

ABSTRACT

Walker Percy and the Catholic Sacraments

Rhea Scott Rasnic, Ph.D.

Mentor: Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D.

A noticeable void in Walker Percy studies is the absence of a full-length theological analysis of his treatment of the Catholic sacraments, an unfortunate omission considering the place they occupy in his work. This project will attempt to fill that void, specifically exploring Percy's presentation of the sacraments in his fiction, focusing on both the theological and literary implications of Catholic sacramental theology.

The impetus for the theological discussion is prompted by Henri de Lubac's claim that the sacraments are by their very nature communal rather than individualistic. In the bulk of Percy's work, we see the importance of community within the Christian life, and the sacraments play a crucial role in establishing such community. This theological treatment of his novels will also supplement previous Percy criticism, much of which deals with his philosophical relevance to the detriment of his Catholicism, by focusing primarily on the specifically Catholic elements in his novels.

In addition to these theological concerns, I argue that Percy's early-mid fiction (*The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentleman*, *Love in the Ruins*, and *Lancelot*) are superior novels due partly to Percy's respect for the inherent "mystery" of the sacraments. In his last two novels (*The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*) the sacraments occupy a less significant role, having been replaced with either sentimental romanticism (*The Second Coming*) or a hortatory, moralizing tone (*The Thanatos Syndrome*). By his last novel, Percy relies upon the vocabulary of Catholicism to express his seething contempt for modernity, rather than the subtle sacramental theology we see in his early fiction. The unfortunate literary consequence is fiction more prescriptive than descriptive, more dogmatic than ironic.

Walker Percy and the Catholic Sacraments

by

Rhea Scott Rasnic, B.A., M.A., M.Div.

A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of English

Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Interim Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by the Dissertation Committee

Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D., Chairperson

Joe B. Fulton, Ph.D.

David L. Jeffrey, Ph.D.

Sarah K. Ford, Ph.D.

Rosalie Beck, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
December 2007

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Copyright © 2007 by Rhea Scott Rasnic

All rights reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments | vi |
| Dedication | vii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. Introduction | 1 |
| Walker Percy's Intellectual and Theological Pilgrimage | 5 |
| The 20 th Century Catholic Renaissance | 14 |
| Henri de Lubac and 20 th Century Catholic Theology | 18 |
| Henri de Lubac and Walker Percy: A Natural Synthesis | 23 |
| 2. This We Believe: Binx Bolling and the Backward Quest for the Community of Faith in <i>The Moviegoer</i> | 30 |
| Binx's Solitary Malaise: The Necessity of the Search | 33 |
| Binx's Quest for Community | 35 |
| Lonnie Smith and the Sacramental Life | 38 |
| Binx's Sacramental Journey | 41 |
| Binx's Leap of Faith | 45 |
| The Soldier's Futility and the Necessity of the Sacramental Life | 49 |
| 3. <i>Ex Opere Operato</i> : Baptism and Christian Community in <i>The Last Gentleman</i> | 55 |
| Will Barrett: The Peregrine's Rift | 56 |
| Rita Vaught: The Humanist's Love | 64 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Sutter Vaught: The Moral Pornographer | 65 |
| Val Vaught: Militant Catholicism | 68 |
| Jamie Vaught: <i>Ex Opere Operato</i> | 71 |
| 4. “Eating Christ”: The Eucharist and the Return to Community in <i>Love in the Ruins</i> | 82 |
| Communion Lost: Tom More’s Abandonment of Christian Community | 87 |
| Communion Regained: Tom More’s Return to the Sacramental Life | 98 |
| 5. <i>Sic et Non</i> : Sacramental and Anti-Sacramental Confession in <i>Lancelot</i> | 109 |
| <i>Lancelot</i> : Diary of a Madman | 110 |
| Lancelot’s Diagnosis: An Indictment of Modernity | 113 |
| Lancelot’s Solution: A Brave New World of the Strong and Pure | 118 |
| Confession or Apologetic? The Sacraments in <i>Lancelot</i> | 121 |
| Father John’s Return | 126 |
| Percy’s Kierkegaardian Indirection | 131 |
| The Foreshadowing of Percy’s Literary Decline | 134 |
| 6. Conclusion: Sacramental Shadows in Percy’s Later Fiction | 140 |
| Percy’s Literary and Theological Decline | 140 |
| <i>The Second Coming</i> : Sentimental Romanticism vs. Sacramental Matrimony | 142 |
| <i>The Thanatos Syndrome</i> : The Moralists’ Rage | 148 |

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Conclusion | 154 |
| Works Cited | 161 |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been completed without the encouragement, hard work, and support of various individuals. First, I would like to thank my director, Ralph Wood, for directing this dissertation and, moreover, for introducing me to the works of Walker Percy. He has been a true *doktorvater* in every possible way. His insightful, penetrating criticism was always balanced with the encouragement necessary to finish this project. He has ever been the model of a Christian scholar, and for that I will always be grateful. I would also like to thank the following members of my committee: David Jeffrey for his crucial help regarding de Lubac and the dissertation's methodology; Joe Fulton for offering countless suggestions regarding my interpretation of Percy's novels; Sarah Ford for making invaluable recommendations concerning the first major revision; Rosalie Beck for agreeing to serve as outside reader from the Religion Department and for reminding me that "history matters." I could not have asked for a better dissertation committee and will always be thankful for their concern and helpful advice.

Much gratitude is due the English department of Baylor University, especially Graduate Director Robert Ray, who generously supported me during my graduate studies with various forms of funding. The department is fortunate to have two excellent Administrative Assistants in Lois Avey and Amber Adamek, and I am thankful for their help. Thanks also to Sandra

Harman of the Graduate School for her patience and guidance in formatting the dissertation. I would also like to offer my appreciation to the department of Liberal Arts at McLennan Community College for providing me with many opportunities to hone my teaching skills.

I have been fortunate during my life to have many good teachers serve as role models in both teaching and scholarship. I would especially like to thank various professors from my time at King College, the University of Virginia, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Baylor University: John Craig McDonald, Anthony Petrotta, Linda Mills Woolsey, and Stephen Woolsey; Langdon Gilkey, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., James Nohrnberg, and Richard Rorty; Diogenes Allen, Bruce McCormack, and Wentzel van Huyssteen; David Jeffrey, Scott Moore, and Ralph Wood.

More than I deserve, I have been blessed with many friends and family who have provided support and encouragement throughout the years. I would especially like to thank my parents, the late Rhea and Peggy Rasnic. I will always be grateful for the lessons they taught and the sacrifices they made. I miss them dearly.

Finally, no words can express the thanks due to my wife, Deanna. She has borne more than her share of the burden of this dissertation and deserves more credit than I can ever offer her. Her love and friendship made this work possible.

For Deanna

CHAPTER ONE

Walker Percy and the Catholic Sacraments

Throughout his fiction, Walker Percy (1916-1990) offers a vision of the world in which God's grace works in the lives of men and women through the Catholic sacraments, those "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us" (*CCC* 1131). By examining his novels in light of this emphasis, we can see how the sacraments, properly understood, help rescue Percy's characters from the dangers of the solitary and self-absorbed life. The theological impetus for this discussion is prompted by Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac's claim that the sacraments are by their very nature communal rather than individualistic. De Lubac argues that the grace "produced and maintained by the sacraments does not set up a purely individual relationship between the soul and God or Christ" (*Catholicism* 82). Rather, "each individual receive[s] such grace in proportion as he is joined, socially, to that one body whence flows this saving life-stream" (*Catholicism* 82). This understanding of the social nature of the Catholic sacraments will prove invaluable as we examine the importance of sacramental theology in Percy.

This specific theological analysis of Percy's novels will also supplement Percy criticism that fails to address the specifically Catholic facets of his fiction. Because of Percy's admitted predilection for existentialism,¹ especially

Kierkegaard, he has often been characterized as an existentialist novelist/philosopher, one who also happens to be Catholic.² If the Catholic elements are addressed, they are either dismissed as “no longer viable” (Quinlan 9) or treated only as generic Christian “themes.” Many critics (e.g. Allen Pridgen) have discussed at length the sacramentalism in Percy’s fiction, but little attention has been paid to Percy’s concrete presentation of the sacrament themselves.

Thus, this dissertation focuses primarily on the specifically Catholic elements in his novels,³ especially his presentation of the sacraments, using Henri de Lubac as a primary guide. Though we have no evidence that de Lubac significantly influenced Percy, he nevertheless sets out the categories and concerns of Catholic sacramental theology. As a theological representative of the Catholic Renaissance, de Lubac provides useful lenses through which Percy’s work can be interpreted. Michael Kobre has also argued that Percy’s fiction has a decidedly Bakhtinian “dialogic” quality (Tolson 279). Thus has Percy’s philosophical voice been most often studied.⁴ This dissertation, by contrast, addresses the sacramental voice—Percy’s fictional representation of Catholic sacramental theology—a much too neglected aspect of Percy’s fiction.

In Percy’s early life, the Catholic sacraments hardly played a prominent role. Rather, his was an upbringing devoted to exploring the rich varieties of the humanistic tradition. Once he converted to Roman Catholicism,

however, Percy's imagination became intertwined with the sacramental life, and his fiction reflects this influence, though his theological vision varies in its depth from his earlier fiction to his later works. In Percy's early-mid fiction (through *Lancelot*), the Catholic sacraments are significant to his novelistic art. The inherent mystery of sacramental theology lends itself well to the subtlety that characterizes Percy's earlier fiction. The confessional and the fictional become necessarily intertwined. As Percy says, with the Catholic faith "you have a man in a predicament and on the move in a real world of real things, a world which is a sacrament and a mystery; a pilgrim whose life is a searching and a finding" (*Signposts* 369). By fusing his vocation and his faith, Percy stands in accord with other major figures in that movement known as the 20th Century Catholic Renaissance, including de Lubac, who is himself a centrist figure in the movement.

Methodologically, this project is an exercise in theological literary interpretation, using the work of Henri de Lubac and Catholic sacramental theology to illuminate a reading of Percy's fiction that emphasizes how it both succeeds and fails as art. Therefore, this dissertation contains both a theological and a literary component. We shall see how the quality of Percy's fiction is necessarily related to his treatment of sacramental theology. To be sure, Percy is a novelist, not a theologian or a saint. He did not write his novels (at least his early ones) as vehicles to preach his Catholic faith or political views. Indeed, in his finer fictional moments, Percy plumbs the sacra-

mental mysteries of the Christian faith that cannot be understood as propositional statements. The less Percy presents sacramental mystery, the more didactic and hortatory his fiction becomes. Thus is the quality of Percy's literary art necessarily related to the Catholic sacramental theology present within his work.

This first chapter addresses Percy's intellectual and confessional biography as well as the theological milieu of the 20th century vis-à-vis Henri de Lubac and the Catholic theological and literary Renaissance. The second chapter demonstrates the height of Percy's literary and theological art in *The Moviegoer*, where the surprising grace of the sacraments (particularly marriage) is made evident through Percy's ironic treatment of the gospel message. Chapter three focuses upon the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism *ex opere operato* in *The Last Gentleman*, seen forming a nascent Christian community. Chapter four demonstrates the necessity of the Christian social life and its relationship to the Eucharist as portrayed in *Love in the Ruins*. With chapter five, we confront a mock-secular confession in *Lancelot*, where we also witness the beginning of Percy's eventual literary decline. This degeneration is discussed in greater detail in chapter six in a brief analysis of *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, indicating how failure of these novels to address the sacraments in any significant sense reflects the degeneration of Percy's literary and theological art.

Walker Percy's Intellectual and Theological Pilgrimage

Percy's influences are decidedly eclectic, perhaps owing to early tutelage under his uncle, William Alexander Percy, who himself was a lawyer, plantation owner, and gifted poet. Percy's "Uncle Will" made sure that his adopted sons had no shortage of high culture. The Percy household was alive with the sounds of music, poetry, and debate. The house served as a sanctuary for transient scholars and artists, so there was certainly no lack of mental stimulation for young Walker. Although himself not a traditional Christian, Will Percy nevertheless instilled in the Percy children an appreciation for the institution of the Church as a necessary social institution. So, it is not surprising that young Walker would for a time adopt Uncle Will's philosophy, a southern flavored Catonism⁵ that had respect for the cultural influence of religion but little else. When he left home for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1933, it appears religious conversion was the last thing on the mind of young Walker Percy.

Although Percy had received a well-rounded education from his Uncle Will and had shown an early predilection for writing (in high school he would sell sonnets to his classmates for 50 cents each), it was in the natural sciences that Percy found his initial calling. During his high school days, the future writer was drawn more to the natural beauty of mathematics and the scientific method than to novelistic prose. Such an attraction was thoroughly commensurate with Percy's worldview at the time, which saw little reason to

look outside the natural world for any ultimate answers. Influenced by the writings of H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley, Percy's faith was firmly placed in the scientific method itself, which Percy honored because of its "elegance and precision" (Brown 11).

It was no surprise, then, that Percy concentrated his undergraduate studies on science. His choice to pursue a pre-medical curriculum was also partly due to Uncle Will, who believed that Walker should choose from among the professions of medicine, law, or the military for his life's career, with theology and ministry being obvious exclusions. It is safe to say, however, that the seeds for Percy's later conversion were planted while he was in college. One of Percy's roommates, Harry Stoval, was a devout Catholic who attended Sunday mass rain or shine. While he did not fully understand it at the time, Percy never forgot Stoval's devotion, nor "the conviction behind it" (Tolson 127). In time, Stoval's sacramental beliefs and practice would become Percy's own. However, in spite of his fascination with Stoval's devoutness, Percy received his B.A. in 1937 with his primary faith in science firmly intact.

This devotion to scientism—an "all-construing ideology that reduces all creation, including humans, to the model of material relations"—led to his matriculation in the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, after being turned down by Harvard (Desmond, *Community* 7). Percy's attraction to the study of medicine was a logical extension of his larger interest in the scientific world. Percy admired the order and even beauty that this

study afforded him, although he still found medicine too “sloppy” to be fully satisfying (Tolson 148). When he finally chose pathology as his specialty, Percy’s attraction was due to “the purely scientific quality of pathology, its neatness and precision, its intellectuality” (Tolson 148). The “scientific elegance and certainty” of this study helped eliminate the least precise variable in medical study, the patient (Tolson 148). Percy’s secondary concentration, psychiatry, should not surprise anyone the least familiar with the young physician’s biography. Haunted by the legacy of an entrenched and even suicidal Percy family melancholia, Walker Percy practiced what he studied by undertaking several years of psychoanalysis to come to grips with his past. This decision marks a similarity between Percy and one of his favorite creations, the “sentient engineer” Will Barrett (from *The Last Gentleman*), one whose own quest climaxes in witnessing the sacrament of baptism.

Percy’s choice to specialize in pathology soon proved to have lasting consequences beyond what the young medical school graduate could have imagined. As part of his internship, Percy decided to perform his residency in New York’s Bellevue Hospital in late 1941, performing autopsies on indigent patients. Though hardly a careless person by nature, Percy nevertheless neglected to shield himself properly during his work. Subsequently, he, along with several of his colleagues, contracted tuberculosis. At the time, the disease was largely misunderstood in both its contraction (it was thought by some that one’s moral turpitude could possibly contribute to infection) and its

treatment. The best “cure” was thought to be found in a high-altitude retreat from the *sturm und drang* of the world. As a result, Percy spent roughly two years (1942-1944) in recovery at the Trudeau Sanatorium in upstate New York. This convalescence period would prove to be a time of both physical and spiritual recovery.

Even while a dedicated student of science at both UNC and Columbia, Percy was also quite well-read in other areas such as literature and philosophy. In fact, Uncle Will had instilled in Percy a love for broad learning. For example, as an undergraduate Percy displayed a proclivity for German language and literature⁶. In fact, Percy had obtained such a high quality undergraduate training in science that while a medical student he was often seen attending movies and reading literature more than studying his textbooks, excelling nevertheless in his medical training. His convalescence period afforded him the time to read and reflect that he very well might not have enjoyed without his illness.

By the time Percy had taken up residence at Trudeau, he had begun to question the humanistic Catonism first learned from Uncle Will (who by this time had died) and then solidified during his post-secondary education. Not unlike G.F. Hegel, the nemesis of Percy’s philosophical hero Søren Kierkegaard, Percy had learned all there was to know about the observable animal known as man; however, Percy’s studies lacked but “one small detail: what it means to be a man who lives in the world and who must die” (*Signposts* 188).

Consequently, Percy supplemented his study of natural science with readings in Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Søren Kierkegaard (who was to have special influence), and Thomas Mann. However, we err if we believe that Percy abandoned his faith in the natural sciences. Rather, he believed that such materialistic scientism⁷ remained valid, though it left many of his deeper questions unanswered, questions that only a sacramental vision of the world could answer. As Linda Whitney Hobson notes, Percy came to realize that

science and its product, technology, [...] ignore other important ways of looking at man. Even more important, science looks at man as an organism, in much the same way a scientist sits above and looks down upon cells under his microscope, never realizing he is part of the experiment. (12)

Upon his final “release” from Gaylord Farm Sanatorium near New Haven in 1945 (Percy had suffered a relapse and was yet again forced into rest), Walker Percy finally gained a sense of what he was meant to do in life. He knew that, rather than deal with pathology of the body, he was to be a pathologist of the soul and that writing was to be his medium of diagnosis (re-reading Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* cemented this choice). After much soul-searching, Percy had also decided that the carefree bachelor life he had been living was also less than satisfying. He pursued with success young Mary Bernice (“Bunt”) Townsend, a woman who not only impressed the budding physician-cum-novelist, but who also set him at ease, a rare state for Walker Percy. Walker and Bunt were married in 1946.

With his professional and personal life in check, Percy turned his attention to his increased religious questioning. In addition to his college friend Harry Stoval, Percy had met yet another devout Catholic while in medical school, Frank Hardart. Perhaps even more influential was a rather studious Catholic resident Percy met while at Trudeau, Art Fortugno. The latter introduced Percy to the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, which were to provide further impetus for him to consider the sacramental quality of the Catholic faith, with Aquinas also appealing to Percy's penchant for rational clarity. Leading to Percy's conversion to Catholicism (he and Bunt were baptized into the church in December 1947), the two figures who exercised the most influence on Walker Percy, then, were Søren Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas, particularly the former.

Kierkegaard's influence is quite surprising considering Percy's eventual adoption of Roman Catholicism. Percy himself writes: "Here I am, a Catholic thinker living in Louisiana, and the man to whom I owe the greatest debt is this great Protestant thinker" (*Conversations* 127). Kierkegaard's brief essay "On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle" was singularly persuasive. The influence of this essay is readily evident in much of Percy's work, for it helped him to see the difference between the realms of the immanent and the transcendent. The former is the sphere of the genius. People may struggle with the work of, say, a Michelangelo, but someday it will be understood and even surpassed. The genius stands in contrast to the

apostle, who speaks a word not necessarily noted for its elegance or brilliance. However, it is a word that transcends the world of immanent possibilities, speaking with an authority not limited to mere genius. The messenger might be the most mundane fellow (e.g. a camel hair-wearing, locust-eating prophet), yet he preaches a message that will not be overturned by someone of greater intellect, for the message transcends human claims. The apostle's message is not the subject of theoretical discourse. It is a bold claim to be either rejected or accepted.

Although he would come to question the usefulness of the phrase, Walker Percy nevertheless initially accepted the phrase "Christian existentialist," owing primarily to his sympathy with and study of such disparate thinkers as Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, and, of course, Kierkegaard. Still, we sell Percy short if we allow him to rest comfortably in this designation. As Percy himself readily admits, Kierkegaard's contempt for systematic thought did not fully satisfy his intellectual desires. Percy admits that the "existentialists have their flaws. One of them is their contempt for science" (*Conversations* 12). While Kierkegaard gave Percy the philosophical and theological vocabulary to put his existential angst into words, Percy was troubled both by Kierkegaard's overemphasis on the solitariness of the Christian life as well as his insistence on the sheer absurdity of the individual's absurd leap of faith. James Collins notes of such existentialism that each

“individual can make the act of faith, provided only that he does so on the basis of his own freedom. This is the crucial opportunity for becoming an individual in the highest sense” (9).

The tendency inherent in existentialism is to over-emphasize the individual, an emphasis, which, if left unchecked, can lapse into solipsism. Percy himself confessed in an interview with Bradley R. Dewey in 1974 that Kierkegaard’s emphasis on individualism was always a “stumbling block” to him (*Conversations* 119). Furthermore, Percy insists 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. (*Conversations* 119)

As Dewey observes, Kierkegaard’s “aura of enclosed, interiorized, radically idiosyncratic selfhood” exposes Percy to the dangers of individualism (*Conversations* 119). As Dewey further notes:

So much of it does take place just inside the person’s head. It’s very cerebral, which could account in part for his relative lack of interest in Christian communities, worshipping communities, communities of reconciliation. One is reconciled to God primarily, and one relates to God directly. (*Conversations* 119)

Percy recognizes, however, that Kierkegaard’s “extreme individualism, inwardness, subjectivity was justified by the blandness and overcorporate nature of Christendom at that time” (*Conversations* 119). However, as a worshipping Catholic, Percy was rescued from a tendency towards excessive isolationism through the sociality of the sacraments. Because they are an objec-

tive and outward working of grace, by definition communal rather than singular, they serve to correct the danger of individualism. As de Lubac writes, the sacraments “make real, renew, or strengthen man’s union with Christ, by that very fact they make real, renew, or strengthen his union with the Christian community” (*Catholicism* 83). With his emphasis on the communal nature of the sacraments, the work of Henri de Lubac helps us to understand more fully Percy’s central theological concerns. Indeed, de Lubac reminds us that

grace which is produced and maintained by the sacraments does not set up a purely individual relationship between the soul and God or Christ; rather does each individual receive such grace in proportion as he is joined, socially, to that one body whence flows this saving life-stream. (*Catholicism* 82)

Rather than the angst-ridden individualism of Kierkegaard, Percy ultimately embraced the Catholic faith because it allowed him to integrate faith and reason. It is primarily for this reason that St. Thomas Aquinas stands beside Kierkegaard as one of Percy’s major intellectual influences.⁸ For Aquinas, faith is no absurd leap. Rather, it is itself a type of knowledge, as

Hobson notes:

Percy’s Catholicism is of the classical type defined by Thomas Aquinas: faith is at least partly a form of *knowing* and, as such, has important cognitive effects on the believer. (6)

While Percy owed Kierkegaard a great debt, he ultimately came to question Kierkegaard’s skepticism about the rationality of the sacraments; Aquinas, by contrast, provided Percy with the framework to maintain his faith in rea-

son rightly construed.⁹ Percy could become a believing Catholic while integrating Kierkegaard's criticism of modernity with the Thomistic reverence for reason.

Although remembered primarily as a novelist, Percy actually considered his work in semiotics and linguistics to be his greatest contribution to modern thought and culture (Tolson 430). In fact, his earliest publications addressed linguistic theory, and Percy was to write on the subject throughout his career. For Percy, the act of naming itself is profoundly theological. Indeed, the ability to ascribe a sign to an object and thus to make meaning are what separate humanity from mere animals. Percy had little patience with what would become Derridean deconstruction, for to deny language its truth-making capability was to deny the essential quality of humanity itself.¹⁰ Percy saw linguistics itself as a markedly theological enterprise.¹¹ Drawing upon the resources of C. S. Peirce, Percy hoped to develop a complete theological semiotic based on Peirce's theory of triadic relations. He never succeeded.

The 20th Century Catholic Renaissance

Along with writers such as Flannery O'Connor, G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh, as well as theologians/philosophers like Jacques Maritain, Gabriel Marcel, and Henri de Lubac, Walker Percy is often identified with a scholarly and cultural rebirth in Catholic life, often labeled the "Catholic Renaissance." This movement inspired the conversion of many

influential artists and intellectuals, and several of these converts distinguished themselves by their literary, philosophical, and theological work. Certainly, Percy would never have identified himself with such a group; he consistently devalued his contributions to both literature and culture. Percy's protestations notwithstanding, he doubtlessly deserves to be in such weighty company. O'Gorman says of this movement:

Intellectual historians have characterized the revitalized Catholic culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France, Germany, and England as the "Catholic Renaissance" or the "Catholic Revival" in Europe; in an American context, the term refers more precisely to what Arnold Sparr has labeled the "Catholic literary revival" of 1920-60. (71)

Percy's work plainly falls into the latter part of this period. In a more specific definition, Gregory Wolfe defines the Renaissance as "an outpouring of philosophy, theology, history, and literature which combined fidelity to the ancient teachings of the Church with considerable sophistication of mind and spirit" (14).

Wolfe offers three criteria for understanding this renewal. First, he writes that it was not "an expression of anything that might be called an 'establishment'". The single most striking fact about the majority of its writers is that they were converts" (17). From Chesterton to Maritain, from Waugh to Percy, many Renaissance figures came to Rome because of deeply developed convictions about the truth of the Faith, not because of a familial inheritance of it. Indeed, their conversions often prompted incredulity if not downright ire from even their closest friends.

Secondly, Wolfe maintains that these figures were not completely univocal in their respective outlooks (18). Instead, Catholic Renaissance writers represented a variety of viewpoints on numerous topics. As Wolfe writes:

There were, of course, ‘schools’ of thought, including the Thomists, the Catholic existentialists, and the neo-patristic theologians, but even within these schools there were widely divergent views. This point may seem like a truism, but it is, to my mind, an impressive corroboration of the intellectual honesty of these thinkers that, while they shared a common faith, their explorations of the world took them down disparate paths. (18)

Two significant influences on Percy, Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel, respectively represent the Thomistic and Catholic existentialist schools.

Though not a notable explicit influence on Percy, de Lubac also embodies a third, the neo-patristic school (and, as we shall see, provides us with a valuable means to understand Percy’s sacramental theology). It is fitting that Percy finds himself identified with a movement thus characterized by such divergent perspectives. Percy’s own theological and philosophical eclecticism speaks to the diversity of the Catholic Renaissance; he is, so to speak, a “one-man Renaissance,” influenced by the Thomistic, existentialist, and neo-patristic groups.

As we see above, completing Wolfe’s tripartite definition of the origins of the Catholic Renaissance are the *Ressourcement* (return to sources) theologians, those who sought a return to the sources of the Christian faith. Perhaps their greatest representative was Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), identified with a group of theologians dedicated to the so-called “Nouvelle Théolo-

gie.” Such a title is quite ironic, since de Lubac himself saw his theology as devoted to a recovery of patristic and early medieval thought rather than obsessed with theological innovation. Never claiming to be “an original or a systematic theologian,” de Lubac “wanted [...] to be simply a vehicle of the great Catholic tradition, on the one hand revealing its true breadth and depth to the Church itself and, on the other, handing on that heritage by showing the relevance of its central insights and values to the problems of this century” (Komonchak, “Recapturing” 14).

Despite his avowed lack of originality, de Lubac’s influence on modern Catholic thought has been “immense,” including his active role in Vatican II (Komonchak, “Recapturing” 14). Oddly enough, de Lubac was condemned prior to Vatican II for being too liberal and again after Vatican II for being too conservative, all the while holding the same basic concerns. Nevertheless, “de Lubac [...] saw his sense of church come to fruition in the work of Vatican II” (Steinfels 15). While his emphasis has been the necessary recovery of church tradition, we err if we see de Lubac as having no awareness of contemporary theological concerns. He was quite interested, for example, in inter-religious dialogue. Although primarily devoted to rediscovering the wealth of ancient theological tradition, perhaps de Lubac made his greatest theological contribution in developing a eucharistic ecclesiology. In de Lubac’s understanding, “Jesus fulfills the destiny of humanity thanks to the

eucharistic offering of Himself through which he is united to the Church, His spouse and body” (Chantraine 840).

Henri de Lubac and 20th Century Catholic Theology

De Lubac is identified with a movement in 20th Century Catholic thought generally known as *Ressourcement* or, by its neoscholastic detractors, ironically, as “New Theology.” In addition to de Lubac, the advocates of *nouvelle théologie*¹² included such figures as Yves Congar, Louis Bouyer, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Yet the phrase “New Theology” is rather misleading and does not adequately capture the group’s main concerns. Indeed, rather than offering a theology inspired by current trends, de Lubac was primarily interested in recovering the rich theological patrimony of the Church and making it available for modern Christian existence. As Susan K. Wood notes, the *Ressourcement’s* program involved a “return to Scripture, [...], a revival of patristic studies, [...], and a liturgical renewal, which used liturgy as a theological source and reaffirmed the symbolic elements of liturgical worship” (318-319). Its understanding of the Church was significant as well, as Sparr indicates:

Under these thinkers, the Church was seen, in older Pauline-patristic terms, as a sign and sacrament of Christ’s presence in the world. The Church was understood primarily as communion and secondarily as institution, drawing its life and direction from Christ who was present in its forms. (140)

With such a variegated array of theological concerns, de Lubac’s influence is substantive, to say the least.

This is not to say, however, that de Lubac's career was without its difficulties. Early in his career, de Lubac had fallen out of favor with certain theologians, particularly such neoscholastics as Etienne Gilson and Maritain. De Lubac dared to question their reading of Aquinas, especially their understanding of the relationship between grace and nature. As Fergus Kerr observes, de Lubac "debunks the Neo-Thomist hypothesis of a 'state of pure nature,' in which human beings could live in purely natural happiness without reference to a supernatural end" (112). There is no "purely natural destiny" for humanity, de Lubac argues, no life apart from our "supernatural destiny" (Kerr 113). Despite his disagreements with his Neo-Thomistic interlocutors, de Lubac had a significant role in shaping the theological milieu of Vatican II as a member of the council's preparatory Theological Commission. Though his "questioning of the adequacy of modern Thomistic theology kept him under suspicion in the 1950s," he was nevertheless an "active promoter" of the Council's "theological vision" (Komonchak, "Recapturing" 14). Consequently, de Lubac's influence would have been felt by all who fell under the shadow of Vatican II. As a lay Catholic convert whose faith developed in the shadow of Vatican II, Percy's faith (and, consequently, his writing) would undoubtedly have been shaped, if only indirectly, by de Lubac's decisive role in defining 20th century Catholic thought, especially its liturgical and sacramental life.¹³

Though de Lubac's influence is far reaching, he is primarily remembered for three major contributions. In *Surnaturel*, de Lubac's most contro-

versial point is the aforementioned critique of the neoscholastic claims regarding the relationship between nature and grace. De Lubac's contemporaries were outraged by his suggestion that "modern Roman Catholic theology had betrayed the patristic-medieval conception of the unity of nature and grace in the divine plan" (Kerr 114). Contrary to the neoscholastic interpretation of Thomas, de Lubac denies the "possibility of a purely natural order" (S. Wood 321). Rather, he "argues that the only destiny for an intellectual creature consists in the supernatural destiny of the beatific vision" (S. Wood 321).

De Lubac also helped recover a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the richness of pre-modern biblical hermeneutics in his monumental *Medieval Exegesis*. While de Lubac "never doubted the legitimacy and fruitfulness of historical-critical exegesis," he still recognized (and questioned) the presuppositions of such post-Enlightenment thought, believing we had much to recover from "pre-Enlightenment exegesis," notably the Church's rich history of allegorical interpretation (Kerr 111). Avery Dulles argues, in fact, that de Lubac embraces a hermeneutic similar to Paul Ricoeur's "second naïveté" (182). That is, having assimilated modern biblical scholarship with its emphasis on critical examination of sources, de Lubac returned to the history of symbolic interpretation with its "spiritual" meaning (Dulles 182).

This recovery of the wealth of pre-modern interpretation also points to de Lubac's revolutionary understanding of the social nature of the sacra-

ments, particularly the Eucharist. He notes that it is “especially the sacrament of unity” because it reflects the communal unity of the Church itself (*Catholicism* 89).¹⁴ De Lubac’s theology of the Eucharist is especially useful for understanding the treatment of the sacraments in Percy’s fiction, principally how they help rescue Percy from the dangers of existentialist solipsism. According to de Lubac, “true Eucharistic piety [...] is no devout individualism” (*Catholicism* 109),¹⁵ for it “cannot conceive of the action of the breaking of the bread without fraternal communion” (*Catholicism* 110). This understanding of the Eucharist stands in contrast with the individualist emphasis in the Protestant traditions.

With his emphasis on the recovery of the ecclesial tradition, it is no surprise that one of de Lubac’s main contributions involves a retrieval of “eucharistic theology grounded in the symbolism of patristic exegesis” (S. Wood 323). In his 1944 work *Corpus Mysticum*, de Lubac demonstrates that an important shift occurred in the middle of the 12th century in which “corpus mysticum” (mystical body) referred no longer to the Eucharist but to the Church. Likewise, the designation “corpus verum” (true body) that had once referred to the Church was now attributed to the Eucharist. At first, this shift might seem to be a matter of mere semantics, having no great significance theologically. To the contrary, it is a “fine example of the importance of explorations in the history of doctrine, often in long, neglected, and forgotten

texts, precisely to understand what needs to be corrected or deepened in theology now” (Kerr 110).

Once the Eucharist is seen as the true body then the Church’s existence becomes merely “peripheral” (Kerr 110). Prior to the 12th century transposition when the Church was understood as “corpus verum,” the Eucharist “was seen as existing to edify the Church” (Kerr 110). The practical consequence of these changes is a much more “individualistic devotion” to the sacrament (Kerr 110). De Lubac argues that the “individualistic forms of piety often associated with the Eucharist in the modern age had no precedent in the early Church” (Doyle 224). Instead, de Lubac maintains that “the Church and the Eucharist make each other every day, each by the other” (qtd. in Kerr 110). In the modern world, however, the Church has often become more of a sociological institution than a true sacramental body. The communal nature of the Eucharist and, indeed, of Christianity itself was the focus of de Lubac’s first significant work, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, a book that would adumbrate the theological themes and concerns to be developed throughout his life’s work. There de Lubac sought to remedy the “extremely individualistic and privatized religious sensibility” that he saw prevalent in the Church by reminding Catholics of “the inherently social nature of Christianity” (Kerr 108).

Henri de Lubac and Walker Percy: A Natural Synthesis

Clearly, then, de Lubac's impact on 20th century Catholic theology is substantive. From his recovery of medieval exegesis to his controversial claims regarding nature and grace, de Lubac's place in the annals of modern theology is secure. Regarding de Lubac's influence on Walker Percy, however, we must recognize that he did not exert as direct an influence on Percy as did Maritain and Marcel. On numerous occasions, Percy explicitly mentions Maritain and Marcel and the many ways their work guided him. Not so for de Lubac. Still, we should understand that Percy *did* have at least a cursory familiarity with this great theologian's work.¹⁶ According to Patrick Samway, during November of 1963 Percy participated in a retreat led by Father Edward Donaue. In addition to de Lubac, this group studied works by such Catholic theologians as Yves Congar (de Lubac's fellow *Ressourcement* theologian), Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx (Samway 230). But while Percy did have at least a minimal awareness of de Lubac and his influence on contemporary Catholicism, it remains unclear whether Percy read de Lubac in detail.

If de Lubac did not exert a powerful influence over Percy's work, then why not use another theologian with whom Percy *was* familiar, such as Marcel, Maritain, or Romano Guardini? Indeed, Percy's debt to these thinkers is substantive and well-documented. From the first, Percy inherited "Marcel's emphasis upon intersubjectivity [which was to influence Percy's semiotics],

his critique of technological and consumer society, and his image of man of wayfarer” (Tolson 238-239). From Maritain, Percy took his critique of Cartesian anthropology and his commitment to the Thomistic tradition. With Guardini (perhaps Percy’s primary modern Catholic theological influence), he found his radical critique of the modern world. While all three thinkers obviously had a great deal of influence on Percy, there is nothing explicitly *sacramental* about their work that would make them helpful guides for interpreting Percy’s fictional portrayal of the sacraments.

Henri de Lubac provides exactly such help, for he and Percy are on a parallel course that stems from the same phenomenon, the 20th Century Catholic Renaissance. Percy’s growth as a Catholic occurred in the light of Vatican II, which in turn was highly affected by the *Ressourcement* theologians, especially de Lubac.¹⁷ Since Vatican II was to place even greater emphasis on the sacraments as sealing the communal nature of Christian faith, it is certainly appropriate to employ de Lubac’s theology for interpreting Percy’s turn away from his earlier existential tendencies

In spite of the unquestionable influence of such individualist thinkers as Kierkegaard and the existentialists, Percy cannot rest comfortably in the elevation of the individual, when the Christian life remains necessarily social. The danger latent in emphasizing the primacy of Percy’s existentialism is that a crucial element within his work is often neglected, namely the social character of the salvation made efficacious in the Catholic sacraments. As de

Lubac maintains, “since the sacraments are the means of salvation they should be understood as instruments of unity” between persons; they do not merely benefit individuals (*Catholicism* 82). We will recall that, deeply concerned with the privatization rampant in the church, de Lubac sought to recover a patristic sacramentalism, in which the Church and the Eucharist maintain an irreducibly symbiotic relationship. For de Lubac, the sacraments are inherently social, thus helping to safeguard the Christian (and the existentialist) from the hazards of an excessive individualism.¹⁸ De Lubac, writes Doyle, “saw the Church’s historical dimensions as inextricably linked with the social” and “opened *Catholicism* with an attack on individualistic notions of Christianity” because “the Church needs to be understood as a society of believers” (224).

We should not attempt to deny the importance of existentialist thought in Percy nor question the value of existentialism itself. Certainly, its advocates appropriately inspired Percy to probe many piercing questions regarding the human predicament. Instead, what is needed within Percy studies is more of a balance between the existentialist themes¹⁹ and the oft-neglected significance of the Catholic sacraments in his fiction. Despite his appropriation of existentialist categories, Percy remained a faithful Catholic whose sacramentalism enabled him to focus his fiction not finally on the individual, but the community, which Percy declares in typical understated fashion to be “a good word, a good word” (Kitchings 5).

It is generally recognized that Percy's later fiction (beginning with *The Second Coming*) does not contain the power of literary art of his earlier work. Because sacramental grace is an ineffable mystery, one that is impossible to capture within the limits of fiction, Percy's earlier work respects the boundaries of his craft as a writer. He does not use his fiction as a means to promulgate his faith or political beliefs. With his later work, however, Percy's ire at the modern world is clearly evident, and his fiction adopts a hortatory, vindictive tone, one that lessens the force of the writing itself. This dissertation argues that one possible explanation for this decline is the de-emphasis that Percy places on the sacraments (and their social nature) in his later work. It is to his early fiction, therefore, that we must now turn.

Notes

¹As James Collins argues, existentialism resists clear, easy definition; nevertheless, he offers several themes that most existentialists share. These include a suspicion of comprehensive philosophical systems and an emphasis upon the “human individual in the world” (226). Kierkegaard particularly emphasized the “subjective, personal dimension of human life” (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy*).

²See *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*. Edited by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

³Lest we doubt the importance of Percy’s Catholicism to his thinking, in the essay “Why Are You a Catholic” Percy states point blank: “The reason I am a Catholic is that I believe that what the Catholic Church proposes is true” (*Signposts* 304). Though Percy admits that he is a “bad” Catholic, his fiction nevertheless demonstrates (either through negative or positive example) the value of the sacramental life. Percy also maintains that “the Catholic faith is, to say the least, very important” to him, but he has “not the least desire to convert anyone or engage in an apologetic or polemic or a ‘defense of the Faith’” (*Signposts* 304-305).

⁴A good example this type of criticism would be *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics*, edited by Jac Tharpe, which explores in detail Percy’s relationship to existentialism, Heidegger, and C.S. Peirce in addition to Percy’s theory of language and art.

⁵As Ralph C. Wood argues in *The Comedy of Redemption*, Percy’s background owes more to Catonism than to true Stoicism. Percy’s Uncle Will “equates the collapse of his own aristocratic tradition with the loss of virtue and order as such”(139).

⁶However, this love of German culture would also convict Percy, for he admits that he admired the strength and conviction of the Hitler youth. Later, Percy will en flesh this conviction in the character of Father Rinaldo Smith (*Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*).

⁷Percy makes clear the distinction between proper science and scientism: “It is one thing, in other words, to speak of the magnificent achievements of natural science and the technology derived therefrom—science, with which, it goes without saying, the Church not only has no quarrel but which it must surely applaud—because the Church is ever on the side of truth and the search for truth, and also because of the obvious benefits conferred upon

man by science and technology in such areas as the treatment of disease and improvement of the material standards of life” (*Signposts* 297).

Percy continues: “Scientism is something else altogether. It needs to be mentioned in this context because it can be considered only as an ideology, a kind of quasi-religion—not as a valid method of investigation and theorizing which comprises science proper—a cast of mind all the more pervasive for not being recognized as such and, accordingly, one of the most potent forces which inform, almost automatically and unconsciously, the minds of most denizens of modern industrial societies like the United States” (*Signposts* 297).

⁸Percy even claims to have read the *Summa Theologica* in its entirety. No small feat, this!

⁹However, we should also remember that, due to Kierkegaard’s tutelage, Percy “became aware of [science’s] shortcomings” (*Conversations* 11). Percy maintains that “the scientific method is good for understanding the world. But the scientific method cannot understand the individual human being” (*Conversations* 73).

¹⁰Percy’s interest in the power of language, however, was also manifest in his fiction, particularly his later work (e.g. *The Second Coming*).

¹¹Percy’s concern with semiotics does implicitly demonstrate his interest in the sacraments, since the former is the science of signs.

¹²As Komonchak notes, the title “New Theology” was coined by the movement’s detractors who “saw in a variety of theological efforts a revival of the intellectual and pastoral challenges which the Church had been repudiating for the previous 150 years” (“Theology and Culture” 580).

¹³Percy’s initial instruction as a catechumen was guided by Father John J. McCarthy, S.J., who read questions from the Catechism to Percy, his wife, and their friend Jidge Minyard as they would answer in unison. Percy admitted to his mutual friend that the sacraments of penance and reconciliation especially helped draw him to the Church (Samway 151).

¹⁴See also *Splendor of the Church*, 90.

¹⁵As the Catholic Catechism states, borrowing from St. Thomas, the Eucharist itself is the “Sacrament of sacraments” because “all the other sacraments are ordered to it as their end” (CCC 1211).

¹⁶Although de Lubac was not remembered primarily as an existentialist theologian, Arnold Sparr notes that “New Theologians” such as de Lubac, “while not existentialists, frequently took account of existentialist themes in their work” (124). This existential awareness was obviously something that Percy shares with de Lubac.

¹⁷Percy readily confesses that he’s “not much of a theologian” and “not really competent in theology” (*Conversations* 118).

¹⁸Regarding the necessity of communal Christianity as opposed to individualistic piety, Guardini, a noted influence on Percy, has much in common with de Lubac. As Sparr notes, when Guardini mentions the Church, he has in mind “the liturgical Church, the corporate community of the faithful united with all other Christians in the Mystical Body of Christ. [...] Guardini urged modern Catholics to rediscover the dynamic sense of this corporate Church and to live their lives within the fullness of its liturgy” (130).

¹⁹However, we should remember that Percy himself came to question whether existentialism as a category still had meaning. He notes that “the word [existentialism] is used so loosely now that it means almost nothing. I don’t use the word either” (*Conversations* 73).

CHAPTER TWO

This *We Believe*: Binx Bolling and the Backward Quest for the Community of Faith in *The Moviegoer*

By the time Walker Percy had completed *The Moviegoer* (1961), he had been a baptized Catholic for nearly thirteen years, having received the sacrament and entered the church on December 13, 1947, along with his wife Bunt. Such a decision was not made lightly. Like many members of the Catholic Renaissance, Percy converted after serious contemplation and prayerful study. Whenever someone asked Percy why he had chosen Roman Catholicism, he would wryly reply, “What else is there?” (*Signposts* 307).¹

Percy biographer Jay Tolson writes of Percy’s momentous decision:

An intelligent, attractive man in his early thirties, a man with a promising medical career ahead of him, decides not only to abandon his profession and become a writer but also to embrace a religion, Catholicism, upon which he, an ardent believer in science, had previously looked with respectful but thoroughgoing skepticism. He also decides at roughly the same time to give up the ways of a minor Lothario and marry a young woman he had met a few years before and with whom he had since conducted a fitful on-again off-again relationship. (*M* 12)

Except for a couple of important details, this description could apply not only to Percy, but also to the main character of his first novel, Binx Bolling. As Robert Brinkmeyer notes:

The knowledge that Binx possesses at the end of *The Moviegoer* is [...] similar to that which Percy attained during his religious crisis in the 1940s. Percy decided [...] that with Catholicism at the center of his life, he did not have to choose between his southern heritage, his scien-

tific learning, and his existential search. His Catholicism was *the* way; he could pursue these other traditions as he wished, for what really mattered was his faith in Christ. As a Christian man, he was also free to be southern gentleman, modern consumer, and existentialist prober. (133)

Of his inaugural novel and its eponymous character, Percy has said that he wanted to “begin with a man who finds himself in a world, a very concrete man who is located in a very concrete place and time” (Tolson 272). Bolling certainly qualifies as Percy’s “very concrete man,” one who is eventually rescued from his solitary cynicism by the unexpected efficacy of the Catholic sacraments, including the baptism he had received during his infancy but had forsaken during his adulthood. In his baptism, the Church has made a claim on John Bickerson Bolling, a silent and often unconscious marker whose power finally becomes evident in his relationship with half-brother Lonnie and his marriage to his cousin (by marriage) Kate Cutrer. In these two relationships, Binx has begun to embrace the Catholic community of faith into which he was received at birth. De Lubac writes of the social nature of baptism:

The first effect of baptism [...] is none other than this incorporation in the visible Church. To be baptized is to enter the Church. And this is essentially a social event, even in the primary, extrinsic meaning of the word. (*Catholicism* 83)

Though Binx’s baptism is never explicitly mentioned, certainly his devoutly-Catholic mother would have baptized him as an infant. Indeed, it is this sacrament that marks Binx as a Catholic, despite his seeming abandonment of the faith.

The Moviegoer is often celebrated as a novel of ideas, one whose success depends upon the author's fusion of laconic style and existential themes. The novel's epigraph from Kierkegaard makes clear Percy's debt to the existentialists.² However, it should not lead to the negative conclusion that Tolson laments: "most critics concluded that the novel was a study of existential anguish. Only a few caught on to the fact that Percy was pointing the way beyond despair" (291). Indeed, the novel's ending, with its presentation of both restored salvation and newly consecrated marriage, clearly qualifies the work as a "divine" comedy. Percy's offering of this sacramental grace is subtle, a trick learned from Kierkegaard's conviction that one must persuade through indirection rather than direct attack. As Ralph C. Wood states, "Like Kierkegaard, Percy does not attempt a frontal assault on our spiritual inertia" (158). Not for Percy or Kierkegaard the "old military science" of rationalistic apologetics.

Part of Percy's conviction stems from his suspicion about the irrelevance of religious language in the modern world. In Percy's view "you have to be wary of using words like 'religion,' 'God,' 'sin,' 'salvation,' 'baptism' because the words are almost worn out" (*Conversations* 79).³ As a result, *The Moviegoer's* ultimately comic ending succeeds not through a heavy-handed presentation of the gospel but because of the "dim dazzling trick of grace" that disrupts the life of Binx Bolling through the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and marriage (*M* 235).

Binx's Solitary Malaise: The Necessity of the Search

At first glance, one might think that Binx Bolling is the kind of character who would hardly be receptive to the grace conveyed by the Church's sacraments. After all, he refuses to identify himself with the 98% of Americans who report their belief in God.⁴ However, we should not couple this hesitation with a lack of faith, for neither does he associate himself with the 2% of atheists and agnostics. Rather, Binx remains a seeker, one engaged in a search that "anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (*M* 12). When we first meet Binx, he is a bachelor living in the non-descript New Orleans suburb of Gentilly, devoting his life to making money and enjoying his secretary *de jour*, their trysts chronicled through the equivalent of Kierkegaard's "diary of a seducer." Binx is obviously "happy in what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic mode—he lives in a place like Gentilly to savor its ordinariness" (*Conversations* 13).⁵ If Binx were not at least aware of the emptiness of such an existence, he would be hopeless. Such is not the case, however. Binx knows he lives in a certain self-conscious despair, even if his awareness is sardonic rather than sincere.

He strives, therefore, to be a "model tenant and a model citizen" by doing his duty in obedience to a burden placed upon him at an early age by his Aunt Emily, who encouraged young Binx to act like a "soldier" after his young brother Scott had died (*M* 6). Binx admits that he could "easily act like a soldier," but how long can such sardonic stoicism last (*M* 4)? Rather than

“doing something great,” Binx has settled for being a bond and stockbroker “living the most ordinary life imaginable” (*M* 9). Binx knows, though, that he is more than a wallet “full of identity cards, library cards, [and] credit cards” (*M* 6). Despite owning a “first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant,” (*M* 7) “Binx is afflicted with a morbid world-weariness, strikingly like that of the romantics, that he refers to variously as the malaise and everydayness” (Tharpe 50). Binx’s attempts to defeat such weariness, such as his dalliances with his many secretaries, hardly suffice.

Aware of his persistent ennui, Binx also confesses that his “peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated” (*M* 10). Although his “armpits never stink,” his self-centered existence certainly does, and Binx knows it (*M* 7). His life of “working, making money, going to movies and seeking the company of women” has left him largely dissatisfied (*M* 41). He knows that there must be more to life than such self-satisfactions. It is at these times that “the idea of the search occurs” to him (*M* 13). So, while he at first seems comfortable living the life of the aesthete, Binx’s displeasure with his life finally brings the end to this shallow happiness. Not even his beloved movie going can rescue him, for “the movies are onto the search, but they screw it up” (*M* 13).

Binx confesses that he is “quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie” (*M* 7). Why so? Perhaps there Binx feels himself member of a community

that he otherwise lacks. He may believe he is part of something larger than himself, able to live vicariously through others and rise above the “everydayness” that has corrupted his ordinary life. Indeed, Binx knows that his is the solitary life, that the “last time [he] had friends was eight years ago” (*M* 41). Another more likely possibility, though, is that through the movies, Binx is able to hold life at a distance—as do the movies—instead of engaging life directly. Whatever the reason, Binx is certainly on an existential search, a quest to understand who he is and where he is going. In the end he is also searching for the community that he lacks in order to break free from the malaise of his self-absorbed solitude. The sacraments will be the key to the discovery of this communal existence.

Binx's Quest for Community

Binx is open to the sacramental life, even if he is largely unaware of it. He says that he has a “pleasant sense of the goodness of creation” when he thinks “of the brick and the glass and the aluminum [of the neighborhood school] being extracted from common dirt” (*M* 10). The sacraments, of course, employ such ordinary materials as wine, water, and bread to effect their grace.⁶ Binx ironically confesses, though, that his feeling is “less a religious sentiment than a financial one,” since he owns stock in Alcoa (*M* 10). This vaguely constructed sacramentalism, however, will be supplanted as he eventually comes to embrace the particular reality of the Church and her sacraments.

Binx inherits his Catholic faith, such as it is, from his mother. Since she is a “devout Catholic,” he claims that he is, “nominally at least, also a Catholic” (M 48). In this concise description, Binx gives us more truth than is first apparent. With such a pious Catholic mother, he was certainly baptized as a child. Such a practice is not mere ceremony. Indeed, in his baptism, Binx Bolling has been claimed by the community of faith. As the *Catholic Catechism* states:

Baptism is the sacrament of faith. But faith needs the community of believers. It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe. The faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a beginning that is called to develop. (1253)

Binx definitely does not display such overt faith throughout most of the novel; however, he does find a developing “community of believers” in his relationship with Lonnie, whose serene faith provides Binx with the impetus to believe. This relationship will prove crucial in his progression from the solitary to the communal life. De Lubac is helpful here in his discussion of the social nature of the sacraments:

Grace which is produced and maintained by the sacraments does not set up a purely individual relationship between the soul and God or Christ; rather does each individual receive such grace in proportion as he is joined, socially, to that one body whence flows this saving life-stream. (*Catholicism* 82)

From the novel’s beginning, Binx is on a journey that culminates in his receiving the sacrament of marriage. Binx’s selfish focus gradually decreases

and his place in a community of faith slowly increases, even if it initially consists only in his relationship with a fellow Christian such as Lonnie.

In addition, Binx's preoccupation with Jews, a pervasive theme throughout Percy's fiction, shows his concern with true religious community. He notes that he has become "acutely aware of Jews," who are his "first real clue" regarding his newfound search (*M* 88-89). Why are Jews so significant to both Binx and Percy? It could be due to their scandalous particularity, their having been the only people in world history who have refused to assimilate with their surrounding culture. For Percy, Jews were "not a myth; they were not generalizable. Their plight was specific, historical, real, and ultimately significant" (Tolson 482).⁷ Binx reflects his author's concerns, in that his "mind is unapologetically clamped on the conviction that human existence thrives amidst the rooted particulars of history and place" (R. Wood 161). Another clue lies in de Lubac's claim that "Judaism passed on to Christianity its concept of salvation as essentially social" (*Catholicism* 61). Judaism is by its nature a communal faith. As John Desmond observes: "Binx's connection to the exilic search of the Jews in their covenant with God underlies Percy's exploration of community in *The Moviegoer*" (*Community* 53).

Along with his fascination with Jews, Binx's critical response to the radio show *This I Believe*⁸ ultimately affirms the value of this communal life, albeit in hilariously negative fashion. In this nightly program, "thoughtful and intelligent people, people with mature inquiring minds, state their per-

sonal credos” (M 108). These participants are nice to a fault, believing in “tolerance and understanding between people” and in “the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual” (M 109). The problem, though, is that these advocates of diversity affirm virtually identical beliefs. In his mock-religious devotion to the program, Binx humorously disparages the values espoused by the show’s participants. While the show’s contributors celebrate their tolerance and niceness, Binx notices that “when it comes down to this or that particular person [...] they usually hate his guts” (M 109). Binx’s sarcastic skepticism about the egoism that the show tacitly encourages demonstrates that the solitary life ultimately leads to despair. Consequently, he will eventually learn to affirm the communal life graced by God’s sacraments.

Lonnie Smith and the Sacramental Life

Binx finds the first substantive challenge to his savory ironical despair in the sacramental life of his half-brother, Lonnie Smith. To be open to the salvation of the Church, Binx must be willing to see the dangers of modernist individualism, as his sickly little brother does. Lonnie understands the communal nature of his Catholic faith, as evidenced by his undertaking a penitential fast. As the *Catholic Catechism* notes,

The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the fathers insist above all on three forms, *fasting, prayer, and almsgiving*, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others. (1434)

Lonnie fasts not only for himself and his sin of envy, but on behalf of the world’s “indifference to the pierced side of Jesus Christ” (M 137). Lonnie

even offers his communion on behalf of Binx, an act which the normally sarcastic Binx does not dare mock. Binx respects the Church's teaching regarding the offering of the Eucharist as reparation for sin:

As sacrifice, the Eucharist is also offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead and to obtain spiritual or temporal benefits from God. (CCC 1414)

In their relationship, we see an incipient Christian community, signified by the Eucharist offered on Binx's behalf, "the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being" (CCC 1325).⁹ Though blissfully ignorant of his latent faith, Binx must still know the significance of Lonnie's offering, for "doubtless no Catholic, however ill-instructed in his religion," is ignorant of the unity represented in the Eucharist (de Lubac, *Catholicism* 89).

One of Binx's virtues in dealing with Lonnie is his refusal to sentimentalize his half-brother's dying condition. They are "good friends" because Binx doesn't "feel sorry for him" (*M* 137). If any character in *The Moviegoer* knows of the efficacy of the sacramental life, it is surely Lonnie. As Bolling declares, he "has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation" for the world's apathy towards Christ's suffering (*M* 137). Binx then admits that he wouldn't mind "trading places with him," for even he knows that Lonnie possesses something he lacks, namely the "serene business" of Lonnie's faithful existence.

Lonnie's life is enlivened by the sacraments, something his own conventionally Catholic mother cannot comprehend when the young man asks for extreme unction¹⁰ and wants to fast during Lent despite his weakened condition. Lonnie embodies the Theresean "Little Way"¹¹ far better than Binx. Lonnie also understands that receiving extreme unction is itself a work for the entire church:

by celebrating this sacrament, the Church, in the communion of saints, intercedes for the benefit of the sick person, and he, for his part, through the grace of this sacrament, contributes to the sanctification of the Church and to the good of all men for whom the Church suffers and offers herself through Christ to God the Father. (CCC 1522)

Lonnie's desire for extreme unction also demonstrates his selfless connection to the community of faith. He does not receive it as some magical panacea, but rather as a sacramental means to live in and through the Church.

In his numerous conversations with Lonnie, Binx refuses to condescend to his younger brother. When they discuss Lonnie's desire to fast, Binx tries to dissuade Lonnie from harming his health, but Binx still knows—unlike the language of merely sentimental Christians—that Lonnie's pious "words are not worn out" (*M* 162). Binx even affirms Lonnie's jealousy of their deceased brother Duval because Duval "sees God face to face" while Lonnie does not (*M* 163). Despite his massive self-centeredness, Binx does not play games when it comes to such serious matters. Percy reminds us that the "reader should know by now that Binx, for all his faults, never bullshits, especially not with children" (*More Conversations* 146). Indeed, it is the

seeker Binx Bolling who encourages Lonnie to “concentrate on the Eucharist,” as a “sacrament of the living” (*M* 165). In Lonnie, therefore, we see a life that “embodies the meaning of this sacrament by his unassuming faith in God and his brotherhood with Binx” (Ciuba 77).

Binx's Sacramental Journey

Despite Binx's bond with Lonnie and his respect for his younger brother's faith, Binx seems to be a witty skeptic, one who “outgrew the creeds and dogmas of organized religion” like those on his favorite radio show, “This I Believe” (*M* 145). After all, he declares that he has “only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in [his] head” (*M* 145). Such a self-judgment, though, may not be entirely accurate. Like Percy, Binx is skeptical of the value of religious language since it has been so devalued by misuse.¹² Similarly, rational arguments are not relevant for Binx and his search. Nevertheless, Binx recognizes God's possible “ironic revenge” on mankind and is subsequently “onto him,” with no need for logical proof (*M* 146). Not unlike Kierkegaard, Binx refuses any rational apologetic for Christianity. In declining to identify himself with the 98% of Americans who confess belief¹³ in God, Binx does not embrace atheism. Rather, as a seeker, he will not reduce God to easily digestible categories. As Ciuba writes, “Binx's apathy keeps God from being reduced to a profane category in a pollster's survey or to the climax of a theologian's syllogism” (70). Despite his persistent sarcasm, Binx Bolling takes his search seriously. Alluding to the novel's Kierkegaardian

epigraph, Binx notes that to “become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (*M* 13). For all his many shortcomings, Binx never doubts that a search is necessary. We should not mistake Binx’s sarcasm for flippancy.

That Binx is on a serious and not an antic quest becomes evident in his refusal to serve as the godfather for his friend’s child. At first, we might assume that Bolling declines because he regards baptism as an empty and hackneyed ritual. In fact, Binx recognizes the power and mystery inherent in baptism. Binx knows that he is a bad Catholic, but he never ridicules serious Catholic faith. If Binx doubted the validity of baptism, he might very well have agreed to serve as the child’s godfather simply out of courtesy to his friend. Instead, his disinclination is grounded in his awareness of his own shortcomings as a practicing Catholic. Binx’s doubts are still not theologically viable—his flaws would not cheapen the child’s baptism—but they hardly reflect any sort of anti-sacramentalism. His concern, however, demonstrates at least implicitly his awareness of the importance of the godparent’s role:

For the grace of Baptism to unfold, the parents’ help is important. So too is the role of the *godfather* and *godmother*, who must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized—child or adult—on the road of Christian life. Their task is a truly ecclesial function (*officium*). The whole ecclesial community bears some responsibility for the development and safeguarding of the grace given at Baptism. (*CCC* 1254)

Eventually, Binx returns his friend's call, yet in typical Percy fashion, we are not told why. Was it to apologize? Or maybe even to rescind his previous refusal? Although we never receive an explicit answer, it is fitting that near the novel's end, when Binx does embrace the community of faith, he is allowed to be "godfather-by-proxy" to his friend's child, for Binx himself has started "on the road of Christian life" with the church and her sacraments (*M* 210).

Yet Bolling would never have arrived at such faith except for a scene near the end of the novel. It concerns an unidentified black man attending an Ash Wednesday service, a man whom Binx describes as "more respectable than respectable" and "more middle-class than one could believe" (*M* 233). When Binx observes the man leaving the church, he notes that due to the man's dark complexion "it is impossible to be sure that he received ashes" (*M* 235). The narrator initially reduces the man's motivation for attending the church service to two possibilities. He is there either to further his financial prosperity—a black man making his way up in the white man's economic realm—and then making contacts to aid him in the "complex business of coming up in the world" (*M* 235)? Or, perhaps he is there for authentic religious reasons "because he believes that God himself is [sacramentally] present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants" (*M* 235). In a later interview, Percy says of this scene:

He was probably there for the wrong reasons and the right reasons. He was there because he was probably an upwardly-mobile, middle-class black, who maybe just started going to a middle-class Catholic church for the first time. You know how

middle-class blacks can be. You know, there're more black debutantes in New Orleans than there are white debutantes. (*More Conversations* 11)

Percy allows, however, for another radically unexpected possibility. Conceivably, the man had come for worldly reasons alone but received instead "God's own importunate bonus"¹⁴ through "some dim dazzling trick of grace" (*M* 235).¹⁵ Percy's subtle point is that God's grace works its salvific power despite a person's imperfect motives.¹⁶ As Percy comments, "And yet, the strange thing is that he will receive the sacraments; that the sacraments work nevertheless. You have this strange admixture of the inauthentic living by social status; and yet who are we to say that the sacraments are not operative? That he's not receiving grace along with it? That's the mystery" (*Conversations* 12).

Still another interpretation is possible. Given Percy's doubts regarding the value of religious language, he might very well mean that it is "impossible to say" what has happened here. As Desmond writes, Percy the novelist must "remain true to the mystery before him, and forego turning fiction into apologetics" (*Crossroads* 9). It is ultimately futile to use words to describe the working of God's grace in the life of this unidentified man. Linda Hobson agrees: "the Negro's act of penitence is a symbol of Percy's primary attitude toward the world: watch, wait, and listen in wonder (and sometimes in wrath) for God's grace" (43). As Percy notes in several interviews, he recognizes the limitations of fiction in describing true theological mystery.

Yet, Percy does provide several pointers to the sacramental grace he sees at work. For example, Percy presents a subtle image of the Eucharistic grace at work in the life of Binx and Kate when Binx literally tastes his nervous cousin's "little shreds of flesh" (*M* 234) for "when Kate begins tearing away shreds of skin from her thumb in a typically self-destructive gesture," her husband-to-be kisses her hand sprinkled with blood (Ciuba 90). At the same time this black man receives his ashes, Binx partakes of a communion of sorts with his future wife. Now at least, he is willing to abandon the solitary life that he has embraced for so long and enter into the marriage covenant.¹⁷ Binx now knows of the difficult road that lies ahead for him and his prospective bride, but he is willing to endure the travail to come.

Binx's Leap of Faith

Binx admits that he is a "member of his mother's family after all and so naturally [shies] away from the subject of religion" (*M* 237). Although he avoids the over-worn topic, we should not assume that Binx has abandoned the faith of his baptism. Far from it. He rightly believes that religion has become a "peculiar word" and is hence something "to be suspicious of" (*M* 237). This doubt, however, does not indicate a lack of faith. Throughout *The Moviegoer*, we have heard Bolling speak ironically. After all, he tells the producers of his favorite radio program, "This I Believe," that his personal philosophy centers on his belief in a "good kick in the ass" (*M* 108). Certainly, he has no bland tolerance for the intolerable. By the end, however, we observe

that Binx's sarcasm does not extend to his relationship with children, particularly his half-siblings. When these siblings quiz Binx on Lonnie's state after the boy dies, Binx is clear and forthright. As children would be prone to do, they wonder whether Lonnie will still be in his wheelchair or whether he will be able to water-ski when "our Lord raises us up on the last day" (*M* 240). Again, Binx responds matter-of-factly that "he'll be like you," to which the children resoundingly rejoice, "Hurray! [...] Binx, we love you too!" (*M* 240).¹⁸

John Hardy's criticism of the ending shows the dangers of reading *The Moviegoer* without a proper understanding of how the sacraments have effected their work in Binx. Hardy writes that he "remains, as I have suggested, much the same old egotist, the same sly old condescender he always was. The only noticeable difference, alas, now he has got religion, is that he is not nearly as funny as he used to be" (55). Hardy misinterprets Binx's commitment to the Church and her sacraments as an abandonment of his humor. What Hardy fails to see is the ending's "depiction of comic victory over religious despair" (R. Wood 155). Indeed, the fact that Binx has finally embraced the sacrament of marriage places the novel squarely in the "classic comic tradition" (R. Wood 172). Binx's acceptance of the Church and his place in it happens in no small part because of his relationship with Lonnie, who hardly abandons his faith or his sharp sense of humor. Ironically, Hardy recognizes that Lonnie's "keen intelligence and comic wit are not wholly obscured either by his deep piety or by the wrenching pathos of his situation as

an incurable paraplegic” (31). The huge difference in Binx now is that he has embraced the comedy of the gospel, its radical offering of salvation, instead of the dour comedy of his cynicism.

Indeed, when Binx declares that he now belongs again to his mother’s family, he may very well be referring to his homecoming to the Church that claimed him in his baptism. If so, then Binx has abandoned the esthetic mode of existence. Percy himself makes this claim: “In the end—we’re using Kierkegaardian terminology—in the end Binx jumps from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious” (*Conversations* 66). Binx’s marriage testifies to this serious reversal of his life’s path. We might be tempted to think that his marriage is an appeasement of Aunt Emily’s ethics, yet another way of “doing his duty.” Such a misreading discounts the radical change that has occurred in Binx’s life. Bolling’s marriage is not a surrender to ethical obligation but an embrace of the Church’s matrimonial sacrament, one more step toward his larger embrace the community of faith.

As if to guard against a falsely pious ending, Percy has Binx’s new bride misinterpret his actions. Kate believes that Binx is being merely sentimental with the children, in a “humanist reaction, in fact, not a Christian one” (Tharpe 60). She praises Binx for being “very sweet with them” (*M* 240). As Percy states bluntly, “Well, Kate missed it, missed the whole thing” (*Conversations* 66). Binx’s response to Kate, a polite if also slightly sarcastic “thanks,” indicates that she does not see that he was hardly being sentimen-

tal. No such thing for this Roman Catholic who has finally embraced the truth of his baptism. As a man who has eventually recognized the necessity of the communal life and has allowed God's sacramental grace to transform him, Binx means what he says. He knows that the sacraments that Lonnie embraced through the church are indeed life-giving and are then not reducible to mere sentiment. It is also to be hoped that, through the communal sanctity of marriage, Kate herself will perhaps move past her sentimentality.

Similarly, Hardy complains that Binx has "no ardor in his acceptance of Kate" (48). Yet, Hardy sentimentalizes the relationship between Kate and Binx much as Kate envisions Binx's relationship with his half-siblings as mere sweetness. Critics such as Hardy fail to grasp Percy's presentation of the deep sacramental quality of marriage, as an estate transcending mere "ardor." Even Stanley Kauffmann, the book's original editor, criticized its "rather evangelical Catholic ending" (Kazin 81). *The Moviegoer* is indeed evangelical in that the gospel works its salvation in Binx Bolling; however, the novel's subtlety belies the heavy-handed presentation of the gospel that is often associated with such evangelism.

We can see, finally, that Binx "comes to a point where he casts the aesthetic from him and makes a leap of faith" because of the example of "Lonnie as a moral touchstone" (Hobson 41). Instead of remaining a sardonic, autonomous subject, succumbing to his Cartesian curse,¹⁹ Binx "chooses the intersubjective relationship, similar to his relationship with the dead Lonnie,

of standing transparently before Kate and then before God” (Hobson 41).

O’Gorman writes of the effects of this new relationship:

Binx’s search ends, however, not in despair, but rather with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth glimpsed in his own age. In the epilogue he has not only given up his life of self-centered hedonism and convenience to marry Kate Cutrer; he has also undergone an understated conversion that enables him to speak with his young step-siblings about the goodness of ‘the last day’—on which their handicapped and dying brother, he tells them, will be raised up and made whole. (*M* 175-176)

To be sure, Binx’s conversion occurs “in his own rather laconic style,” but that does not detract from its validity (*Conversations* 16). By embracing the sacrament of marriage, Binx has declared that he will enter into a true community, for in marriage “the love of the spouses requires, of its very nature, the unity and indissolubility of the spouses’ community of persons” (*CCC* 1644). Binx and Kate’s marriage transcends the brief flights and momentary fancies of romantic love.

The Soldier’s Futility and the Necessity of the Sacramental Life

Percy laments that several readers have misinterpreted his presentation of Emily Cutrer, particularly her diatribe against mediocrity that occurs near the novel’s end. Percy confesses that “people in the South think that’s the best part of the book,” assuming Emily’s point of view to be Percy’s own (*Conversations* 16). Certainly, Percy does not present her as a figure to be mocked, for to do so would be to mock his beloved Uncle Will, the inspiration for Aunt Emily. In fact, she is in many ways a thoroughly admirable figure,

and we should not hastily dismiss the objects of her scorn. When she berates our age for being “the only civilization in history which has enshrined mediocrity as its national ideal,” she makes an appropriate diagnosis (*M* 223). We are indeed “sentimental people” who “horrify easily” (*M* 223).

Like Percy’s Uncle Will, Binx’s Aunt Emily has a bleak view of our approaching end. Consequently, we must do our solitary duty in the interim. Emily Cutrer makes clear her autonomous, indeed anti-Christian devotion to high-minded ethics when she proclaims of her noble tribe that “we live by our lights, we die by our lights, and whoever the high gods may be, we’ll look them in the eye without apology” (*M* 224). Again, we should not believe that Percy dismisses Aunt Emily’s virtues, for they are the virtues that Percy himself cherished. Without question, he greatly admired Uncle Will’s stoic fortitude and his serene devotion to duty, referring to him as “the most extraordinary man he had ever known” (*Conversations* 5).

The problem, however, is that neither Will Percy nor Emily Cutrer live in a world with any room for divine grace, for a life united with Christ, his Church, and her sacraments. Binx, like Percy, has respect for the ethical life, but recognizes that it can only take one so far. In Aunt Emily, we find “neither grace nor mercy in her Stoic humanism” (R. Wood 136). “What Aunt Emily can’t understand about” Binx is, as Percy says, “he just doesn’t believe in being the honorable man, doing the right thing for its own sake” (*Conversations* 66). As Ralph C. Wood states,

Binx may have lived a wastrel life, as Aunt Emily insists, but her stern summons to duty will not deliver him from his self-absorption. Nothing less than the miraculous grace of Ash Wednesday can serve, in the arresting phrase of Kafka, as an axe to break the frozen sea within him. (157)

Having skipped over the ethical realm to land directly in the religious, Binx returns to the moral sphere, now that he has a theological reason for so doing. He thus performs the two ethical acts that Aunt Emily has most desired: he marries Kate and enters medical school. For at last, he has returned to the sacramental life that can sustain such a dutiful existence, even if he will remain, as he says, a perpetual “ass-kicker.”

Notes

¹Perhaps the most appropriate answer Percy gives, however, is the following: “I am a Catholic, or, if you like, a Roman Catholic, a convert to the Catholic faith. The reason I am a Catholic is that I believe what the Catholic Church proposes is true” (*Signposts* 304).

²Percy quotes from *The Sickness Unto Death*, in which Kierkegaard states that the “specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair” (23).

³Percy discusses the problem of religious language and the craft of writing in more detail in *The Message in the Bottle*: “Its [Christendom’s] vocabulary is worn out. This [...] failure raises problems for a man who is a Christian and whose trade is with words. The old words of grace are worn smooth as poker chips and a certain devaluation has occurred, like a poker chip after it is cashed in. Even if one talks only of Christendom, leaving the heathens out of it, of Christendom where everybody is a believer, it almost seems that when everybody believes in God, it is as if everybody started the game with one poker, which is the same as starting with none” (116).

⁴According to a September 2006 study conducted by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and Baylor University Department of Sociology, that number would now be between 85%-90% (*American Piety* 4).

⁵Kierkegaard’s words from *Either/Or I* could easily apply to Binx: “With the help of his intellectual gifts, he knew how to tempt a girl, how to attract her without caring to possess her in the stricter sense. I can picture him as knowing how to bring a girl to the high point where he was sure that she would offer everything. [...] For him, individuals were merely for stimulation; he discarded them as trees shake off their leaves—he was rejuvenated, the foliage withered” (306-308).

⁶Percy notes that “the special marks of the Catholic Church: the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which, whatever they do, confer the highest significance upon the ordinary things of this world, bread, wine, water, touch, breath, words, talking, listening” (*Signposts* 369).

⁷Elsewhere, Percy writes that “the Jews, their unique history, their suffering and achievements, what they started (both Judaism and Christianity), and their presence in the here-and-now” cannot be “encompassed by theory” (*Signposts* 312).

⁸*This I Believe* is no Percy creation. An actual CBS radio show hosted by Edward R. Murrow, the original series ran from 1951-1955. National Public Radio revived the show in 2005.

⁹As Ciuba writes, “Lonnie’s speech voices Percy’s belief that language is fundamentally intersubjective. Whether or not he actually asks Binx about his love, all of his words make a risky adventure into communion that inspires Binx to answer in kind” (78).

¹⁰After Vatican II, “Extreme Unction” was renamed “Anointing of the Sick” so that church members might understand that it is not a sacrament only for those on the brink of death. The anointing is also in its very nature communal. As the Catechism declares, those who receive it, “by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ, contribute to the good of the People of God” (CCC 1522).

¹¹St. Teresa of Lisieux, a Carmelite nun (1873-1897), taught that not everyone was capable of producing great physical or mental deeds to demonstrate his or her faith. Nevertheless, all are capable of a childlike trust in God, offering what each is capable of giving. This path she called the “Little Way.”

¹²As Percy writes in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, “words can become slick as coins worn thin by usage and so devalued” (306).

¹³By the time Percy writes *Lost in the Cosmos* in 1983, he notes a significant change (though he does not say *where* he obtains this new information): “According to a recent poll, more Americans set store in astrology than in science of God” (5).

¹⁴Percy’s language suggests a parallel with the parable of the importunate widow in the gospel of Luke 18:1-18

¹⁵In this passage, the influence of Hopkins is again evident: “Glory be to God for dappled things--/For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;/For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;/Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;/Landscape plotted and pieced--fold, fallow, and plough;/And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim./All things counter, original, spare, strange;/ Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)/With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;/ He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him” (*Poems and Prose* 30).

¹⁶We should note, though, that receiving the ashes is a sacramental, not strictly a sacrament. According to the Catholic catechism, sacramentals

are “sacred signs instituted by the Church” which “prepare men to receive the fruit of the sacraments and sanctify different circumstances of life” (CCC 1677). While such sacramentals as the imposition of ashes “do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do,” they “prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it” (CCC 1670).

¹⁷We should also note well the order of events here. Binx does not *ask* Kate to marry him. Rather, she unexpectedly *announces* that she and Binx are to be married, an example of the prevenience of divine grace.

¹⁸Dostoevsky’s influence on Percy is readily apparent here, for the ending of *The Moviegoer* directly parallels the ending of *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Karamazov, we love you!’ a voice, which seemed to be Kartashov’s, exclaimed irrepressibly. ‘We love you, we love you,’ everyone joined in. Many had tears shining in their eyes. ‘Hurrah for Karamazov!’ Kolya proclaimed ecstatically” (776).

¹⁹As Percy makes clear, Binx is “a victim of [the] great philosopher René Descartes, to whom I attribute many of the troubles of the modern world” (*More Conversations*, 160). Percy says elsewhere that the “Self since the time of Descartes has been stranded, split off from everything else in the Cosmos, a mind which professes to understand bodies and galaxies but is by the very act of understanding marooned in the Cosmos, with which it has no connection” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 44).

CHAPTER THREE

Ex Opere Operato: Baptism and Christian Community in *The Last Gentleman*

With his second novel, Percy offers a more decidedly dialogic work. In *The Last Gentleman* (1966), we find numerous conflicting voices competing for primacy, including Rita Vaught's secular humanism, Sutter Vaught's so-called moral pornography, and Val Vaught's militant Catholicism; each of these characters represents a different view of the Christian faith and its sacraments. As we have seen in *The Moviegoer*, Emily Cutrer expresses the view most directly antithetical to the sacramental life. In contrast, *The Last Gentleman* shows several different characters influencing the life of the main character, Will Barrett,¹ who is unsure which path he should take. With lines drawn between the disparate worlds of Rita, Sutter, and Val, the engineer Will Barrett finds himself caught amidst various extremes.

By the end, Will does not personally embrace the sacramental life of faith. However, when he serves as “translator” for Jamie Vaught during the young man's baptism, something life-changing does happen to Will. He undergoes a change that enables him to act and thus to be freed from his life-crippling stasis. Not unlike *The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentleman* is an ultimately comic novel, one where community trumps individualism through the sacraments that, as de Lubac teaches, “make real, renew, or strengthen the

union with the Christian community” (*Catholicism* 82). As Desmond writes, Percy’s

somber diagnosis of the communal malaise is filtered through a comic vision in which the threatened social upheaval is counter-balanced by signs of the real divine presence in the world—the mystical-semiotic community signified by the sacrament—a possibility for those whose hearts and wills are open to it. (*Community* 81)

The baptism of young Jamie Vaught makes evident the efficacy and power of the Catholic sacraments as the “means of salvation” as well as “instruments of unity” (de Lubac, *Catholicism* 82). However, before analyzing this all-important final scene, we should first understand both the problems confronting the novel’s protagonist as well as the viewpoints that challenge Will throughout his journey.

Will Barrett: The Peregrine’s Rift

Will Barrett, as he appears in *The Last Gentleman*, is a character at once endearing and frustrating. Percy’s third-person narrator calls him the “courteous engineer” who “always tells the truth,” gives his heart to a woman he barely knows, and who thus indeed remains a “gentleman.” Nevertheless, he is troubling for many of the same reasons. Will can fall “in love” with Kitty Vaught so easily because he lives “in a state of pure possibility”² and is hardly grounded in the complex realities of life (*TLG* 4). Not unlike Walker Percy himself, Will inherits the gentlemanly lineage that paralyzes his ability to act. Whereas Barrett’s grandfather “knew what was what and said so and

acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought,” Will “did not know what to think” and as a result “had trouble ruling out the possible,” becoming lost in the way that Kierkegaard describes as the damnation of the infinitely possible (*TLG* 9-10).

Will’s journey is, among other things, a struggle to learn how to live in a world that requires him to decide how he is to live. We will recall that Percy blames Descartes for the sundering of the human soul into subject and object.³ As Allen Pridgen argues, this split is personified in Will Barrett, who suffers from a “scientific episteme in which the individual’s understanding of himself is limited by his role as Cartesian observer and analyzer of phenomena” (*Brownian* 297). Will is an astute observer of life; however, such skill necessarily limits his ability to decipher *himself*. In Barrett we see a version of Percy’s own Kierkegaardian critique of Hegel. Much as Hegel lived in a world of abstraction, so does Will. Kierkegaard, however, focused on how to make decisions and to live as a finite and fallen creature in the world. By the novel’s end, Will does finally learn how to live in the world, and although he has not embraced the sacramental faith of Catholicism, he at least has learned not to embrace the mindless futility that a life with Kitty Vaught would afford him, nor does he embrace Sutter Vaught’s stark, suicidal resignation. Will knows “what moral and metaphysical dead ends he must now avoid,” but his pilgrimage, as a metaphysical peregrine, ultimately leads to

no final conclusions (R. Wood 155). Though his journey will be incomplete, he has still taken a vital first step in the right direction.

Not far into the novel, we learn of Will's crippling problem; he is the sort of person who "had to know everything before he could do anything" (4). As such, he lives most of his life, as Kierkegaard would put it, in a state of "pure possibility" (*TLG* 4). Will is appropriately trained as an engineer, for he "lives in a state without grace because he has come to view himself objectively" (Luschei 114). Such a state is deadly for Percy, whose existentialist sympathies place high value on personal, subjective engagement with the hard questions of life. In a world where everything seems to be an option to such a young man, having a world of choices open to him can be a crippling experience, especially when there is no real continuity between his choices: "what a man can be the next minute bears no relation to what he is or what he was the minute before" (*TLG* 356). For Walker Percy, having and knowing our limits is crucial, for it is principally in relation to others that we discover the boundaries of our lives.

It is obvious that one of Will's major problems lies in his inability to be grounded in the real world; he is afflicted with a paralyzing transcendence over the world and would, as Nathan A. Scott says, "rather be pure intellect or pure will or pure something-or-other" (91). What else could explain a man who "fell in love, at first sight and at a distance of two thousand feet" (*TLG* 71)? Will's paralysis (of, ironically, his own *will*) is due in no small part to his

paternal heritage. As the Barrett lineage passed forward from Will's accomplished and courageous great-grandfather, the sons became increasingly less prone to action than the fathers, so that finally Will became "a watcher and a listener and a wanderer" (*TLG* 10). Barrett's inheritance cripples him because a "powerful moral inheritance can be as much binding as loosing" or else turn one "graceless toward those who fail to achieve its moral mission" (Wood 143). The man who wishes to find the peregrine falcon is a peregrinator himself, a wanderer who discovers himself more bound than free by his heritage. Such is the problem for modern man, particularly, Walker Percy believes, for a Southern gentleman such as Will Barrett, one who "had trouble ruling out the possible" (*TLG* 10). Such a banal activity as playing golf is not a problem, but "it was living that gave him trouble" (*TLG* 192).

Throughout the novel, Will suffers from various physical ailments, including unpredictable fugues. Will's physical problems are no mere plot device. To be sure, Will's amnesiac fits do add much to the story's plotline; however, the "spells" and fugues that Will suffers are the ailments of a man doomed to suffer under the curse of absolute autonomous freedom. The sense of *déjà vu* that Will repeatedly encounters hints that there was a time when his great-grandfather and others like him actually knew what *to do*. Will, however, is unable to act, and although he waits with "liveliest expectation" regarding his life, "no such time had come and he still didn't know how to live" (*TLG* 11). Will's amnesiac forgetfulness is a sign, therefore, that, like so

“many young men in the South,” he had simply forgotten how to live in the world (*TLG* 10). As a result, he would often “lapse into an unproductive and solitary life. He took to wandering” (*TLG* 12).

The image of the telescope, one of the most important symbols of the novel, again solidifies our understanding of Will as someone unwilling to enter into the concrete living of life; he must view the world from a distance. The telescope allows Will to engage others on his own terms, comfortably and with no necessary commitments. It symbolizes the detachment that Percy believes has come to plague our modern world. Unable to view reality directly, “special measures were needed to recover” the otherness of things. The narrator claims that “the telescope recovered them” by enabling Barrett to view them close at hand; however, the telescope also functions for Will not unlike the way movies do for Binx Bolling (*TLG* 31). They both serve to keep life at a comfortable distance.

We see further evidence of Will’s inability to confront the “otherness” of life when Percy has Will assaulted by the “ravenous particles” that are as “thick as mustard gas” during Will’s trip to the museum, hindering his viewing of the paintings (*TLG* 27). These “particles” represent a world whose air is so dense with concreteness that the abstracted Will Barrett is unable to participate in it. It takes a radical change—in this case the violent “KeeeeeeeeeeeeeeRASH” of the skylight—for Will actually to “see” the paintings (*TLG* 27). Once again, only a disaster allows this young man of “pure

possibility” to get a brief glimpse of the actual world. Will’s selective vision is not unlike that of a fellow Southerner who “looks at a Negro twice,” once when as a baby and once when dying; one only sees properly during times of crisis (*TLG* 195). Thus, we can say that “the world of being, the physical world in which a man lives as an animal” is “no longer accessible to him except under the most extraordinary circumstances” (Douglas 138).

Will is nevertheless aware that he is not well, and thus proceeds to spend \$18,000 on psychotherapy with his analyst, Dr. Gamow.⁴ Of course, Dr. Gamow does not exactly provide Will with the help he needs; the therapist does, however, enjoy the mental calisthenics that Barrett provides. As Percy makes clear in *Lost in the Cosmos*, he is rather leery of psychoanalysts who claim to heal anyone; our modern anxiety is a spiritual dilemma, not a “psycho-sexual” one.⁵ Will finally becomes aware that Gamow cannot, for all his erudition, cure him or his “will.” Gamow fails to realize that it is not “the prospect of the Last Day” that depressed Will (*TLG* 23). Rather, it was “the prospect of living through an ordinary Wednesday morning” (*TLG* 23). Still, Barrett does learn a great deal from his analyst, not the least of which is that “people would feel better if they could lay hold of ordinary words” (*TLG* 33). Will realizes, as does Percy, that much of our language has become bankrupt.

Will wants Gamow to tell him what he is “*really* supposed to do” (38). The addled analyst cannot, of course, since he regards Will as “an object of

technique” (*TLG* 35). Thus, by abandoning his sessions with Gamow, Will can finally proclaim his alleged independence, “I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge I have so arduously gained from five years of analysis” (*TLG* 41). While putting psychoanalysis behind him is a positive step, Will Barrett still makes a crucial mistake. For Percy, we engineer nothing; we are finite and flawed creatures, meant first and last to learn our radical dependence. Because our lives are given to us, trite psychological panaceas will not cure Will (or will). If anything, such a decision to manage his own life will only exacerbate the split within him. Rather than confirming Will’s entry into the human race, his choice to become the “engineer” of his life serves instead to further alienate him from others. Yet in undertaking to manage his own existence, Will meets the Vaught family, and his journey with these typically modern Southerners provides him with the first impetus to find his life’s true direction.

Chandler Vaught is the family patriarch. Owner of the “world’s second largest Chevrolet dealership,” he is hardly a proponent of the examined life and is too busy embracing the life of the *nouveau riche* to think too much about life; his simple creed is “we all headed for the same place and I don’t think the good Lord cares how we get there” (*TLG* 234). He provides his children each with \$100,000 on their 21st birthday, provided they haven’t drunk or smoked. When he discovers that Will is a Princeton Episcopalian, he declares plainly, “Man, there’s nothing wrong with you” (*TLG* 78). Still, Chan-

lder Vaught does see that something *is* wrong with Will, that he does not know “what in the hail” to do with his life (*TLG* 78). Ultimately, Mr. Vaught affords Will the opportunity to delve into the thickness of life as well as “return to the South and discover his identity” (*TLG* 79).

By asking the engineer to become the guardian of his dying youngest son Jamie, Mr. Vaught gives Will the chance to actually *do* something with his life. Will embarks on both a physical and metaphysical journey with Jamie and Kitty, Chandler’s youngest daughter and Will’s initial love interest. Of course, the elder Vaught knows that his youngest child’s days are numbered, and he wants his son to enjoy life while he still can. It is ironic, then, that he chooses a man “who had lived a life of pure possibility” to help his son towards this goal. Still, Chandler Vaught recognizes that, although Will might be a man unable to act in his own life, he will still act as a true gentleman.

Through his relationships with Jamie and Kitty, Will encounters the remainder of the Vaught family: Sutter, a failed physician and Chandler’s oldest son; Val, the eldest daughter, who has become a nun; Rita, Sutter’s ex-wife, who though no longer a member of the family, takes care of Jamie and Kitty. By looking more closely at these three crucial characters, we can have a better look at the options confronting Will Barrett.

Rita Vaught: The Humanist's Love

Not unlike Dr. Gamow, Rita Vaught, Sutter's ex-wife, sees people as problems to be solved. Consequently, Kitty and Jamie are her pet "projects." In a negative way, she reflects Percy's Uncle Will who, though interested in people's moral duty, abandoned any theological basis for the ethical life. Although Rita does not hold to any moral standard outside of herself, Kitty, Rita's former sister-in-law and enigmatic love interest, actually admires Rita for her actions. Whereas Val Vaught, according to Kitty, "does what she does for a reason, love of God and the salvation of her own soul, Rita does it without having these reasons" (*TLG* 73). Ellen Douglas discerns the truth about Rita, describing her as "one of the most convincingly unattractive women in recent American literature," for she is "the modern, liberal, dilettantish, 'unselfish,' aesthete" (130). One thing is certain. Rita Vaught certainly has no room in her life for sacramental mystery, despite her humanist devotion to Jamie's well-being.⁶ Because Rita has no communal standard on which to base her ethics, she necessarily advocates a humanistic individualism. Such "displacement of values" results in what John Desmond calls "Rita's form of humanism" (*Community* 94).

Although Rita may not offer any transcendent reasons for her actions, she has her own reasons that Kitty cannot understand. Rita is herself an "engineer" of sorts, for she tries to engineer the lives of others, particularly the unaware Kitty. Unlike Val or even Sutter, Rita lacks a theological foun-

dation for her “good works.” She asks Will to partake of her humanistic goodwill by encouraging him and Jamie to “drink and love and sing” while they still can (*TLG* 160). Rita pities Jamie mostly because he will never awaken “in the morning and [feel] the warm mouth of one’s beloved on his” (*TLG* 160). This pagan desire for Jamie reflects her belief that “anything two people do together is beautiful if the people themselves are beautiful and reverent and unselfconscious in what they do” (*TLG* 179).

Rita hopes Jamie can find as much “self-fulfillment as he can in the little time he has,” desiring for him “beauty and joy, not death” (*TLG* 244). Rita insists that “there are needs [...] which take precedence over this or that value system” (*TLG* 275). The chief of these needs is so-called “self-fulfillment” through “beauty” and “joy,” admired for their own sake, severed from any larger, definitive belief, whether human or divine.

Sutter Vaught: The Moral Pornographer

Sutter Vaught, the oldest of the Vaught children and Rita’s ex-husband, is a self-confessed “moral pornographer,” a seeming oxymoron. However, it is through pornography that Sutter recognizes the necessity of real virtues, not a mere value system for condemning such lascivious behavior. Consequently, he recognizes, along with Val, the reality of an all-embracing truth (i.e., Christianity) that requires a yes or no response; he simply answers “no.” Whereas Val embraces the sacramental faith of Catholicism, Sutter rejects it, adopting a life where sex replaces the post-Freudian

loss of God. Sutter's statements regarding the sacraments only make this chasm between him and his sister wider:

The only difference between me and you is that you think that purity and life can only come from eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. I don't know where it comes from. (*TLG* 282)

Sutter even admits, along with Val, that he does not deny "that sin exists" (*TLG* 292). He merely embraces the lewdness of sin forthrightly rather than covertly, in the fashion of most "Americans, the most Christian of people" (*TLG* 292). Although Will finds Sutter's philosophy highly enigmatic at times, it still "had the effect of loosening his synapses, like a bar turning slowly in his brain" (*TLG* 309). Whereas Will is trapped in the transcendent realm of pure possibility, Sutter has tried to re-enter the "world of immediate reality, of immanence, through sex" (Douglass 131-132). Yet he discovered that this humanly devised form of transcendence "did not solve the problem of how to be a man and to live and to die" (Douglass 131-132).

Will's relationship with Sutter demonstrates the full depth of the engineer's inability to live as a concrete human being. Will is convinced that Sutter possesses some special *gnosis* that, if he could acquire it, would enable him to act. He finds this knowledge in a medical casebook where Sutter discusses life, God, and, of course, sex. While Sutter's casebook "brilliantly catalogues the spiritual and sexual ills that plague our culture," he offers "no other solution than suicidal drinking and whoring" (Wood 155). Still, as a physician Percy himself is well aware that the diagnosis is often more impor-

tant than the cure, and so he has Sutter offer a stinging critique of modern “Christian” America.

Through Sutter’s casebook, we learn that he is, surprisingly, more like Val than Rita. He is still aware of the “prime importance of the religious dimension of life” (*TLG* 383). At least Sutter knows that “Christianity is still viable enough to underwrite the naughtiness which is essential to pornography” (*TLG* 280). Unlike his ex-wife, Sutter allows Christianity to provide the foundation of his beliefs, no matter how perverse such beliefs may be. Despite his ailments, Will is still perceptive enough to notice that Sutter recognizes life’s inherent “religious dimension” (*TLG* 383). Even though pornography and Christianity stand at odds, the former is still “reinforced” by the Church’s sexual ethic; the “naughtiness” of pornography depends on its condemnation by Christianity. So, Sutter can claim to be a “sincere, humble, and even moral pornographer” because he knows that a Christian ethic is necessary for pornography to have its potency (*TLG* 280).

Not surprisingly, sex is Sutter’s solution to Will’s crippling inability to embrace the world. Sutter maintains that “lewdness” is the “sole portal of reentry into a world demoted to immanence” and that we can gain “reentry into immanence via orgasm” (*TLG* 345). Because the Christian faith is not a viable option for Sutter, he chooses “the only reentry into the world which remains to us,” which is sex (*TLG* 354). Ironically enough, Sutter himself never has a single sexual escapade during the course of the narrative.

Through his escapades with Kitty, however, Will has already learned the failure of Sutter's world of sex. Although Will does not embrace Sutter's philosophy, the physician's words still "had the effect of loosening his synapses" (*TLG* 309). However, Will is finally able to see that where Sutter "probably goes wrong [...] is in the extremity of his alternatives: God and not-God, getting under women's dresses and blowing your brains out" (*TLG* 354). As Desmond argues:

Sutter calls for the collapse of bankrupt forms of Christendom that, under scientism, have domesticated belief, devalued religious language, and either reduced sacramental life to ceremonial observance or displaced it into profane 'sacraments.' Only with the collapse of this formulaic Christianity is there any hope for a recovery of Christ. (*Community* 87)

Sutter's casebook does provide a positive function for Will because "like Kierkegaard's questing knight, Will must first, paradoxically, learn the reality of human despair before he can achieve his goal. Symbolically, Sutter's casebook provides him with this knowledge" (Pridgen, *Brownian* 303).

Val Vaught: Militant Catholicism

Sutter's older sister, Val, sees the religious choice as one of stark seriousness, a yes or no that requires immediate answer. Such starkness is what causes Will to be "obscurely scandalized" by her (*TLG* 209). She is unapologetically Christian, although still sinful enough to hope that her enemies burn in punishment. She has "always distrusted so-called spiritual people" because they care more about their inward and subjective experience than

the outward and objective Gospel (*TLG* 211). Furthermore, “Val’s authoritative command, rooted in the sacramental vision and belief in the mystical community, contrasts starkly with Sutter’s impotent skepticism and Rita’s ‘humanism’” (Desmond, *Community* 99). Rather than use her inheritance for a life of worldly pleasure, Val “gave it to the Tyree niggers,” an act of generosity that her materialistic father cannot comprehend (*TLG* 84). Even though this worldly nun came “to believe in Christ and the whole thing” and afterwards was “more hateful than before,” at least she knew what she had to do—in spite of her “theology of hatred” (*TLG* 116). Val had to devote her life to Christian service, regardless of her innate spite. Certainly, she believes in “the whole business,” the “Scandalous Thing, the Wrinkle in Time, the Jew-Christ-Church business, God’s alleged intervention in history,” but she is still “meaner than ever” and hopes that her “enemies fry in hell” (*TLG* 301, 307).

In describing Val’s conversion, Percy offers a literary representation of Kierkegaard’s distinction between the genius and the apostle. Val did not convert because she became convinced by a rigorous, rationalistic apologetic for the faith. Rather, she heard the gospel proclaimed to her in an unadorned manner, recognized the power and truth of the message, and immediately accepted it.⁷ Although Will normally had a reliable radar that allowed him to get a handle on other people, Val “boggled” his senses so that he “couldn’t get hold of her” (*TLG* 209). Whereas Will wants to know before he acts, Val is a Christian who rightly understands the order of doing and knowing, embody-

ing the dictum *credo et intelligam* (TLG 209). Will even confesses that he “didn’t like her much,” and Val’s pressing Will to take responsibility for Jamie’s salvation does nothing to alleviate such dislike (TLG 210). Val enlists Will to tell Jamie about “the economy of salvation”; however, Will strongly resists this mandate (TLG 210). After all, he admits that he does not share her faith. Still, we should not believe Val to be a thoughtless fideist who merely believes what she is told. Rather, she has no patience for the sentimentality of Rita’s humanistic individualism. Indeed, “Val’s message calls for a community based on charity, and thus subverts the pride of individualism so engrained in American culture” (Desmond, *Community* 99).

Whereas Rita hopes Jamie can discover the best physical pleasures and joys life can offer, Val doesn’t “want him to die without knowing why he came here, what he is doing here, and why he is leaving” (TLG 210). For Val, the clear and positive call is to “stop stealing or abusing Negroes, go confess your sins and receive the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (TLG 213). Val knows of the healing value of the Eucharist as a “sign of unity, this bond of charity, this symbol of harmony” that can heal even the darkest soul (de Lubac, *Catholicism* 90). Val’s position, as described by Sutter in his case-book, reflects Percy’s own:

Man is a wayfarer (i.e. not transcending being nor immanent being but wayfarer) who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him (i.e. his salvation) and which he had better attend to. (TLG 353)

Though Will is skeptical of Val's "Catholic monkey business," he will soon find himself caught up in the sacramental faith that she commands he apply to her youngest brother.

Jamie Vaught: Christian Ex Opere Operato

Jamie Vaught's baptism perfectly captures Val Vaught's understanding of the wayfarer, a conception Percy learned from Gabriel Marcel. By the novel's end, Jamie's leukemia has finally taken control of the young man's body. He finds himself in the patently real world of a hospital, constantly reminded of his mortality and existing in the "awkward innocence of essential humanity" (Scott 90). The Catholic priest on-call at the hospital is appropriately named Father Boomer, for he offers an ineloquent presentation of the gospel as oblivious to good taste as it is serious. The scene itself adds to the novel's comedy, if not its dark humor. Jamie receives his baptism by water from a plastic cup in the midst of his dying bowel movements. Jamie is unable to speak intelligibly, but Will, true to form, understands Jamie's garbled speech. Consequently, Will serves as the translator, the mediator between Jamie and Father Boomer. Though Will hears the same message as Jamie, it is Jamie, not Will, who ultimately accepts Father Boomer's message. If we define a wayfarer, as Val does through Sutter, as one who "stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him," then Jamie satisfies this description (*TLG* 353). He hears the gospel

presented in its starkest and most unapologetic form and accepts it, however ambiguously.

The ironies here are poignant. Percy tempts us into thinking that perhaps it will be the sentient engineer who will have at least found the way to transcendent faith. After all, we have been privy to Will's torturous journey throughout the entire novel. Instead, he has one of the novel's "minor" characters accept the Christian scandal as neither Will nor Sutter can. Consequently, the true comedy of the ending lies largely in the grace that God bestows upon this less-than-religious young lad.⁸

The joke is on both Will Barrett and on the reader, for the events surrounding Jamie's baptism are no mere "Catholic tricks" (*TLG* 392). W. L. Godschalk insists that the sacrament is an empty act of superstitious Catholicism:

Jamie's baptism [...] is a biting commentary on the inadequacy of Val's Catholicism [...]. While Jamie mumbles and has diarrhea, the priest apparently baptizes him. After Jamie's death, Sutter curtly dismisses the priest. It is a scene that reminds us of our mortality, but it hardly glorifies the sacraments or gives us any hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. (*TLG* 35)

Godschalk misses Percy's subtle, Kierkegaardian indirection. A transcendent, undeserved gift is given to the dying Jamie. Godschalk is unwittingly guilty of the ancient heresy of Donatism, which teaches, in part, that the efficacy of the sacraments depends upon the worthiness of the person administering them. Percy knows his readers may take this heretical approach to Jamie's baptism and thereby miss its strange and surprising authenticity.

As de Lubac declares, divine grace “is diffused everywhere and that there is no soul that cannot feel its attraction,” not even the skeptical young Jamie (*Catholicism* 218). Even the unsympathetic Kieran Quinlan concedes that, “God acts through his ordained ministers, however unworthy they may be” (115). Confirming this point, de Lubac writes that the “sacraments derive their efficacy from the Church,” not from the person performing them (*Catholicism* 84).

Reflecting Kierkegaard’s influence on Percy, God’s divine messenger is certainly more apostle than genius. No learned Jesuit, the ordinary parish priest Father Boomer simply presents the message of the gospel to Jamie (and Sutter and Will) in bare, yes or no fashion⁹:

Do you accept the truth that God exists and that He made you and loves you and that He made the world so that you might enjoy its beauty and that He himself is your final end and happiness, that He loved you so much that He sent his only Son to die for you and to found His Holy Catholic Church so that you may enter heaven and there see God face to face and be happy with Him forever. (*TLG* 403)

Father Boomer brings to the mundane world of the hospital “tidings from the sphere of transcendence” that Jamie Vaught surprisingly accepts (Wood 147). The news that Jamie hears as he leaves this world is news that “cannot be aesthetically and morally evaluated like any other piece of news,” but requires a simple response to the priest’s unadorned message of salvation (R. Wood 149). By having Jamie thus hear and receive the sacramental good tidings, Percy “heightens our awareness of this authority by eliminating any-

thing even vaguely resembling Christian apologetics: the priest has a message revealed by God and brought by him. There is nothing more to be said” (Hawkins 72).

Father Boomer, one of God’s broken vessels, makes God’s grace real in the life of Jamie Vaught and those around him despite his being “a bit callous and stupid and bewildered by the irregularity of the request” to baptize the dying youth (Douglas 141).¹⁰ However, Percy knows that the sacraments work their grace *ex opere operato* (lit. “by the work, worked). Father Boomer’s shortcomings are simply not relevant.¹¹ Eschewing any sort of apologetic (perhaps because he would be ill-equipped to do so), Father Boomer states without passion that his message is true “because God Himself revealed it as the truth” (*TLG* 404).¹² Ever the skeptic, Jamie needs confirmation that such claims are indeed true. Father Boomer responds by saying, “If it were not true, then I would not be here. That is why I am here, to tell you” (*TLG* 404). This somewhat commonplace priest¹³ is perceptive enough to recognize that Jamie will need to “ask for the faith to believe” the truths he has proclaimed (*TLG* 404).¹⁴ Consequently, the priest engages in a “Catholic sacramental rite that is an overt sign of the Incarnation and the sacramental world God entered” (Pridgen, *Brownian* 306). Thus, to treat Jamie’s baptism as anything less than the infusion of God’s grace completely disregards Percy’s sacramental Catholicism.¹⁵ Jamie’s faith is certainly imperfect; however, the “faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a

beginning that is called to develop” (CCC 1253). Jamie’s incipient faith is far more developed than that of an infant who also receives the sacrament of baptism.

Although the hospital room on its surface appears less-than-holy, there is nevertheless present a Christian community, even if it only consists of Jamie, Father Boomer, Will, and the apostate Sutter. Jamie’s baptism is in every sense a Christian “social event” (de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 83). With the passing of the Holsom bread truck outside the hospital window during this scene, Percy hints at the world’s sad substitute for the Eucharist—the “sacrament of sacraments, the consummation, as it were, of the spiritual life and the goal of all the sacraments” (de Lubac, *Catholicism* 89).

From the perspective of Percy’s sacramental Catholicism, therefore, we may see Jamie Vaught as the true comic hero of the work. He is comic in the sense defined by Nathan A. Scott, Jr. who argues that the vicissitudes of our humanity themselves provide the scene for true comedy. Jamie’s baptism certainly qualifies as an appropriate place, for the realities and foibles of humanity are present in a hospital room as they are in no other. As Douglas notes, “Jamie’s death is the sickening dissolution of the body that every man who has watched a death knows and averts his eyes and soul from” (141). However, Jamie is also a comic hero due to the sacramental grace that intervenes in Jamie’s life, reminding the reader that this world is not the youth’s ultimate end. As Pridgen says of Jamie’s affliction, “human suffering is one

of those signs that should remind us that God has entered history to redeem us from what is otherwise hopeless suffering” (*Brownian* 305). Percy’s sacramental understanding of reality is thus embodied in an alarming and stark fashion, namely as “the unique and divine means for the transmission, in a human manner, of God’s grace to our souls as they live in the flesh [...]”¹⁶ It is through Jamie’s baptism and death, therefore, that

Will moves toward resolving this inherited dichotomy between society and spirituality, immanence and transcendence, the riches of this time-place and their covert roots in eternity: he discovers the radical bonds that provide meaning in this life. Will meets the eschaton in the hospital room where Jamie lies dying. Percy stresses the sheer physicality of death—the swollen face, the skin blotched with purple, the stink of defecation [...]. The flesh in ruins marks the end of the road for this wayfarer who has never known how to live in his own body. [...] Percy’s last gentleman beholds the messy horror of mortality. (Ciuba 124)

Indeed, even if it is only a fellowship of two (not unlike Binx and Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*), Will does enter into a true community: “It was understood that the universe was contracted to enclose the two men,” declares Percy’s narrator (*TLG* 365). Jamie’s baptism serves to confirm the reality of what Will learned when he revisited his boyhood home and he touched the iron and the wood of the horsehead banister—namely, that there is a unity of the world of the flesh and the world of faith, a unity that evades Will during most of the novel.¹⁷

Surprisingly, after Jamie’s baptism and death Will still looks to the suicidal Sutter for answers. The engineer knows *something* has “happened

back there,” but he is unsure about what it is (*TLG* 407). Since Sutter possesses a type of “anti-faith,” he is thoroughly aware of the theological significance of Jamie’s baptism. For once, however, it is Will Barrett who asks another person “what are you going to do?” rather than the other way around (*TLG* 408). The eight-fold echo of “wait” reminds us, of course, of a time in Will’s life when his father, preparing to commit suicide, did *not* wait, but this time someone does wait for him, Sutter. In hearing Will’s call and choosing to wait on him, Sutter also decides to forgo the suicide he had been considering throughout the novel. Thus, by waiting on Will, not only does Sutter avoid self-murder, he also offers Will the chance to form a nascent community of two fellow pilgrims: a failed suicide and a baptism-addled engineer, both of them having at least learned the folly of a self-managed life.

Even though Will Barrett “misses” the ultimate significance of Jamie’s baptism, by the end he nonetheless knows what *not* to do, even if he is still unsure of what *to* do. In a way that thoroughly reflects Percy’s Catholic existentialism, *The Last Gentleman* tells the story of a protagonist who comes to the realization that it is “not a new science that we need so much as a renewed faith” (R. Wood 164). As Hawkins argues, Percy:

gives us comic distortions of a world clearly recognizable as our own, as if by then rendering it absurd he can break the hold of the present age upon the reader, thereby opening him or her to what may very well be a totally alien point of view: the Christian faith. (65)

We err, therefore, if we believe that Will has learned nothing from the experience. Even though “Will did not know what was going on in the baptism,” it “does not mean that he could not come to know and did not find out. On the contrary, the signs and signals given by the ending indicate that he could and probably would” (Schwarz 51). Jamie’s baptism confirms the reality that Will himself had experienced only recently and obscurely in the “extraneous of the iron and the bark” (*TLG* 332). As Gary Ciuba observes, “Will feels the inexplicable dynamics of self-transcendence well up amid the giving and receiving of the sacrament” (129). Here at the end, the often baffling and baffled Will Barrett has come, if only just barely, to understand where such “extraneous” comes from: the mercy and grace of God meet a young man literally awash in the “grossest expressions of his creatureliness” and led to sacramental salvation by a priest named Boomer (Scott 92).

Notes

¹Fittingly, a well-known study of existential philosophy was published eight years before *The Last Gentleman* in 1958 entitled *Irrational Man*. The author, William Barrett, explains the interest that had developed in America regarding continental existentialism: “Here was a movement that seemed to convey a message and a meaning to a good many people abroad, and Americans wanted to know about it” (7). Percy was directly familiar with this work is unknown; however, given Will’s journey in *The Last Gentleman* and Percy’s familiarity with existentialism and its critics, it remains distinctly possible that this name choice was not by accident. Of course, Will’s name also describes his refusal to give up on his search or life itself (i.e. Will Bear It).

²As Kierkegaard explains, “in possibility, everything is possible. For this reason, it is possible to become lost in possibility in all sorts of ways” (*Sickness Unto Death*, 37).

³See *More Conversations*, 160.

⁴The \$18,000 sum is not insignificant. It is \$500 more than Will’s monetary inheritance from his father. Thus, we see that Will assigns more value to the “cure” of psychotherapy than he does to his “inheritance,” which is far more than the mere money his father leaves him. Fittingly, Walker Percy himself spent a significant portion of his own inheritance on therapy during his years at Columbia University medical school.

⁵However, we should not think that Percy completely discounts psychoanalysis or counseling, himself having found such treatment useful during his time at Columbia. He only wants to remind people of the limits of such therapy. Will’s therapist, Dr. Gamow, is based on the psychotherapist Abraham Maslow, and thus his name indicates that his kind of treatment for the tortured human soul is more akin to a “game” than to anything serious.

⁶As Rita says regarding Jamie’s baptism, she cannot understand why Val would want “a rather stupid Irishman in a black shirt [to] pour water over his head while uttering words in a dead language (and uttering them in atrocious ecclesiastical Latin besides)” (233). In fact, she finds “the whole affair” to be “exceedingly curious” (233).

⁷As Percy writes in *The Message in the Bottle*, one trusts an “apostle” because “he has the authority to deliver the message. The communication of the genius (the scientific message in the bottle) is in the sphere of immanence. ‘A genius may be a century ahead of his time and therefore appear to

be a paradox but ultimately the race will assimilate what was once a paradox in such a way that it is no longer a paradox.' Given time, knowledge may be arrived at independently on any island. It is otherwise with the apostle. His message is in the sphere of transcendence and is therefore paradoxical. It cannot be arrived at by any effort and not even eternity can mediate it" (147).

⁸However, we should not be too quick to accept Jamie's earlier rejection of faith. Percy makes it clear that Jamie is not so much turned off by faith *per se* as he is by the "clownishness" that often accompanies its practice (234).

⁹Mary Sweeny writes of the baptismal scene: "The priest is an athletic robot, at first reluctant to have any part of the situation but [is] overwhelmed by Will's strength. Since Sutter, sunk in his own egocentric despair, has no objection, he prepares to baptize the unconscious patient 'conditionally.' The priest senses Will's role as engineer and names him the friend 'who loves' the dying youth" (63).

¹⁰As de Lubac says, "If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church [as seen in Father Boomer] is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term; she really makes him present" (*Catholicism* 76).

¹¹In fact, Percy admits that he must present a scene such a baptism in a shocking way, otherwise the reader will perhaps not realize its importance since religious language has become so devalued. Percy writes: "The fictional use of violence, shock, comedy, insult, the bizarre, are the everyday tools of [the writer's] trade. How could it be otherwise? How can one possibly write of baptism as an event of immense significance when baptism is already accepted but accepted by and large as a minor tribal rite somewhat secondary in importance to taking the kids to see Santa at the department store? Flannery O'Connor conveyed baptism through its exaggeration, in one novel as a violent death by drowning. In answer to a question about why she created such bizarre characters, she replied that for the near-blind you have to draw very large, simple caricatures" (*The Message in the Bottle* 118).

¹²Hawkins observes: "Even more striking here than in the earlier encounter between Val and the nun is the unadorned proclamation of this messenger. [Father Boomer] speaks with utter confidence about an objective truth; he also speaks, through in his own voice and about himself, with the impersonal authority of the Church" (72).

¹³As Hardy writes, "One may find his insensitively self-assured, cliché-ridden manner of speaking both aesthetically deplorable and spiritually un-

edifying. But Boomer's clichés, unlike the kind of phraseological horrors Will has taken up, are not doctrinally compromising. Boomer, presumably, is a duly ordained Roman Catholic priest. Either one takes the authority of such ordination seriously, or one does not" (*Fiction* 99).

¹⁴Father Boomer is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's similar creation, Father Finn, from "The Enduring Chill."

¹⁵Predictably, Quinlan argues that Jamie's "conversion" would hardly be convincing for anyone outside of the Catholic faith. Yet, this is entirely Percy's point. This scene is not a springboard for rationalistic apologetics; a decision must be made for ultimate life or ultimate death, and here they are starkly presented (116).

¹⁶*Canon Measure*, as quoted in De Lubac, 356.

¹⁷As Hobson writes, "The horse's head is an important symbol in Percy's work, for it represents comic wholeness and synthesis of man's angelic side with his bestial side [...]. The horse's head joined with the oak is one more image in Percy's work of the Christian notion of a God both transcendent and immanent" (65).

CHAPTER FOUR

“Eating Christ”: The Eucharist and the Return to Community in *Love in the Ruins*

With *Love in the Ruins* (1971), we see a marked shift in tone from Percy's two previous novels, which focused upon the “personal existential quests of his introspective and troubled wayfarers” (Pridgen, *Landscapes* 147). Both Binx Bolling and Will Barrett are surprised by the intrusion of sacramental grace in their lives. Percy's presentation of such grace is by stealth, surprising the reader as well. With his third novel, Percy engages in a more frontal assault, being “more interested [...] in satirically attacking various kinds of philosophical and theological fatuousness in twentieth century American culture” (Pridgen, *Landscapes* 147).¹ Gone is the “genteel, reflective voice of the philosopher-novelist readers had grown comfortable with” (Hobson 68).² In its place is the voice of a cynical satirist,³ yet one still hopeful for salvation through the Church and her sacraments.⁴ Despite this cynicism, *Love in the Ruins* demonstrates the futility of a sour-spirited individualism and affirms the power and efficacy of the sacraments (particularly the Eucharist) received in community through Dr. Tom More's return to the Church.

The fictive embodiment of this new satirical voice, Tom More, is one of Percy's most colorful creations. Through More, Percy criticizes the various

problems afflicting a world captive to what he has elsewhere called “scientism,” the belief that science somehow contains the answers to all of humanity’s problems, despite the fact that it ultimately objectifies and hence reduces humanity to mere biology. Percy elsewhere defines scientism as follows:

It is the absorption by the layman not of the scientific method but rather of the magical aura of science, whose credentials he accepts for all sectors of reality. Thus in the lay culture of a scientific society nothing is easier than to fall prey to the kind of seduction which sunders one’s very self from itself into an all-transcending “objective” consciousness and a consumer-self with a list of “needs” to be satisfied. (*Message* 113)⁵

We will recall that Percy, while himself a student of science, is critical of the pseudo-religious status that science occupies in the modern world.

More shares both Percy’s fascination and skepticism of science.

More is also intriguing because he does not avowedly reject the faith of his ancestors. True, he confesses that he has “stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and [has] since fallen into a disorderly life” (*LITR* 6). Nevertheless, this rather earthy descendant of St. Thomas More clings to his faith while admittedly refusing to live by its precepts. Indeed, he confesses that he believes “in God and the whole business” but that he loves “women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth” and his “fellowman hardly at all” (*LITR* 6). Hence the novel’s subtitle: “The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World.”

Percy points out that, unlike Binx Bolling and Will Barrett, Tom More “knows exactly who he is and what he needs. He has no doubts at all. There’s no identity crisis here. He knows exactly,” whereas Binx and Will encountered “various losses of identity and a lack of belief and alienation” (*Conversations* 48). More’s formal beliefs, however, stand in marked contrast to the Gnostic impulses he clings to throughout *Love in the Ruins*. As Lewis A. Lawson states:

The speaker is a thoroughgoing Gnostic, who conceives of the apocalypse as a secular event and believes that he can either preclude its occurrence or, if it occurs, use it to further that progressive movement in history that all Gnostics detect. (*Following* 148)

More erroneously believes that his invention, the Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer, can mend the rift between man’s body and soul. This latter-day Thomas More believes he can bring about a physiological utopia. Percy the novelist, commenting on his novel, warns that while science can accomplish much, it certainly has its limits. Of these limitations, Percy notes the following:

Dr. More was a diagnostician. He knew something was wrong but he fell victim to pride, was seduced by the devil. Immelmann was the devil, of course, who showed Dr. More how to cure. It worked for a while. [...] The big mistake was in him, that he could believe he could treat a spiritual disease with a scientific device however sophisticated. (*Conversations* 85)

The Cartesian split that affects humanity cannot be solved through mere devotion to science, though the latter may certainly contribute to a true diagnosis of the disorder.⁶ As we shall see by the end of *Love in the Ruins*, the

Eucharist will serve to heal the brokenness which the lapsometer can only diagnose.

Though the sacraments continue to play a crucial role in Percy's third novel, we begin to see traces of the didactic ire⁷ that will later overpower his fiction, although his goal at this point is "calculated to wake up the placid and self-satisfied reader" (Hobson 71). Such ire has yet to dominate his writing,⁸ though, and Percy confesses that he had a great deal of joy in writing the novel.⁹ The reason for such enjoyment may be that *Love in the Ruins* still "offers another form of grace to its readers" in the form of Percy's "comic therapy" (Luschei 231).¹⁰ Throughout the novel, we see Percy doing what he does best: offering criticism of both the right and the left. Percy admits that "there's a little something in the book to offend everybody: liberal, conservative, white, black, hawk, dove, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, the English, the Irish, the Swedes, Ohioans, Alabamians, to mention only a few" (*Publishers Weekly* 23). No one escapes Percy's satirical needle. This "everybody" also includes those who

do not understand the inhumanity and immorality inherent in the scientific and social scientific mind-set that is the source of the medical, artistic, economical, and political institutions the novel ridicules. (Pridgen, *Landscapes* 148)

Indeed, perhaps the greatest object of Percy's criticism (and More's wrath) are those for whom science provides the ultimate answers to the questions of our humanity.

Percy reveals that the novel “was supposed to be a serio-comic review of the state of the world, throwing in everything at once, you know: race, religion, neurotic complaints, and so on” (*Conversations* 46), though he does confess that the novel “might have been too much” (*Conversations* 46). Indeed, Percy attempts nothing less than a mock-epic “comic synthesis of modern thought,” a witty parody of Dante’s *Commedia* (Luschei 169). This synthesis is nevertheless a distinctly *theological* novel. Kieran Quinlan, who is critical of the effect of Percy’s faith on his fiction, maintains that in *Love in the Ruins* Percy can be seen as a “distinctly Catholic writer” due to his explicit discussion of Catholic theology (134). In addition to offering more explicit theological material, Percy also has a central philosophical concern in *Love in the Ruins*. This unease is prompted by the mind-body problem introduced by Descartes some three hundred years ago: modern man lives in a world that is, as Tom More himself explains, “broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man” (*LITR* 382-383).¹¹ As Allen Pridgen elaborates, the novel is about More’s “professional, political, psychological, emotional, and spiritual engagement with a scientific culture that leads him into the enclosure of the angelic-bestial self” (*Landscapes* 147). More’s struggle with this culture will ultimately lead to his return to the Church and her sacraments, though when we first meet him, he is the “broken, sundered” man he mentions.

We see such sacramental brokenness in Tom More when he tells us that he had “left off eating Christ in Communion” and began “sipping Early Times and seeking the company of the fair sex” (who were not his wife) (*LITR* 24). The novel’s central theological concern, however, is to show how the sacrament of the Eucharist ultimately heals the break within the novel’s protagonist. In Kierkegaardian terms, More’s progression, like Binx Bolling’s, is from the aesthetic sphere to the religious. By abandoning the sacraments, More enters the aesthetic realm of pure possibility, not unlike Will Barrett. Therefore, when he once again embraces the sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as marriage, More leaves behind his solitary self-centeredness by entering the community of faith.¹²

Communion Lost: Tom More’s Abandonment of Christian Community

From the novel’s beginning, Tom More claims to adhere to the essential doctrines of his Catholic faith, affirming his belief in

the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church, in God the Father, in the election of the Jews, in Jesus Christ His Son our Lord, who founded the Church on Peter his first vicar, which will last until the end of the world. (*LITR* 6)

However, More’s beliefs are mere abstractions and thus not the concrete stuff of saving faith. As de Lubac argues, “one’s faith commits one more deeply than a simple belief” (*Splendor* 33). More maintains a purely intellectual assent to the doctrines of his familial religion: “A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is

right, then I am a liar. Nevertheless, I still believe” (*LITR* 6). His “theological orthodoxy is genuine” (even if his orthopraxis is lacking) and “he is himself quite conscious that it constitutes his anchor against the undertow of the powerful currents of modernity” (Brooks 59).

More’s affirmations are what we would expect from someone who suffers from a Cartesian rift between mind and body. Clearly, More’s intellectualization of his faith has resulted in his being sundered from the body of Christ, the Church. He thus dwells in a spiritual vacuum, confirming de Lubac’s argument that “he who voluntarily separates himself from [the Church] no longer has a valid faith” (*Splendor* 44). Because More is a scientist and therefore concerned with making correlations with data, one might think that More would see the connection between his abandonment of the Eucharist and his “disorderly life” (*LITR* 6); however, he is apparently blinded to this connection. While his mind readily assents to the doctrines of the Church, he has “stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass”; his life is a shambles, his loves being completely disordered (*LITR* 6).¹³

Though More willingly admits that he is “a not very successful psychiatrist, an alcoholic, a shaky middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors,” he also recognizes, none too humbly, that he is “a genius nevertheless who sees into the hidden causes of things and erects simple hypotheses to account for the glut of everyday events” (*LITR* 11). To

be sure, More's genius is without question. Who else could have invented the Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer (MOQUOL) but this less-than-holy descendant of the great Renaissance humanist saint, Thomas More? Still, Percy's description of More's dreadful physical condition hints at the disease that troubles him from within. While his genius is certain, More has far too much faith in his ability to offer a potential cure for the plague of angelism/bestialism with his mechanical device, his invention of the "first caliper of the soul and the first hope of bridging the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since the famous philosopher Descartes ripped body loose from mind" (*LITR* 191). Unfortunately, the one who plays Mephistopheles to More's Faust,¹⁴ Art Immelmann, encourages Tom More by telling him that "if the old U. S. of A. doesn't go down the drain in the next year, it will be thanks to your MOQUOL" (*LITR* 169). Immelmann uses More's pride to manipulate him, as Mephistopheles does with Faust.¹⁵

Such Faustian Gnosticism is perhaps More's greatest shortcoming, an ironic fault since he criticizes others who "fall prey to Gnostic pride" (*LITR* 64).¹⁶ By making More guilty of these impulses, the narrator implicitly criticizes the "secular power in a culture now dominated by the ideology of scientism" that he believes is so prevalent and ultimately harmful to humanity itself (Desmond, *Community* 118). While science may properly diagnose our physical maladies, such diagnoses do nothing to cure the deeper spiritual ills that plague modern man. More's scientific erudition is beyond reproach;

however, he must learn the limits to scientific knowledge. More is messianic in his claims:

I can save you, America! I know something! I know what's wrong! I hit on something, made a breakthrough, came on a discovery! I can save the terrible God-blessed Americans from themselves! With my invention! Listen to me. (*LITR* 58)

Proclaiming himself to be a scientific savior, More also hopes to win the Nobel Prize for his discovery. Consequently, More's solution during most of the novel at least is a form of "purely secular and Gnostic" (Hobson 69) and at most "hides a mad messianism" (Ciuba 149).

Throughout *Love in the Ruins* we see Percy criticize the individualism that has taken hold of the modern world.¹⁷ Recognizing the euphemistic irony behind such phrases as "quality of life,"¹⁸ Percy shows that, far too often, people who cherish "the right of the individual to control his own body" and believe that it is "a man's sacred right to choose his own destiny and realize his own potential" also regard the weak and infirm as impediments to such progress (*LITR* 197). More's advocate and eventual adversary Art Immelmann also affirms the rights and primacy of the self, claiming that he and his colleagues are "dedicated to the freedom of the individual" as well as encouraging one to "develop his own potential" (*LITR* 363).¹⁹ More, reflecting Percy's own views on such solipsism, is starkly critical: "What crap" (*LITR* 363).²⁰ Percy knows that such individualism ultimately leads to relativism as well as a loss of "any real community" (Desmond, *Community* 123). As he asks elsewhere, "why does humanism lead to beastliness?" (Percy, *Solipsism*

495). While Percy is highly critical of objective scientism, elevating hard core research to a level beyond its limitations, he is also skeptical of people who maintain that “belief, truth values” are “relative things” (*LITR* 113). In addition to affirming the historical Roman Catholic faith, More also defends the objectivity of “modern science” and even the “laws of materialism” (*LITR* 272). Percy believes that modern relativism inevitably leads to the culture of death that various institutions such as the Love Clinic, the Behavioral Institute, and the Geriatrics Center embrace.

More’s parish priest, Father Rinaldo Smith, shares Percy’s concern. More notes that “Father Smith is a good priest, a chaste and humble man who for twenty-five years had baptized the newborn into a new life, shriven sinners, married lovers, anointed the sick, buried the dead” but has still “had his troubles” (*LITR* 183). One such trouble occurs during a daily Mass when Father Smith was struck with a sudden aphasia before delivering his sermon, eventually breaking his silence with the declaration that “the channels are jammed and the word is not getting through” (*LITR* 184). When prompted by More to explain his seemingly enigmatic statement, the priest judges the time as having been conquered by “the principalities and powers” (*LITR* 185). Our problems are ultimately demonic in their origin. Having his finger on the pulse of modernity, Father Smith boldly declares that “death is winning, life is losing” (*LITR* 185), anticipating the proclamation made by Pope John Paul II, who would refer to modernity as being plagued by a “culture of death.”

Though far more developed as a character than Father Boomer in *The Last Gentleman*, Father Smith is still “in no way remarkable, having been a good and faithful if undistinguished priest for twenty-five years” (*LITR* 139). Peter Hawkins notes that Father Smith presents his message in a “less abstract and seemingly arbitrary manner” than Father Boomer because he is a fellow sufferer like More, a “wounded healer” who “prescribes a cure as one who has himself been stricken with the disease and then delivered from it” (Hawkins 74).

The commodification that arises from such materialistic humanism occurs amid what Percy calls elsewhere the “age of the theorist-consumer” (*Signposts* 309). Whenever a product (e.g. a car, a household appliance) breaks down, the owners simply abandon the item and purchase a new one. More emphatically states that the U.S.A. didn’t go “down the drain because of Leftism, Knotheadism, apostasy, pornography, polarization” and the like (*LITR* 63). Rather, what “finally tore it was that things stopped working and nobody wanted to be a repairman” (63). In neglecting the art of repair, More’s contemporaries treat the things of their world simply as disposable objects. Materialism is elevated to such a high degree that no one is willing to work with one’s own hands to repair that which is broken. One simply buys a new item, whether it be a refrigerator or a car. As we see from the treatment of the infirm and the elderly, this commodification does not apply only to automobiles and refrigerators. People are as disposable in More’s

world as are appliances. Such is our world of “theory and consumption” that is a direct consequence of the problem of angelism/bestialism that Percy recognizes to be at work in the modern world (*Signposts* 311).

More intuitively grasps the theological significance of our cultural disorder, that it is in essence another fall.²¹ Though not himself ready to return to the Church and her sacraments, More does recognize the sacramental nature of the healing that needs to take place. In a passage reminiscent of Hopkins, More asks: “What if man could reenter paradise, so to speak, and live there both as a man and spirit, whole and intact man-spirit, as solid flesh as a speckled trout, a dappled thing, yet aware of itself as a self!” (*LITR* 36).²² More thus understands that our “alienation is an inevitable result” of our “separation from God” rather than a “psychological disorder” (Brinkmeyer 154). And so he has occasional glimpses of the life offered by the sacraments when he recognizes that it is God that he loves “in the beauty of the world and in all the lovely girls and dear good friends, and it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels” (*LITR* 109).²³

Notwithstanding this recognition, in a conversation with his colleague Dr. Max Gottlieb, More admits and even regrets that he does not have the requisite guilt over his sexual escapades that is necessary for true repentance. Still, More recognizes the efficacy of the sacraments and admits that if he did feel guilty, he could get rid of the sin because the sacrament of penance would absolve him. Nevertheless, More admits that he gains too much

pleasure from his sexual dalliances to want to give them up (*LITR* 117). More's admitted lack of guilt reveals a deficiency of what the *Catholic Catechism* calls "sorrow for and abhorrence of sins committed" (1490). Later, More "confesses" to Father Smith that he also lacks "contrition" as well as a "firm purpose of amendment" (*LITR* 186). The sacrament of penance, however, also requires that the penitent "practice complete humility," which may also be too difficult for the proud and cynical Tom More to endure (*CCC* 1450).

We see no better example of this lack of proper contrition than in the scene in the Little Napoleon bar. In this scene, More describes a local bar in distinctly sacramental terms. The shelves that hold the liquor become for him a "miniature cathedral, an altarpiece, an intricate business of shelves for bottles, cupboards, stained-glass windows, and a huge mirror whose silvering is blighted with an advancing pox, clusters of vacuoles, expanding naughts" (*LITR* 151). In the microcosm of the Little Napoleon, More observes (if not contributes to) the unfair racial disparity that mirrors his "Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world" (*LITR* 3). While both Leroy Ledbetter and Victor Charles come to his aid, the latter is forbidden to enter the bar as a patron because of his race, something that More does not question.

Seeing himself in the bar's mirror, More describes himself as the "new Christ, the spotted Christ, the maculate Christ, the sinful Christ" (*LITR* 153).

While the “old Christ died for our sins,” it nevertheless “didn’t work, we were not reconciled” (153). Therefore, the “new Christ [More] shall reconcile man with his sins,” not the least of which is the sin of racism (153). By helping More, the “spotted Christ,” during his time of need, Leroy and Victor “love the new Christ and so they love each other” (153). However, the scene at the Little Napoleon shows how More has become a non-sacramental Catholic. He is willing to diagnose (through the lapsometer) and to effect change in others, but not willing to surrender his own life.

More’s late confession regarding his dead daughter Samantha is further evidence of this unwillingness. More wistfully recalls the “best of times” he had with Samantha. Constant companions at mass, father and daughter had received the sacraments together with great joy. He remembers rejoicing on the way home after they had partaken of the Eucharist together, acting the “fool all the way home like King David before the Ark” (*LITR* 12-13). More confesses that at this time he cared “naught for [his] fellow Catholics, but only for [himself] and Samantha” (*LITR* 13).²⁴ When he lost his daughter to an untimely death from cancer, More “experienced [...] the kind of fall that the lapsometer was designed to measure” (Ciuba 156).

Oddly, More admits that there was a “compensation, a secret satisfaction to be taken in her death, a delectation of tragedy, a license for drink, a taste of both for taste’s sake” (*LITR* 374). He confesses that he was “afraid she might be cured” had he taken her to Lourdes for healing, a trip that even

his pagan wife wished he would make (*LITR* 374). More wonders: “suppose you ask God for a miracle and God says yes, very well. How do you live the rest of your life?” (*LITR* 374). The answer for More is clear. He would need to give up the drinking and whoring that he loved too much. More the “maculate Christ” is willing to change others, but hardly willing to embrace the sacramental life that would require serious change.

Prior to this loss, More tells us that he was “happy as a man could be” because he “ate Christ and held him to his word” that “if you eat me, you’ll have life in you,” so More “had life” in him (*LITR* 138). Again, while More recognized the life-giving power of the sacraments, he still treated them as a means to gain his own happiness, resulting in his sentimental recollection of the past. As Pridgen observes, the mass

only furnished Tom with an interior spiritual stimulation analogous to the kind of physical need satisfaction he enjoyed with Doris at the motel; it did not awaken him to a Christian love larger than the personal happiness that the satisfaction of his desires produced. (*Landscapes* 162)

Pridgen further suggests that even More’s feelings for Samantha indicated that he saw her as a means of producing positive feelings for himself (*Landscapes* 166). Eventually, though, More will learn that mere sensate happiness is ultimately unfulfilling, especially when he hears his nemesis Art Immelmann proclaim: “Didn’t God put us here to be happy? Isn’t happiness better than unhappiness? Love them! Work on your invention. Stimulate your musical-erotic! Develop your genius. Aren’t we all obliged to develop our

potential? Work! Love! Music! That's what makes a man happy" (*LITR* 364). Percy says that *Love in the Ruins* is "really about the pursuit of happiness" (Tolson 355); however, it is certainly also about Percy's implicit and explicit criticism of false happiness, which Immelmann represents.

While More does not immediately deny Immelmann's claim, he does, in the end, reject it. A turning point occurs when Art threatens to return to Denmark with Ellen Oglethorpe. It is worth noting that, of his three girlfriends, Ellen is the only one with whom More does *not* have sex. Though she is not a woman of explicit Christian faith, she is still a woman of high moral integrity, and More is drawn to her because she unabashedly questions his hedonism. Ultimately, she is the perfect woman for him and he the perfect man for her; she will share her moral uprightness and he will share his knowledge of the grace of God's sacraments. When Immelman seeks to take Ellen with him back to Sweden, More prays earnestly if not eloquently: "Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence" (*LITR* 376). Unlike Faust, Tom More finally rejects the temptations of the Mephistophelean Art Immelmann. Through More's prayer, "Art's evil purpose—creating anarchy so that his dark kingdom will prevail—is foiled" (Hobson 88). The immediate consequence is that Immelmann disappears in a whirl of smoke, More's prayer being efficacious. In recognizing his need for holy help, though, a more lasting effect begins. In calling upon his saintly namesake, More finally sees that he

cannot stand alone, that he must depend upon others for help.²⁵ As de Lubac declares, the “real believer is not alone in his faith. His dependence on other men can be a trial to him, but his solidarity with them is a strength that more than compensates for it” (*Splendor* 53). In short, More learns that he must draw upon the community of faith. In so doing, he begins to live up to his name.

Communion Regained: Tom More's Return to the Sacramental Life

Throughout the novel, More progresses from a rejection of the Eucharist (and a denunciation of community that this dismissal symbolizes) to a return to the faith and his concomitant acceptance of the sacrament. This is no mere symbolic move, for as Louis Bouyer states, “by the celebration of the sacraments, and especially of the Eucharist, the people of God becomes conscious of itself as a distinct people, conscious of its spiritual unity” (78). Similarly, the *Catholic Catechism* declares that believers “participate with the whole community in the Lord’s own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist” (1322). More’s desire once again to “eat Christ” occurs alongside his spurning of his old sexual decadence. By the novel’s end, he no longer strings along a harem of women, but takes as his wife the lusty Presbyterian, Ellen Oglethorpe.²⁶ He also exchanges the “miniature Cathedral” of the Little Napoleon—the bar wherein More had discerned himself as a false Christ—for the blood and body of the true Christ.

More's transformation is quite radical, for he acknowledges that the sacrament of Communion has healed his internal split. He proclaims that "it took nothing less" than "eating Christ himself" to make him "mortal man again," to let him "inhabit [his] own flesh, and thus to "love [Ellen] in the morning" (*LITR* 254). The Eucharist, with its union of the earthy and the spiritual, serves to enact the healing of the Cartesian rift within Tom More. More now knows that both sexual "desire and the flesh link him to a world that has been transformed by Christ, a sacramental world in which grace is available" (Desmond, *Community* 125). Such grace is needed in the world of Dr. Thomas More due to its great political, racial, and theological divides. By affirming the Eucharist, by its nature a social event, Percy ends this apocalyptic novel on a note of social and political hope. As de Lubac notes, "there is a true Eucharist only where there is unity" (*Catholicism* 93). By the novel's end, the sacraments have begun the necessary process of healing within Tom More, evidenced in his abandonment of the materialistic individualism that has plagued him throughout much the novel.

Tom had once explained to his late ex-wife Doris that his faith saved him from the dangers of angelism, that it "took religion to save [him] from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels, that it took nothing less than touching the thread off the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make [him] mortal man again" (*LITR* 254). Without the sacrament of the Eucharist, More was in danger of becoming amorphously

“spiritual” like Doris (*LITR* 254), who complained to Tom that “there are no overtones in our relationship, no nuances, no upper mansions” and that “people grow away from each other. Spiritual growth is the law of life. Our obligation is to be true to ourselves and to relate to this law of life” (*LITR* 66). Such is the ethereal spirituality espoused by Doris’ new “Unity Church” (*LITR* 67). The Eucharist, being intimately bound up with Christ’s incarnation, rescues More from both Doris’ misty spirituality as well as from his own gross sensuality.²⁷

More’s marriage to Doris was ultimately doomed because his wife sought a “purely spiritual relationship” that Tom admits to never understanding (*LITR* 71). In the end, Doris and Tom went down opposite paths; she “went spiritual” while Tom “became coarse and disorderly” (*LITR* 72). Doris was better suited for her new lover, Alistair Fuchs-Forbes, her fellow Unity Church member who saw truth in every religion²⁸ and, consequently “greatly admire[d] the Catholic Mass” (*LITR* 272). For all his problems, Tom More never condescends merely to “admire” the consecrated Host and thus vigorously defends the scandalous particularity of the Church, forthrightly contradicting Alistair’s blissful acceptance of “the validity of all religions” (*LITR* 272).²⁹ More confirms de Lubac’s bold (and not to mention ironic) claim that “syncretism is artificial, generally the work of rulers or literary men, and presupposes declining faith. It is an insult to the living God” (*Catholicism* 300).

Although More has once again taken the sacrament and embraced a seminal community by the novel's end, he still has far to go. Alas, he still believes that his "lapsometer can save the world" if only he "can get it right" (*LITR* 382). He has faith that he can "diagnose and shall one day cure: cure the new plague, the modern Black Death, the current hermaphroditism of the spirit, namely More's syndrome, or chronic angelism-bestialism" (*LITR* 383). Nevertheless, he has abandoned his care and pursuit of the Nobel. "Screw prizes," he now affirms (*LITR* 383). He can also enumerate his many sins in confession to Father Smith: "I do not recall the number of occasions, Father, but I accuse myself of drunkenness, lusts, envies, fornication, delight in the misfortune of others, and loving myself better than God and other men" (*LITR* 397).

More admits that he has not "lost his faith," that he believes "in the Catholic faith as the Church proposes it," affirms that his "sins will be forgiven here and now" if he "can confess them," feel "sorry for them," and "resolve to sin no more" (*LITR* 397). However, More is yet unable to "feel sorry" for them, though he does admit that he feels sorry for his *not* feeling sorry! Still, since More infused the sacraments previously with meaning based solely on his feelings of tenderness and sentimentality, such an admission may indicate positive prospects for More's faith. In the end, he does finally admit to being ashamed for his many sins after Father Smith chastises him for "dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams" (*LITR* 399). Father Smith's

role is crucial, for he helps More return “to the sacramental language of the Church,” an “alternative semiotic that speaks the Good News of a human brotherhood and love that can heal the individual and social divisions that plague Tom and the citizenry of Paradise Estates” (Pridgen, *Landscapes* 181). Once again, and without the urging of his now dead daughter Samantha, Tom More can finally “eat Christ, drink his blood” as part of the Christian community of faith, pledging to protect this community from its previous downfall (*LITR* 400). Even the novel’s end, as More makes sexual advances to his wife, confirms that he has started to make amends for his previous wastrel womanizing.

While he certainly still has far to travel in his journey of faith, More has abandoned his pseudo-harem (each of whom represented possible futures for himself) and committed himself to a life of marriage with the moral if as yet unbelieving Ellen. More can “put the strivings of his past life behind him and can take authentic joy in a Christmas Eve spent quietly with his new family” (Hobson 89). Finally, he has abandoned his cynical solitude and once again partakes of the blood and body of Christ, however imperfect his rediscovered faith may be.³⁰ This discovery of the true meaning of the Eucharist offers More a “release from his enclosed consciousness and a community with all humanity for all time” (Pridgen, *Landscapes* 182).³¹ Percy’s final message is that the “way to health” lies not with a scientific understanding of the human psyche, but rather “to accept man’s fallen condition and his fate as way-

farer” (Brinkmeyer 154). Though Thomas More is hardly the paradigm of faith, *Love in the Ruins* nevertheless ends with a star affirmation of orthodox Christian beliefs. Indeed, it is a celebration of the sacramental life, through marriage, confession, and Communion.³² Thus does the novel conclude with Tom More back in the cradle of the Catholic Church enjoying her sacraments, including marriage to his former nurse. With no hint of sarcasm, More can affirm that “it is Christmas Day and the Lord is here, a holy night and surely that is all one needs” (402). More’s return to the folds of the Church allows him not only to embrace the ecclesial sacraments, but to enjoy the sacramentality of life itself.

Notes

¹A review in *The New Yorker* was more blunt, calling *Love in the Ruins* “controlled, sardonic, flat, flip, smart-ass” (Tolson 359).

²As Tolson notes, during this time Percy “did betray a growing disenchantment with liberalism both for its confidence in social engineering and for its excessive faith in the democratic dogma” (345).

³Though its primary tone is predominately satirical, *Love in the Ruins* contains, according to Hardy, “virtually every other kind of fiction ever devised: melodrama, sentimental farce, anatomy, pseudo-history, utopian and dystopian sci-fi fantasy both repeatedly undercut by the narrator’s anti-utopian skepticism, comedy of manners, mock-epic, burlesque, and musical comedy” (110).

⁴Percy admits that writing *Love in the Ruins* was “a picnic” because it had “everything in it but the kitchen sink” (*More Conversations* 143).

⁵In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy comments further on the position of influence that scientists occupy in contemporary American culture: “Where the genuine scientist is generally amazed at the meagerness of knowledge in his own field, the layman is apt to assign omniscience as what he takes to be a property of scientific transcendence” (119).

⁶Concerning the problem of “angelism/bestialism,” which is “the condition of mind-body separation which has been endemic in western civilization since the time of Descartes,” Percy declares that “it would be important to have such a condition diagnosed because then one might elect to do something about it” (*More Conversations* 64).

⁷Percy says that “there may be times when the greatest service a novelist can do his fellow man is to follow General Patton’s injunction: Attack, attack, attack. Attack the fake in the name of the real” (Tolson 346).

⁸Brinkmeyer comments that “in the process of molding a work designed to shock and disorient, Percy must necessarily flatten out his artistic vision; he must downplay the complexities of man’s identity and fate in the modern world—particularly the tension between Stoicism and Christianity—in order to adopt a less complex satirical vision integrally tied to his didactic intent. For this reason, *Love in the Ruins* lacks the depth and intensity of Percy’s previous novels, though on the level of satire it is very effective” (155).

⁹See *Conversations* pp. 143-144.

¹⁰Percy elaborates by saying that *Love in the Ruins* was “intended to be an exercise in the comic and the religious” (*Conversations* 115). He maintains that “people are scandalized” by the notion that “you can have a book that is supposed to be comic and yet religious,” while he himself fails to “see any contradiction” (115).

¹¹That is to say, “since the time of Descartes, humanity has increasingly come to exist as flesh devoid of spirit, scientific intelligence divorced from body” (Ciuba 138).

¹²Thus does he confirm de Lubac’s thesis that “true Eucharistic piety [...] is no devout individualism” (*Catholicism* 109).

¹³Ellen Oglethorpe, More’s future wife and one of his three love interests, will prove to complement him well. Whereas More believes in “God, the Jews, Christ, the whole business,” he fails to “do right” (157). Ellen, a nominal Presbyterian, is “embarrassed by the God business,” yet believes in “the Golden Rule and in doing right,” reminiscent of Rita in *The Last Gentleman* (157).

¹⁴This comparison to Faust is apt, since Percy himself tells us that the “use of the Faust theme was deliberate” (*Conversations* 47). In fact, Percy drew upon both the Faust of Goethe’s epic poem and Don Giovanni of Mozart’s opera in his characterization of More (*Conversations* 47).

¹⁵As Tharpe notes, More is “a bad Catholic in part because of his extremely humanistic pride as the inventor of a machine to cure all ills of the spirit, a task that God has assigned himself” (79).

¹⁶More’s mother claims to possess a secret knowledge as well, though hers does not derive from any scientific means. Ironically, More is quite critical of his mother who “has a “reputation hereabouts as a seer and a prophetess” but who is in reality nothing more than a “Catholic Gnostic” (177). We might very well say that same of Tom More, except that he is a Catholic Gnostic who also partly worships at the altar of scientism.

¹⁷Such autonomous individualism is readily seen in Flannery O’Connor’s story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” The Misfit tells the grandmother why he has no need to pray: “I don’t want no hep. I’m going all right by myself.” Such is the attitude of the scientific modernity that Percy criticizes as well as the “romantic and idealistic concepts of the self popular in 1960s America” (Pridgen, *Landscapes* 148).

¹⁸Of this language usage Percy writes: “One thing that happens is that words change their meanings. The good old words remain the same, but the meanings begin to slip. In 1983, you see, we will still be using words like ‘freedom,’ the ‘dignity of the individual,’ the ‘quality of life,’ and so on. But the meanings will have slipped. Right now, in 1971, the meanings have already begun to slip, in my opinion. It is the job of the satirist, as I see it, to detect slips and then to exaggerate them so that they become noticeable” (*Signposts* 248).

¹⁹De Lubac provides an appropriate response to Immelmann when he writes: “In Christianity the person is never subordinated or sacrificed to some collectivism, as the individual is to society according to so many theories of purely human inspiration. Far from being absorbed, he is, in fact, exalted” (*Splendor* 66). Immelmann’s temptation is to exalt the individual on his or her own merits.

²⁰Like Percy’s previous protagonists, Binx Bolling and Will Barrett, Tom More is at least self-aware, as we see when he admits that he is “possessed by terror” and has a desire to “live a solitary life” (23), which is confirmed by Victor who tells Tom that he was “always . . . to yourself” (148).

²¹As More says, “only in man does the self miss itself, *fall* from itself (hence *lapsometer!*)” (36).

²²Compare with the first stanza of Hopkins’ poem, *Pied Beauty*: “Glory be to God for dappled things/ For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;/ For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;/ Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;/ Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;/ And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim” (*Poems and Prose* 30).

²³Percy speaks to this sacramental understanding of life in a letter written to Shelby Foote regarding *Love in the Ruins*: “I have in mind a futuristic novel dealing with the decline and fall of the U.S., the country rent almost hopelessly between the rural knotholed right and the godless and alienate left, worse than the Civil War. Of that and the goodness of God, and of the merriness of living quite anonymously in the suburbs, drinking well, cooking out, attending Mass at the usual silo-and-barn, the goodness of Brunswick bowling alleys (the good white maple and plastic balls), coming home of an evening, with the twin rubies of the TV transmitter in the evening sky, having 4 drinks of good sourmash and assaulting one’s wife in an armchair, etc. What we Catholics call the Sacramental Life” (Tolson 338-339).

²⁴Pridgen notes that More's "response to these masses and the Eucharist was a Kierkegaardian aesthetic response; that is, he valued these celebrations of Christ's sacrifice not because they reminded him of his brotherhood with all humanity in the suffering and death that all wait to be redeemed from, but because the rituals made him feel good" (163).

²⁵As Mary Sweeny notes, the "act which saves him is his prayer for help when the soul of his true love is threatened. His humility and acknowledgment of free will give him back his own sovereignty" (51). Similarly, Pridgen says that when "Tom banishes Art and the angelism he represents with his prayer [...], Tom is [...] prayer recognizing a knowledge beyond his own angelic intellect and assenting to the possibility of a source of information about life beyond his *cogito* and desires" (152).

²⁶Percy describes her thusly: "Ellen Oglethorpe is a beautiful but tyrannical Presbyterian. A ripe Georgia persimmon not a peach, she fairly pops the buttons of her nurse's uniform with her tart ripeness. She burgeons with marriageable Presbyterianism. It somehow happens that the strict observance of her religion gives her leave to be free with her own person" (155).

²⁷Pridgen observes, though, that More fails to recognize the Incarnational implications of the Eucharist, that it "celebrates the union of the flesh and spirit and the love incarnate in Christ" (*Landscapes*, 162).

²⁸De Lubac is appropriate here when he writes that to "see in Catholicism, one religion among others, one system among others, even if it be added that it is the only true religion, the only system that works, is to mistake its very nature, or at least to stop at the threshold" (*Catholicism* 298).

²⁹More notes that Alistair and his "boy friend Raymond" would sit in More's patio "on their broad potato-fed English asses, and speak of the higher things, of the law of life—and of the financial needs of their handicraft retreat in Mexico" (67). More speaks of their hypocrisy thus: "Here they sat on my patio, these two Fake English gurus, speaking of the law of spiritual growth, all the while swilling my scotch and eating three-dollar rib-eye steaks that I barbecued on my patio grill. They spoke of Hindoo reverence for life, including cattle, and fell upon my steaks like jackals" (67). He also notes the sad irony that "of all cuckolds in history" he is the "first American to be cuckolded by *two* English fruits" (69).

³⁰Hardy maintains that the difference that occurs in Tom More does so because he is "in a situation which renders him more *susceptible* of Grace" (138). Commensurate with proper Catholic doctrine, however, this grace works "however obscurely through the agency of the Church's sacraments—

themselves necessarily imperfect since they must be administered by the imperfect, human priest” (138).

³¹One of More’s first acts in joining the community around him is to organize the local “SOUP” chapter—“Southerners and Others United to Preserve the Union in Repayment of an old Debt to the Yankees Who Saved It Once Before and Are Destroying It Now” (401).

³²As Sweeny notes, “in the epilogue, Tom makes his confession, makes public his faith, and reaches out to others in the community of faith” (68). Desmond adds that More’s “newfound stability in marriage, family, and work helps him to reconnect with the ‘thread in the labyrinth,’ the sacramental life” (132).

CHAPTER FIVE

Sic et Non: Sacramental and Anti-Sacramental Confession in Lancelot

Introduction

Barely three pages into Percy's fourth novel, *Lancelot* (1977), the book's eponymous protagonist proclaims, "I've nothing to say" (L 5). No more ironic words were ever spoken by a Percy character. Without a doubt, Lancelot Andrewes ("Lance") Lamar has quite a bit to say; all but the last two pages of the novel consists of a one-sided "dialogue" between Lance and his old friend Percival, who has since become Father John, a Catholic priest. No mere friendly banter this, however. Having been committed to the "Center for Aberrant Behavior" for his murderous conduct, Lance chooses Percival to hear his complaint and apology for his crimes. At the beginning of the second chapter, Lance states: "I have a confession to make" (L 9). On the surface, it appears that Lance simply confesses his feigned ignorance concerning Percival's identity; he had pretended not to recognize Percival the day before and wishes to make amends for his deception. However, since Lance's friend is also an ordained priest, we must examine whether Lamar's "confession" may mean more than he intends, his small cell possibly serving as a confessional.

In Lance's confession and its murderous details, Percy demonstrates the dangers of living apart from the communal grace of the sacraments in fa-

vor of an individualist and humanist ethic.¹ As Brinkmeyer observes, *Lancelot* is clearly “Percy’s most intense and most upsetting novel” (155). Although *Lancelot* is, on its surface, the least explicitly Catholic of Percy’s novels, it nevertheless gives a fictional embodiment to the necessity of the sacramental life through its absence. Although Lance ostensibly purports to offer a confession, he fails to participate in an authentic ecclesial sacrament, Percival’s presence notwithstanding. In its place Lance offers a mock-secular confession, an accusation of modernity coupled with a detailed justification for his behavior, rather than a true confession of sins. With Lance’s accusation, Percy’s narrative style begins to unravel, for it is unclear where Lance ends and the novel’s increasingly vitriolic author begins. The absence of any true sacrament may explain the disintegration.

Lancelot: Diary of a Madman

As Lance tells Percival, “in order for you to understand what happened at Belle Isle [Lance’s home] and why I am here, you must understand exactly how it was that day a year ago” (*L* 24). Tolson summarizes the plot succinctly:

Embarked on a quest to uncover the mechanism of evil in his wife’s adultery—and, thereby, at least some possibility of a spiritual order in the cosmos—Lancelot uncovers a more profound evil in himself, an emptiness that allows him to commit the sin of murder with an almost chillingly scientific indifference. (403)

It is helpful, however, to have a more fully detailed understanding of the novel's plot so that we may hopefully better understand Lance's justification for his actions.

The novel consists of Lance's first person narration during the latter part of his confinement to a prison psychiatry ward, euphemistically named the "Center for Aberrant Behavior." On five occasions, he is visited by his old friend Percival, a former Catholic priest who has abandoned his vows and since become a psychiatrist. Whether due to his status as priest-psychiatrist or as a trusted friend, Percival becomes the recipient of Lance's novel-long complaint. Though Percival does not utter a single word during Lance's lengthy, torturous condemnation until the novel's end, Percival is still a vital presence. While Lance not once expresses regret for his actions, the effect of his words on Percival is still crucial. Thus when Percival *does* finally speak, the reader knows something important is taking place.

The story begins on November 2, which is, not coincidentally, All Souls' Day, the Day of the Dead. This day is a significant one, for it is a time devoted to prayers by loved ones for dead souls who have not been fully cleansed from their earthly sins. In part, it serves as a reminder to those living that purgation is necessary to enter paradise. The choice of this day coupled with the novel's epigraph from Dante indicates that Lance, if not Percival, stands in need of cleansing. Indeed, Lance knows that he has occupied a form of hell himself, but believes that he has found the way out. He claims

that his “life is divided into two parts,” the first characterized by an apathetic malaise, the second by a violent, radical condemnation of the current age’s moral failures (*L* 19). Thus, he plans to build a new world based upon “Nietzschean ‘Superman’ values and southern chivalry” (Tolson 403).

Lance’s “rebirth” occurs upon his discovery that he is not the legitimate father of his youngest daughter, Siobhan. Rather, her real father is his wife Margot’s lover, a film director named, fittingly enough, Merlin. Rather than exact immediate revenge on his wife and her lover, Lamar instead sets out to seek his own “unholy grail.” He hopes to prove the existence of evil because he does not “know what a sin is” (155). If sin does not exist, Lamar argues, then neither does God. Throughout his continual diatribe against the evils of the age, Lamar’s indictment grows ever more vitriolic. He continually reminds Percival that “he will not tolerate” this age. By the novel’s end, Lance recounts the horrible events that led to his current incarceration.

He decides to quicken God’s judgment upon this evil time. Belle Isle has become home to a cadre of actors and moviemakers who are filming at a nearby site, his wife Margot having taken up acting relatively late in life. According to Lance, these moviemakers corrupt everyone around them, encouraging the townspeople to imitate their empty behavior. Not content to be merely a righteous judge, Lance decides to be executioner as well. He sets fire to Belle Isle, killing four people, including Margot and her new lover, an obtuse actor named Jacoby. By the time Lancelot recounts this apocalyptic

event, Percival, having returned to the priesthood, is ready to speak to his old friend. The question then becomes, what will Father John say? Will he too speak a word of condemnation? Or will he deliver the “good news” to his murderous friend? The narrator does not say, though he does provide many hints. Before we address this enigmatic conclusion, however, we must examine Lance’s condemnation in greater detail.

Lancelot’s Diagnosis: An Indictment of Modernity

By using Lance as his first-person narrator, Percy has the freedom to offer trenchant criticism of both the world and the church. As Percy readily admits, *Lancelot* is “an attack on the 20th century, on the whole culture. It is a rotten century, we are in terrible trouble” (*Conversations* 209). In every novel, Percy unabashedly identifies the many problems he finds latent within the modern world, and *Lancelot* is no exception. Indeed, Percy laments that the “end of modern times will be the end of Christendom as we know it” (*Conversations* 281). Percy expresses these concerns in the one-sided dialogue between Percival and Lance.

Initially, Lance is skeptical of Percival, not sure if his old friend is a “psychiatrist or a priest or a priest-psychiatrist” (*L* 4). Lance expresses Percy’s own conviction that far too many priests and nuns have secularized their calling, going into “social work” or “counseling” rather than preaching and incarnating the unadorned message of salvation (*L* 5). For all his problems, Lance can still diagnose his former friend’s condition quite well, noting

that he has been more “abstracted than usual” (*L* 6). In Lance’s mind, such abstractions could be due to Percival’s being either a “screwed-up priest” or a “half-assed physician” (*L* 10). Hence Lance’s conviction that his friend is not true to either vocation, but believes himself to be free enough to live in the no man’s land between the two. Lance will prove to be quite a complicated figure. Though he is a resident of the “Center for Aberrant Behavior,” he is yet perspicacious enough to diagnose the problems of both his old classmate and of the world itself (*L* 3).²

The impetus for this novel-length confession as well as for Lance’s incarceration is his furiously violent and destructive reaction to his wife’s persistent adultery. Lance’s ethical fury is seen primarily in his obsession with Margot’s sexual purity. Rather than love her for her own sake, Lance completely objectifies Margot, elevating her body “to the level of a sacrament” (Desmond, *Crossroads* 70).³ As Hobson notes, Lance, “a self-proclaimed scientist of the human heart, regards Margot not as a woman—as she reminds him just before she dies—but as an object to be studied” (94). Because she is *his* object, the “sole obsession” of his “very life” thus becomes “to determine whether or not Margot slept with Merlin” (*L* 89). Percival sees to the heart of Lance’s narcissism, asking his friend numerous times whether he loved his wife (*L* 89). For all his vocational confusion, Percival is still familiar with official Church teaching:

Without the help of grace, men would not know how “to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to

evil, and the violence which under the illusion of fighting evil only makes it worse.” This is the path of charity. (*CCC* 1889)

Such “love of God and of neighbor” is “the greatest social commandment,” respecting “others and their rights” (*CCC* 1889).

Ruminating about whether he did in fact love his wife, Lance responds that the older he gets, “the less [he knows] about such large subjects” (*L* 89). He does say, though, that “there was a time just before and after [they] were married when [he] could not *not* touch her. There was no getting enough of her” (*L* 89). Lance admits that, rather than love, his only “emotion was a sense of suddenly coming alive” through sex (*L* 90). He further confesses that he was not sure what the “word [love] means,” but that “it was good between” them (*L* 117). The selflessness that Christian charity requires is anathema to Lance, his concern being solely with his own pleasure and power.⁴ Again, Lance’s “love” involves treating those around him as mere objects, admitting that he loved Margot if

loving her is wanting her all the time, wanting even the sight of her, and being away from her was like being short of breath, and seeing her, just catching sight of her at a distance, was a home-coming to a happy home and a rising of heart. (*L* 118-119)

Desmond adds that “the fact that [Lance] identifies sex with love is the major blind spot in his vision” (*Crossroads* 66).

Lance’s moral detachment is readily seen in the “movies” that he makes to prove his suspicions. The novel continues Percy’s lifelong fascination with movies, though Lancelot Lamar is hardly on the same existential

quest as Binx. As Percy says, Lance “doesn’t like the vulgarization of culture, and the increase in what he sees as immorality, and the crookedness, corruption, politics. But unlike [Binx Bolling and Will Barrett], he does not undertake an interior quest” (*More Conversations* 79). Rather than being a mere moviegoer, Lance becomes an actual movie *maker*, with help from his black retainer, a MIT-educated helper named Elgin. He captures not only Margot’s sexual infidelity; he discovers his daughter’s Lucy aberrant sexual behavior as well.⁵ Such revelations only confirm his suspicions about the corruption of our age.

In his many conversations with Percival, Lance confesses a preoccupation with evil, a desire to prove God’s existence negatively. By capturing his wife’s infidelity and his daughter’s promiscuity on film—a twisted, almost Dantesque representation of sin—Lance provides the warped justification he needs for his self-devised apocalypse.⁶ In the end, Lance comes to believe that the “secret of [American] life is violence and rape, and its gospel is pornography” (*L* 224). Lance is so detached from the consequences of his actions that he remembers the “most unpleasant experience” of his murderous actions to have been the “damn fiberglass” that found its way “under [his] sleeve and collar” and made his “neck and arms itch just to think about it” (*L* 229). Ciuba argues that this seemingly small detail has greater implications than first apparent. It shows that Lance

ends in a hellish version of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage. Since he lives at nerves’ end, he recognizes only a stimulus and his ir-

ritated response. Lancelot knows no sense of sin but merely pure sensation, the only feeling left when all human feelings have been lost. (Ciuba 187)

Lance's warped views of sexuality are made clear in his twisted sacramentalism. Rather than seeing the Eucharist as the earthly union between the transcendent and the immanent and thus reflecting the Incarnation, Lance elevates sex alone to the place held by the sacrament of marriage, viewing the "sanctuary of bedrooms as enclosing a similar rapture of transcendent intimacy" (Ciuba 186). He maintains that the "orgasm is the only earthly infinity" that is itself "either an infinite good or an infinite evil" (*L* 140). Jacoby, the film director, affirms Lance's view of sex when he proclaims that in the movie they "are trying to get across [...] that it is not just screwing, though there is nothing wrong with that either, but a kind of sacrament and a celebration of life" (*L* 148). Elevating Margot to an almost Venus-like idol, Lance confirms that his wife Margot was a "feast," his communion,⁷ as he worshipped in that "sweet dark sanctuary guarded by the heavy gold columns of her thighs, the ark of her covenant" (*L* 171).⁸ As Tharpe argues:

By this point, Lancelot has linked sex and religion. His attempt to define his love for Margot and the loss he feels, a joyful positive and a dark negativity, approaches both a definition of a mystical experience of God's love and a definition of evil resembling that of St. Augustine and St. Thomas. This love for woman, which is the highest that Lancelot knows, resembles the love for God which Percival presumably has come to know. (97)

Such love is, therefore, ultimately blasphemous.

It is thus clear that Lancelot Lamar also has little regard for the sacramentality of marriage. According to the Catholic Church, this sacrament

involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving [...] . In a word it is a question of the normal characteristics of all natural conjugal love, but with a new significance which not only purifies and strengthens them, but raises them to the extent of making them the expression of specifically Christian values. (CCC 1643)

Indeed, human sexuality “is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such” (CCC 2361). Lance concurs that sexuality is “not merely an item on a list of human needs like food, shelter, [and] air”; rather, it is a “unique ecstasy, ek-stasis, which is a kind of possession” (L 21).⁹ He recognizes the inherently powerful nature of sex and does not reduce it to mere animal passions. However, he nevertheless fails to recognize the sacramental quality of sex, ascribing its power, ultimately, to mere physics. Lance admits that his wife’s “fornication, anybody’s fornication, amounts to no more than molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves—no different in kind from that housefly scrubbing his wings under my hair” (L 89).

Lancelot’s Solution: A Brave New World of the Strong and Pure

When Lance realizes that he cannot be the father of his youngest daughter, his descent into moral madness quickens. Although he fails to see

the gross sinfulness in his own life, Lance easily recognizes the sin in both individuals and the whole nation. Unlike Tom More, whose sense of right and wrong is informed by his Catholic faith, however pale it may be, Lance has no ethical compass outside himself. He hopes for a time when we “will do right, not because of Jew-Christian commandments, but because we say it is right” (*L* 178). This is clearly a madman’s confession, one driven to lunacy by his radical devotion to an upside-down ethical system.¹⁰ In allegedly searching for his own holy grail, Lance becomes instead preoccupied with an unholy grail, the positive existence of evil, that ultimately takes control of him.

Lance foresees the need for a new beginning, a fresh start. Thus he begins with his own household by setting fire to Belle Isle. At first, we might be tempted to think that this violent act is a logical consequence of his desire to make a new world, to purge the old one of its patent immorality. However, it seems more likely that Lance has simply tired of playing the cuckolded husband and decides to punish his wife and three of her friends for their wickedness. So detached is Lamar from the moral consequences of his actions that when he risks his life to enter the inferno of Belle Isle, he does so only to retrieve his favorite Bowie knife. Looking at the carnage he had caused, Lance could even state without hesitation that he did not “feel bad” (*L* 246). His purgation of the world, if not himself, had begun.

We might be tempted to think that Lance’s actions are those of a man consumed with a holy zeal. After all, he not only recognizes the evil of this

age, but also vows “not [to] tolerate” it (*L* 156). Percy declares that indeed part of what pushes

Lancelot to madness and puritanical revolution is the increasingly bland, permissive Christianity that regards sin as merely sickness, and asks a man to forgive an unfaithful wife, to cheerfully accept the challenge to the womb posed by women’s lib. (*Conversations* 154)

Though he is fascinated with evil and believes he can find God only through a search for evil, Lance admits that he still “does not know what a sin is” (*L* 155).¹¹ His desire to purge evil from the world comes from his claim to be a “sober, reasonable, and honorable man” who has the freedom to act with “perfect sobriety, reason and honor” (*L* 156).

Rather than ushering in the kingdom of God, Lance wishes to start a “new order of things” and establish a new breed of gentleman who will not tolerate moral turpitude (*L* 156). He defines this new world by a “stern rectitude valued by the new breed and marked by the violence which will attend its breach” rather than “based on Catholicism or Communism or fascism or liberalism or capitalism or any ism at all” (*L* 158). Lance’s ideal community consists of a savage Stoicism,¹² a world where “we will know each other as gentlemen” and have a common belief based on “a stern code, a gentleness toward woman and an intolerance of swinishness” (*L* 157). Such a violent outlook is the logical revolt against a world without sin, for if sin does not exist, then “there is no need for repentance or forgiveness, for there is nothing to be forgiven or reconciled” (Desmond, *Community* 144). Although Lance

wishes to found “an ethical utopia where goodness will prevail without recourse to faith,” the “hope is totally divorced from reality, therefore mad” (Hobson 98).

In Lance’s new order, right and wrong are defined by the pure will of the world’s new leaders, those who are “strong and pure of heart” for “their own sake” rather than “for Christ’s sake” (*L* 178). Lance romanticizes this hypothetical society, thinking that “life there will be based on the codes of courtesy and chivalry by which [he] believes noble men of the past acted” (Brinkmeyer 157). Lance concludes that this fresh beginning lies in Virginia, where the original “new world” began. He hopes to start this new order with Anna, a former social worker and fellow inmate who suffered the ignominy of being gang-raped by the youths she gave her life to help. She has since been rendered mute because of the savagery she experienced. Lance maintains—in the way only a madman could—that she has thus been purified by such horrors and is worthy of being by his side as they start afresh. For all his talk about seeking purity, however, Lance remains “more an evil seeker than a holy seer” (Ciuba 185).

Confession or Apologetic? The Sacraments in Lancelot

It is hardly coincidental that Lance declares he has “a confession to make” to his priestly friend (*L* 9). On the surface, it appears that Lance only wishes to apologize for feigned ignorance regarding Percival’s identity. Since the novel primarily consists, however, of Lance enumerating his allegedly

righteous revenge and offering justification for his actions, we must ask whether Lance may have a more theological purpose in mind. After all, his old friend is certainly qualified to provide the sacrament of confession. As Hardy notes, “Percival receives [Lance’s discourse] –almost without exception from beginning to end—with exactly the customary air (always so disappointing to the imaginative penitent) of the priest in the confessional” (173). However, proper confession necessarily entails the recognition that one has sinned and that God will be ultimately merciful. The Catholic Church says of this sacrament:

It is called the *sacrament of confession*, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a "confession"—acknowledgment and praise—of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man. (CCC 1424)

As we see, Lance has no such understanding. In writing Lance’s non-sacramental confession, Percy offers an implicit literary critique of the vulgar biographical “confessions” so prevalent in the modern world.¹³ While Lance holds nothing back, he also does not submit to any form of divine judgment. The Church explicitly maintains that the following is necessary for true penance to occur:

Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. (CCC 1431)

Divorced from the formal penitential office of the Church, Lance instead offers a confession characterized more by sentimentalism and self-righteousness than by humility and repentance. However, his ignorance does not mean that *Lancelot*, in the end, does not hint at the possibility of redemption, even if it is not Lance who is redeemed.

So long as Lance remains unwilling to recognize the stark immorality of his actions, he cannot come to faith, although Catholicism's clear teachings on morality are not the only stumbling blocks Lance must face. His aversion to the "banality of the past" will prevent his coming to the faith as well (*L* 105). He confesses to Percival that for him "the past, any past, is intolerable, not because it is violent or terrible or doomstruck or any such thing, but just because it is so goddamn banal and feckless and useless" (*L* 105).¹⁴ Lance privileges the present moment because "mystery lies in the here and now" rather than in a supposedly noble past. In contrast, Catholic dogma understands that the past is far from a burden or "useless." Rather, the past gives rise to the Church's rich theological tradition, something not easily discarded. As G.K. Chesterton astutely observes in *Orthodoxy*, tradition is the "democracy of the dead" (47). It is fitting that Lance's confession occurs near All Saint's Day, a time reserved for recalling the faithfulness of those departed. In confronting their past faithfulness, Lance could have been prompted to his own repentance. The danger of neglecting the rich tradition of the Church, Percy implicitly argues, is a necessary abandonment of the saving grace of

the sacraments. In their stead, we are left with “Ideo-Personal-Dynamics” (*L* 111), a “California-created idea which is supposed to fill up the spiritual vacuum created by the failure of Christianity to say anything meaningful to twentieth-century consumers” (Hobson 98). In a world where Christianity is not a viable option, Percy intimates, people will “turn to superstition and science to fill the spiritual vacuum created” (Hobson 99).¹⁵

By the time the novel begins, Lance has been pronounced “cured” by the hospital and relieved of any legal burden for his actions. While Lance accepts his cure without question, he does not turn away from his evil actions, for he does not even recognize that he has, in fact, sinned. For Lamar lacks the necessary conviction for true repentance to occur: “It is in discovering the greatness of God’s love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin being separated from him” (*CCC* 1432). Lance feels no such fear, nor does he admit to his sin, which is “before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him” (*CCC* 1440). Rather than simply accepting his cure, for true confession and penance to take place Lance must “still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for his sin” (*CCC* 407).

Not only is Lance not willing to make amends, he has never acknowledged any spiritual health to be recovered. The Church clearly requires three steps for true penance: contrition, confession of sins, and satisfaction (*CCC* 1450). Lance seemingly fulfills the second requirement. After all, the novel

from beginning to end contains a proud litany of Lance's deeds; however, what a faithful Catholic would see as sins in need of repentance become occasions for Lance's boasting. We see no regret on his part, nor any desire to change his sinful ways.

In contrast to Percy's previous protagonists such as Binx Bolling or Tom More, Lance has no faith to abandon. Rather, he ostensibly rejects Christianity in favor of his own, privately formed stoicism.¹⁶ However, the narrator does give us glimpses of what is necessary for Lance to come to faith. First, he must be willing to embrace the primacy of community over solitariness. We see a threadbare hope for such community, even while he is involuntarily incarcerated. His "confession" to Percival points him in that direction, as do his attempts at communication with his fellow inmate, Anna. Still, the one-sided portrayal of their discourse reflects the deadly price Lance has paid by refusing all communal existence and confessional faith.

Thus, while Percy might agree with much of Lance's diagnosis,¹⁷ he nevertheless disputes Lance's cutthroat cure. As Tharpe writes, Percy "does not reject Lancelot. He writes Lancelot's tirade. He rejects Lancelot's plan" (102). While Percy may even share Lance's indictment of the state of Roman Catholicism, in the end Percy knows from personal experience that the transformative grace of the Church and her sacraments is the only salve for the world's wounds.¹⁸ Percy subtly condemns Lance because Lance finds the answer in apocalyptic righteousness, rather than the Church's transformative

grace. Attempting to justify his brutal behavior, Lance reminds Percival that “it was your Lord who said he came to bring not peace but a sword” (*L* 179). Though Percival does not speak until the end, Lance still reports that his priestly friend can sense he is “full of hatred, anger” (*L* 179). This recognition will lead to a radical reformation in Percival.

Father John’s Return

In *Lancelot*, Percy plays with the reader’s expectations from beginning to end. Although Lance confesses, it is Percival who ultimately does penance. For he has seen the dreadful consequences of his old friend’s attempt to live apart from the sacramental life of the church. In fact, he even decides to return to the priesthood. If anyone shows us the social nature and effects of confession, it is Percival, whose reinvigorated faith will allow him to “take a little church in Alabama” so he can “preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers” and “administer Communion to suburban housewives,” not unlike Val’s ministry to backwards, impoverished blacks in *The Last Gentleman* (*L* 256).

This transformed faith is more than a devotion to “belief and social commitment,” as Deborah J. Barrett has argued in an otherwise convincing essay (11). Rather, it is a life-changing restoration, a renewed devotion to the sacramental community that Lance rejects.¹⁹ As O’Gorman argues:

For Percival, such a seemingly ordinary world is new beginning enough, once renewed eternally and shot through with the goodness of an ever-ongoing Creation. The image of the Eucharist

here, of a God who comes again and again into the mundane circumstances of contemporary lives, suggests as much. (192)

Rather than Lance's failed hunt for the "unholy grail," Percival "finds the Holy Grail in the communion given and received" (Ciuba 200). Lance's erstwhile chum will do penance for his being a "screwed-up priest" and a "half-assed physician" (*L* 10). Percival's desire to serve Christ and his church displays the "radical reorientation of our whole life" that the Catechism discusses (*CCC* 1432).

As Percy notes, Percival's decision involves sacrifice, for his return to the priesthood will require him to give up "his psychiatrist [practice], his business, and his girlfriend" (*More Conversations* 10).²⁰ His taking of the Alabama church will serve as his expiation for failing to live up to his priestly vocation. Percival's reaffirmed vocation will have "a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of her members" (*CCC* 1469). By hearing Lance enumerate (though not lament) his many sins, Percival recognizes his own evils and is consequently "healed and re-established in ecclesial communion" (*CCC* 1448). As de Lubac argues, in "the efficacy of penance [...] the relationship is quite clear [...] between sacramental forgiveness and the social regeneration of the sinner" (*Catholicism* 87). Father John's return confirms de Lubac's thesis that "the whole apparatus of public penance and pardon make it clear that the reconciliation of the sinner is in the first place a reconciliation with the Church" (*Catholicism* 87). Indeed, there can be "no return to the grace of God without a return to the commun-

ion of the Church” (*Catholicism* 88). As in previous Percy novels where the sacraments play such a vital role, the importance of their communal role is confirmed in *Lancelot*.

Though we hear only a few words from Percival, we can nevertheless observe important changes that are taking place in his life due to Lance’s horrible self-revelation. Lance initially chides his friend for being “neither fish nor fowl,” neither a committed priest nor a practicing psychiatrist (*L* 5). At the beginning of chapter seven, however, Lance wonders why his old friend has once again donned his “priest uniform” (*L* 163). Though his transformation is subtle, Percival’s recommitment to his priestly vocation occurs alongside Lance’s description of his violent acts. His priestly garb is an outward confirmation of the inward change effected in part by Lance’s unintended role as confessor. Indeed, it is no small stretch to affirm along with Hardy that “Percival himself is redeemed; redeemed again, one might say, in the effect of Lance’s story upon him” (185). Percival’s clerical garb “argues that he will henceforth present himself as the visible church, as a clear alternative to the profanity in which he finds himself” (Lawson, *Following* 188).²¹ Once again Father John, he is indeed “girding for battle,” as Lance observes (*L* 163). This change in Percival’s outward appearance “shows that the madman’s words have had a substantial effect on him. Thus, the story is as much Percival’s story of rediscovering his faith as it is Lance’s confession” (Hobson 95).

In the end, we learn that Lance is declared “psychiatrically fit and legally innocent” (*L* 249). However, Percy knows that these medical and legal categories fall short of describing the real problem in Lance’s life, that of his unconfessed sin. Though he blames his actions on a quest for sin (and hence for God), Lance in the end indulges in a modern Gnosticism, denying “sin as a human act of disobedience to God” (Lawson, *Following* 184). While Lance has engaged in a confession of sorts, he still lacks the resolution of spirit required for necessary repentance. Lance’s search for the grail of pure evil has failed him, and the “the reason [for this failure] is that he can neither get beyond the facts of the flesh nor read the signs of his own spiritual perversion” (*L* 186). Percival at last recognizes that Lance’s problem is theological and moral, not legal and medical. Hence his “long face, the frowning preoccupation” (*L* 249).

Lance and Percival have discovered two very different truths by this time. Percival will move to Alabama and assume the humble role of a local parish priest, administering the sacraments to undistinguished parishioners while Lance holds to his delusory notion that the “great secret of life” lies in “the ignominious joy of rape and being raped” (*L* 252).²² It is now clearly evident that “Lance is obviously mad,” as “Percy blends Lance’s genius and his madness so seamlessly that the reader needs to think hard in order not to miss the point” (Hobson 96). While Lamar has viciously condemned the moral failures of our time, he is blind to his own serious shortcomings. By al-

lowing Lance to dominate the “conversation,” Percival allows his friend to condemn himself. Lance’s words and actions stand in direct opposition to one another. Indeed, Lancelot Lamar is ultimately no different from those whom he so virulently condemns.²³

While a transformation has been effected in Percival, Lance fails to recognize the stark sinfulness of *his* actions, thus denying the possibility of true confession. Lancelot admits as much: “No, no confession forthcoming, Father, as you well know” (*L* 253). However, his outpouring “can be called a preconfession or self-examination [...] and that movement at least *provisionally* opens the door to the power of sacramental grace” (Desmond, *Community* 148) even if Lance “does not seek sacramental aid” from his redeemed friend (Hardy 173). Though Lance is not completely unaffected by his choices (he admits that feels “nothing now except a certain coldness”), he concedes the failure of his great experiment: there was “no discovery, no flickering of interest, nothing at all, not even any evil” (*L* 253). Still, Percival’s priestly presence has had its effect, as Lamar confirms that “something has changed” in him (*L* 254). While Lance “was talking and changing,” Percival was “listening and changing,” so much so that by the end Percival has become, once again, Father John (*L* 254).²⁴ He has reassumed the mantle of the priesthood. Lance believed that he could prove the existence of God negatively, and though he may have failed in that lofty goal, his narrative did drive his old friend back to the priesthood and to sacramental grace.

Percy's Kierkegaardian Indirection

The novel's end demonstrates Percy's Kierkegaardian subtlety and may be his "greatest coup of indirection" (Hobson 104). Through a series of affirmative responses to Lance's queries, we know that Percival has a message for his friend, one that Percy refuses to flesh out for the reader, noting the "esthetic limitations of the novel-form" (*More Conversations* 146). Such an omission is perhaps the novel's chief literary strength. Not unlike Flannery O'Connor, Percy knows that the language of faith has been worn thin through abuse,²⁵ and he declines to fill in the blanks of Percival's gospel convictions.²⁶ Percival has been a patient, though active listener, and the time has come for him to speak, though we are not made privy to the conversation.²⁷ Lance has made the choice between two extremes very clear, and his old friend agrees that there is no Laodicean middle ground. So, when Lance asks his friend if he has anything to say after Lance's rambling tirade, Percival's clear "Yes" may very well be his clear, angular presentation of the gospel by "offering a man deep in sin the discipline of Christian faith," a holy moment Percy will not engender (Hobson 100).

Percy recognizes that "the main criticism of [his] novels is that they all end indecisively, which is very deliberate. They'd be in big trouble if they ended decisively" (*Conversations* 280). Percival's "preaching," while subtle, is nevertheless potent, for as Simone Vauthier notes, "Percival never presses Catholic doctrine upon his listener. [...] yet when asked to, he never fails to

advance his experience” (195). Still, Percy’s characterization of the protagonist in *Lancelot* falls far short of what he achieved with, say, Binx Bolling, whose internal, philosophical complexity has been replaced by a hortatory madman.

With a mere thirteen monosyllables,²⁸ Percival bespeaks Percy’s insistence that while a prophetic word *is* necessary, it is impossible for literature to capture such a moment. For him to end this novel with an “altar call” would lessen the power of the novel’s implicit unspoken insight. As a novelist and not a preacher, Percy is not “authorized” to “bring the Good News to his readers” (Hardy 185). Percy does speculate that, in the end, “Percival gives [Lance] a similar version of the orthodoxy, of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which can’t be done in a novel. You can’t do it” (*More Conversations* 10). In hearing Lance’s unrepentant narrative of clear acts of evil, this physician-priest rediscovers the reality of sin and a necessary response. Before he can preach the gospel to Alabamians, Percival, a “true vessel of grace,” must first speak to his friend about the necessity of grace in his life (Ciuba 195).

Percy makes it clear that the key to the entire novel lies on the last couple of pages, when Lance declares that, in the end, it will either be his way or Percival’s, no middle way.²⁹ Having rediscovered the value of a priestly and sacramental life, Father John will perhaps teach his friend that “the Holy Grail is not glimpsed in fitful visions of transcendence but embodied in full communion” (Ciuba 194). The novel’s epigraph from Dante could

be Percy's subtle indication that Lancelot may be ready for a journey to "purgatory," with Percival as his initial guide.³⁰ As Tharpe writes, what "Percival has left to tell Lancelot is, of course, everything he has not heard. [...] Percival will talk to him about Paradise, as the apostle with authority to speak of the grace of God" (103).

While Lance may be physically and legally "cured," he is still sick in a way that only a minister of the gospel, an apostle, may address.³¹ As Hardy argues, Percy is quite critical of the "*whole* system of justice" that depends upon "various 'experts'—legal, medical, or other—to make all our decisions for us" (144). The message that Lance needs to hear will not be delivered by a state-sponsored legal or mental health system. Percival's positive message is subtle, to be sure, and will thus involve the radical claim (for Lance, anyway) that "only love, not vengeance, can redeem the world" (Hardy 184). Indeed, as Tolson notes, the message was "so subtly made that many people ignored it" (363). Percy's biographers note the personal difficulties that he endured while writing *Lancelot* only to emerge with his faith and hope renewed. Percy had "been in hell" and "had made it through" (Tolson 363). One can hope the same for Lance.

The Foreshadowing of Percy's Literary Decline

Lancelot marks a significant departure in Percy's prose compared to his previous work. With *Lancelot*, we can see how Percy's vitriolic condemnation of modern society begins to affect his prose itself, though the effect is not

as pronounced as it is in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.³² The gap between the philosophic musings of *The Last Gentleman* and the satirical stabs of *Love in the Ruins* is miniscule compared to the leap that Percy makes in his fourth novel. As Tolson observes, Percy himself went through a “kind of personal hell to create *Lancelot*,” which may partially explain why the line between Percy’s personal fury and his literary creation is blurred in this novel (362).³³ From *Lancelot* forward, we become witness to Percy’s literary fury. His anger is not the self-righteous moralizing of the religious right. Rather, his holy rage condemns conservative and liberal alike for America’s failings. In every one of his novels, the protagonist becomes a mouthpiece for Percy himself, and his disappointment in the modern world is evident. Percy confesses that he writes better when he is angry, and this rage is evident in Lance’s condemnation of contemporary America. However, Percy’s indignation is ultimately tempered by the redemptive grace of the Church that Percival (and Percy himself) receives. Thus, we err if we neglect the novel’s value because of the author’s minor deficiencies.³⁴ Alas, *Lancelot* also marks the beginning of the end of Percy’s literary embodiment of sacramental grace.

Notes

¹In many ways, *Lancelot* shows the logical outcome of Rita Vaught's, if not Emily Cutrer's, secular humanism.

²We should always filter Lancelot's "wisdom" through his madness. *Lancelot* is, in the end, still a novel about "the violence and hatred of a man gone mad" (Brinkmeyer 155).

³As Lance says, "I loved her sexually in such a way that I could not *not* touch her. My happiness was being with her. My old saturninity vanished. I hugged and kissed her in the street, necked in the car like white trash in the daytime, felt her up under the table in restaurants, and laughed like a boy to see her blush and knock my hand away [...]" (*L* 122).

⁴As Brinkmeyer says, "the life Lancelot is planning will be one of secular chivalry, founded not on charity but on rage" (158). Lance has no room for "Christian forgiveness, which Lance sees as corrupting the true ideal of honor" (O'Gorman 191).

⁵Percy says that the "critics are right [about *Lancelot*] in that the point of satire was to destroy mushy American liberalism. The mushy way of approving everything which is 'life-enhancing' or 'self-improving' or 'how to cultivate personality'" (*Conversations* 210). No greater example of such "mushiness" exists within *Lancelot* than Lance's daughter, Lucy. With her, Percy demonstrates the danger of a "freedom" that is truly no freedom at all. Lucy maintains that her friends Troy and Raine, marked by their lax sexual mores, are "free to make their own lives" (*L* 135). However, the unholy trinity that these three form ("we're equals, a threesome, one for all, all for one") is enslaved to the sensuality that defines their relationship. True freedom, rather, involves "the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility" (*CCC* 1731). Indeed, true human freedom "is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness" that "attains its perfection when directed toward God" rather than human eroticism (*CCC* 1731). While Lance condemns such sexual mores as well, he does so based on his own twisted sense of personal morality, not any higher calling.

⁶Ciuba says of Lance's movie-making that "in the worst form of intellectual pride, Percy's twentieth-century Ethan Brand turns people into parts of his production company" (188).

⁷Of this perverse understanding of Communion, Desmond says that the "sex act is potentially the most intimate act between a man and a woman,

a communion in which they can come closest to knowing each other. Such a communion is both physical and spiritual, a communication of one's very being, and a way of knowing the other. Hence it is potentially most divine, an analogue of the Godhead's communion of love to man, the communion of Himself by which He is made known" (*Crossroads* 67).

⁸Desmond argues that Lance commits a serious error when he tries to understand the problem of sin—a metaphysical problem—through mere empirical means, “reductive empirical categories” (*Crossroads* 69). He adds that this category mistake “reveals the loss of a sacramental view of reality [...]. A sacrament represents the interpenetration of the divine and the physical world, so that the physical becomes mysteriously an instrument or medium of grace. To ‘know’ reality in a sacramental way is to acknowledge the divine spirit which is both manifested within and yet also mysteriously ‘beyond’ the object world. To know reality in a sacramental way requires anagogical vision. Conversely, to betray this vision is to commit idolatry in a literal sense, by making the physical object itself absolutely equitable with the divine. Such a betrayal is evident in Lance’s profane elevation of Margot’s body to the level of a sacrament” (*Crossroads* 69-70).

⁹Unfortunately, Lance does not understand the proper etymology of ecstasy, which literally means to stand outside of oneself. When one is placed in such a transcendent sphere, one cannot regard the other as merely a possession as he does with Margot.

¹⁰Desmond says of Lancelot’s madness that it “reveals Percy’s sense of the direst possible consequences of the Cartesian dilemma—a person so self-absorbed and cut off from real connection to the world that the result is monomania and spiritual obliviousness” (*Community* 145).

¹¹Desmond maintains that Percy uses Lance’s fascination with evil to “probe a central truth about modern Western society—the loss of the sense of sin as a spiritual, metaphysical reality, or to state the matter differently, the loss of a sense of sin as a fundamental flaw in the order of being” (*Crossroads*, 65-66).

¹²As Brinkmeyer argues, Lance’s “observations soon become the distorted ravings of a man who has let his Stoic ideals of honor and courtesy run wild” (155).

¹³For example, see Percy’s wicked satire of “The Last Donahue Show” in *Lost in the Cosmos*, pp. 45ff.

¹⁴Lance is not unlike certain writers that Percy chastises because they labor “under the romantic delusion that if one can escape the particularities and constraints of the past [one can] breathe the pure air of freedom, when in truth what the truly Catholic writer knows, a writer like Flannery O’Connor, that it is only through the particularities of place, time, and history [...] that the writer achieves his art and all of us achieve humanity” (*Signposts* 321).

¹⁵Ciuba adds that Percy’s specific form of apocalyptic in *Lancelot* shows “the way the world looks after all but the ego has disappeared” (171).

¹⁶Lance’s view is not unlike that of Percy’s Uncle Will, who “equates the collapse of his own aristocratic tradition with the loss of virtue and order as such” (R. Wood 139). The clear difference, obviously, is that Lancelot sees violence as the means to restore such order. Percy even admits that Lancelot is “in many ways like Aunt Emily” and carries “Aunt Emily’s ethic to its logical conclusion” (*Conversations* 207, 209). Hobson confirms that in *Lancelot* Percy “was pushing Stoicism to the limit in a character to see what would happen fictionally” (97). O’Gorman argues that “Lancelot Lamar is Aunt Emily gone mad, a spokesman for a grotesque version of the Stoic code of honor” (188). Finally, Desmond adds that “Lance’s monologue can be seen as Percy the religious writer’s exorcism of those dark impulses toward the rhetoric of stoicism and humanism always latent in his vision” (*Crossroads* 55).

¹⁷We fail to understand Percy’s complex presentation of Lancelot if we “label Lance *simply* as a madman, demagogue, murderer, or fascist” (Desmond, *Community* 147). For all his problems, Lance is more complicated than he may first appear.

¹⁸Quinlan discusses the many problems that Percy encountered at this time, not the least of which was his disappointment in the Church’s accommodation of modernity (153-155). Percy’s ire is evident: “I might have tolerated you and your Catholic Church, and even joined it, if you had remained true to yourself. Now you’re part of the age. You’ve the same fleas as the dogs you’ve lain down with” (*L* 157). As both Samway and Tolson make clear, Percy was also going through a particularly dark, depressed time while writing *Lancelot*, “including an increasing reluctance to receive the host at mass” (Tolson 383). Rumors of adultery also abounded. *Lancelot* indeed may be a self-condemnation.

¹⁹Barrett fails to appreciate that “at the center of Father John’s vision of community is the scandal of the word made flesh in the Eucharist, the communion he will dispense to Buick dealers and suburban housewives” (Desmond, *Community* 176).

²⁰We should also remember the sacramental nature of the vows that Percival once took. By doing so, he was marked with “an indelible spiritual character” that cannot be revoked even if he is “discharged from the obligations and functions linked to ordination” (CCC 1582, 1583).

²¹Once again, Percy effects a sacramental transformation not in the protagonist, but in a side-reflecting character. In this way, Percival is not unlike Jamie Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*.

²²Percival, well aware of the Church’s teachings on penance, knows that he must “recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins” (CCC 1459).

²³The irony of this condemnation is readily seen in the visions he recounts of the “Lady of the White Camellia.” Lance’s unholy substitute for the Virgin Mary points to the organization The Knights of the White Camellia, a southern racist group devoted to white supremacy. Percy’s subtle point is that, far too often, those who set themselves up as moral arbitrators indeed themselves stand in need of judgment.

²⁴It is worth noting that John is the baptismal name Percy himself took, perhaps knowing that he would become a writer and serve a similar apocalyptic role as his namesake. The name Percival, obviously, hints at the author himself.

²⁵Percy engenders this awareness in Lancelot, who is “very much aware that the language [of religion] is worn out” (*Conversations* 140).

²⁶Percy actually had written previous versions of the novel with more developed dialogue between Percival and Lancelot; however, Percy notes that “as soon as the priest opened his mouth it was no damn good” because “religious language is shot, just *defunct*” (*Conversations* 155).

²⁷Hobson speculates that Percival’s message may take the following form, by way of a paraphrase of Kierkegaard: “Yes, I have something to tell you, [...] and it is news of where you come from and who you are and what you must do to ensure your eternal happiness” (107).

²⁸Ciuba argues that the strength of Percival’s words belie their scarcity: “Yet Father John is not just a shadowy set of enigmatic inferences about whom it is impossible to say anything certain, for Percy consistently makes his words, actions, and reactions point to his vocation as a bearer of God’s news. Indeed, Percy’s minimalist depiction of the priest is the fictional sign

of his spirit. Father John does not need the self-aggrandizement of a dramatic monologue because he lives in his self-effacement, so reduced to his essentials that he becomes a cipher totally expressive of the mystery that is Other” (196).

²⁹See *Conversations* 155.

³⁰“He sank so low that all means/for his salvation were gone,/except showing him the lost people./For this I visited the region of the dead.”

³¹As Hardy argues, however, we should be skeptical of Lancelot’s claim to be cured because “the delusions of the accomplished ‘cure’ and of imminent discharge are pathetically commonplace among inmates of mental institutions” (141).

³²Consider, for example, Lance’s diatribe in chapter six about how he will not “tolerate this age.” One is not sure if it is Lance’s voice or Percy’s.

³³For example, Lance’s critique of the Catholic church may very well reflect Percy’s own concerns.

³⁴As Shelby Foote states, *Lancelot* is “a good book, sharp, incisive, mean as a booger” (*Correspondence* 221).

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: Sacramental Shadows in Percy's Later Fiction

Percy's Literary and Theological Decline

In 1988, Walker Percy was one of only fourteen laymen asked to address the Pontifical Council for Culture in Rome. Such a request should not be surprising, for after the crisis of faith he endured while writing *Lancelot*, Percy embraced the church with a renewed vigor, even to the point of attending mass every day.¹ Consequently, Percy became a Catholic cultural apologist in his later years. While he did not abandon the social consciousness with which he was raised, he nevertheless rethought his path. Percy would eventually steer to the right theologically, linking abortion and euthanasia with Nazi social engineering.² He celebrated the election of John Paul II to the papacy, praising him as a “*mensch*” who offered “orthodoxy without oppression” (*More Conversations* 125). Unfortunately, Percy’s reaffirmed theological commitment gave rise also to a sub-literary spleen. During his address to the council, Percy “cited all the usual cultural suspects contributing to the spiritual decline of the nation” such as “the deadening power of the mass media, consumerism, and the tyranny of scientific expertise and scientism” (Tolson 473). His criticism of our scientific culture was furious, and his fiction reflects this anger. Though Percy himself becomes more stridently Catholic in later years, his fiction becomes less so. His Catholicism seemingly provides

the vocabulary to express his rising fury at the modern world rather than the possibility of faith expressed in a subtle sacramentalism present in his earlier work. Though Percy certainly became more active in the daily rituals of his faith, it does not follow that he more deeply embraced the sacramental mysteries of the faith in his fiction.

After the publication of *Lancelot*, a noticeable shift occurs in Percy's writing. For the most part, the ironic satirist disappears. In addition, *The Second Coming* (1982) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) are characterized by several other noticeable absences. Neither book deals with the Catholic sacraments in any dramatic or convincing sense, as Percy abandons the theological tension that characterized his earlier fiction. Furthermore, neither novel utilizes the sly Kierkegaardian subtlety that characterized his first four books.³ Yet another casualty of Percy's didactic distemper is the loss of community that necessarily accompanies the Church's sacramental grace; both *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* deemphasize the necessity of the sacraments received in community. While we can still learn much from Percy's last two novels, we must nevertheless recognize that they do not have the theological or literary power of his earlier work, where Percy allows for more irony and theological tension.⁴ The sacraments provide hopeful signs that a "happy ending" may occur, yet Percy is subtle in his presentation of them in his earlier works. With *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syn-*

drome, however, we see the fictive embodiment of the dichotomous “Pope or Los Angeles” thinking that Percy adopted in his later years.

*The Second Coming:
Sentimental Romanticism vs. Sacramental Matrimony*

For his penultimate novel, Percy returns to his favorite character, Will Barrett.⁵ At first, it may seem odd to follow the story of the murderous Lancelot Lamar with the affable Barrett. However, Percy suggests that the progression is a logical one. He argues that Lance and Will “represent opposite solutions to a similar predicament. Lancelot adopts a destructive one, the way of Thanatos, of death. Will adopts a constructive one, the way of Eros, affirming life” (*Conversations* 189). How, though, does Will Barrett “affirm” life? His solution involves a romantic relationship with Allison Huger (Allie) who, initially unbeknownst to Will, is also the daughter of his former love from *The Last Gentleman*, Kitty Vaught.

The Second Coming (1980) takes place some twenty years after the events of *The Last Gentleman*. By this time, Will has become a successful Wall Street lawyer and married a wealthy woman, Marian, whose early death leaves Will with a fifteen million dollar fortune. At first, such wealth would seem to satisfy Will. However, he still thinks he may have missed something valuable in life. While a “successful lawyer,” Barrett is also “bored, despairing, middle-aged” (*SC* 109). Allison Huger, by contrast, is a 19 year-old former mental patient who experiences memory loss because of her

electroshock treatments for mental depression. As Allie herself puts it, she “got straight A’s but flunked ordinary living” (SC 93). The novel is divided between Will’s story and Allie’s, with the two eventually coming together. Old enough to be Allie’s father, Will nevertheless finds himself enamored with Allie, enough to desire marriage by the novel’s end.

Having been criticized for the ambiguity at the end of his other novels, Percy’s fifth novel is lauded by many critics for the clear, unambiguous affirmation of life at the end. Percy himself claims that the Will Barrett of *The Second Coming* finally succeeds at the novel’s conclusion: “He actually sees a way to live and to work” (*Conversations* 235). Being more self-congratulatory than usual, Percy even claims that *The Second Coming* “may be the first unalienated novel written since Tolstoy” (*Conversations* 190). Critics echo Percy’s optimism, saying that *The Second Coming* is a “gloriously optimistic, affirmative book” (*More Conversations* 37). Most readers apparently agreed; *The Second Coming* is one of Percy’s best-selling novels. Despite its popularity, however, the book has many literary and theological shortcomings. Indeed, the Will Barrett of *The Second Coming* is hardly recognizable as the same burgeoning seeker we met at the end of *The Last Gentleman*. *The Second Coming* also contains several examples of the didacticism (and hence loss of the narrative distance) that so often plagues Percy’s later fiction,⁶ although this problem becomes more prevalent in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.⁷

Also lacking is the keen, satirical irony that made his earlier novels so poignant. As Tolson observes:

We need to hear from the Christian ironist before this novel ends; but we don't. Instead, we have Adam going off to join his Eve. What one distrusts most about this in some ways brilliant and beguiling novel is that it serves too therapeutic an end rather than the harder truth as Percy saw it. (432)

In Percy's earlier work, such as *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, such "neat" endings are noticeably absent, with Percy being comfortable with the tension that these novels present.

Perhaps more to the point, however, is whether the ending is a theological success compared to former endings that were not so "unambiguous."⁸ We should perhaps first recognize that *The Second Coming* does address serious theological questions.⁹ In fact, the novel contains a serio-comic scene reminiscent of Percy's finest moments, when Will Barrett, having retreated into a cave, devises his own life-or-death Pascalian wager. He describes this bet in a long letter to Sutter Vaught:

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

However, Will's experiment is interrupted by a dreadful toothache, which causes him to forget his philosophizing and to exit the cave as soon as possible (never entertaining the possibility, of course, that the toothache may very well have been the sign he was seeking, not unlike St. Augustine hearing the

child's cry in Book IX of *The Confessions*).¹⁰ Exit the cave he does, and he literally falls into the greenhouse that Allie has taken as her residence.¹¹ With her rescuing Will and nursing him back to health, their budding romance begins.

While Will and Allie's story is captivating in many ways, Percy has nevertheless traded the mystery of the sacraments for the comforts of sentimental romanticism. In this choice, we readily see the relationship between the role of the sacraments and Percy's craft of writing. Sacramental mystery is by its very nature difficult if not impossible to render in literature. Indeed, how does an author communicate the indescribable grace communicated through, say, the Eucharist? The danger that faces any author trying to capture this moment is that the fiction becomes hortatory rather than mysterious, trying to explain the unexplainable. In his early novels, Percy seems to respect the boundaries of his craft and does not try to solve the variegated problems of life or leave the reader with a pat "happy ending." From Jamie Vaught's baptism to Tom More's taking of the Eucharist, Percy allows the power of the sacraments to stand on their own with little need to moralize or to instruct. With *Lancelot*, the dangers of Percy's moralizing became evident, though not fatal. In *The Second Coming*, however, we see the perils of Percy's assertive and defensive Catholicism.¹² It is a world more hortatory than mysterious, one with little room for subtle, sacramental grace such as Jamie Vaught's baptism. When Percy allows his Uncle Will's rather romantic

kind of stoicism¹³ to overpower his Catholic faith, a saccharine sentimentalism¹⁴ is the natural consequence.¹⁵ Does the far-fetched, mawkish romance between Will and Allie compare to the understated, sacramental matrimony between Binx and Kate? Hardly.

By the end of *The Second Coming*, Percy offers a conclusion that is certainly “optimistic,” “affirmative,” and “unambiguously happy,” with the middle-aged Barrett and the teenage Allie having declared their mutual love. However, does he provide an ending that is also redemptive? In his previous novels, Percy parodied the idea that sexual bliss is somehow the ultimate be-all and end-all for humanity, that salvation can be found between the sheets.¹⁶ In contrast, *The Second Coming* Percy concludes with a oleaginous “boy meets girl” sentimentality. There is no presentation of the mystery latent within the sacrament of marriage. It is simply a “happy ending” that strains credulity. Alas, Percy seems to endorse the same misty spirituality that he wickedly satirizes in many characters from his previous works (e.g., Doris More in *Love in the Ruins* and Emily Cutrer in *The Moviegoer*). Kieran Quinlan, himself not sympathetic to Percy’s Catholic faith, still rightly diagnoses one of the main problems with *The Second Coming*:

It is a *willed* conclusion, more a manifestation of its author’s own faith and intentions than an artistically achieved development. Percy does not appear to have been fully engaged with his subject, and it is hard to balance the seriousness of Will’s questions against the ridiculous means (especially from an informed theological viewpoint) he uses to answer them. (172)

The worst outcome for this couple is that they attempt to sustain their love through a private romanticism, “the way of Eros,” as Percy himself puts it. The *Catholic Catechism* makes it clear that through marriage, a couple takes part in the larger Christian community of faith and that the couple’s love will be sustained by such communion.¹⁷ Will Barrett, by contrast, believes that their love can actually “revive” marriage itself, the sacrament having become a “troubled, often fatal, arrangement” (SC 343). Barrett willingly admits that he is “not a believer” and does not “wish to enter the church,” an honest if not unfortunate declaration since marriage is meant for participation in the sacramental life of the Church as a whole (SC 357).

If there is any sacramental hope to be found in *The Second Coming*, it is through Will and Allie’s openness to be instructed by the reluctant priest Father Weatherbee, not in their romantic love as a “source of sacramental life” (Ciuba 246). Will proclaims: “I am willing to be told whatever it is you seem to know and I will attend carefully to what you say” (SC 358). Barrett continues: “We are also willing to take instruction, as long as you recognize I cannot and will not accept all of your dogmas. Unless of course you have the authority to tell me something I don’t know. Do you?” (SC 358). For all the differences in Will between *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, his theological radar is still intact. He can tell when an “apostle” has a message worth hearing.¹⁸ By being open to catechesis, Will and Allie can reinforce their love through the Church and not be left to their own whims and de-

sires.¹⁹ Such instruction could be found in a larger community of faith, one that compensates for Father Weatherbee's theological and pastoral shortcomings.²⁰

However, this reading may be too forgiving of Percy's literary and theological sins. As Brinkmeyer says, chiding Percy for his authorial shift, the "sentimentality of the conclusion weakens the point Percy is making about Will's movement toward the Church" (168). Perhaps a lifetime of "movie-going" finally had its effect on Percy, for he offers a tidy, neat ending that does not consider the problems such a relationship would likely endure.²¹ Percy would do well to consider de Lubac's claim about the temporary nature of the sacraments: "when the consummation comes, the sacraments will be employed no more" (*Splendor* 77). De Lubac's point is that when the true "Second Coming" occurs, the sacraments will no longer be necessary, for then believers will truly encounter the one to whom the sacramental signs point.

The Thanatos Syndrome: The Moralists' Rage

With his sixth and final novel, Percy once again writes a pseudo-sequel. In the case of *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), he returns to Dr. Tom More as his protagonist. Not unlike Percy's rewriting of Will Barrett, the Tom More of *The Thanatos Syndrome* unfortunately bears little resemblance to the same character we last saw in *Love in the Ruins*. In spite of his many moral failures, Tom More demands our respect in *Love in the Ruins*. Not so in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. When we meet him again, he has served two

years in prison after being convicted of selling amphetamines to truck drivers. His wife Ellen, rather than being the voice of good sense as she was in *Love in the Ruins*, now spends more time improving her bridge game and attending Pentecostal revival meetings than improving her husband. Tom still struggles with his Catholicism while Ellen has settled into charismatic evangelicalism. The married More certainly did not live “happily ever after.”

Far more than in any of his other works, *The Thanatos Syndrome* is a searing indictment of the 20th century culture of death.²² What he called in *The Moviegoer* the “very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism” is here characterized by the:

widespread and ongoing devaluation of human life in the Western world—under various sentimental disguises: “quality of life,” “pointless suffering,” “termination of life without meaning,” etc. I trace it to a certain mind-set in the biological and social sciences which is extraordinarily influence among educated folk—so much so that it has almost achieved the status of a quasi-religious orthodoxy. (*Signposts* 394)

This time, More’s wrath is reserved for his medical peers who see it as their calling to rid their world of those—the aged, the infirmed, the mentally ill—who “have no chance for a life of any sort of acceptable quality” (*TS* 333).

They seek to tincture the town’s water supply with heavy sodium additives so as to eliminate certain immoral behaviors. However, this change comes at the risk of robbing the test subjects of their humanity, enabling a “regression from a stressful human existence to a peaceable animal existence” (*TS* 180).

The resulting behavioral changes in the residents of Feliciana parish include

aberrant sexual practices. Women, for example, begin presenting themselves rearward, so as to be mounted like apes. Percy's point? The practical consequence of scientific objectivism is ultimately bestialism.

These behavioral changes are actually more alarming than mere regression to animalistic sexuality. More speculates that those who have been thus "infected" experience utter loss of self, evidenced by their failure to communicate contextually, i.e. they can memorize facts, names and dates easily, but have no comprehension of the *meaning* of their knowledge. By the novel's end, More has saved the townspeople from the diabolical genetic engineers and has rekindled his relationship with Ellen. However, this "happy ending" comes at a price. Percy's stinging rebuke of our culture of death comes at both a theological and literary cost.

Percy's sharp scalpel of cultural analysis is readily seen in the relationship between More and another character from *Love in the Ruins*, Father Rinaldo Smith. At first, More thinks Smith to be just another mentally disturbed parish resident. After all, how normal is it for someone to live perched atop a fire tower? However, as the novel progresses, More sees this modern St. Simeon Stylites as wiser than he had previously thought. The further More digs into the novel's mystery, the more he realizes the Father may speak more truth than fiction.

Father Smith's most powerful claim is that "tenderness leads to the gas chamber" (*TS* 361). Having borrowed this line from his friend Flannery

O'Connor, Percy shares her conviction that the 20th century was an age of sentimental charity, a time where there was great desire to improve the human race.²³ Unfortunately, such a desire can lead to a merely sentimental regard for human life, resulting in the "beneficial" elimination of those who make no contribution to society. Rather than being opposed to the spirit of the Enlightenment, Percy believes that such murderous kindness is its natural conclusion. In a scene particularly reminiscent of *Lancelot*, Father Smith confesses his own youthful fascination with the Hitler *Jugend*. He even admits that, had he been German rather than American, he would have joined them.²⁴ The dangers of a sentimental romanticism thus become clear with what John Desmond calls

[...] Percy's powerful analysis of the death-wish pathology of the twentieth century, of the spiritual roots of the disorder, and its manifestations in the corruption of language. Moreover, the novel's vigorous defense of the individual's sacred, inviolable uniqueness, of free choice, and its affirmation of a community of charity serve as important thematic counterforces to the threat of human deprivation that Percy saw facing the culture. (*Community* 219)

Despite the novel's strength of identifying the myriad of problems evident in our time, it still has marked weaknesses. Percy's contempt for our death-dealing culture causes him to lose sight of the Kierkegaardian indirection that guided his earlier work. This final novel thus exhibits a blatant didacticism that was not present in his earlier novels. In many places Percy's creativity is stretched thin, e.g., the heavy handed reference to "Doe v. Dade." At several moments the narrative voice simply lapses into outright

moralizing. For example, consider one of Father Smith's many rants against contemporary America:

We're talking about the decay of the social fabric. The American social fabric. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know—all the way from the destruction of the cities, crime in the streets, demoralization of the underclass, to the collapse of the family. (*TS* 265)

Percy did not deny that his anger helped fuel the novel's creation. As in *Love in the Ruins*, we once again hear Percy's voice of splenetic judgment and righteous anger. The notable difference, though, is that his fury often mars the quality of his prose, not unlike similar moments in *Lancelot*.²⁵ As Tolson notes, in composing *The Thanatos Syndrome*:

Percy wrote like a man distracted, distracted not only by his life or even an observable weakening of his mental powers, but also by the moral argument that he wanted his novel to make. Between the moralist and the artist in Percy, there had always been a powerful but creative tension. Writing *Thanatos*, though, Percy seemed to lose his balance. (453)

As John Hardy astutely observes, the novel even contains a number of contradictions and errors regarding simple matters of time and space that would have never happened in his earlier work.²⁶ Furthermore, the deadly accuracy of Percy's satire so prevalent in his earlier work is notably absent, even if it still has a worthy target.²⁷ Throughout *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy maintains that our post-Christian world is dehumanized due to its being formed by the precepts of Enlightenment scientism rather than Christian sacramentalism.²⁸ It is regrettable, however, that Percy makes his point through blatant preaching than through his characteristic satire.

Though it fails to show the sacraments in any detail, *The Thanatos Syndrome* still hints at their importance in Percy's work as a whole. In fact, for the first time in a Percy novel a sacrament is actually given an explicit definition. Father Smith defines a sacrament as a "sensible sign instituted by Christ to produce grace" (*TS* 125). Although the novel does not have any scene as poignantly convincing as, for example, Jamie's baptism in *The Last Gentleman*, the novel's ending nevertheless confirms the hope and power of the sacraments, including communion, penance (with Father Smith engaging in "vicarious penance for the world"), baptism (with Tom affirming the salvific efficacy of his baptism to his wife), and marriage (with Tom and Ellen's recommitment to their marriage, notwithstanding the many difficulties they have faced) (*TS* 113).

The problem, however, is that Percy simply mentions the sacraments in passing, almost as a reminder to the reader that he is indeed still a Catholic novelist. What *The Thanatos Syndrome* lacks, therefore, is a sustained and literary presentation of the efficacy of these sacraments in the lives of its characters.²⁹ As Hobson rightly observes, *The Thanatos Syndrome* is primarily a "novel of ideas" (150). Unfortunately, these ideas ultimately lead to abstraction, rather than concrete fictional embodiments of the Church and her sacraments. Thus is Percy's final novel unfortunately characterized by its didactic fury rather than sacramental grace.

Conclusion

If we make this noticeable decline our final judgment on Percy's *oeuvre*, we err. The bulk of Percy's writing is characterized not only by his sharp wit, biting irony, and scathing satire, but also by his recognition of the necessity of a life enmeshed within the life-giving sacraments of the Church. No complacent cradle Catholic, Percy the convert continually struggled with his faith, yet never forsook the church and its communal life. He would thus write this poem simply entitled "Community":

*Now comes the artist to his life's surprise—
A fond abstract middle-aged public man is he,
Come to a place in his time when he thought he knew something.
What?
Namely, that on the short lovely Louisiana afternoons,
The winter sunlight making spaces, pale gold above
And in the live oaks, a shafted gloom like rooms
Of moss and leaf and tenant squirrels and jeweled birds—
He trafficked in loneliness, little brother, cellmate
And friend to him, and even turned it to good use,
A commodity, a good business man selling solitariness
Like GM selling Chevrolets or Burns furniture.
A strange success, this selling to other selves the very
Sealed-offness of self from selves.*

*Now comes the surprise—
What?
That in the very things he had denied and done so well
Denying—
Friendship, laughter, good red wine (well, anyhow, Early Times)
Marichal [sic] merriness, Lyn loveliness—
All the good things we Catholics used to stand for
Until something went wrong—
Did I help them go wrong?
I hope not—I only named the wrongness
Which in a way is to make it right and turn it around.
But what a surprise!
Twenty years of solitariness and success at solitariness,*

*Solitary with his family like the Swiss family on their island,
Then all at once community.
Community? What, friends out there in the world?
Yes. (Samway 327-328)*

This poem, with its last line reminiscent of the novel written during Percy's darkest years, shows his recognition of the power and necessity of the communal life, something that he knew intimately. In his best moments as a novelist, he would indeed "name the wrongness" of a soul-destroying scientific humanism and point the way towards sacramental healing, whether it be through marriage (*The Moviegoer*), baptism (*The Last Gentleman*), the Eucharist (*Love in the Ruins*), or Penance (*Lancelot*). For all his literary and theological struggles, Percy could nevertheless affirm with de Lubac that "the path to which [the Church] commits us is the only safe one. To follow it is neither naïveté, nor syncretism, nor liberalism; it is simply Catholicism" (*Catholicism* 302).

This devotion to the Church and her sacraments provided both theological and literary depth to his writing. In his better moments, it allowed him to transcend the vicissitudes of his own tortured soul as well as his artistic shortcomings. From Percy's early to late fiction, from doubt to faith, the Church supplied Percy with the theological and literary lexicon to create his art. Though both Percy's faith and his fiction would vacillate throughout his life, the sacramental rituals of the Church would provide the stability he needed as both a believer and as a novelist.

Notes

¹Percy would tell his daughter, herself experiencing a crisis of faith, that “you can always count on the church. Don’t turn your back on the church. It’s what saved me at the worst time of my life” (Tolson 423).

²For example, Percy writes that “it should not be surprising that present-day liberals favor abortion, just as the Nazis did years ago. The only difference is that the Nazis favored it for theoretical reasons (eugenics, racial purity), while present-day liberals favor it for consumer needs (unwanted, inconvenient). Nor should it be surprising that for same reasons liberals not only favor abortion but are now beginning to favor euthanasia, as the Nazis did” (*Signposts* 310).

³Discussing Kierkegaard’s approach to apologetics, Ralph C. Wood writes the following: “Søren Kierkegaard wittily dismissed apologetics as ‘the old military science,’ a blunderbuss shot fired across the bow of faith’s cultured despisers and deniers. Thus put on the defensive, the enemies of Christianity volley back their own missiles. The resulting battle bloodies both sides but leaves no one edified, much less converted. Hence Kierkegaard’s cunning suggestion that the best apologetic approach is to attack from the rear, to sting pagans and secularists alike into a surprising consideration of the Gospel, not by the cannonade of a frontal assault but by the gadfly’s satirical bite” (*Contending* 7). Percy’s earlier work is certainly characterized by its “satirical bite” as opposed to the “frontal assault” of his later work.

⁴A good example of such irony is Aunt Emily’s diatribe against “liars and thieves and whores and adulterers” in *The Moviegoer* (223). Percy acknowledges that he received much praise for this speech from readers who were on her side (and, by association, Uncle Will’s). They mistook Aunt Emily’s fury for Percy’s own, an unfortunate mistake since in the context of the novel’s subtle sacramental conclusion Aunt Emily is clearly in the wrong. Such irony is noticeably lacking in Percy’s latter work.

⁵Percy says forthrightly that he is “fonder of Will than of any other of [his] characters” (*Conversations* 188).

⁶In Percy’s earlier work, such as *The Moviegoer*, he encountered editors such as Stanley Kauffmann who seriously challenged his work, forcing him to produce far better writing than he demonstrates in his later fiction. Percy admits that he was “sick and tired when [he] sent it to the publisher, and of course as soon as [the publisher] gets it, he wants to put it in the hopper and get it published” (238). Of *The Second Coming*’s publication, Tolson confirms

that “Giroux reported that the manuscript, except for some minor changes, looked ready to print” (429).

⁷As Hobson notes as well, another major literary weakness of the novel is “the hero’s long interior monologues, which slow down the action” (109). For example, Will’s long “letter” to Sutter reads more like a soliloquy than a letter to an old friend.

⁸Tolson argues that, though *The Second Coming* is the most “firmly resolved” of all Percy’s novels regarding its plot, the fact that the novel is so theologically distinct from his other works compels “the reader to think beyond the immediate text and to consider its relationship to the other fictional works created by Percy” (425).

⁹Percy says that “Will Barrett is involved in an almost self-destructing search for theological answers” (*More Conversations* 111).

¹⁰As Pridgen argues, the toothache is a “sign that Will has not expected, a sign that will, ironically, return him to the glorious mountain and to the light he needs to cure his blindness” (119).

¹¹Percy notes of this scene that “Will Barrett falls out of the cave into Allie’s arms, i.e. out of his nutty gnostic quest into sacramental reality” (147). How the cave represents “sacramental reality” Percy does not say.

¹²As Quinlan observes, *The Second Coming* is a “Percy novel that seems to have had an especial appeal for those sympathetic with a New Age style of Christian Gnosticism, an outcome that would hardly have pleased its by now ultraorthodox author” (172).

¹³In *Lanterns on the Levee*, Percy’s Uncle Will speaks of his concerns regarding his nephews’ education where we see the romanticization of his stoical values: “I had no desire to send these youngsters of mine into life as defenseless as if they wore knights’ armor and had memorized the code of chivalry. [...] Should I therefore teach deceit, dishonor, ruthlessness, bestial force to the children in order that they survive? Better that they perish. It is sophistry to speak of two sets of virtues, there is but one: virtue is an end in itself; the survival virtues are means, not ends. Honor and honesty, compassion and truth are good even if they kill you, for they alone give life its dignity and worth” (313).

¹⁴As Wood notes, such sentimentality can be defined as “self-serving emotions” that are “exalted over true mystery” (*Contending* 123).

¹⁵Though he is essentially sympathetic with Percy's shift in *The Second Coming*, Desmond nevertheless recognizes that the novel "seems to record the emptying out of traditional sacramental meaning that existed, however marginally, as a real spiritual dimension in Percy's earlier novels" (181). Desmond further argues that Percy has come to agree with Sutter Vaught and Lance Lamar who "both argued that the traditional sacraments were 'emptied out' of meaning" (181). Indeed, "their arguments reflect Percy's own concern with the status of the sacraments in a scientific-dominated culture" (181). Desmond does not see this shift as a weakness, however, claiming that Percy's use of "Peircean triadicity" infuses the novel "with sacramentality in a more thoroughgoing way than in any of his previous novels" (181). The danger of this position, however, is that the sacraments become divorced from the Church and become transformed into a hazy "sacramentalism."

¹⁶As Hardy asserts, in "three of the earlier novels, he was consistently very good at representing amorous activity in its more genially laughable aspects, and very good with marriage and the family in both joy and sorrow. Especially in *Lancelot*, he showed himself also capable of handing, to something more than merely sensationalist effect, the madness and horror of sex" (186).

¹⁷"It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other through the offering of their own lives by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and by receiving the Eucharist so that, communicating in the same Body and the same Blood of Christ, they may form but 'one body' in Christ" (CCC 1621).

¹⁸It is worth comparing the Episcopal Father Weatherbee to the Roman Catholic Father Boomer. The former remembers when he preached the gospel to a "tiny village in Mindanao" that everyone "believed the Gospel whole and entire, and the teachings of the church" when he preached it to them (359). Their justification was that "if [he] told them, then it must be true or I would not have gone to so much trouble" (359). One is reminded of Father Boomer's similar declaration to Jamie Vaught in *The Last Gentleman* and of the priests' roles as Kierkegaardian "apostles."

¹⁹Hardy confirms this concern: "The pattern of the essential Christian mysteries [i.e. the sacraments], Percy suggests, survives in the modern world not in the activities and observances of any institutional body—it is, perhaps, least of all discernible in deliberately 'religious' usages—but primarily in the most intensely private, most uncalculated, purely personal encounters" (207).

²⁰Pridgen notes that “Father Weatherbee lacks the authority to tell Will of a Christian faith that would enable him to rejoice in a life that threatens his happiness in such overwhelming ways” (142). Furthermore, as an Episcopalian, Father Weatherbee technically does not regard marriage as a sacrament.

²¹Percy himself confirms this diagnosis: “It seems to me that these two characters achieve their lives in a way no other characters I’ve written about have. I consider this my first unalienated novel. It’s a very ordinary conventional story that could even be seen in Hollywood terms: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl” (*Conversations* 183).

²²As Percy writes elsewhere, the twentieth century “is the most scientifically advanced, savage, democratic, inhuman, sentimental, murderous century in human history” (*Signposts* 309).

²³O’Connor states the following of our age and its potentially deadly sentimentality: “If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absences of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber” (*Mystery and Manners* 227).

²⁴Father Smith’s experience is Percy’s own, as young Walker felt the same way on a trip to Germany in his youth.

²⁵Consider, for examples, Percy’s reference to “Doe v. Dade, the landmark case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court which decreed, with solid scientific evidence, that the human infant does not achieve personhood until eighteen months” (333). Percy’s anti-abortion stance was well known and fully commensurate with his Catholic beliefs; nevertheless, it seems that, all too often, his later work is used as a springboard to express his rage. As Tolson notes, “his satirical portrait of what might be described as ‘Weimar’ America is an attempt to fuse his vision of the folly of a dangerously sentimentalized, scientized, and desacralized world with his own personal struggle against the attractions of death” (452).

²⁶See *The Fiction of Walker Percy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

²⁷As Tolson argues of this novel, “it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Percy’s reach exceeded his grasp” (452).

²⁸We should remember the great regard Percy has for science and its proper methodology. Without question, Walker Percy is no anti-scientific Christian. One would be hard pressed to find a greater example of a Christian who recognizes the inherent value in scientific study than this physician *cum* novelist. His scientific rigor even put him at odds with some fellow believers. Percy, for example, balks at the pseudo-science endorsed by the Christian right (Tolson 448). Still, he is critical of the humanistic worldview that accompanies so much of modern science.

²⁹While Percy's anger may not be as pronounced as it is in *Lancelot*, it is accompanied by a heavy-handed didacticism in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In both novels, his admonitory tone is reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë's lapse in Chapter Twelve of *Jane Eyre* where Brontë declaims the unfair expectations society has of women in her time. While Brontë's point is valid, within the novel it is nevertheless a hortatory rant that lessens the narrative voice. Similarly, Percy's vitriol may add to the novel's rhetorical force; however, it nevertheless compromises the literary quality of the novel.

WORKS CITED

- “The Authors that Bloom in the Spring.” *Publishers Weekly*. 22 March 1971. 22-24.
- Barrett, Deborah J. “Discourse and Intercourse: The Conversion of the Priest in Percy’s *Lancelot*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 23.2 (1981-1982): 5-11.
- Barrett, William. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1958.
- Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion. *American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depths and Complexity of Religion in the U.S.* September 2006.
- Bouyer, Louis. *The Word, Church, and Sacraments in Protestantism and Catholicism*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1961.
- Brinkmeyer, Robert H. *Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.
- Brooks, Cleanth. “Walker Percy and Modern Gnosticism.” *Modern Critical View: Walker Percy*. Edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 53-62.
- Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text*. Promulgated by Pope John Paul II. 2nd edition. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- Chantraine, G. “Henri de Lubac.” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2003. 839-841.
- Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*. 1908. Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994.
- Ciuba, Gary. *Walker Percy: Books of Revelations*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991.
- Collins, James. *The Existentialists: A Critical Study*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952.

- The Correspondence of Shelby Foote & Walker Percy*. Edited by Jay Tolson. New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 1997.
- Desmond, John F. *At the Crossroads: Ethical and Religious Themes in the Writings of Walker Percy*. NY: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1997.
- . *Walker Percy's Search for Community*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004.
- Douglas, Ellen. "Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*: Introduction and Commentary." *Religious Dimensions in Literature*. Edited by Lee A. Belford. New York: Seabury Press, 1982.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. 1880. New York: Random House, 1990.
- Doyle, Dennis M. "Henri de Lubac and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology." *Theological Studies* 60.2: 209-227.
- Dulles, Avery. "Henri de Lubac: In Appreciation." *America*. (Sept. 28, 1991): 180-182.
- Gallagher, Kenneth T. *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1962.
- Glenn, John D. Jr. "Marcel and Sartre: The Philosophy of Communion and the Philosophy of Alienation." *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*. Ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Edwin Hahn. La Salle: Open Court, 1984. 525-550.
- Godschalk, W.L. "The Engineer, Then and Now." *Walker Percy, Novelist and Philosopher*. Edited by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 33-41.
- Hardy, John Edward. *The Fiction of Walker Percy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Hawkins, Peter. *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, & Iris Murdoch*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1983.
- Hitchcock, James. "Postmortem on a Rebirth: The Catholic Intellectual Renaissance." *American Scholar*. 49.2 (1980): 211-225.

- Hobson, Linda Whitney. *Understanding Walker Percy*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Poems and Prose*. Ed. With an Introduction and Notes by W.H. Gardner. New York: Penguin, 1953.
- Kazin, Alfred. "The Pilgrimage of Walker Percy." *Harper's Magazine*. 242 (June, 1971): 81-86.
- Keen, Sam. *Gabriel Marcel*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967.
- Kerr, Fergus. "French Theology: Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac." *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. David Ford. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997. 105-117.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or, Part I*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- . *Sickness Unto Death*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Komonchak, Joseph A. "Recapturing the Great Tradition." *Commonweal*. 119.2 (1992):14-17.
- . "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac." *Theological Studies*. 51 (1990): 579-602.
- de Lubac, Henri. *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*. Translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund. 1947. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.
- . *The Splendor of the Church*. Translated by Michael Mason. 1956. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986.
- Lawson, Lewis A. *Following Percy: Essays on Walker Percy's Work*. Troy: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1988.
- Lawson, Lewis A. and Victor A. Kramer, eds. *Conversations With Walker Percy*. Jackson: U. Press of Mississippi, 1985.
- , eds. *More Conversations With Walker Percy*. Jackson: U. Press of Mississippi, 1993.

- Luschei, Martin. *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972.
- McInerny, Ralph M. *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain: A Spiritual Life*. Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2003.
- Modern Critical View: Walker Percy*. Edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979.
- . *Mystery and Manners*. Edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1969.
- O'Gorman, Farrell. *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004.
- The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Edited by Ted Honderich. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Percy, Walker. "Hughes's Solipsism Malgré Lui," *Sewanee Review*. 72 (1964): 492-495.
- . *Lancelot*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977.
- . *The Last Gentleman*. 1966. New York: Picador, 1999.
- . *Lost in the Cosmos*. 1983. New York: Picador, 2000.
- . *Love in the Ruins*. New York: Picador, 1971.
- . *The Message in the Bottle*. 1975. New York: Picador, 2000.
- . *The Moviegoer*. 1960. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- . *The Second Coming*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.
- . *Signposts in a Strange Land*. Edited with an introduction by Patrick Samway. New York: Picador, 1991.
- . *The Thanatos Syndrome*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987.

- Percy, William Alexander. *Lanterns on the Levee*. Introduction by Walker Percy. 1941. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973.
- Pridgen, Allen. "The Brownian Leaves: Sacramental Presence in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*." *Renascence*. Volume 48 (Summer 1996), 297-308.
- *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes: The Search in the Desert*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000.
- Quinlan, Kieran. *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996.
- Samway, Patrick H. *Walker Percy: A Life*. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Scott, Nathan A. *The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.
- Sparr, Arnold. *To Promote, Defend, and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Catholic Transformation of American Catholicism 1920-1960*. New York: Westport Press, 1990.
- Steinfels, Margaret O'Brien. "Dissent and Communion." *Commonweal*. 121.20 (1994): 9-15.
- Sweeny, Mary K. *Walker Percy and the Postmodern World*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987.
- Tharpe, Jac. *Walker Percy*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.
- Tolson, Jay. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- Vauthier, Simone. "Story, Story-Teller and Listener: Notes on *Lancelot*." *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*. Ed. J. Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co. 184-199.
- Wolfe, Gregory. "'Ever Ancient, Ever New': The Catholic Writer in the Modern World." *The Catholic Writer*. Edited with a Preface by Ralph McInerney. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989. 13-30.

Wood, Ralph C. *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

--- *Contending for the Faith: The Church's Engagement with Culture*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003.

Wood, Susan K. "Henri de Lubac: Theologian of the Church." *Theology Today*. 62.3 (2005): 318-328.