient, while at the same time communicating an opposite message—his lack of respect and disdain for Will as the head of this house. Barrett's reaction is at first curious but later turns angry and volatile. He says to Yamaiuchi:

"Bring this man a plate of food," he said, pointing to Mr. Arnold, who was pointing a finger straight into his mouth.

"Y'sah," said Yamaiuchi, "the buffet is urready." Again his eye slewed toward Leslie. Was he saying I'd rather take orders from her?

"Do it now," he said, smiling angrily. He was genuinely puzzled: I wonder why this Japanese is playing this game, calculating decimal points of insolence? (198)

Will's response to Yamaiuchi's game playing—looking at Leslie, pretending to listen to him, and then "bowing two degrees too far" (198)—is "rage." He has been insulted by his servant. Though Will does not act or mention his thoughts aloud, the narrator exposes what Will is thinking: "Someday I'm gonna hit that grinning little bastard, he thought, drive him right into the ground with both fists" (198). Thus, the ethical comes apart at the seams: Will can contemplate killing one man for insulting him while he is trying to

feed another! Will desires to do good, but in attempting a noble and ethical action, he is so enraged by the lack of "respect" he receives that murder becomes an option. The disjunction between these two versions of himself is now complete and apparent. Moments earlier he had ended the animosity within the wedding party (195), and now he is angry himself. Will recognizes this contradiction and relates it to the attitude of his father, Ed Barrett, who often exhibited a volcanic hostility. Will's observation that his anger is like his father's and it relates to the issue of Will's experience of "subjective dread." The narrator explains:

In the very instant of feeling the anger rise within his thought, he [Will] remembered it was exactly the same sudden rage his father had turned on the black guide. His father--known as a nigger-lover, cursed the guide like a nigger-hater. (197-8)

By choosing the ethical stage, Will Barrett thought he had gone beyond his father's alternative--suicide. However, at the end of the ethical, Will finds that he is at the same place once again. He realizes he cannot be—in an ultimate sense—good. The ethical stage founders when an individual realizes the inability of the self to do good. What magnifies this realization ten-fold is the added recognition that this situation cannot be changed. Every decision, every act of human freedom, every human choice is burdened with this freedom, to do good or evil. By becoming conscious of the self's ability to choose, the individual enters the ethical realm. But by becoming conscious of the self's inability to choose consistently the good, the individual is forced to leave the ethical realm. This is subjective dread, the realization that freedom is a burden and that the self can never—no matter how hard it tries—live a purely ethical existence.

When Will comes to this realization, he hears his father say, "You're one of us[.]" Will's response is, "Yes, very well, I'm one of you. You win" (198). Since Will's investigation of the ethical is coming to a close, he is again in a state of despair. If he decides not to go on, he might opt for his father's option and kill himself—but Will has repeatedly rejected this option. Thus, Will's despair is the logical end of the Ethical stage. He is at the place where a reflective individual in the ethical mode of existence must arrive—the subjective dread of freedom. Will realizes that he feels "rage" and "impotence," and that the first gives rise to latter. As Will leaves the wedding party, after his run-in with Yamaiuchi, he has one final thought on his position in the ethical stage. He thinks to himself, "where does such rage come from? From the discovery that in the end that world [the ethical] yields only to violence, that only the violent bear it away, that short of violence all is impotence" (198).

Will now indicts all ethicists at this stage of living. His recognition of his own violent nature shows him the essential violence of everyone else's nature—no matter their ethical creed. The world may talk of goodness, but when pushed to the extreme this commitment to the good vanishes. Barrett thus concludes that he, like everyone, is impotent to do good permanently and consistently. Barrett therefore goes to his bedroom upstairs, where he will put into place his final plan, to provide an ultimate answer to the despair at the end of both the aesthetic and the ethical stages of existence. Barrett vents his sense of objective dread in a letter to his friend, Sutter Vaught, a man whom Barrett once believed had the answers but whom Will now knows is "just like the rest of us." Barrett writes to Sutter, "If you remember, it was your constant complaint that I was

forever looking to you for all the answers....One must arrive at one's own answers”
(217). Barrett's statement is a fitting end to the ethical stage. He now understand that the self cannot rely on a system to save it. The self is left with the realization that its answers can only come from within—and even then they are suspect because of the self's penchant for self-deception. I now turn to Barrett's indictment of both aesthetic unbelievers and ethical believers, and his view that both groups have got it wrong.

Barrett's Objective Dread: No One Can Do Good

In Barrett's letter to Sutter Vaught, Kitty's brother, who first appeared in one of Percy's earlier novels, The Last Gentleman, he explains his understanding of the world's guilt. Barrett begins his diatribe against the world by stating emphatically what his quarrel is and with whom he is quarreling. He says to Sutter, "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" (218). Barrett's two classes of people are believers and unbelievers. As Barrett describes them, these two classes fit the Kierkegaardian categories. Barrett's believers are individuals who exist at the ethical stage. Will's unbelievers correspond to the individuals in Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage. Barrett's new attitude toward both these groups, demonstrates his resolve to reject both of their options as viable alternatives in which to live his life.

Barrett recognizes that he must find a third way, something that goes beyond these two alternatives. This desire is clearly stated in the letter that Barrett sends to

Sutter. He writes, "My belated discovery of the bankruptcy of both classes has made it possible for me to take action. Better late than never" (218). Will is headed towards this third way, but before he gets there he explains to Sutter in detail why he has rejected both believers and unbelievers. Rejecting two-thirds of what we know of the stages of existence, he has begun to experience "objective dread."

Goodbye Believers: Barrett's Departure from the Ethical

Barrett's argument with belief is not an argument against belief. Rather, Will is critical of believers who claim to have found the truths, then act as if it did not matter. In A Severe Mercy Sheldon Vanuaken, speaking not of The Second Coming but of general human existence, sums up the misgivings that Barrett has with "belief." Vanuaken says,

The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians--when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths. (85)

Barrett's estimation of current believers falls along similar lines. He says, "The present-day Christian is either half-assed, nominal, lukewarm, hypocritical, sinful, or, if fervent, generally offensive and fanatical" (219).

The problem for Barrett, and for many people, involves trust. How can you trust the message if you cannot trust the messenger? When belief and action do not match, skepticism results. The greater the belief—the greater the cynicism when belief and action split. Barrett adds, "...if the good news is true, why are the public proclaimers such assholes and the proclamation itself such a weary and used up thing?" (219). Barrett

admits to Sutter that he does not know the answer to this question. The message seems to ring true, but not the messengers; yet Barrett hints what his future actions might be. He says, "If the good news is true, the God of the good news must be a very devious fellow indeed, fond of playing tricks. But two can play that game" (219). Though he now eschews external forms of belief, Will is not finished with the reason to believe. If God wants to play a game of hide and seek and disguise himself in fools and hypocrites, perhaps Barrett will play the same game with him and try a trick of his own. Barrett explaining this in his letter to Sutter, believes he can arrange a game to trick God into revealing himself. Such is the nature of Will's thoughts at the end of the ethical. This is Barrett's final stand, a last gamble in the game of life. He hopes that in the midst of this farcical experiment, God just might declare, finally, that he is real, that he exists, and thus settle the issue once and for all. Bordering on insanity, he believes he can pull one over on God.

Believers and Unbelievers: Both Blind and Dying

Barrett's indictment of the unbelieving aestheticist centers on his view that the unbeliever is "insane." Whereas the believer is an unabashed "hypocrite," the unbeliever is mad because, as Barrett says,

He [the unbelievers] finds himself born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion of how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, shits, fucks, works, grows old, gets sick, and dies and is quite content to have it so. (219)

How can they live in a world of beauty and vice, Barrett asks and not wonder at the strange arrangement of it all? Barrett concludes that the unbeliever must be insane because he or she is not stunned by the incongruities and wonders of existence. Will continues his criticism by delving into the kinds of activities these unbelievers cultivate:

No, he takes comfort and ease and plays along with the game, watches TV, drinks his drink, laughs, curses politicians, and now again, to relieve the boredom and the farce (of which he is dimly aware) goes off to war to shoot other people--for all the world as if his prostate were not growing cancerous, his arteries turning to chalk, his brains cells dying off by the millions, as if the worms were not going to have him in no time at all.
(220)

Will feels that unbelievers are insane for two reasons: first, they are preoccupied with the temporary and inconsequential and second, they are daily dying without any awareness or trepidation. Such an attitude seems to him the very height of "lunacy" (219). It signifies that the unbeliever is living in total denial of the most important facts of existence.

Will Barrett's estimation of believers is that they are intolerable because of their claim to know the truth. And the added element that they "act for all the world as if they don't" (220). His estimation of the unbeliever is that they are unequivocally insane because they "...don't know the reason [for existence], and don't care if they don't" (220). Given these views, Barrett proposes a third way, something between the "fecklessness" of the believer and the "insanity" of the unbeliever. He explains this alternative to Sutter. As we shall see, it sounds very like Kierkegaard's religious stage of existence. Thus, it is there, in the third stage, that Barrett's final alternative is best understood.

PART THREE

The End of the Game: Confronting the Absolute at the Religious Stage of Existence

**But he knows also that higher than this winds a
solitary path, narrow and steep; and he knows that
it is terrible to be born outside the universal,
to walk without meeting a single traveler.
He knows very well where he is and how he
is related to men. Humanly speaking, he is mad
and cannot make himself intelligible to anyone.**

Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard
—Mark C. Taylor

**The historical data serve only as signs that point
non-coercively in the direction of faith, signs whose true meaning
can be missed through either misinterpretation or the failure
to recognize even their function as signs. Since, on the present assumption,
the Truth is not within us, and the function of these signs therefore
cannot be to remind us of... what we already know, it becomes
a pressing question how they can ever be correctly interpreted,
how they can ever function as an occasion for faith.... We need therefore,
not only a Teacher who can confront us with the Truth, but also one who can
implant within us the condition for recognizing it as such. This fundamental
remaking is nothing short of an act of re-creation, and the one who
performs it is not just a Teacher but a Savior.**

Becoming A Self
—Merold Westphal

**It is for this reason that the present age is better than Christendom.
In the old Christendom, everyone was a Christian and hardly
anyone thought twice about it. But in the present age the
survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer
in the desert like St. Anthony, which is to say, open to signs.**

Morality and Religion
—Walker Percy

Introduction

Since the ethical stage, like the aesthetic, ends in despair, this is where we find Will Barrett at the end of his investigation of belief in the ethical environment. Barrett has come full circle. He entered the realm of belief hoping there might be a way to go beyond his father's "alternative" to despair—suicide. But, by the end of the ethical stage, Barrett recognizes that he and his father are "one" and that his father has "won" (198). And yet, even though there is the recognition that his father's understanding of life may in fact have been correct, there is still one course left before Will that his father ignored—the religious alternative. To understand this possibility, we must first look at what Kierkegaard has defined as a "religious existence." Having done so, we will see many correlations between Kierkegaard's concepts and Percy's as they relate to Will Barrett. Therefore, in the following section I will briefly, but systematically, explain the main characteristics of the religious stage. In doing so I will concentrate on those aspects that have the greatest direct application to The Second Coming.

At this point Barrett has despaired because he has found no ultimate satisfaction in either the sensuousness of the Aesthetic stage or the rigorous rule-keeping of the Ethical. Neither position answers Barrett's deepest questions: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Does existence have any meaning?" For Kierkegaard, these questions can be adequately answered only within the Religious stage. Kierkegaard's conception of the Religious stage of existence is two-fold. As in the Aesthetic stage, he includes two poles: Religiosity "A" and Religiosity "B." In the following pages I will describe Kierkegaard's answer to man's despair. This last answer is advantageous for the

individual because it overcomes the inherent deficiencies of the Aesthetic and the Ethical stages while maintaining the positive characteristics of each.

SECTION ONE:

Kierkegaard's Religious Stage: An Absolute Relationship to the Absolute

Religiousness "A" - The Necessity of Despair

At the end of the ethical and aesthetic stages, one is faced with a choice: How do I respond to despair? The ethical life crumbles when the self understands that the law cannot save because, despite the individual's best effort, he or she is incapable of keeping the letter of the law. Thus, what had begun in hope and belief ends in frustration and despair. The individual realizes that it is impossible to know without equivocation what is "right" in each and every circumstance. And those who claim to know are more blind than anyone. Essentially, what confronts the individual at the end of the ethical is the inherent nature of his or her own subjectivity. An objective, and thus binding, universal ethic no longer seems a tenable proposition. To proceed in the ethical stage at this point is to deceive oneself. No longer does the individual rely on "inwardness," a devotion to a personal truth and honesty as the grounding on one's being. Instead, the self leads an external life of ritual and tradition that maintains a form of religion without the devotion to its ideals. Therefore, to be honest at this point is to be in despair. Peter Vardy summarizes the result of this "despair."

Only when despair is reached and when it is understood that all finite ends terminate in disappointment may the individual come to relate him or herself directly to God. Human beings learn to live behind the mask or

cloak of public opinion and think that this gives them identity and security. Only when this is recognized, in Kierkegaard's view, is the way open for the individual to take the religious dimension seriously. (55)

At the end of the ethical stage, the individual in such "despair" is presented with two possible destinations. The first one is a step forward and leads to the religious stage; the second is a step backwards and leads to more despair and to cynicism. In the latter case the individual rejects all possible truth claims as nothing more than the wish fulfillments of partisan followers. In this manner all truth claims are relativized through the individual's awareness of the self's subjectivity. If the individual takes this route, the self will fall back into an aesthetic mode of existence. As M.C. Taylor points out, "the ethical stage is only a transitional sphere between the aesthetic and religious" (Journeys to Selfhood 251). Thus, to relapse into the aesthetic mode means an acceptance of boredom and despair as defining characteristics of existence, where truth and meaning are impossible.

Relating Absolutely to the Absolute

For the individual unwilling to retreat back into aestheticism, there is the possibility of venturing forward. But this journey is unlike that of the aesthetic and ethical; it requires actions that will completely separate the self from the social context in which it exists. This movement into the religious stage is a movement away from the crowd and towards the subjectivity of the individual before God. In The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard emphasizes the nature of the choice before the individual. He states that an individual must achieve "the simultaneous maintenance of

an absolute relationship to the absolute *'Telos'* and a relative relationship to the relative ends" [author's italics] (Postscript 347). What Kierkegaard means is that a person must give up the notion that he or she can be related to God through any outside agency—an ethical system that endorses and promotes a particular, and supposedly objective, view of God. In his book, Kierkegaard's Philosophy, John Douglas Mullen outlines the four characteristics of the "religious exister." These traits are the bedrock of a religious existence, and as such provide the basis of our examination of Will Barrett's final journey into the Religious stage. Mullen states:

This [religious existence] demands some preliminary remarks. It assumes first that existence contains a gigantic chasm which cannot be "mediated;" that is, the chasm between the transcendent (infinite, eternal) and the secular (finite, temporal). Second, that this chasm is reflected also in the nature of the person, in you. Third, that human life is a battleground in which the person fights with himself concerning which of these he will try to make the telos of his life. Fourth, that the attempt to make the relative teloi of the secular into an absolute telos of one's life will end in failure (despair). Step number one is to recognize all of this. (137)

The Quest for Eternal Blessedness

Essentially, then, the religiously existing individual must make eternal blessedness his or her focus of attention. The term "eternal blessedness" implies a commitment to a state of being that has no earthly or temporal equivalent—there is, however, nothing "eternal" in our day-to-day human experience that prepares us for this stage of experience. Essentially, the quest for eternal blessedness means a leap into a kind of existence that offers no social certainties or objective assurances. As Donald Palmer points out, this leap "is more horrible, for in that first movement one fell away

from one's old sick self, but in the second movement [leap] one falls away from humankind" (116). Kierkegaard has described the nature of the second leap as the feeling that one's entire being is stepping into an abyss of "seventy fathoms of water" (Vardy 59). Such an action must be predicated on a faith that has relinquished the assurances of an objective world. In the following two sub-sections on "Religiousness 'A'" we will examine two characteristics of the religiously existing individual—the notion of "infinite resignation," and what Kierkegaard has termed "the teleological suspension of the ethical" (Fear and Trembling 64). Both characteristics have a direct correlation to the pilgrimage of Will Barrett.

Infinite Resignation: The Ethical is not Enough

When Kierkegaard speaks of "infinite resignation," he is referring to the state of an individual who no longer relies on a socially produced ethical system whose priority is to make one an acceptable member of a certain class, congregation, or group. In Existentialism and Religious Belief, David Roberts explains the transition to "infinite resignation" this way:

Thus the transition from the ethical to the religious is made not by thinking but by what he [Kierkegaard] called a "leap." Not until a man's attempts to solve life's problems by means of philosophical theory or ethical effort have come to a dead end is he really ready for this leap. (71)

Thus, this stage of individual experience contains a feeling of exhaustion. The individual's attempt to "work out his own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phillipians 2:12, RSV) has come to an end. The ethical realm with its stress on commitment and

choice, has demonstrated that the individual cannot adhere to a system that is idealistic and divorced from the finiteness of our common humanity. The logical result of such a system is, Kierkegaard says, guilt and dread.

The Individual is Above the Universal

When the individual comes to the stark realization that universals, in spite of their ethical appeal and social security, cannot answer the longings of a person made in the image of God, then that individual is inevitably thrown back upon the self as the only basis upon which a true connection to the absolute can be created. Because universals abstract from human experience and thus create selected experiences from which they build a system, such universals cannot speak to, or represent one's highest actualization. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard grapples with this notion of the individual being superior to the universal:

Faith is precisely this paradox, that the single individual, as the individual is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior—yet in such a way, be it observed, that it is the single individual who, after he has been subordinated as the individual to the universal, now through the universal becomes the individual who as the single individual is superior to the universal, for the fact that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation comes about precisely through the power of the universal; it is and remains to all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought. (66)

By inverting the positions of the individual and the universal as they relate to the absolute, Kierkegaard's religious stage places responsibility for the health of the soul directly upon the shoulders of each and every individual. Whereas the universal (ethical

system) previously acted as a mediator between the individual and the absolute, that gap now is permanently filled by the individual. Therefore, the religiously existing individual must be committed to seeking the absolute in all things and in doing so must be willing to subordinate all temporal relationships to this one end—knowing God. Kierkegaard's book Purity of Heart suggests this in its title and theme. In Kierkegaard Peter Vardy clarifies this position. He states:

Purity of heart is to will one thing is Kierkegaard's great spiritual classic. It is particularly significant because it is written under his own name and also it is dedicated to "That Solitary Individual" which was the highest category that Kierkegaard outlined. A solitary individual is an individual living life before God. [author's italics] (73)

The Individual Alone Before the Absolute

Thus, on a practical and human level, the individual is alone—albeit, with the absolute—but, nevertheless, cut off from human understanding, sympathy, and mutual concourse. However, Kierkegaard expected and accepted this isolation. He knew that to seek the absolute in all actions would inevitably make the self strange in the eyes of the world. The world is full of judgments, associations, and distinctions that determine to a large extent what we think of each other. But the religiously existing individual must resist the temptation to judge the self, or the world, by these external and artificial standards. In speaking to the issue of "infinite resignation," Mullen points out that,

To be an individual before the Eternal is to avoid applying to others the rules which do not apply to yourself or your group...true human unity is based on the idea that each person stands alone before the eternal. (143)

Thus, the religiously existing individual must not only accept his or her solitude in the world, but must deal fairly and justly with all other individuals, knowing that they too, regardless of whether they know it, stand alone before the eternal.

A second aspect of "Religiousness A" is the concept of the "Teleological Suspension of the Ethical." In many ways this is the natural outcome when the self begins to live its life before the absolute. As we shall see, it signifies an ultimate resignation from the world and the concerns of the ethicist and the aesthete.

Abraham's Sacrifice: The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

The story Kierkegaard uses to illustrate the state of being "absolutely related to the absolute" is that of Abraham sacrificing his son, Isaac. The story, found in Genesis 22: 1-24, demonstrates in vivid detail how the claims of the religious stage supersede those of the ethical. The story illustrates how the ethical self cannot understand or incorporate this dimension of the religious into its conceptual framework. Verses 9-14 read:

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from Heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I.' He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place "The Lord will Provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." (Harper's Study Bible, RSV 36)

Though in the end Abraham does not actually sacrifice Isaac—a ram is provided by divine providence—his intent, nevertheless, has been to follow God's command and offer Isaac as a sacrifice. But how does this intent effect the religious stage, and how does it distinguish the religious from the ethical? Simply put, this action of Abraham is scandalous. It represents the exact opposite of everything for which the ethical stands—a complete repudiation of the demands of the universal over those of the individual. However, seen from the perspective of the religious, Abraham's intent is the necessary continuum of the individual who has chosen relation to the absolute. Any other reaction would involve a kind of double-mindedness or divided loyalty—thus ending the absolute relatedness of the self with the Absolute.

The Demands of an Absolute Relationship to the Absolute

Only by accepting the demands of this absolute relationship to the absolute can the religiously existing individual maintain a connection to the absolute. To relinquish this attachment because of another demand invalidates the relationship of the individual to the absolute. In the ethical stage the individual can deceive the oneself with the external measurements—rituals and traditions of honest adherence to ethical norms—but only by substituting external formalities for internal realities. At the religious stage—in "Religiousness A"—this is not the case. Without the intense inward appropriation of the absolute, and the desire to live wholly connected to it, the connection falls apart. Why? Because, as Kierkegaard explains, there are no external markers to signify its existence—

the absolute becomes subjective and thus cannot be maintained by any superficial or materialistic measurement. If the self is to maintain connection to the absolute, it must be, first and foremost, a personal encounter subject to no external definition, interruption, or validation. The relationship will exist only if the individual is totally devoted to it.

Creator and Creatures: The Position of the Individual in The Religious Stage

There is no way to prove Kierkegaard's anthropological assumptions—indeed, he would find such an attempt destructive to faith and to the individual who must live by faith. Thus, Kierkegaard is well aware that his description of the Religious stage might be offensive to many people and that many might misunderstand or mischaracterize it; however, he is not dissuaded from espousing such a view. Kierkegaard's Religious stage is an inevitable outgrowth and affirmation of his understanding of God as creator and humanity as creatures. If we are indeed created by the purposeful design of God, and if we are dual beings—body and spirit—as Kierkegaard affirms, then humanity's quest to find fulfillment must eventually come back to the creator who designed us.

Now I want to turn to the two results that are logically derived from Kierkegaard's belief in the creaturliness of humanity and God's role as creator. First is the conflation of faith and fanaticism, which are frequently seen as one by the secular world. Second, is the extreme vulnerability that the religiously existing individual experiences at this stage of religiousness "A." Third, is the dissolution of Religiousness A" where the individual begins to realize that the self cannot maintain a relationship with the absolute on one's own.

Faith or Fanaticism: The Question of Kierkegaard's 'Irrationalism'

It is regarding this section of the religious stage that the charge of irrationalism is most often leveled against Kierkegaard. Indeed, for those in an ethical frame of mind the actions that Kierkegaard espouses as a higher form of individual existence seem both patently false and inherently dangerous. The danger is that it puts the interests of the individual above that of the crowd. The crowd—which represents the ethical—feels threatened by the elevation of the individual and sees this reversal of priorities as madness. To say that the individual supersedes the crowd is to say that the *one* is more important than the *many*. Such a claim denounces two truths the crowd holds most dear—democracy and objectivity. Thus, it is no wonder that Kierkegaard's belief that one can and should be related to the absolute—absolutely—is often vehemently opposed, for what concept could threaten the primacy of modern scientific rationalism and democratic capitalism more than this complete reversal of society's most cherished and basic assumptions?

Vulnerability: The Individual's Position before the Absolute

In addition to being thought of as irrational by the crowd, the religiously existing individual must contend with a sense of vulnerability and insecurity. This vulnerability is generated by the route such individuals have chosen. By being absolutely related to the absolute they are necessarily cut-off and alone. There is no safety in numbers because the self has no others through whom it might receive consolation. Indeed, much of what

an individual at this stage of Religiousness "A" does is done in secret. Just as Abraham told no one of his intention when he took Isaac into the desert, because to state his intention would have exposed him to ridicule and counter-arguments, so the current "knight of infinite resignation" (Mullen 139) must keep his or her intentions and decisions private or face the same kind of incredulity from today's crowd.

The individual at this stage of existence is willing to endure loneliness for one reason—the self has its eyes on eternal blessedness, or eternity. Such individuals would resign their position and prestige in this world only if they believed that something higher and more important was at stake. Thus, because of the religious individual's belief in the existence of the soul, in an eternity that is real, and in the fundamental morality of all that we do, say, or think, that individual suspends allegiance to the ethical ideologies of this world.

However, though the individual at religiousness "A" may desire an uninterrupted connection and may willingly deny those things that deter the self from this attainment, this self has forgotten one thing—that they are finite. As finite creatures, even "religious" individuals cannot relate to the infinite on their own—the finite self cannot create or foster a relationship with the infinite. Thus, Kierkegaard ends his presentation of religiousness "A" with a discussion of the differences between Socrates and Jesus. He sees the former as a perfect representative of religiousness "A," a person devoted to truth, inwardness, and the absolute resignation of all worldly connections in order to find an eternal blessedness in the hereafter. Plato's The Phaedo provides an interesting account of Socrates' belief in the immortality of the soul and the way the self achieves this

“blessedness.” However, according to Kierkegaard, Jesus supplies what Socrates has left out—an understanding of guilt and sin—and what must be done to alleviate the guilt that sin produces. Thus, in the final section of religiousness "A" Kierkegaard contrasts these two individuals and how their respective positions provide the clarification for progressing to the last stage of existence—religiousness "B," and to what Kierkegaard simply calls Christianity.

The Final Confrontation: Socrates and Jesus

Since religiousness "A" is a form of natural religion, it must be apprehensible to anyone who truly seeks it. In this way religiousness "A" is consistent with the Socratic concept of the eternal forms which are always present in an individual awaiting the apprehension of an inquiring mind. When religiousness "A" is conceived of in this manner, there is no disjunction between the absolute and the individual. In

Existentialism and Religious Belief, Roberts points out that in Socrates' philosophy there is no separation between man and the divine:

Using Socrates as an example, Kierkegaard brings out the way in which philosophy must take for granted an unbroken affinity between the human mind and the ultimate truth....Because Socrates ironically confesses his own ignorance, he is vastly superior to those pretentious rationalists who think they can get a choke-hold on the Absolute by means of their systems [Hegel]. Yet even Socrates assumes that, despite the limitations of the body, finitude, temporality, and “opinion,” the soul is already connected to the divine. (75-6)

Thus, what is needed in the philosophy of Socrates is a teacher who is able to elucidate and explain the truth and at the same time draw the individual's attention to that truth.

Because the truth resides within the individual and is waiting to be rediscovered, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the self and the absolute that remains unbroken as long as the individual continues to seek the truth. Socrates takes for granted that if the individual is willing to find the truth, there is no impediment that cannot be overcome by consistent effort and self-scrutiny. However, Socrates leaves out elements in his concept of man that Kierkegaard points to as essential if we are to understand the disjunction between God and humanity.

Evil, Guilt, and Sin

The question that arises at the final stage of religiousness "A" is whether it is enough to believe in God. If it is, then the actions of an individual are of secondary importance, though, certainly, there should be some correspondence between the belief of an individual and how the individual lives. But belief must be primary—it is an intellectual assent to a proposition of the mind that remains disconnected from a utilitarian morality. However, for Kierkegaard, this is where Socrates' philosophy, (like religiousness "A") begins to fall apart. The one thing that Socrates leaves out of his understanding of man is an awareness of sin and the guilt that such sin produces. Mullen points out that "Socrates had said that knowledge leads inevitably to virtue, that no man would knowingly do evil" (64). And since to do evil is to do harm to one's self, then evil must be done out of ignorance. If so, the individual bears no responsibility for the evil committed. Therefore, if this conception of human behavior is valid, the individual is

exonerated and can refer to any action that others deem unjust as an unfortunate mistake committed out of ignorance. This is precisely where Kierkegaard says religiousness "A" goes wrong because it fails to address the core issue of "evil" committed in full knowledge that such an that action is evil. In essence, Kierkegaard's position invalidates Socrates' central assumption—"to do evil is to harm oneself... and no man would knowingly harm himself" (Kierkegaard's Philosophy 64). It is evident that men and women do, in fact, commit evil and are conscious that these acts have negative results on both their objects and the perpetrators. However, these actions persist, and history is replete with examples of humanity's atrocities committed in full knowledge of their evil. On the difference between Kierkegaard's and Socrates' philosophy Roberts points out:

If we ask how man fell into this condition of inner warfare, the answer is "through his freedom." And he remains in sin and error by continually forfeiting what would save him. But since all his efforts spring from an enslaved self, he cannot solve the problems by sheer effort. Nor will a presentation of the truth by a skillful teacher suffice, for seeing an ideal does not mean that we can live up to it. What is needed is a complete transformation of character, a regeneration of the individual from the ground up. But no human teacher can literally re-create a soul; only God can do this. (76)

Thus, when the individual in religiousness "A" realizes that the self cannot maintain connection to the absolute, absolutely, that indeed, there are times when the self does not even want this connection, then it is here that a final state of "despair" is reached (Vardy 55). This despair is characterized by hopelessness, inaction, and the terrible realization of the unbridgeable gap between humanity and the absolute that is final and forever. For Kierkegaard this moment of despair is the gate to paradise. In this place all his work detailing the various stages of human existence comes to fruition. For all along he has

been pointing to this singular realization: in spite of humanity's talents, rationality, technology, and philosophical speculation, the self cannot, in the end, save its self.

Therefore, the final stage that the individual must enter is what Kierkegaard calls religiousness "B" or Christianity. But this is more than a stage; it is a relationship where the self finally admits to its utter dependence on God. This is not an easy thing to do. Indeed, it is so difficult that even Kierkegaard is unsure if he has ever done it. Yet here the individual finally finds a place where despair and meaninglessness are put to rest.

Religiousness "B": Creator and Creature Harmonized

The fundamental difference between the religiousness of "A" and "B" resides in their opposite responses to the issue of dependence. In religiousness "A" the individual still believes that the self can "will" its search for the absolute, and in so doing, will the self to abstain from all earthly loves that may impede the relationship to the absolute. In religiousness "A" the individual still believes the self is in charge of its life. There is the recognition that God is more important than all other things, but this recognition is based upon the ability of the individual to effect the desired change of behavior.

In religiousness "B" the attitude of willfulness comes to an end. As we saw in the previous section, religiousness "A" ends in the same "despair" as the other stages. The individual believes that the self can effectively change in order to maintain a personal connection to the absolute, but finds that this is impossible. The first reason for this failure is the inherent nature of sinfulness within the individual; the second derives from

the finite nature of a creature trying to do the work of the infinite. In Kierkegaard, Vardy summarizes the transition from religiousness "A" to that of "B."

Religion A can be attained by an individual's own efforts. A person can will to give up all hope in the temporal and ground themselves in the Eternal. They can look to Christ as an exemplar, but the transition from A to B occurs when the individual realizes that her or his own will is not sufficient and depends on Christ alone for forgiveness of sins and salvation. (61)

An acknowledgment of the insufficiency of the human will defines the transition to the stage of religiousness "B." Until this point, the various stages have portrayed various depictions of human striving, but at the final stage of existence not human independence but human dependence is prized above all else.

The fourth century Bishop Polycarp, of the Church in Constantinople, said: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O' Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee." (Roberts and Donaldson Encyclical) This is the message of Religious stage "B." This message also involves a recognition of sin and faith, a knowledge of the paradox at the heart of faith, and an understanding of love and how love should express itself to both God and to the world. All these things stem from that same stalk, the simple statement—that our "rest," as George Herbert says in his poem, *The Pulley*, must not be "in Nature," but "the God of Nature" (95). And thus, the natural religion of "A" gives way to the transcendent religion of "B," where the individual realizes his dependent status as a created being whose deepest fulfillment comes in being rightly related to the Creator-Being.

Inherited Sin and Actual Sin

In religious stage "B" the issue of sin is of utmost importance. Without a concept of sinfulness the individual cannot establish a true relationship to the absolute. For sin has both an "inherited quality" and an "actual quality" (Taylor, Pseudonymous 276), but to become aware of one's sinfulness is also a matter of revelation. Kierkegaard attempts to clarify the notion of the individual's awareness of his or her sinfulness in Sickness

Unto Death.

Precisely the concept by which Christianity distinguishes itself qualitatively from and most decisively from paganism is the concept of sin, the doctrine of sin; and therefore Christianity assumes quite consistently that neither paganism nor the natural man knows what sin is; yea, it assumes that there must be a revelation from God to manifest what sin is. (220)

Thus, when an individual comes to religious stage "B," the self must accept its inherited and actual sinfulness; both are necessary. Without the concept of an inherited nature of sin, the self may suppose that it can work its way to Heaven and thus take credit for its own spiritual progression. This, of course, coincides with the kind of human striving that we have examined, and seen nullified, through each of the previous stages of existence. Thus, because of the inherent nature of sin, work of any sort can never be good enough to warrant communion with the absolute. Sin is the perennial barrier between God and man.

Along with inherited sin stands the reality of actual sin. This involves the volitional actions of the self that run counter to the dictates of conscience. These actions are, in whatever form, violations of the inner understanding of right and wrong, and the

individual who is willing to admit that the self is sinful is ready to accept a dependent status before God. Thus, an understanding and acceptance of both inherited sin and actual sin is necessary to entering religious stage "B."

The Necessity of the Incarnation

When the individual accepts a position of subservience and dependency on God, based on the sinfulness of the self, then the individual is prepared to accept a savior. And because the self is sinful, such salvation must come from God. This leads to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, the cornerstone of the Christian message. Incarnation is the bridge that spans the chasm between God and humanity. Without the incarnation there could be no reunion between the temporal and the eternal, no reconnection between the infinite and the finite, no true concourse between God and humanity. If the Christian gospel is an ideology that best explains the nature of the universe and human existence, then the incarnation is the fulcrum upon which the ideology turns. But what exactly does the incarnation mean to Christianity, to the believer, and to the individual's quest to find a self fundamentally aligned to God's will? In the following section I explain how the incarnation helps us understand both the nature of selfhood and the nature of God's love for humanity.

If humanity is sinful and cannot effect a lasting change in itself, then the full revelation of the self must come from outside. And, as such, it cannot be negotiated on human terms. We are like the "captiv'd town" in one of John Donne's holy sonnets, "Batter My Heart Three Person'd God," where the speaker affirms that he must "labor to

admit Christ". Such salvation will not be easy, however, as a "captiv'd town" the self has no other choice if it is to have what it needs and wants—a relationship with the eternal.

In Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society Merold Westphal makes the choice between "apotheosis" and "incarnation" very clear:

In one respect I am saying nothing new. It has always been clear, I believe that the issue between Hegel's philosophy and Kierkegaard's faith is that of apotheosis vs. incarnation. Does the human race become God or does God become human? (37)

Here Westphal makes plain the weight of the matter involved in this choice. The incarnation contains the promise of an individual's renewal but only under certain conditions. But the individual who decides that these conditions are too high a price to pay must settle for an existence that is self-contained, self-reliant, and in the end, self-serving. Without the "incarnation" humanity must save itself. But when given absolute power, and the means to carry out its ends, has humanity ever created a truly just, free and equitable society?

Humanity's Choice: Self-Deification or Submission

What is the effect of our wanting to save ourselves? If Hegel is correct and man has the ability through knowledge, which is growing everyday, to manipulate the environment of his own existence and shape and condition the world, what does this mean? Essentially, it means that the Judeo-Christian God will have to go. In order to continue its own project, man must kill God. This is what Nietzsche knew and what Dostoevsky foresaw when he made his now famous prophetic statement: "When God is

dead, everything goes." (Hubben 85) In reference to apotheosis and incarnation, Westphal also uses an example from Camus's novel The Rebel to illustrate the dichotomy between the two choices. It is a striking and clear statement of the nature of the choice before humanity:

[Camus's novel] is striking not only in its vivid account of the terror that self-deified humanity unleashes upon itself, but also in the profound agreement between militant unbeliever and militant believer in identifying the "characteristic depravity" or "specific immorality" of the age.... Camus sees not simply a morality justifying means by reference to ends, but a moral nihilism that rejects all limits and replaces questions of right and good with questions of power and efficiency. The major premise for the moral nihilism that produces political cynicism is theological, the death of God and the logically inconsequent but historically actual deification of human society. As sacred and absolute, "the people" are constrained by no law but are themselves the sovereigns of history. Their self-appointed representatives have a kind of cosmic, executive privilege that inevitably produces the kinds of cosmic Watergates we've seen from Robespierre to Auschwitz. (Kierkegaard's Critique 41)

The choice before humanity is either to accept its self-deification, and thus, as a logical consequence to eliminate God, or to accept its inherent sinfulness and the need for a savior, which is brought to fruition in the incarnation of God in the person of Christ. Each creates a problem, but one in the short-term and the other in the long-term. If the individual accepts the validity of the incarnation, then the self will have to sacrifice its pride and arrogance, and recognize its submissive status before and utter dependence on God. Thus, through the awareness of sin and the acceptance of the incarnation, individuals ready themselves for the life of faith. I therefore turn to the life of faith and what it means to be a Christian at religious stage "B."

Religious Stage “B”: Faith and the Paradox of The Christian Life

The Christian life consists of living a life of faith, a belief and trust in the efficacy of God's promises. Kierkegaard associates a number of things with the life of faith; these include first, the subjective and solitary nature of faith; second, the suffering it entails; and third, the community of the faithful that the person of faith is called to serve. I look first at the notion of faith's solitariness and how this influences the lives of those who aspire to call themselves Christians.

The Knight of Faith: Subjectivity and Solitude

Kierkegaard's concept of faith involved a high degree of subjective appropriation within a very individualized context. He associates the life of faith with Abraham, whom he considers the very paradigm of faith (Fear and Trembling 49), because of his belief and trust in the promises that God has made to him—even in the face of God's asking him to sacrifice one of those promises—his only male heir, Isaac, his son. Abraham obeys God. Though in the end God stays Abraham's hand and provides a substitute sacrifice, a ram, Abraham is called in the New Testament the “father of the faithful” because his life provides a paradigm for the faithful life. Such a life involves an absolute trust in God which is subjective and, as a consequence, isolates the self from others in the world, and at times, even from other believers.

Faith and the Subjectivity: the basis of the Christian Life

Kierkegaard's view of the life of faith emphasizes the role of the self in appropriating faith in a subjective manner. Such a life, as he describes it, requires much more than the intellectual assent to Christian dogmas. Rather, unless the whole self is engaged in the appropriation of the faith, it is not rightly aligned to God. Kierkegaard has been much criticized for affirming that "subjectivity is truth" (Concluding, 214), but what Kierkegaard means is that in a relationship one cannot know another person by objectively learning about him or her. The truth of the God-relationship, and thus of the Christian faith, must be "subjective." In this it mirrors human love. If I want to love a person whom I find fascinating and attractive, I must involve myself in her life and she in mine. If I were to limit my relationship with her to reading about her daily life, then I would know much about her life, but I would not know her in the sense that Kierkegaard means. Kierkegaard believes that the god-relationship must exist in intimacy, passion, if it is to be true. Yet, such a subjective appropriation of faith necessarily leads to a sense of isolation and loneliness.

The Knight of Faith: The Inevitability of Suffering

One consequence of living a life of faith is that the self encounters a kind of suffering that is both internal and external. The internal suffering associated with the life of faith is its opposite—doubt. It is a suffering associated with reason and the objective nature of our empirical world whose demands for proof continually clamor to be heard in

the silent subjective places of the believer's heart. The external suffering that the Christian believer must accept is manifested in various ways, but it almost always involves a subjugation of the self in service to others--in either attitude or in actions.

Internal Suffering: The Self's Awareness of Its Continued Sinfulness

The way of faith requires that the individual continually press on in the subjective appropriation of the truth of a god-relationship. It is never something finally attained and continually possessed. It must be possessed in each and every moment of existence. Therefore, there is the continual struggle with doubt and a continual need to remind the self of its sinfulness.

Even when there is no external challenge to faith, doubt continues to plague the serious believer. Our world places such a premium on validation and reason, on the objective-scientific model of verification, that even in everyday situations the believer is aware of the self's difference from the world, and which the believer's faith is called into question. The believer must ask: "How is that I, of all the people in the world, have been given the truth?"; "What if God is simply what I want to believe?"; "With so many versions of Christianity, how can I be sure that my version is the correct one?" Each question is valid and should be approached with respect; however, each can be answered only by subjecting the truth of Christianity to an objective standard outside the frame of relationship that Kierkegaard emphasized as the only legitimate standard of true faith—subjectivity. As a result, the believer is thrown up against the world, its measurements and realities, and must exist in this world, while accepting that the believing self cannot

be of this world. Such a situation implies suffering. In The Mind of Kierkegaard, James Collins expresses the reason for Christian suffering: "Suffering is the great training school for eternity. Its burden may be heavy, but there is no other way of learning the meaning of repentance, obedience to God, and the power of faith" (222).

External Suffering: Misunderstanding and Ostracization

The way of faith also involves a willingness to accept inevitable secular misunderstanding and antagonism. If it were acceptable for a Christian to remain silent, perhaps the believer would not encounter animosity from the world. But, as Kierkegaard's own life attests, such "silence" is not an option. Late in his life, Kierkegaard heard Stages on Life's Way criticized by P.L. Moller for its confusing of the "literary" and "moral" realms in writing; however, a local paper, *The Corsair*, came to Kierkegaard's defense and praised the pseudonymous works as a great example of aestheticism. But Kierkegaard, regarding *The Corsair* as a promoter of social cynicism, thought that being praised by such a publication was more a condemnation than being roundly condemned by it. Therefore, Kierkegaard challenged the editors of *The Corsair* to treat him with the same gloves with which they treated the other public officials of Copenhagen. As a result, Kierkegaard was mercilessly caricatured in almost every edition of the paper. His works, ideas, and person were vulgarized in such a way as to make him a laughingstock in his own time. Collins describes how the "incident" affected Kierkegaard on a personal level.

Week after week, Kierkegaard (under the guise of his pseudonyms) was held up to public ridicule. His awkward gait and appearance, his daily habits and turns of speech, were made the subject of circumstantial reports and searing cartoons. The attack soon degenerated into a brawl, for even the children, with whom he liked to talk, began to call him "old man either/or." As "the great philosopher with uneven pant legs," Kierkegaard took his place among the stock comic characters of the contemporary stage, and certainly underwent the martyrdom of laughter. (13)

Collins adds, "From this incident, Kierkegaard learned how it feels to be trampled on by a flock of senseless geese" (13). Thus, as he realized that his days of general equanimity were over, he had hoped to find a country pastorate where he could live out his remaining days in relative quiet; however, the conflict with *The Corsair* made that impossible. It destroyed his reputation in the eyes of the public and reduced his esteem in the eyes of the established Danish Church.

Thus, in Kierkegaard's life we see how a Christian who brings his Christianity into the marketplace of ideas will be treated. The world will not tolerate an individual who questions the assumptions underlying its values. By attacking *The Corsair's* unfair treatment of others and challenging the editors to treat him the same as they did the poor and oppressed, he fulfilled the calling of a Christian—to set aside personal comfort, private desires, and the adulation of the crowd, in order to serve Christ—even if it leads to suffering..

The Knight of Faith: Love and Community

The last important element of Kierkegaard's concept of religiousness "B," or Christianity, is the admonition to love God and one's neighbor as oneself. Since

Kierkegaard makes subjectivity the focus of his description of Christianity, placing it beyond objective measurements, it may seem contradictory to include love and community as the measure of faith. However, such is the nature of Kierkegaard's philosophical enterprise. It is not defined by the rules of logic. It is therefore contradictory and paradoxical. For if faith is real, it will issue forth in love for God, which is subjective, like the intimacy shared between lovers; it will include many private encounters of which the world knows nothing. But, if faith is real, it will also manifest itself in a public, objective manner. A Christian's faith, though never validated or secured by any public act or work, is, nevertheless, demonstrated by how each individual believer responds to the world. Kierkegaard outlined objective faith in a small book called Works of Love, in which he details how a love for God must also cause the believer to love others. Therefore, I now attempt to detail the ways in which Kierkegaard demands that the believers love the world around them.

Christian Love is Non-preferential

The distinguishing trait of Christian love is that it attempts an equality of distribution. Believers are called to be impartial in how they express their love for others. In this way, the believer follows the model of Christ, whose incarnation and propitiatory death were a free gift of God to every person. Thus, to follow Christ's example, the believer must love those whom the world despises; believers must accept those the world rejects, and befriend enemies in order to demonstrate the love of God for all. Such actions may seem idealistic and naive. Loving the unlovely has never been popular,

especially when it calls into question the values or perspective of the powerful.

Kierkegaard describes how the world loves and how such love differs Christian love.

The distinction which the world makes is namely this: if a person wants to be all by himself in being selfish... the world calls it selfishness, but if in selfishness he wants to form a group with several other selfish people, especially with many other selfish people, the world calls it love[.]... What the world honors and loves under the name of love is group selfishness. (Works of Love 123)

Christian Love Knows Only One Allegiance

When a believer loves in the manner of Christ, such love sets the self above every political power or social system that may make a claim upon their allegiance. By excluding any connection to all other “gods,” the Christian sets him or herself apart from society. Such an attitude is seen as an “attack” on society, for it undermines the stable organization and social cohesion of the state. When, for example, Nero, Diocletian, and Justinian ordered the state to kill the Christian insurrectionists, the emperor’s believed that they were acting in the state’s best interests—and they were! Whereas the state makes no distinction between gods, but tries to placate all religions equally, some Christian believers say, “I can only worship the one, true God.” Thus, the stage is set for an inevitable clash between those who believe that all beliefs are equally true, and those who believe that their’s alone is true. The state’s allegiance is to the first concept, as it must be in a secular and pluralistic arena; whereas the allegiance of a “Christian believer” is to the second concept. The conflict arises when the state asks such a “believer” to make a choice. I must now examine the results of such a choice.

Christian Love is Self-Sacrificial

When this kind of believer follows Christ, and claims to love God above all other things, systems, people, and ideas, then that “Christian” will be dramatically different from most others. Though the examples are few, some individuals have manifested this love of God towards others: Bishop Romero in Guatemala, who, though being one of the elites of that society, nevertheless, stood with the peasants against the established and moneyed interests; Mother Theresa, in Calcutta, whose work with the untouchables of the Indian caste system is a testament to her faith and love, and her willingness to sacrifice her life for the sake of others; Martin Luther King, Jr. in our country, whose work in civil rights and nonviolent confrontation was modeled on Christ’s acceptance of the cross. In such cases, the test of a Christian’s love is the willingness to follow Christ to the cross and to sacrifice the self in loving the world.

I now apply Kierkegaard’s religious stages “A” and “B” to Will Barrett in Percy’s The Second Coming. At the conclusion of the novel, these final stages of Will’s search unify his self both internally and with the external world.

SECTION TWO:

Descent and Ascent: Percy’s Depiction of Barrett’s Resignation of the World and His Quest to Find God

When last we saw Will Barrett, still in the ethical mode of existence, he was writing a letter to his old friend Sutter Vaught in which he proposed a "third way," between the aestheticism of the unbelievers and the ethicism of the believers. For neither group had a sufficient answer to the questions that Will had posed regarding life's meaninglessness. In this letter Will reveals the intent of his experiment. He believes he has discovered a way in which he can make God reveal himself and thus enable himself to solve the perplexing question of God's existence. As we enter Kierkegaard's third and final stage, we'll examine the result of Barrett's experiment. Does he find the answers he's looking for? Does his pilgrimage finally fit the pattern laid out in Kierkegaard's theories? But, before returning to the novel, I wish to comment on the views Percy and Kierkegaard share in reference to the Religious stage.

Percy and Kierkegaard: Their views on Religiousness

Although Percy agreed with much of Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the existential maladies of contemporary man, he didn't always share his descriptions of the solution. And, it is here in the "religious stage" that some divergences occur—minor ones but important enough to be cited. However, I don't believe they alter, in any significant way, the essential "Kierkegaardian" journey that Will completes.

Kierkegaard's theory of religiousness "A" and "B" puts great emphasis on the way "subjectivity" cuts one off from other people. It also posits a completely "transcendent" solution to the social and religious problems that the individual may encounter. Though Percy might agree in principle with Kierkegaard's ideas and general direction, being a

Catholic believer, he differs somewhat with Kierkegaard's "individualistic" emphasis. that risks ignoring the objective constituency of faith and the need for a community of believers. In Percy's interview with B.R. Dewey, *Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview*, Percy is asked to detail the differences in their religious positions, these "divergences" I believe help the reader clarify Percy's presentation of Barrett's quest for God in the final section of The Second Coming.

Percy and Kierkegaard: On Objectivity

One difference involves the part objectivity plays in the search for God. Whereas Kierkegaard affirms the absolute subjectivity of the faith, Percy affirms that with subjectivity there is also a place for an objective validation. Dewey notices that "The Kierkegaardian aura of enclosed, interiorized, radically idiosyncratic selfhood did not seem to fit Percy's goals" (290). When Dewey asks Percy about it, he replies in the following manner:

This has always been a stumbling block to me. I think that Kierkegaard was simply wrong or carried his opposition to Hegel's system—objectivity—too far. Kierkegaard seemed to set up subjectivity as the only alternative. That has always bothered me, because I think he is falling into the trap of emotion, inwardness. (290)

The Catholic faith has always maintained that there are rational (i.e. objective) reasons why someone should believe the tenets of the Christian faith. Though seldom noted in discussions of Percy's work, while he was reading Kierkegaard and the other Existentialists, in the 1950's, Percy was also reading Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica from start to finish (Quinlan 31). Elizabeth Anscombe, a Catholic, and a

Professor of Philosophy at Oxford, explains the attitude that many Catholics had toward the Kierkegaardian Subjectivity in the 1950's. "To the educated laity and the clergy trained in those days, the word was that the Catholic Christian faith was rational, and a problem, to those able to feel it as a problem, was how it was gratuitous—a special gift of faith" (Quinlan 34). Unlike Kierkegaard, Percy's attitude exemplified the Catholic belief that faith could be expressed in rational propositions that all men could examine and then accept or reject.

Percy and Kierkegaard: On Christian Suffering

Percy and Kierkegaard also differ in some degree as to what happens to the self once it has assumed a faith. Kierkegaard affirms that the Christian believer must experience suffering. But in his interview with Dewey, Percy differs with this assumption, and Dewey gives voice to this difference.

I don't find that agony in the characters in your novels who move toward faith. There seems to be a kind of balance point that is reached, a kind of peace. That seems to be one place where you really diverge from Kierkegaard. (290)

Percy answers Dewey by asserting the Apollonian character of the mind within the Catholic faith in contrast to "Protestant anguish" (290). Later in the interview, Percy clarifies the kind of suffering his characters do experience as a result of their faith. He asserts that suffering is for him a vehicle to move a character toward knowledge and grace. For...

[I]n the novels suffering is really used as a vehicle. In several places it is used as an asset, a cognitive avenue toward knowledge and grace.... This is

a curious phenomenon, which is certainly not my discovery. Several writers have recorded what is discovered through ordeal. Suffering is an evil, yet at the same time through the ordeal of suffering one gets these strange benefits of lucidity, of seeing things afresh. (292)

In The Second Coming, Will experiences a kind of suffering that allows him to clarify his place in the world. This kind of mental and spiritual anguish is personal and subjective. Kierkegaard is familiar with it for he often speaks of the “believer’s” separateness from the world, however when he emphasizes Christian “suffering” he equates it with the believer being “rejected” by the world. Percy’s form of suffering is therefore more internal, and Kierkegaard’s more external. A small difference, but one that needs clarification.

Percy and Kierkegaard: The Individual and the Natural World

Another difference between Kierkegaard and Percy is their view of the individual within the natural world. A concept of a “natural world” is essentially absent from Kierkegaard’s writings. His theories essentially involve abstractions about beliefs and ideas. On the other hand, Percy involves natural wonders; their beauty and rich texture signify an intense interest in creation. Once again, Dewey asks the formative question: “How did nature become such a part of the novels?” (294). Percy’s response points to an important element in his fiction—how the natural world intersects with the transcendent:

If you are talking about literary sources—and if you want a contrast with what the novels owe Kierkegaard—they owe something to an entirely different source: the English poet, Gerard Hopkins, who was a great nature poet and who wrote some beautiful nature diaries. And this is a much more, I guess, consciously Catholic attitude toward nature—nature, created nature, as a sacramental kind of existence. Hopkins made a great

thing in poetry of being able to look at a cloud or a leaf or even a piece of rock and see in it what he called a certain "inscape," and thinking always that if your gaze was sufficiently fresh and if you could see it sufficiently clearly, you would see it as an act of existence, a gratuitous act of existence which was evidence of God's existence. He saw it in a very sacramental and religious way, which really owes a lot more to Aquinas than it does to the Kierkegaardian tradition. (294-95)

Percy's view of nature emphasizes its ability to be a kind of "signal" to us, hinting at the possibility of a deeper and more significant existence. Whereas Kierkegaard mainly refers to nature as the arena of "fallenness," for Percy it also a place of renewal. However, such a difference does not demonstrate a fundamental break with the Kierkegaardian point of view—especially as it relates to the religious stages of "A" and "B"; it is rather a difference of emphasis, or degree, not kind. As we continue the investigation of Barrett's journey through the Religious stage, we notice that Percy does not deviate from Kierkegaard's conceptual framework; rather, he simply adds a subtle layer of "Catholic" religious experience and expression to Kierkegaard's concept of religiousness.

Into the Cave: Barrett's Via Negativa - The Way Up is the Way Down

When Will Barrett finishes his letter to Sutter Vaught he has decided what he is going to do. He has seen through the sensual excesses of aestheticism, he has been repulsed by the hypocrisies of those espousing the ethical stage, and now he is alone at the end of both stages. He has also said no to the three individuals—Lewis Peckham, Kitty, and Ewell McBee, who have tried to lure him back to a prior stage of development. Will turns them all down—at times with a bit of remorse for what cannot be—but he

realizes that he must go on. And so, it is to this next region we turn—Will's journey into the religious stage of existence.

Will's Motivation: Infinite Resignation

One of the key attributes of infinite resignation, and a way of knowing whether the self has entered religious stage "A," is the issue of apparent madness. From the viewpoint of an outsider, anyone in infinite resignation may seem to have gone mad. They have become fanatical and have lost all sense of balance and proportion in their quest to know God. A person in this stage counts everything else as lost in order to have one essential thing—the presence of the absolute. C. Stephen Evans says the individual will "...give up the finite for the sake of the infinite" (110). The infinite resignation of giving up the finite for the sake of the infinite is not without New Testament parallel. Jesus often tells stories that include similar morals. He shares the parable of "The Pearl of Great Price," in Matthew 13:45-46, where he is telling his followers that "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (RSV 1460). Here the one pearl is more valuable than all other things. However, for the non-believer who does not value a relationship to the absolute, such a selling of "everything" for a single "thing" seems not just excessive but truly mad.

Will's Divine Madness: Giving Up All to Find God

Percy understands this notion of the “believer’s madness” for in The Second Coming he includes depictions of Barrett’s own “belief inspired madness” (228). In chapter nine of the novel, the narrator explains what has happened to Will. As an objective and outside viewer, the narrator tells how Will decides to descend into the bowels of Sourwood Mountain and wait there until God does or does not reveals himself. The narrator calls such action “madness:”

So it was that Will Barrett went mad. His peculiar delusion and the strange pass it brought him to would be comical if it were not so perilous. This unfortunate man, long subject to “spells,” “petty mall” trances, and such minor disorders had now gone properly crazy.
(228-29)

However, the narrator proceeds to detail how Barrett has gone mad and the issues that his madness raises. For those who have “ears to hear,” as Christ tells those who listen to his parables, Barrett’s raving does not sound “insane.” Rather, Will’s ravings might make those who maintain that they are sane, yet continue to live in a world that endorses the insanities of nuclear proliferation, genocide, poverty, question the validity of their own reason. Percy has the narrator ironically comment on the specifics of Barrett's insanity:

This is how crazy he was. He had become convinced that the Last Days were at hand, that the world had fallen into the hands of the only species which knew how to destroy itself along with all other living creatures on earth, that whenever in history that this creature had invented a weapon, it had forthwith used it; that is was characteristic of this species that, through a perversity or an upsidedownness peculiar to it, while professing a love of peace, freedom and life, secretly it loved war and thralldom and death and loved them to the degree that it, the species, in these last days behaved like creatures possessed by demons. (229)

As we have seen in Kierkegaard's analysis of religious stage "A," there is a kind of madness that is divine, not the result of lunacy. What the narrator indicates about

Barrett's craziness may be a kind of prescience of the future. Barrett's apparent craziness is his rejection of the world's truly insane fixation on death. The narrator points out several ways in which the world is proceeding down this path of generational annihilation. And the question Will asks himself is whether the person who sees these insanity's going on and calls attention to them—crazy? Or, are all the others who remain silent and happy, unworried and disbelieving that anything is wrong—crazy?

Will's Journey: Crossing the Boundaries of Existence

Once Will has finished his letter to Sutter, he changes clothes and packs some essential items for his journey: a flashlight, tin-foil, and the placidyl capsules that Vance Battle has prescribed for his insomnia. He then sets off toward the secret entrance to Lost Cove Cave. The path that Barrett takes is interesting because it transgresses the geographical boundaries that Percy has continually indicated in The Second Coming. By constantly associating Kierkegaard's stages of existence with certain geographical locations within the novel, Percy is able to illustrate a fundamental change Barrett as he journeys toward the cave.

Mapping the Departure: Barrett's Goodbye to the Aesthetic and the Ethical

The first place where Barrett goes after mailing his letter to Sutter is the Linwood Golf Course. While examining the aesthetic stage of existence, I discussed some of the friend's of Barrett who were playing golf on this same course. Barrett admits, that like them, he has been a resident of the Aesthetic—living the moneymaking, pleasure-loving

life that his friends and colleagues have admired and sought to emulate. So, when Will again crosses the golf course's fairways and greens, we sense in him a deep familiarity with the surroundings. He acknowledges such a familiarity:

Though he could not see the rough on either side, there was never a moment when he did not know exactly where he was....The golf links was like his own soul's terrain. Every inch of it was a place he had been before. He knew it like a lover knows his beloved's body. (240)

At the edge of the golf course, near the rough, Barrett walks straight to an old pine tree that the golf balls from a recent tournament have bombarded. Here, at the edge of the course, he again encounters the Ethical stage of existence. Using a creature of nature, Percy, symbolically captures Will's earlier movement from the aesthetic to the ethical.

The narrator describes the scene:

He walked straight to the pine tree near the edge of the rough....The shell of the cicada hard as a gold bug had been clamped to the tree for three years. His fingers felt the slit in the shell where the creature had escaped. (240)

The cicada's escape reminds us of Barrett's hopeful escape from the aesthetic into the ethical. He too has tried to find a stable tree to which he could attach himself, but like the cicada, he has discovered that there can be no lasting, eternal attachment to anything in this world. Thus, as Barrett realizes that the cicada's attachment to the tree was a stage in it's development, so too does Barrett understand his stage in the Ethical. Thus, looking at the cicada's shell, Barrett now knows he must find another escape, one deeper than the Ethical. And now, here, as he is about to enter the religious realm, Barrett finds his final escape from the Aesthetic and the Ethical. He has located the entrance to Lost Cove cave, the symbolic foundation for the entire area since it runs beneath both the golf

course and the out-of-bounds. It is consistent with the nature of the Religious stage that the cave runs beneath both stages, for in Kierkegaard's conceptual framework when one enters the Religious stage the self regains, or reappropriates, but in a different way, both the Aesthetic and the Ethical.

Descending into the Cave: Barrett's Final Desire

Barrett's descent into the cave represents his final commitment to find God, even if this means losing all concourse with humanity and possibly his own life. For Barrett, this descent will either begin an existence, assuming God does reveal himself, or it will cause his death. However, if he dies, his million dollars in life insurance will go to Sutter to fund further research into the question of God's existence; and therefore, in the midst of this particular form of dementia, Barrett believes that he wins on both counts—in life, if God choose to reveal himself, and in death, by funding further research into the question of God's existence.

Like many other mythic and literary travelers—Orpheus, Aeneas, Dante, and Christ among them—Will descends into the death of his old life in order to ascend reborn and armed with some special wisdom. Thus Percy depicts Barrett's journey into the cave as the archetypal journey of descent and return.

Into the Tiger's Lair: Will's Confrontation with the Absolute

Will's journey into the cave is therefore both an experience of death and of rebirth, but whereas Will descends to find God or die, ironically, neither occurs. As in

the story of Abraham, the “hero,” or “knight of infinite resignation,” as Kierkegaard refers to him, journeys downward with the intention to sacrifice the self. And instead the self intent on sacrifice receives back the life he sought to give. This is what happens to Will; he experiences both a kind of dying and a kind of rising to life generated by his quest to find the absolute of existence.

The "Man-Shaped" Entrance: Will's Descent into the Cave

As Will enters the cave through the "Confederate Army's escape hatch" (242), he remembers that Lewis had told him that this entrance was man-shaped. Such a statement would imply that it is who God must shape our access to him or else we would never find him. Thus, there is both a push and pull to our existence—we push and God pulls.

Vardy explains the nature of this relationship.

There are forces acting to push and pull the individual into faith. First is despair, which can push an individual toward God. The individual may come, through despair in either the ethical or aesthetic stages, to recognize that it is only in relation to God that any security and hope can be found. Secondly, God, on the other side, provides the gift of grace [i.e. the "pull"]. (60)

Kierkegaard affirms that the “hungering after God” response of someone journeying into the religious stage, is a God-shaped emptiness that only God can fill. Only when the self seeks the “absolute,” can it begin to understand the depth of its estrangement and alienation from God. The narrator of The Second Coming describes Barrett’s descent into the cave, ironically, not as a “death” march but as the descent of a baby about to be born:

Down, down he crawled, letting himself feet first down a rockslide, first prone, then supine because he needed the flashlight. There was no way, he

figured, to go wrong going down.... There were places where the ceiling came so close to the floor that he had to turn his head sideways like a baby getting through a pelvis. (242)

But stating that "there was no way...to go wrong going down" (242), the narrator reverses the conventional understanding of descent symbolism. Usually going down implies loss, death, or some other ordeal that the hero must suffer in order to be regenerated. Here the convention is reordered; the downward journey becomes a birth where Barrett must squeeze himself through an ever-tightening enclosure until he is able to wriggle free into the cavern of the tiger.

In the Tiger's Eyes: The Message of the Absolute

The Tiger's Lair is the place in the cave to which Barrett is headed. It is place where legend has it the body of an ancient Saber tooth tiger was found—it's bones ossified into the rock floor. When the cave was open to public viewing, many visitors came to this spot to view the place where the "tiger" died. It is here that Will settles down to wait for God to speak. He is in a state of teleological suspension, or dreaming, when God finally speaks; however, He does so in a way unanticipated by Barrett, and by many readers. Having descended part way into the cave, Will is able to stand up and walk around. Because the cave had at one time been used as a commercial venture and Will had visited it, he remembers some of the landmarks: the "three nuns" (243), three cowed stalagmites resembling three praying nuns; and "Honest Abe" (243), each seeming to convey that this will be a place of trial and separation, where "honesty" and "truth" will be required. However, the chief place of interest for Will is Tiger's Lair, the small

alcove of rock where the tiger thousands of years ago lay down to die Barrett meditates upon the possible presence of the tiger and how the alcove has taken on the tiger's shape, "It looked a little like the great flattened head of a tiger. One could even imagine the lip bone on each side where the massive jaw muscle attached. Could the tiger's skull have been fused into the rock over the years?" (243). Thus, Will finds the place for which he has been looking; he is now ready for his encounter. The narrator indicates, "He smiled. Here I am, he thought, folding his arms and nodding and smiling. Now. Now we'll see." (244).

Will's Teleological Suspension

Now before describing Will's extended stay in the tiger's lair, I want to explain how his descent into the cave and his waiting for God to speak are connected to Kierkegaard's concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical. Like Abraham, Will has decided to do something which flies in the face of ethical rules and norms, and as Abraham intended to make a sacrifice in the hope that his relationship with the absolute might be solidified and assured, so too does Will intend such a sacrifice. Abraham keeps silent about his intentions, Barrett only tells Sutter Vaught, who can do nothing to prevent the sacrifice. However, the difference between Abraham's offering of Isaac and Barrett's offering of himself is that Abraham acted in obedience to God's command, whereas Barrett hopes to trick God into revealing himself. Though this difference is important, each man's willingness to set aside the ethical injunction to do "good" is the essential similarity. Thus, Will becomes a modern-day Abraham, searching for the

absolute meaning to creation, which he knows can be discovered only in finding God, and for which he is willing to sacrifice everything. Will explained this motivation to Sutter in his letter.

My project is the first scientific experiment in history to settle once and for all the questions of God's existence. As things presently stand, there may be signs of his existence but they point both ways and are therefore ambiguous and so prove nothing....But what if one should devise a situation in which one's death would occur if and only if God did not manifest himself, did not give a sign clearly and unambiguously, once and for all?

Would not the outcome of such an experiment be a clear yes or a clear no, with no maybes?....

We have had five thousand years of maybes and that is enough.

Can you discover a flaw in this logic?

I've got him!

No more tricks!

No more deus absconditus!

Come out, come out wherever you are, the game's over. (222-23)

Though Will thinks of his sacrifice as a great game, it has serious consequences. He must know whether God exists; once he does, that knowledge will forever alter his existence. At last we come to God's answer to Will's imploring question; however, the transmission of this message is not without a degree of ambiguity.

Will's Visions: Dreaming His Life and the Tiger

The narrator indicates that Will has now been in the cave for "seven to eight days" and that "what happened" happened after this period of time (247). Will has been popping placidyl capsules daily, keeping the self in a state of constant sleepiness. On the seventh or eighth day, the narrator indicates that Will is beginning to drift off into a deep sleep, but as he does so, he starts to dream. In these dreams Will is confronted by people

and images from his past, and is able to make sense of issues that had formerly perplexed and disturbed him. As he drifts off to sleep, he dreams of many things: he is in an old Negro woman's cabin getting help after his father has shot at him and barely missed; he is with Marion at a funeral; he is listening to Leslie, his daughter, tell him why his marriage went bad; he is on a long trip with his father going from the east coast to California, sitting for hours in silence, realizing that he can never connect with his father. As Barrett continues dreaming, "Years passed. He awoke many times. The cave was companionable. The living rock was warm and dry. There were times when the ceiling of the cave seemed to open to the sky. As he gazed up, the darkness turned bright" (252). As Barrett dreams, a transcendent atmosphere pervades the narrative. Though his dreams remain disconnected, the events are being replayed in his subconscious to affirm their fundamental importance in his life.

At the very end of the dreaming sequence, Barrett has a vision of the tiger, which appears as a type of christ. It figures prominently in this portion of the narrative and reappears later to confirm its importance in Barrett's regeneration. Will first sees the tiger within his dream in a very odd situation.

Once he saw the tiger traveling the highways and byways. But perhaps it was only one of the little explosions of light and color that now and then lit up the fragments of road map, bits of highway, crossroads, dots of towns which drifted across his retina. In the grey watery world, anyhow, no one seemed to notice the tiger. Very well, he thought, neither shall I. (255)

If the tiger is a type of christ, then Barrett's vision of the tiger in "a grey watery world where no one notices him" (255) is a fit description of the modern world's attitude toward

christ. In a "watery world" there is no passion for the tiger, no knowledge or awareness of his beauty, or ferocity. Barrett realizes that he, like the world, has denied full knowledge of the tiger. Yet, his vision does not end there. He awakes and thinks he sees the tiger standing in the cave with him. He notices that the tiger is not the "Blakean Tyger" whose "fearful symmetry" (Kennedy 292) inspires awe and wonder. This tiger is old and worn and tired.

His eyes were lackluster and did not burn. His coat was not thrifty. His muzzle looked more like a snout. Otherwise there was nothing notable about him. He was as commonplace as the tiger in the picture book the child recognizes and points to "tiger," says the child. The tiger's head turned this way and that. He swayed as he stood. He was too tired to even unlock his legs and let himself down. It was clear he had come to die. (256)

The tiger has come to die, just as Barrett has. As Will continues his examination of the tiger, he notices its "careworn" and "self-conscious" eyes. The tiger makes Will think of himself and of the many others who question their existence. Will sees that the tiger is an "old male tiger" (256) and that, "as he absently explored the beast, hide now hardened and chitinous as a locust, his hand felt along the spine as if it were looking for the slit where the creature had escaped. There was no slit" (256). This tiger cannot escape, for there is no slit to slip through. He has come here, has always been here, to die.

In the last image and interaction with the tiger, Will realizes that this beast is more than a tiger. He says:

Very well. Whatever is alive here is more than a dying tiger. Yet it is not a tiger giving birth or a tiger molting and being transformed into a cicada. It is the same tiger but different. He watched curiously until he saw the joke. Then he grew sleepy and lay down beside the beast. (256-57)

When Will recognizes that it is "the same tiger, but different," we have a picture and symbol of Will's own renewal. He will be the same "Will" but different, for caught in the thicket this tiger has become Barrett's ram. The tiger shall die for Will and take his place, and in so doing, renew Will. In many ways the tiger takes on Will's frustrations, questions, and anxieties. Even Barrett recognizes this difference, and calls it the "joke." The narrator points out this awareness in Will.

For the first time in the history of the universe it was the man who knew who he was, who was as snug as a bug in his rock cocoon, and the beast who did not, who was fretful, unsure of himself and the future, unsure of what he was doing here. (257)

Though the opportunity for Will's renewal is apparent to us, the narrator lets us know that Will is at something of a loss: "Tiger or no tiger, he thought, it is all the same. The experiment continues. That was no sign" (257). But Will is wrong. He has seen the sign but does not yet realize it. The experiment is now over, which quickly becomes apparent to Will, for in the very next sentence Will is "vomiting" from the pain of a "toothache" and screams "let me out of here" (257). The absolute has revealed itself, and though Will still has not seen it fully, later he will recognize that he did receive something in the cave. Exactly what, he is not sure, though that, too, is the nature of "faith." Humanity wants definitions and answers, and receives instead signs that both reveal and conceal.

Barrett's Rebirth: Up from the Cave and Falling into Paradise

Barrett's sojourn in the cave waiting for God to speak in an unequivocal manner comes to an abrupt end when Barrett begins to experience the searing and throbbing pain

of his toothache. The pain makes him lose all desire for ultimate answers and divine speculation. He can think of only one thing and that is getting out of the cave.

Shakespeare also uses the pain of a toothache to teach another philosopher a similar lesson; speaking of pain and divine speculations, Benedict says in Much Ado About Nothing, "there was never yet philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently"

(344). Barrett comes to the same conclusion:

A tiger? John Ehrlichman? He shook his head. It made him vomit again. But he shook his head again and, gathering flashlight and batteries, started for the opening. Let me out of here. It is astonishing how such a simple and commonplace ailment as pain and nausea can knock everything else out of one's head, lofty thoughts, profound thoughts, crazy thoughts, even lust. (257)

Thus, Will makes his way up toward the light. He believes that he has given up and given in to the pain, and is now leaving without a revelation. But when he reaches the top, he realizes that even if things did not happen as he thought they should, something occurred down in the darkness of the cave.

After Barrett leaves the cave, Percy continues to use the Kierkegaardian matrix of self-development, but he also incorporates a "Catholic" understanding of what it means to live the life of Christian belief. His ideas regarding the Christian's life within the world become more subtle, more full of doubt and questionings. And though the hunger for the old ways of belief die hard, Percy's answers to the questions of belief take on an orientation more human than divine. But how, precisely, does Will integrate his self with the world, and how has his experience in the cave changed him, if at all? In this next section we will discover the answers to these questions.

Will's Recovery: Seeing the Light

As Will makes his way out of the cave, he must navigate its dark interior in a state of extreme weakness, having gone for seven or eight days without food. Not surprisingly, he loses his way and becomes disoriented, falls down a long slide, and injures his leg. He surmises that he has perhaps broken a bone. When he reaches the point of sheer exhaustion, Will decides to turn off his flashlight. Immediately he notices that the surrounding darkness is not quite black, that light is coming from some place. He begins looking for it, and as he does so the symbolic import of the scene—his crawling toward the light—becomes a fitting image for Will's upward movement.

As he crawled along the cave a light breeze sprang up, and by the time he reached the shadow, he could smell leaves and bitter bark and the smell of lichen on rock warming in the sunlight.

But when he turned, he saw, not sunlight but a lattice of vines which all but sealed a hole in the rock. The hole was square.

Well then, he said, and noticed that he was not excited about his deliverance from the cave. (261)

Will is not excited about his deliverance because he believes he is leaving the cave as a defeated penitent, someone who came looking for God, but departs disappointed, deprived of the answer he so dearly sought. However Barrett has found more than he realizes. Sometimes finding is only realized when the self leaves the confines of its cave and journey's into the upper world where life is complicated, and gray with ambiguity.

Will's Rescue: Regeneration and Renewal

As Barrett reaches the square hole with its lattice work of vines, he thinks of himself as a Confederate soldier who, like the Japanese soldiers who hid out in the

jungles long after World War II ended, then emerged from their caves and asked, "Who won the war?" (261). For Will, the journey into the cave has been both a "war" and "game." And with such definite ideas regarding the winners and losers in this game—Will believes he has lost. But when Will falls into Allie's greenhouse, he discovers that his "fall" is propitious, that a loss can at times be a victory.

As Barrett inches toward the square of light, the ceiling closes down making the passage to the light a narrow canal of space through which he must wiggle forward. Will wonders, "what to do when the slide meets the roof? For here in fact the slide did meet roof and he crouched in an angle..." (260). He manages to squirm forward so that he is "resting his elbows on the sill he meant to poke his 'head' through for a look" (261). Coming headfirst through a dark, wet, narrow opening suggests rebirth. Unknowingly, Will is being reborn in a long and arduous process that began when he descended into the cave to seek the meaning of his life.

Barrett hits the concrete floor of the greenhouse hard as he crashes through the wooden and shuttered window connecting the greenhouse to the cave (262). As he lands, he believes he may have died after all, but once again, he is not quite right. Instead, he has fallen into good hands. The greenhouse is in fact, a place of renewal and recovery.

After hitting his head on the concrete floor and passing out, Will wakes and the first thing that he sees is a "woman, a girl, bent over him with a paper cup" (222). He receives from her a cool drink of water, then remarks on what it is like to get water when very thirsty; "There are few joys greater than drinking cool water after a serious thirst" (262). It is a "serious thirst" that Barrett has been in. Given his quest for God, his

comment is an echo of Christ's statement in the Gospel of John, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38, RSV 1596). Thus, Barrett finds in this greenhouse a place of recovery. As he lies upon the concrete greedily gulping cold water, he believes at first that he has fallen into a church, for suspended above him is a stained glass window in a niche within the roof, through which the sunlight descends filtering rays that bathe him in multicolored light.

Before Barrett passes out from exhaustion, he notices something strange, yet comforting. During his transition from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage, Barrett had first discovered Allie in her greenhouse. She was trying to decide how to move an old enameled stove up from the ruined basement and into the greenhouse. Will offered to do it for her, but she refused his help and did the job herself. Now, as Will is laying there on the cold concrete, he notices the "reborn" stove, and we understand the significance of the symbolism between the two. The narrator states:

There, fitted snugly under the raised sashes of the partition, squatted the huge old kitchen range, no not old but surely new, transformed, reborn. Its polished nickel glittered in the sunlight. Expanses of immaculate white and turquoise enamel glowed like snowy peaks against a blue sky. (264)

The connection is clear. The stove, like Barrett, has been moved from the darkness underground into this greenhouse where things are transformed and reborn. Though the range is the same old stove, it is, nevertheless, new. The image Percy here employs is a finely balanced and appropriate picture of both salvation and regeneration. Barrett has gone in search of God, and though he does not yet understand the nature of what he has

found, he has been, by God's grace, led to this house of water, light, and growth, to this greenhouse where a girl not of this world cares for him.

Percy develops the idea of salvation and regeneration one more step. Now, as Will lies on the cold concrete being ministered to by a young woman, drinking deeply of the cool water and letting it quench his thirst, he notices something behind the glassy mica surface of the burning stove, he sees that "A fire burned behind amber mica bright as tiger's eyes" (264). The correlation is clear; if the stove is an image of rebirth, then it is accomplished with the "fire" of the "tigers eyes" burning inside. Barrett may not yet realize that he has been the recipient of God's grace, but he is beginning to reinterpret his descent into the cave and his dream of the tiger through the people and objects in the world around him.

Will's Reintegration: Knowing Life and Death

Intimations of Life

After a week under Allie's care, Will is well enough to move around the greenhouse with only a slight limp. Allie has bathed and fed him and brought in Doctor Battle, Will's physician, to take a look at him. Will is on the road to a full physical recovery. However, there remains the question of what Will believes happened in the cave. He tries to explain it to Allie at different times, his words are always a bit confused. Early in their week together, Allie pointedly asks Will, "why were you in the cave?" (281), and though Will is initially thrown off balance, he recovers enough to begin to tell her about his experience and the tiger. Allie's response to his revelation is to ask a

series of questions that give us a hint that Barrett is coming to grips with what has happened. Allie says:

"But the tiger wasn't there."

"No."

"Then--?"

"Then what?"

Then there was more than the tiger?

"Yes."

"You were trying to find out something besides the tiger?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I was asking a question to which I resolved to find a yes or no answer."

"Did you find the answer?"

"Yes."

"Which was it?"

"I don't know." (282)

Will is now aware that something of importance happened in the cave, but he is unsure of its significance. He no longer denies that the tiger was a sign, but he is at a loss about what kind of sign or what it meant. However, this conversation is an indication of growth in Will. He is learning that the answer he sought may be more elusive and many-sided than he anticipated. Nevertheless, Will is maturing. He is beginning to understand the futility of seeking absolute proof of God's existence, and is rather seeing for the first time the "signs" that have always been there for him.

Before leaving the greenhouse Will feels compelled to tell Allie the truth of what he knows about her. Will informs Allie that he and her mother, Kitty, are old friends. This takes Allie by surprise; she wonders if Will could be her "father." (298). Will denies this, knowing that he and Kitty never engaged in a sexual relationship. Will also informs Allie that she is now "independently wealthy," having inherited her Aunt Grace's

property—the land adjacent to the Linwood golf course and a 2,000 acre island in North Carolina. Will is now strong enough to begin thinking about taking care of Allie. Though he is still weak, he believes he must reintegrate with the world, but this effort proves to be like much of his past experiences in the world—full of fits and starts and the uncertainties that define the finite world.

As Will gets ready to leave the greenhouse, he begins to revert back to his old tired and pensive self. Allie notices the change. He now seems colder and more distant, when, for example, Allie returns from town, having spent much of her meager funds to buy steaks so that they might have a real feast. She announces to Will, "I bought some steaks" (304), but Will, "didn't seem surprised"(304). Allie tries to dismiss this lack of reaction by going about her business:

She put her marine jacket on. He lay quietly, watching her while she cooked. She didn't mind feeling his eyes on her back and her bare legs. She went outside, to get the beer. It didn't matter that it was cold and raining and she was barefoot. The steaks were good. But he ate absently, as if they were in a restaurant and the steaks were no more or less than what he expected. The rain stopped. It was still dark when he left. She didn't know what time it was. (304)

Will is obviously distressed by the prospect of returning to the world—a world he thought he had left for good two weeks ago, and now returning with no obvious "insight" or "revelation" that might help clarify his experience and his future in the world. Will returns to Allie after his initial leaving, for just a moment; he needs to make a statement and ask a question. He says he wishes to be her legal guardian, if that is what she wants. However, Allie, has grown very attached to Will. She also asks him a question:

"Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"
"Is it enough for you?"
"Me?"
"Why do you sound so tired?"
"Me? It is not an interesting subject. At least not to me." (304)

Will cannot yet interpret what has changed since he went down into the cave. He knows only that he is once again left with only himself and with no clear relationship to God. He is tired of himself, which is no longer an "interesting subject" (304). But, just as Will seems again headed for despair, he has a moment of clarity and illumination that provides a sense of hope.

The Names of Death

As he prepares to leave the greenhouse, Will is in a quandary. He understands that something happened in the cave, something that he cannot describe or interpret fully. He knows he is now confronted with going back to real world without any certainty regarding God's existence. But at this moment, Will suddenly realizes that he knows the names of "death," and that by knowing them he may have learned the secret of existence. But does this newfound knowledge have the power to restore the equilibrium of Barrett's soul?

After leaving Allie in the greenhouse, Will sits in the back seat of his Mercedes at the rear of the Linwood golf course, shivering. He is wrapped in one of Marion's old blankets, remembering his long drive out West with his father. He has been thinking how his father had been "in love with death," and wondering if this love of death is in the "genes." But suddenly, without prior warning, he has a moment of illumination that

alters the foundation of his thoughts. The narrator notes that, "Something occurred to him. Excitedly he jumped out of the car... Now he snapped his fingers and nodded to himself. For all the world like a man who has hit upon a solution to a problem which had vexed him for years" (310-11). The solution that Will has hit upon is that he now knows who his enemy is—it is the living death that he has feared and been running from his whole life: "The name of the enemy is death, he said, grinning and shoving his hands in his pockets. Not the death of dying but the living death" (311). But what are these "names of death," to which Barrett refers? He begins to cite them.

Will believes that the names of death are deceits. They are the lies that each of us tells ourselves to trick our self into believing that it is "living," when in fact it is "dead." Will fundamentally believes that these deceits stem, ultimately, from the "father of lies," the devil himself. Barrett says, "Old father of lies, that's what you are, the devil himself, for only the devil could have thought up all the deceits and guises under which death masquerades. But I know all your names" (312). Barrett's "names of death" match the categories of "despair" in Kierkegaard's stages of existence—within both the aesthetic and the ethical. Since Barrett mentions eleven names of death, and there are only three stages, each incorporating a single aspect of despair, I will examine these names of death within their stage groupings, instead of dealing with each individually.

Barrett devotes the least amount of space to a name of death in the Aesthetic stage.

Death in the guise of unbelief is not going to prevail over me, for unbelievers believe nothing, not because truth does not exist but because

they have already chosen not to believe, and would not believe, cannot believe, even if the living truth stood before them, and that is death. (313)

Barrett has little respect for aesthetic unbelief. Its horizon is so low that it cannot see beyond its gluttonous, never-satisfied desires. Because truth forces the self to evaluate and discriminate among conflicting desires, the aesthetic unbeliever wants to avoid the truth at all costs.

Barrett has many more names for ethical death: "Death" in the guise of "Christianity," "Old Christendom," or "New Christendom" and he states most emphatically that these lies and deceits will not triumph over him (312). These names of "death" refer to the religious forms of belief at the Ethical stage of life. Here Barrett associates death with an external form of religion that dominates and controls the individual's self in such a way that the self "hardens" as it seeks to live according to the rituals and patterns of any "system." Barrett now understands that this kind of life is a lie. He says "...the churches smell of death....The old churches are houses of death" (312).

Will's next grouping of the names of death revolves around a less religiously defined ethical center. Instead, as we saw while investigating the Ethical stage, these names represent the socialized ethic of family, marriage, and the other social institutions which define a socialized ethical existence. Barrett declares that these too are names of death: "Death in the guise of God and America and the happy life of home and family and friends...Death in the guise of marriage, and family and children" (312), He states affirmatively, "Death in the guise of belief is not going to prevail over me." (312-13).

Barrett thus condemns the believer for believing anything and everything, and for failing to seek after the "truth" with a willingness to "suffer" in order to find it; this kind of belief, Barrett believes, is all too easy to provide any real nourishment. Will saves his strongest indictment for belief in marriage and family. He knows that family is good, God is good, marriage and children are good. But there is something missing, and Barrett rails against it. He is imploring anyone and everyone to stop distracting themselves with "good things" and start concentrating on the one essential thing that's missing:

Where is it? What is missing? Where did it go? I won't have it! I won't have it! Why this sadness here? Don't stand for it! Get up and leave! Let the boat people sit down! Go live in a cave until you've found the thief who is robbing you. But at least protest. Stop! Thief! What is missing, God? Find him! (314)

That is Barrett's most impassioned advice to himself and to us—find the missing part—the absolute of the universe, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of all things.

Integration and Completion: The Grace of the Giver

In section five Will recommences his journey through the stages of existence. Though he has long been distracted by the efforts of those around him to control and manipulate him, Barrett now comes to his senses, seeing through the ulterior motives of those who have been closest to him—his daughter, his Priest, and his doctor. Though they believe what they are doing is for Will's betterment, they are deluded. They themselves are living at a lower stage of existence, and thus are unaware of their own

self-deceptions, and how their actions inhibit and diminish Will's desire to find a lasting meaning in his life that supersedes their aesthetic and ethical notions.

In the following section I look at three areas that indicate spiritual progression: knowledge, action, and faith, which are indicative of Will's self coming to grips with its responsibilities toward God and the world. Will's movement toward an integrated self continues to be inspired by a transcendent perspective informed by both a Kierkegaardian and Percyean perspective.

Knowledge, Action, & Faith: The Final Integration of Will Barrett

While Will is still at the convalescent home, but after Kitty has departed, he begins to ruminate on the nature of his existence (368-69). He realizes that simple knowledge of faith or God is not enough. Actions must accompany knowledge.

Knowledge: Will's Living Death

The illumination Will experienced when he left Allie's greenhouse, his awareness of the names of death, revisits him now in a more specific and distinct way by informing Will of the errors he has made in his life. This "revelation" concerns what happened to him after his father had shot him during their hunt at the Thomasville swamp. Will speaks of the "revelation":

But now I have learned something and been surprised by it after all.
Learned what? That he didn't miss me after all, that I thought I survived
and I did but I've been dead of something ever since and didn't know it
until now. (370)

All his life Will has been mistaken. When his father shot at him, he was, in a certain sense, killed, for all of Will's subsequent development has been directed at not repeating his father's mistakes, at avoiding anything associated with his father. Therefore, Will has ceased to "live his life" except as it cancels out his father. By realizing that he has really been dead all these years, living a life of fear and running from death, Barrett now feels as if he is ready to finally live life on his terms. He says, "But is it not also a surprise that discovering you've been dead all these years, you should now feel somewhat alive? (371). With each successive revelation— first the tiger, then the names of death, and now his death-in-life, Barrett feels himself becoming more and more truly "alive."

For a while Will feels this new-found knowledge may be enough, that there is no longer anything required of him, no action he would have to take. However, this proves a false assumption. While sitting in the lounge of St. Mark's convalescent home, Will initially thinks that his new "knowledge" about the "living death" can easily be integrated into his current life. However, once Barrett studies the situation he knows what the answer must be—an unequivocal "no" (371). Will realizes that "there was something [he] had to do" (371). He must take some practical action immediately, for knowledge, if it is true and affirming, must inevitably issue forth in some practical and life-giving action. Thus, as Will comes to understand the nature of his living death, he makes the choice to align himself with life, and with all those actions that affirm life.

Action: The Result of Will's New Knowledge

Barrett's resultant action is to go at once to the greenhouse and tell Allie that the sheriff and the sanatorium director, Alistair, are going to forcibly return Allie to Valleyhead Sanatorium. The narrator's description of Will is indicative of his mental transformation and readiness to act:

Thirty minutes later he had changed into street clothes, walked to his Mercedes, and was spinning down the highway. The car drove better than ever and he did not see double. Carefully, yet absently, without thinking that he did so, he had dressed for the first time in months in suit, shirt, and tie, laced up the plain-toed Florsheims he hadn't worn since he left New York. (372)

Will is now all "business." Not only has his demeanor changed, but his clothes, attitude, and intention indicate that he has "returned." The Will who had been docile and willing to go along with what others had planned for him has disappeared. While he is in his car, he remembers that for the last twelve hours he has not taken his medicine and that by now his pH is probably way out of balance. Will realizes that "the old heavy molecules (the "ion" molecule) were on the rise again. Again the past rose to haunt him and the future rose to beckon to him. Things took on significance" (372). The real Will returns because he has realized he must stop taking a drug that deadens him. While on the drug Will was safe and quiet and willing to listen to everyone else's advice, but off the drug he begins to feel like his old self and wants to take responsibility for his life and his decisions. The first action that Will takes once he leaves the car is to cross the golf course that leads to Allie's greenhouse. There is once again, symbolic significance to the

journey over the golf course and through the out-of-bounds. For it is here that the final integration of the stages of existence takes place.

The golf course has acted within the novel as a metaphor of Kierkegaard's stages of existence; the Aesthetic and the Ethical are separated by the out-of-bounds and by the fence marking the demarcation between these two realms. The last time Will came to this fence between the realms, he "stepped over it," as if he were above its limitations, but now Will does something radically different:

When he came to the fence, he stretched up the top strand of wire to hear the guitar sound. He let it go slack, stretching it again harder, cocked an ear. The wire sang again, creaked, and popped against the musical bridge of the post. He let it go. It sounded like a wire stretching against a fence post, no more. The near post was rotten. It broke and swayed towards him. He kicked it down and walked over the fence. (373)

Will kicks down the metaphorical line of separation between the realms of existence. He has been over and over this ground. It is, as he says, "his soul's terrain," and he must now take firm possession of it. This is an example of the integrated personhood that Kierkegaard and Percy believe should be the goal of life. Both writers have stressed that unless the self is willing to act, to take responsibility, and to for meaning, then self will live forever within the "fences" that separate us from each other and from God.

When Barrett reaches Allison, she notices the change in Will: "the girl and the dog were sitting on the stoop of the copper-roofed porch." Though Allison does not immediately recognize Will, the dog does and comes over to Will grinning. When at last Allie recognizes him, she says, "It is you, irregardless of who" (373), which puzzles Will and makes him smile. He asks her, "who did you think I was?" Her reply is instructive

because Allie has always had the ability to see people as they are—in their pretentiousness, arrogance, selfishness, and deceit. However, today she notices something about Will that indicates the depth of his transformation. In reply to Will's question, "who did you think I was" (375), she says:

"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....But Atlantean also because of the way you came through the woods like you were coming from elsewhere not there."

"Not where?"

"There. The golf links and the players. You were not one of them, you never were." (373)

Allie has gotten to the root of the matter. She sees Will as he is now. He is no longer one of them, but she also knows that he never truly was. Will was always dissatisfied with the life of the aesthetic and the ethical—neither of them had enough of real life in them. When Will turns to the religious stage, he finds it is not an easy life, either. The absolute is not there for the taking and faith is not the simplest road to travel down. However, now Will has decided what he wants.

Faith: Barrett's Final Transformation

The last person with whom Will talks before the novel closes is the old priest, Father Weatherbee, who has recently returned from a fifty-year missionary stint in the Philippines. Barrett met him earlier at St. Mark's where he, too, is a patient. However, while Jack Curl is gone, Weatherbee is going to be in charge of the parish. But that is not why Barrett comes to him instead of to Jack Curl, but rather because, as Will says, "I

perceive that you seem to know something—and that by the same token Jack Curl does not" (409). Barrett has come to ask the aged cleric to officiate over a marriage ceremony for him and Allie. Unlike Jack Curl who is a "modern" priest, Father Weatherbee still believes in the doctrine of "apostolic succession" (355), which is a "laying of hands," by which the power of Peter is passed down from the first Pope. Will now understands this line of descent. If the Jews are the chosen people of God, and since Christ was a Jew, perhaps the line of God's intention and plan falls here with the Church, Peter, and the followers of Christ through Peter. Though Will wants Father Weatherbee to marry him and Allie, he does not deny that he is still an unbeliever. He states unequivocally:

What I am suggesting is that though I am an unbeliever, it does not follow that your belief, the belief of the church, is untrue, that in fact, it may be true, and if it is, the Jews may be the clue. Doesn't scripture tell us that salvation comes from the Jews? At any rate, the Jews are the common denominator between us. That is to say, I am not a believer, but I believe I am on the track of something. I may also tell you that I have the gift of discerning people and can tell when they know something I don't know. (409)

The old priest is, as Kierkegaard would affirm, a "Knight of Faith." His life has been spent in the Philippines going from village to village teaching the children, marrying the young, ministering to the sick, and burying the dead. The priest's life has been one of self-sacrifice and service in the name of Christ. Weatherbee, says of his life in the Philippines, "They believed me! They believed the Gospel whole and entire, and the teachings of the church. They said that if I told them, then it must be true or I would not have gone to so much trouble" (410). The old priest fits Kierkegaard's description of an apostle; he speaks with authority not through the eloquence of design but in the simple

presentation of the truth. As Barrett listens to the priest tell his stories of how the people believed him, he suddenly cries out "Right!" (410). The narrator indicates that, "In his excitement [Will] had risen from his chair and started around the desk. 'Tell me something, Father. Do you believe that Christ will come again and that in fact there are certain unmistakable signs of his coming in these very times?'" (410-11). Throughout the novel Will has been searching for signs. Even the first line of the novel reflects Will's awareness of the importance of signs: "The first sign that something was wrong manifested itself while he was playing golf" (3). From the first, Will has been a searcher, and as one he must pay close attention to these signs if he is to find what he has been looking for. In the old priest and in Allie, Will receives these signs.

Will Barrett stopped the old priest at the door and gazed into his face. The bad eye spun and the good eye looked back at him fearfully: what do you want of me? What do I want of him, mused Will Barrett, and suddenly he realized he had gripped the old man's wrists as if he were a child. The bones were like dry sticks. He let go and fell back. For some reason the old man did not move but looked at him with a new odd expression. (411)

The priest has suddenly understood what Barrett wants. Father Weatherbee stays close to him, this knight of faith with a bad eye can still recognize the hunger for answers, and he now sees this hunger in Will. As Will stands next to the priest, he thinks of Allie. It is here and in this place that the last sign reveals itself. Will now knows that he has been given signs all along. He has been looking for signs in the heavens, but instead they have been right there in front of him. The narrator notes how Will comes to this realization:

Will Barrett thought about Allie in her greenhouse, her wide grey eyes, her lean muscled boy's arms, her strong quick hands. His heart leapt in a secret joy. What is that I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that

the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have. (411)

Will now knows that the signs of God's existence often manifest themselves in "simple, silly, holy faces" (411), not in loud declarations that render faith meaningless. Will now affirms that he will have her, his love, a gift from the giver, God. However, knowing that this gift is good, and a sign of a giver, is still not enough. Will must have something more—he must have God. As he says, he must have "Him"(411). Percy's capitalization of the pronoun signals who the "Him" of this sentence is, none other than God. Will has taken the journey of existence as far as it can go, to the foundation of existence—God—and to a selfhood that is intricately and intimately connected to God. Will's next step is anyone's guess. But as Kierkegaard has consistently affirmed, once one's self is connected to the source of being, one can go anywhere and everywhere because existence is now wholly integrated. Thus, as we see Will at the end of the novel, we are left with a deep impression that Will's life has just begun, or perhaps, better yet, begun again. We know that Will has been the recipient of a great gift in Allie, and that he now knows the giver of that gift, God. For Will, this revelation is his second coming.

Conclusion

Will Barrett's journey through the stages of existence culminates when he emerges from the cave and begins to see the signs of God's presence that were there all the time—the silly, holy face of an old priest, and the gift of a young woman's love. For Will such a realization is an epiphany, for it reconnects him to both the transcendent, and

to all that is God and “good” in the external world. In essence, Barrett’s realization at the end of the novel gives him a second chance at life.

Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages of existence provides the means to arrive at this “second coming” by describing in detail the various stages where individuals can become entrenched—the Aesthetic or the Ethical. However, the goal of existence, as both Kierkegaard and Percy conceive of it, is to integrate one’s self transcendently and this can happen only in the Religious stage—by being absolutely related to the Absolute. Will Barrett journeys through each of the stages of existence to find a reason for living—he finds this reason when begins to see the “signs” of God’s gifts. Such is the intention of Kierkegaard’s Philosophy—to point us to the deeper levels of existence in life and to show that ultimate existence can be realized only when we accept our status as a creatures of infinity.

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