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‘This I Believe’: Meaningful Belief and
Uncertainty in the Novels of Walker Percy

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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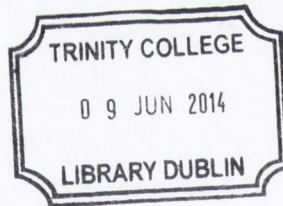
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Summary

This thesis analyses how the American novelist Walker Percy (1916-1990) anatomizes belief in his six novels and one work of non-fiction satire, *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983). In critical studies of Percy's fiction, no study has thoroughly addressed the issue of belief within Percy's work, specifically the way that Percy constructs meaningful and non-meaningful belief in his novels, whether religious in the traditional sense—belief for the orthodox Christian—or a looser sense—belief for an atheist or Stoic.

In Percy's essay 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World' from *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), Percy argues that a 'religious' novelist's interest lies with 'explicit and ultimate' concerns, such as the presence or absence of God, the existence of good and evil, and how such concerns transform the life of the individual. Percy includes atheists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in his brief list of 'religious' authors, since both are concerned with the implications of God's non-existence. In this way, Percy provisionally reorients the term 'religious' to include individuals with express interest in existential and theological questions, even if these individuals are not religious in the traditional sense. In Percy's novels, characters such as Binx's Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* (1961) and Sutter Vaught in *The Last Gentleman* (1966) fall into this category of religious, since they both have passionate concerns with what it means to live an unsponsored existence.

Percy's novels construct two forms of belief that cut through the traditional dichotomy between belief and unbelief. In this study, the first form of belief Percy constructs is provisionally titled *participative belief* and the second *conventional belief*. Participative belief denotes a mode of belief that is a passionate, sincere, and lived expression of a belief. Conventional belief, in turn, refers to belief that is a detached and cognitive assent to an idea.

Participative belief draws its definition from the works of the Roman Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel, who argues that a meaningful belief is defined by a rallying of the individual to a belief—whether in a person, cause, or idea—which is coextensive with Percy’s application of the word ‘religious’ to passionate convictions about the world. A meaningful belief that is a commitment of the individual does not preclude doubt or uncertainty, but coexists with uncertainty. Marcel also briefly outlines the concept of a ‘spectator-attitude’, which refers to a way of seeing and understanding the world in a detached way, rather than being a participant in the world. Percy concretely dramatizes the ‘spectator-attitude’ with protagonists who are eavesdroppers, filmgoers, and careful but distanced observers of others. The ‘spectator-attitude’ corresponds with the way one treats a belief, not as something to be studied, something theoretical, but as something to be lived and expressed concretely. Percy’s protagonists must circumnavigate a world of conventional belief—a Southern ‘Christendom’ and region of conventional unbelief—and move from a detached and abstracted view of the world toward one that participates in their beliefs and in the lives of others.

‘This I Believe’: Meaningful Belief and Uncertainty in the Novels of Walker Percy

By Robert Cameron Wilson

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Finally, to my wife, Kim, to whom this work is dedicated. Your patience and kindness are nothing short of astounding. I am lucky to have you.

Abbreviations

Works by Walker Percy

The Moviegoer (New York: Vintage International, 1961). (MG)

The Last Gentleman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966). (LG)

Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time (LR)

Near the End of the World

(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971).

The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man is, How Queer (Message)

Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other

(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

Lancelot (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977). (L)

The Second Coming (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980). (SC)

Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book (LC)

(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

Conversations with Walker Percy (Conversations)

Ed. by Lewis A Lawson and Victor A. Kramer

(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985).

The Thanatos Syndrome (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987). (TS)

Signposts in a Strange Land (SSL)

Ed. by Patrick Samway

(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991).

More Conversations with Walker Percy (More Conversations)

Ed. by Lewis A Lawson and Victor A. Kramer

(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).

Works by Gabriel Marcel

Square Brackets Indicate Original English-language Publication Date

Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary (BH)

Trans. by Katharine Farrer (Glasgow: Dacre Press Westminster, 1949).

The Mystery of Being Vol. I: Reflection and Mystery (MB 1)

Trans. by G.S. Fraser (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2001 [1951]).

The Mystery of Being Vol. II: Faith and Reality (MB 2)

Trans. by G.S. Fraser (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2001 [1951]).

Introduction - 'This I Believe': Meaningful Belief and Uncertainty in the Novels of Walker Percy

0.1 - Conventional Belief in Walker Percy's Southern Christendom

On a sunny Sunday morning in North Carolina, middle-aged Will Barrett drives through the center of a quiet town on his way home after playing nine holes of golf. As the protagonist of Walker Percy's fifth novel, *The Second Coming* (1980), Williston Bibb Barrett is the lens through which Percy refracts and focuses his view of Christian belief during the rich, prosperous late twentieth-century in the New South. The widowed former Wall-Street lawyer is a quiet man, given to observing people and their rituals from a distance rather than directly talking to or interacting with them. Even in his native South, Barrett is an outsider. As Will takes the road that snakes through town, the residents are emerging from their Sunday services, and the townspeople appear 'well-dressed and prosperous, healthy and happy'. Barrett passes churches of every denominational stripe:

The Christian Church, Church of Christ, Church of God, Church of God in Christ, Assembly of God, Bethel Baptist Church, Independent Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, and Immaculate Heart of Mary Roman Catholic Church. (13)

The list moves from simple to complex, from the directly titled 'Christian Church', to the more distinctly named 'Independent Presbyterian', 'United Methodist', and finally 'Immaculate Heart of Mary' churches. Barrett perceives that he lives 'in the most Christian nation in the world, the U.S.A., in the most Christian part of that nation, the South, in the most Christian town in North Carolina' (13).¹

¹ In his essay 'A Personal Fable', Lewis P. Simpson sketches his own hometown: 'In the same vicinity is the small wooden structure known as Mount Pisgah Methodist Church, a congregation of blacks and the oldest church in the town. At close remove from the square are the First Christian Church (the Disciples of Christ), which we attend, the Baptist

The focus of the description tightens, from nation to region to a town within a 'Christian' state; the impression produced by this description is concentric circles of Christendom (town, region, state, country), with the troubled Williston Barrett at the center. Though located at the locus of this world, Will finds he is, paradoxically, an outsider, and it is with his character's plight in the middle of this peculiar paradox that Will's narratives in *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* are concerned. What are the odds that this man, Williston Bibb Barrett, the wavering Episcopalian from *The Last Gentleman* (1966), should find his new home (in *The Second Coming*) here in the very center of an American, and more specifically Southern Christendom, where everyone is a 'Christian', even Barrett, but no one truly believes in a meaningful, substantive way?

In both works, Will wanders through a South comprising a vast mosaic of Christian denominations. It is a cultural landscape where everyone he encounters practices a nominal faith that has no real bearing on their everyday lives, whether in helping them reconcile the ethical quandaries they face, or in enlarging their understanding of their sense of alienation and purposelessness. In *The Last Gentleman*, Will journeys south from New York down to Alabama and Georgia, leaving the 'post-Protestant Yankees' (187) of New York. He finds that 'the South he came home to was different from the South he had left. It was happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican' (185).

As he pressed ever farther south in the Trav-L-Aire [camper], he passed more and more cars which had Confederate plates on the front bumper and plastic Christs on the dashboard. Radio programs became more patriotic and religious. More than once Dizzy Dean interrupted his sportscast to urge the listener to go to the church or synagogue of his choice. 'You'll find it a rich and rewarding

church, the Presbyterian church, and Methodist Church South. The 'Holy Rollers' (Assembly of God) hold their lively services in an unpainted wooden structure down below the jail. The Episcopal faith is unrepresented, but near the town cemetery, Oakwood, several blocks from the square to the north, is an abandoned Roman Catholic chapel that has been repeatedly vandalized, the relic of an effort to bring a Catholic presence into a world so thoroughly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant that a Catholic is regarded as an exotic and may even be regarded with dark suspicion'. *The Fable of the Southern Writer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 217.

experience', said Diz. Several times a day he heard a patriotic program called 'Lifelines' which praised God, attacked the United States government, and advertised beans and corn. (186)

Barrett's search in both *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* can be conceived as a quest for meaningful belief within a perceived culture of token, lip-service belief. Will is increasingly frustrated when the ubiquity of religious language defies all attempts to engage others in serious conversation about ultimate or metaphysical concerns. In one scene, Will reflects that in conversations and arguments about religion, 'that there [are] no clear issues any more. Arguments are spoiled. Clownishness always intervenes' (LG 234). Later in *The Second Coming*, when Will asks an Episcopalian priest if he 'believe[s] in God', a serious inquiry with no hint of irony or jest, the priest is immediately put on the defensive, worried that he may be the butt of a joke, and fails to provide an unequivocal response (SC 136).

From his search for a father in *The Last Gentleman* to his discovery of the truth about his father's suicide in *The Second Coming*, including his own Pascalian wager to prove the existence of God, Will is centrally concerned with perceiving and embodying belief at the level of action, where belief cannot just be affirmed cognitively or vocally, but must be lived. The disinterested belief of Jack Curl, Rita, and Lewis Peckham afford Will no clarity in understanding why one can be so miserable in a time of plenty. Such is the concern not only of Will, but of the protagonists of Percy's other works: Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* (1961); Dr. Tom More in *Love in the Ruins* (1971) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987); and Lancelot Andrewes Lamar in *Lancelot* (1977).

In their varied and often hapless journeys, all of Percy's protagonists encounter this absence of meaning in the language of Christendom, as practiced in the deeply-rooted culture of Bible-belt Protestantism. Through the absence of personal belief and the prevalence of its employ for political or therapeutic aims, it is no longer possible to speak meaningfully of a spiritual reality.

This strange linguistic situation was noted by Percy in a 1976 interview:

There's nothing new about this, it's been noted before by people like [Gabriel] Marcel—but language undergoes a period of degradation, words wear out. I think there's always an awareness in the novels, even going back to *The Moviegoer*, that people say words, and words have become as worn as poker chips, they don't mean anything. (*Conversations* 140)

Sometime during the twentieth-century, language lost its correspondence with metaphysical realities—a loss due less to any theoretical shift in either academia or theories of language than to the sheer exhaustion of the language. Percy continues, 'Particularly religious words: baptism, sin, God. These get worn out, and there's always a problem of rediscovering them. As the Psalmist says, you have to sing a new song: I think that's one of the functions of the novelist' (*Conversations* 140).

Percy's fiction can be conceived as an attempt to expose the problems associated with an exhausted religious vocabulary and the community of ostensible Christianity that causes such an evacuation of religious language. Jac Tharpe links Percy's South to the concept of Christendom described by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855):

Percy's work is also an attack on Christendom. Like Kierkegaard, from whom the specific idea and the expression are taken, Percy distinguishes between Christendom and Christianity. Christianity is the uncluttered central body of Christian doctrine, with its concept of God's grace and individual salvation through a personal savior. Christianity is a way of living and a concept of eternal life. Christendom is the geographical area, the realm of Christianity, as opposed to that of Islam or Buddhism, which has nourished the fantastic institution that has formed in association with Christianity, without regard for Christian doctrines.²

In his native Denmark, Kierkegaard identified 'inwardness' as a defining feature of those that believed in a meaningful way, a way to contrast with the dominant, conventional belief of Christendom. C. Stephen Evans writes that for Kierkegaard, 'the person who has genuine faith necessarily expresses this faith by being a follower, an imitator, of Jesus; it is

² Jac Tharpe, *Walker Percy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 19.

not merely an abstract, propositional belief³. Authentic faith, then, is not an opinion, a general statement; it is a way of life.

Barrett, like Percy's other protagonists, acts as a foil for the average Southerner, and by extension the South he inhabits: Ostensibly a member of the Episcopalian church, Barrett is an inheritor of the Southern, Republican, Christian outlook. Even so, the Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* is never comfortable with the mantle of Southern Gentleman, as it has been laid out for him by his forefathers. From his early peregrinations in *The Last Gentleman* to his early retirement in North Carolina over twenty years later in *The Second Coming*, Barrett's vision as a stranger to the religiosity of the Southern states serves as a diagnostic tool, as a means of revealing the emptied-out language of belief. Thus, the question for one who recognizes that meaningful belief is a more complex issue becomes: what constitutes true and meaningful belief in a region of the country where everyone is, almost by default, a Christian? Even those who do not claim to believe Christian dogma, rare as they may be in Southern Christendom, believe with a kind of 'perfunctoriness' (SC 287). The prevailing belief and unbelief are equally empty in the view of Percy's protagonists.

In critical works that examine the Catholic themes in Walker Percy's fiction, and specifically those that analyze the relation of his Catholic belief to that faith practiced in a predominately Protestant South, Percy is often paired with Georgia native and cradle-Catholic Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964).⁴ Together with O'Connor, they formed a unique

³ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9.

⁴ See Farrell O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Paul Elie's literary biography of Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Walker Percy, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); John Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and the Aesthetic of Revelation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Peter S. Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2004); L. Lamar Nisly, *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics, and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Constructions of Audience and Tone in O'Connor, Gautreaux, and*

literary presence of Roman Catholicism in a region of the United States generally affiliated with Protestant Christianity, and a region that has historically viewed Catholics with suspicion, even hostility.⁵

Both Percy and O'Connor's Catholicism inform their philosophic and literary sensibilities, particularly in regard to their sacramental views of reality. Percy, however, distinguishes himself from O'Connor in several ways, whether in the New South setting of his novels, featuring golf courses and country clubs as opposed to the more rural locations in O'Connor's novels and short stories, or in his choice of protagonists, who at the opening of their stories tend to be upper middle-class, educated, and less zealous in their religious commitments than O'Connor's passionate fundamentalists or staunch atheists.⁶

The initial absence of religious zeal in his protagonists, however, is counterposed to the intensity of belief many of his secondary characters consistently live by. Percy's South is populated by nominal Christians, sincere Catholics, atheists, and Stoics who have religious concerns, who attempt to act in the world consonantly with what they believe. And many atheists and non-Christians in this setting are as indifferent to the content and demands as the nominal Christians. Just as Percy's South divides nominal Christians from self-aware, earnest, and devout Catholic Christians (such as Lonnie, Val, and Father

Percy (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011); Gary M. Ciuba, *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction: Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

⁵ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1991 [1941]), 334: Cash writes, 'For the Protestant all through the centuries, the Catholic even more than the Jew has stood as the intolerable Alien, as the bearer of Jesuit plots to rob them of their religion by force and of schemes for new and larger St. Bartholomew's. In the South, and especially the rural South, moreover, that feeling has probably always been fed and kept alive by the relative infrequency of contact with Catholics—on the same principle which I have indicated in the case of the cotton-mill workers and the Negro'.

⁶ See O'Connor's Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990 [1952]) and O'Connor's Misfit in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find', found in *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1955), pp. 9-29. Peter Hawkins notes, 'To begin with, there is the matter of their protagonists. How far a cry are Percy's alienated lawyers and alcoholic doctors, wending their calamitous ways across the golf links, from O'Connor's crazed evangelists, complacent farm women, and would-be intellectuals'. See Hawkins, *Language of Grace*, 59.

Smith), the novels depict gradations of unbelievers as well. Several of Percy's atheists stand out in the nominally Christian South, specifically Aunt Emily and Sutter in these first two novels, for holding beliefs as intensely personal as those of Percy's most staunch Catholics.

The central role of the unbeliever (atheist, agnostic, Stoic, or non-Christian) in initiating conversations about belief, authenticity, and the root of humankind's malaise and unhappiness in Percy's novels raises the question: how does one account for the atheist who believes with more apparent sincerity, and acts in greater consonance with her or his beliefs, than the 'Christian' who dutifully attends Sunday services, votes in every election cycle, gives to the needy, but is indifferent to the claims of the Gospels if they demand changes in habits or outlook? The belief may not be placed in God or some supernatural source, but in a principle, worldview, or quest. In his interviews, Percy is aware of vacated belief among Southern Protestants, but does not comment on the intensely personal—and even inward—beliefs of atheists or agnostics (*Conversations* 124-125).

This study anatomizes belief in Percy's novels, specifically the ways that Percy constructs meaningful belief for his characters, whether religious in the traditional sense (belief for a Christian) or in a heterodox sense (belief for an atheist or Stoic). Working from Percy's claim in 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World' in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), that a 'religious' novelist's interest is in 'explicit and ultimate' concerns, such as the presence or absence of God, and the implications of that presence or absence on the lived experience of characters, I argue that Percy provisionally broadens the concept of 'religious' to include characterized individuals who believe passionately or inwardly. The belief may not be in God, Christ, or qualify as traditionally conceived 'faith', but it is nevertheless personal and of ultimate concern. In this way, he emphasizes the significance of the *way* one believes to demonstrate, as a sign and symbol, *what* one believes. This thesis defines and evaluates *participative belief*, which I define further in

the next section of this thesis. Participative belief draws upon several ideas of existentialist thinker Gabriel Marcel (1889 - 1973) to conceptualize and articulate the forms of belief depicted in Percy's novels. I argue that for Percy, as for Marcel, a meaningful belief is an active stance in the world, a mode of being that changes the believer's way of living, rather than the detached, cognitive assent to an idea, or cultural identifier (a *conventional* or *cultural belief*), that other believers in Percy's novels represent. Participative belief is co-extensive with Percy's definition of 'religious' in *Message in the Bottle*. Ultimately, rather than sealing off the protagonists from further doubts and uncertainties, I argue that participative belief within Percy's novels is always held in tension with religious uncertainty. This uncertainty comes into play primarily for Percy's protagonists, who never entirely resolve their philosophical and religious questions by the end of their recorded narratives.

To date, no critical work has examined the representations of belief that appear in Percy's novels, though several studies have undertaken examinations of Catholic themes. A few works offer an overview of Percy's fiction, whether the major themes of his work or Percy's techniques as a novelist: In Martin Luschei's *Walker Percy: The Sovereign Wayfarer* (1972), the author examines Percy's first three novels (*The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentleman*, and *Love in the Ruins*), and provides an analysis of Percy's indebtedness to Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* and the way that Percy's protagonists journey from the aesthetic to the ethical and finally religious stages. Jac Tharpe's overview of Percy's first five novels in *Walker Percy* (1983) examines several of the major themes of Percy's work, and provides a section on Percy's own version of Kierkegaard's 'Christendom', but in the context of Percy's native South. John Edward Hardy in *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (1987) focuses on Percy's craft and technique as a novelist, rather than turning to an examination of the existential and Roman Catholic trends and themes in Percy's novels. Linda Hobson's *Understanding Walker Percy* (1988) provides an overview of the six

novels of Percy, and links them to the theories and cultural concerns that Percy addressed in his essays and interviews.

In *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels* (1990), Mary Deems Howland demonstrates how Gabriel Marcel's theory of intersubjectivity provides a framework for conceptualizing the spiritual and intellectual development of Percy's protagonists, who move from abstracted, distanced states to states of being with others. Kieran Quinlan's *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* (1996) examines Percy's debt to neo-Thomism, and argues that 'both Percy's philosophy and his theology have serious flaws that affect his fiction', and that 'because the notion of an 'absolute' truth has been shown to be itself culturally and historically bound, it is unlikely that there can be any more 'Catholic' novelists [...]'.⁷ Quinlan includes a chapter on 'The Rhetoric of Faith', which explores belief in Percy's work, but Quinlan's treatment is limited to Tom More's putative return to the Catholic Church in *Love in the Ruins*.

In *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes* (2000), Allen Pridgen traces the sacramental landscape that Percy crafts in his fiction, but Pridgen is interested in sacramental consciousness, not necessarily the development of the protagonists understanding of their own beliefs or the beliefs of others. Michael Kobre's *Walker Percy's Voices* (2000) shows how 'the form and method of Walker Percy's fiction exemplify Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic novel'.⁸

Most recently, two works employ reader-response theory to examine Percy's constructions of an ideal audience. Peter Hawkins' *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (2004) explores how Percy, Flannery O'Connor, and Iris Murdoch attempt to portray the life of faith—or unbelief, in the case of Murdoch—to an audience that may or not agree with the authors' respective religious or

⁷ Kieran Quinlan, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 226.

⁸ Michael Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 3.

philosophical visions of the world. In *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics, and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Constructions of Audience and Tone in O'Connor, Gautreaux, and Percy* (2011), L. Lamar Nisly examines how Percy, O'Connor, and Tim Gautreaux construct audience in their novels. Nisly places all three authors in the post-Vatican II historical context and illuminates how all three respond to what they perceive as the radical cultural changes taking place in mid-twentieth century American culture.

With the exception of Kobre's Bakhtinian reading of Percy's novels, the majority of the critical works mentioned above present belief as something arrived at or achieved. But the novels never conclude with the kind of religious certitude implied by some of these readings. Percy's protagonists never fully reject or accept the Christian faith, at least not in any explicit way. Moreover, the protagonists never resolve some of the doubts and questions they pose in their dialogues.

0.2 - Categories for Meaningful Belief

In 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World' Percy defines the themes of an imaginary novel that might deal with a post-Christian society and the end of the world, speculating upon the kind of writer who would pen such a novel. In the essay, Percy labels Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Camus, Sartre, Faulkner, and O'Connor as 'religious' novelists, and anticipates the objection that Sartre, being an atheist, cannot be rightly considered a 'religious' author. Percy responds that Sartre's 'atheism is 'religious' in the sense intended here: that the novelist betrays a passionate conviction about man's nature, the world, and man's obligation to the world' (103). I expand Percy's definition of 'religious', used originally here to refer to novelists, and extend it to his characters, many of whom carry some of the same theological and philosophical torches as Camus, Sartre, and O'Connor (Sutter, Val, and Lance, particularly). Percy is not using 'religious' in the same sense that it

is often used in the broader, cultural context, but in a unique way.

Percy's protagonists, regardless of whether they are atheists (Lance), nominal Episcopalians (Will), nominal Catholics (Binx), or confessing but 'bad' Roman Catholics (Tom More), are increasingly interested in belief as they live it out, take it seriously and inwardly, and expand the expression of their belief to the life of action and experience. Although these characters begin as detached, abstracted spectators, they all desire to see true and meaningful belief lived out. In this way they are seekers. This common feature of spectatorship in Percy's protagonists connects with the theme of participative belief by reflecting the distance of the protagonists from others and any form of investment in the lives of others or systems of belief. In all areas of their lives, Percy's protagonists, at least early in their stories, avoid participating in the lives of others, religion, or belief systems.

This study identifies in Percy's novels what Kenneth Gallagher sees as the 'leitmotif of Marcel's thought', Marcel's emphasis on participation as a key aspect of faith:

To be, says Marcel, is to participate in being. There is no such thing as an isolated experience of existence, and therefore no problem of breaking through to realism. The purely private self is an abstraction: the ego given in experience is a being-by-participation. This participation might be said to have more than one level, but at every level a similar statement may be made: we cannot effectively divorce the self from that in which it participates, because it is only the participation which allows there to be a self.⁹

In his satirical non-fiction self-help book, *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), Percy develops a theory of 're-entry', where an individual re-enters the orbit of the immanent world of physical, immediate experience, even by 'direct sponsorship of God', but is prevented by 'at least two reasons, having to do with the nature of this age [...]'.⁹

One is that from the abstracted perspective of the sciences

⁹ Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), xi.

and arts—an attitude of self-effacing objectivity which through the spectacular triumph of science has become the natural stance of the educated man—God, if he is taken to exist at all, is perforce understood as simply another item in the world which one duly observes, takes note of, and stands over against. (156)

The other obstacle, argues Percy, is the ‘God-party’ who say “Lord Lord” most often, are so ignorant that most educated people want no part of them’ (156).

A very real danger for Percy’s protagonists is a mode of existence characterized by abstraction and this ‘self-effacing objectivity’. In his essays, Percy develops these two threads separately: the first regarding religious concerns and the vacuity of religious language; the second, a brand of over-abstraction of the self. But in his novels, these two strands are very much inextricably bound. Through attention to these two ideational expressions in Percy’s aesthetic, one can trace the journeys of his protagonists as they develop their beliefs in meaningful religious terms with other similar practitioners, yet apart from the widespread vacated belief of many fellow Southerners. Personally, each protagonist moves from a self-abstracted, distanced stance toward the world and others to a consciousness of being-in-the-world.

I argue that the two forms of belief implicit in Percy’s fictive constructions of the South are *participative belief* and *conventional belief*. Percy’s characters—both primary and secondary—implicitly reflect and belong to one of these two categories: in the first category, the participative dimension of religious belief, or participative belief, for short, is depicted in those characters who are ‘religious’ in their beliefs, whether denoting the practicing Roman Catholic or the atheist or Stoic who believes with sincerity and depth.

Participative belief is an appropriation of Marcel’s term and concept participation, used here in the hope of capturing the participative nature of meaningful belief in Percy’s novels. Participative belief is a specific form of belief that is characterized by the desire to live in a way consonant with the content and implications of one’s belief. One whose belief is characterized by this participative dimension will not treat a belief, specifically

the kinds of metaphysical beliefs that are touched upon in Percy's novels, as a theoretical game or an academic exercise, as a detached observer may, but as central to questions of how one is to live one's life and how to cope with alienation. In Percy's oeuvre, this alienation entails a sense that something is fundamentally wrong with the world, that the human race has suffered a separation from a state of peace, or grace, even. Percy outlines his concept of alienation in the essay 'The Man on the Train', found in Percy's collection of essays *The Message in the Bottle*. In the essay, Percy defines the alienated individual as one whose physical, social, and psychological needs are met, yet who remains haunted by a spectre of anxiety: 'He is horrified at his surroundings—he might as well be passing through a lunar landscape and the signs he sees are absurd or at least ambiguous' (*Message* 84).

Conventional belief, conversely, denotes a form of belief that reflects a cultural milieu rather than an interest in the individual's role in giving lived expression to his or her belief. In practicing this belief, the individual relinquishes the need to follow the contents of their belief through to action. Consequently, nothing is at stake in conventional belief, as the individual does not take personal ownership of the belief since it belongs to the region, to his or her family, or even to the social fabric of his or her home region. Conventional belief exemplifies belief that is generally composed of cultural Christians or even—especially in the novels following *The Moviegoer*—atheists who believe perfunctorily. Percy's protagonists tend to be, at the beginning of their respective stories, lodged between these two categories—not quite members of Southern Christendom or members of the vacuous unbelief that develops in Percy's later novels, but residents of a liminal state of indecision and non-commitment.

In general, Percy's satirical portrayal of Christianity in the South focuses on characters who worship according to cultural adherence rather than personal, inward belief. Percy's protagonists elucidate this distinction in various ways: Will Barrett in *The*

Last Gentleman is an Episcopalian because his family is Episcopalian, and he can make no claim to believe in the incarnation or Christ's substitutionary death on the cross (*LG* 221). Binx in *The Moviegoer* provides a wry commentary on the people who call in to the radio program 'This I Believe' with vigorous affirmations of believing in a 'child's smile' and the 'uniqueness and the dignity of the individual', or the concluding affirmation that Binx satirizes, one caller claiming to 'believe in believing' (*MG* 108-110). Dr. Tom More in *Love in the Ruins* 'believes' in all the doctrines of the Church of Rome but is well aware that he does none of the things prescribed to Christian behavior, and says that a man, according to St. 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' (*LR* 6). Percy's protagonists are witnesses to the two ends of this spectrum—the genuine, inward belief and, on the opposite side, culturally received belief. A truly religious, or participative belief, whether for the theist, the atheist, or the agnostic, addresses the question of the presence or absence of God, the veracity of the truth-claims of the gospels—but more significantly, how such belief is deployed meaningfully in a world of empty or evacuated religious language and concepts.

Methodologically, this thesis is a work of literary interpretation that explores the constructions of belief (as participative belief and conventional belief) and uncertainty about their veracity, both as they appear throughout the six novels of Walker Percy, as well as in in Percy's satirical non-fiction work, *Lost in the Cosmos*. In this study, I show how the novels construct a region of conventional religious belief—a form of belief that defines the 'Southern Christendom' of his novels, along with conventional unbelief—and evaluate how the protagonists struggle to live out their beliefs by enacting them as projects of participative beliefs in their own narratives. My methodology is informed by the following questions: how can one best trace the development of these protagonists, specifically their relationships to their beliefs? How do Percy's characters demonstrate their evolving

beliefs? How do the depictions of their journeys evolve over the course of Percy's career as a novelist? Finally, as I explore in the conclusion, what conversations in a modern post-secular context does this type of reading open Percy up to?

In Marcel's *Being and Having*, Marcel sketches a few brief notes about spectatorship in life and writes that the 'detachment of the spectator is [...] desertion, not only in thought but in act'. Marcel adds that the 'spectator-attitude corresponds to a form of lust; and more than that, it corresponds to the act by which the subject appropriates the world for himself' (BH 20-21). Gabriel Marcel offers a helpful resource to this study for his clear and precise formulations of belief, along with his similar concerns with reconciling belief and action, the challenges inherent in belief that arrive in the form of uncertainty, as well as his conception of human beings as "homo viators", as pilgrims on the way. In Marcel's dramatic illustrations of belief in *Being and Having* and *The Mystery of Being* (Vol. II), he emphasizes the correspondence between distance, whether physical or metaphysical, and non-committed forms of belief (BH 20-21; MB 2 77-80). In the same way, Percy's novels introduce motifs of objects of observation, which distance the protagonists from the people they attempt to understand, ironically through the very means of observation.¹⁰

The spectator-attitude articulated in Marcel's philosophy can be conceived as a detached stance or outlook that assigns no unique significance to the claims the other makes on the individual, and specific to this study, the obligation or claim a belief or

¹⁰ There are other thinkers that supply helpful categories for meaningful belief, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Tillich, although neither is recognized as influencing the thought of Percy to the extent that Marcel is. In his *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich's categories for meaningful religious belief are similar to Marcel's in emphasizing the lived expression of belief over the content of belief. As well, Jean-Paul Sartre delineates the contours of meaningful belief for the atheist in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. What Marcel provides, however, is the clearest formulation of belief as related to a detached spectatorship that finds reified form in Percy's fiction. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 1-20; see also Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism: (l'existentialisme Est Un Humanisme); Including, a Commentary on the Stranger (explication De L'étranger)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 27-28.

worldview makes on the believing individual. This attitude of spectatorship treats the world, events, and others as things to be observed in a detached mode, and not as interconnected subjects that call upon the individual to be involved or live out an expression of obligation or fidelity.

I use the spectator-attitude as a conceptual tool to diagnose a condition inherent to Percy's protagonists, which reflects their status as abstracted individuals who hold the world and others at a distance. This distance also corresponds to the absence of an animating form of belief. What one believes is, ideally in Marcel's understanding, a part of the fabric of one's life, not a game or an objective experiment. As Sam Keen writes, 'If, for instance, I am faced with questions about freedom, commitment, the meaning of life or the existence of God, there is no objective standpoint which I can adopt to answer such questions. I am involved in, and inseparable from, that about which I am asking'.¹¹ A meaningful or participative belief is therefore a personal project with an affective dimension that calls upon a transformation in ways of perceiving the world and acting according to the moral implications of that view.

This study examines the dialogues between Percy's protagonists and other characters in the aim of identifying moments when issues of belief are prominent and inform the progression of the novel. As well, I examine the physical apparatuses the protagonists use to view the world from a distance, or that remove the protagonists from entering into community with others—specifically, such apparatuses and devices as films in *The Moviegoer*, eavesdropping and a telescope in *The Last Gentleman*, the MOQOUL (an invention used to diagnose the fallenness of a human individual) in *Love in the Ruins*, and surveillance tapes in *Lancelot*.

I argue that the motif of distance is related directly to the way that characters in Percy's novels believe. Just as Marcel sees a connection between a dry and impersonal

¹¹ Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 20.

belief and spectatorship, along with a link between a living belief and personal engagement and physical nearness, so too does Percy dramatize in his novels the shift in the beliefs of his protagonists through their usage of devices of observation and spectatorship. As the protagonists begin to grow involved in the lives of others and challenge the conventional belief around them, they abandon their modes of distancing others. Accompanying this trend are the dialogues that Percy's protagonists engage in over the course of their journeys, often with characters that typify or illustrate either conventional or participative forms of belief—dialogues which, as the protagonists begin to express more of their personal beliefs and questions, reveal an increasing dissatisfaction with conventional belief and their own way of living at a distance from others.

In the essay 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World' Percy argues that, for the Catholic novelist, the 'question is not whether the Good News is no longer relevant, but rather whether it is possible that man is presently undergoing a tempestuous restructuring of his consciousness which does not presently allow him to take account of the Good News' (*Message* 113). Percy continues,

His [the American Christian novelist] dilemma is that though he professes a belief which he holds saves himself and the world and nourishes his art besides, it is also true that Christendom seems in some sense to have failed. Its vocabulary is worn out. This twin 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. (116)

The Southern religious milieu, exhausted by overexposure to Christian language and terminology, has to be circumvented by means of rhetorical devices, whether caricature or indirection. Here, where so-called belief is ubiquitous, sincere belief gains definition and clarity in contrast with the cultural Christianity of Percy's South. So what method of indirection does Percy employ in communicating the necessary depth of faith and trials true belief has to undergo to be tested? In querying the proper method to use in

framing such a novel, Percy recalls that ‘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’ (118).

Lewis Lawson refers to Percy’s fictive technique as an ‘indirect approach’, whereby Percy writes ‘maiuetically’ in order to circumvent the evacuation of meaning in religious language—an evacuation he attacks by this ‘indirect’ method in his novels. According to Lawson, Percy manages this attack ‘without ever directly discussing religion or lapsing into a ‘serious’ tone’, and that, ‘In a sense, then, Percy’s novels are the ‘indirect communications’ that complement his ‘direct communications’, his nonfiction articles [...]’.¹²

While Percy’s novels present the basic tenets of the Catholic faith, clearly articulated by either his Catholics or by his questioning atheists, the novels are not works of proselytization, and none ends with an entirely unambiguous conversion.¹³ The novels hover between, on the one hand, Percy’s presentation of the gospel within his sacramental vision and the unresolved wrestling with faith, belief, uncertainty, and doubt that trouble his protagonists on the other. Characters like Sutter, Tom, and Father Smith provide clear doctrinal statements of Christian faith, but the spiritual direction of the protagonists is always tentative, never entirely assured. Michael Kobre argues that *The Last Gentleman* ‘leads us to consider how those beliefs stand in relation to the other values and convictions expressed in the novel’s dialogue of voices’. Kobre adds that at the conclusion of the novel, the reader is left “‘on the threshold”,’ to decide ‘among the many voices echoing’ in

¹² Lewis A. Lawson, *Following Percy* (Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 1988), 6.

¹³ The only work that concludes with a clear, unambiguous conversion by the protagonist to Roman Catholicism is Percy’s unpublished *The Gramercy Winner*, which concludes with the baptism of the protagonist, Will Grey, and his subsequent death. See Percy, *The Gramercy Winner*, in the Walker Percy Papers #4294, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 336.

the reader's mind.¹⁴

As Percy states: 'If the scientist's vocation is to clarify and simplify, it would seem that the novelist's aim is to muddy and complicate' (*Message* 108). Percy's aim to muddy and complicate is perhaps best understood as an attempt to write a novel (or novels) that walk the tightrope between Catholic evangelism and free artistic expression. Rather than compose a novel where the protagonist searches and finds, definitively, an answer to his search, Percy's novels generally end in uncertainty, both in terms of the reader's impression of the future of the protagonists, and in terms of the protagonists' sense of what they believe and what the future may hold for them.

Thus, while Percy's intent to show the reader 'what he must do in order to live', may seem to conflict with his aim to 'muddy and complicate', this framework allows for a both/and. Percy's novels demonstrate an understanding of the Christian faith that is complex, multilayered, and marred by disappointment and uncertainty—novels that show one what one must do if one wants to live fully, and yet complicate realistically any notion that holding a faith and belief is simple or conventional. This complexity also applies to the life of the atheist, who possesses a participative or religious form of belief—albeit in a non-traditional sense. As John Edward Hardy writes, 'Faith is the central and final issue in all the fiction. And faith is a mystery. To find it is an undertaking quite as dangerous and absurd, as fraught with endless terror and uncertainty, as 'preposterous', as that situation of man's mortality which can be corrected in no way except by faith'.¹⁵

0.3 - Walker Percy's Journey: From Agnosticism to Roman Catholicism

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916, Percy was the oldest of three boys in a

¹⁴ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 114.

¹⁵ John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 224.

family with a troubled history of melancholy, depression, and suicide. When he was thirteen years old his father, LeRoy Pratt Percy, turned a gun on himself and committed suicide in the attic of their home. Two years later his mother died in a car accident and Percy and his two younger brothers went to live with their father's cousin, the poet and statesman William Alexander Percy (or 'Uncle Will', as he was known), in Greenville, Mississippi.

At the home of Will Percy, the young Walker found himself surrounded by books, ideas, and culture, and living with a renowned writer-poet as a surrogate father. The Greenville home hosted such notable figures as William Faulkner and the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan.¹⁶ Here the young Percy was encouraged in his appreciation for art and literature, where Will was, according to Jay Tolson, 'not simply the source of the best education the boys would ever receive; he would become the fixed point, the pole star, by which they would navigate their lives'.¹⁷

Walker Percy entered the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 1933 and majored in chemistry with a minor in mathematics. Upon graduation, he decided to pursue a career in medicine, attending Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. Percy contracted tuberculosis while an intern at New York City's Bellevue Hospital and was sent to a sanitarium in upstate New York between 1942 and 1944. An additional loss was to strike Percy, for early in 1942 Uncle Will, died. Walker's own illness and the death of his Uncle sent Percy into a time of searching, of spiritual and intellectual exploration that led him to read Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Camus and Sartre. In the process, Percy found himself questioning the scientific mindset of his university and medical training that explained man in strictly biological, rationalistic, and functional

¹⁶ Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

terms.¹⁸

The movement from agnostic scientism to an open-ended existential search eventually led Percy to the Roman Catholic Church. The draw to Roman Catholicism was, perhaps, most strongly felt in how it answered the questions of meaning that so preoccupied Percy. Martin Luschei writes that Percy's own illness and the death of Uncle Will 'brought about a radical shift of perspective', and that through Percy's time as a patient—and his diligent reading of the works of Kierkegaard—he became more convinced of the inadequacy of science to account for man's spiritual needs.¹⁹ Percy would later write,

The existentialists have taught us that what man is cannot be grasped by the sciences of man. The case is rather that man's science is one of the things that man does, a mode of existence. Another mode is speech. Man is not merely a higher organism responding to and controlling his environment. He is, in Heidegger's words, that being in the world whose calling it is to find a name for Being, to give testimony to it, and to provide for it a clearing. (158)

Percy recuperated and moved back to the South following William Alexander Percy's death, and later married Mary Bernice ('Bunt') Townsend in New Orleans in November of 1946. In 1947 Percy and his wife converted to Roman Catholicism, and the couple moved to New Orleans, later settling north of across Lake Pontchartrain in Covington, Louisiana, where they raised two daughters and remained until Percy's death in May of 1990.²⁰

¹⁸ Patrick Samway, 'Grappling with the Philosophy and Theology of Walker Percy', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, (17.3 1999), 35-50 (pp. 36-37).

¹⁹ Martin Luschei, *Walker Percy: The Sovereign Wayfarer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 6. In 'The Delta Factor' from *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy states, 'Science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature in so far as it is an individual but only in so far as it is like other individuals. The layman thinks that only science can utter the true word about anything, individuals included. But the layman is an individual. So science cannot say a single word to him or about him except as he resembles others. It comes to pass then that the denizen of a scientific-technological society finds himself in the strangest of predicaments: he lives in a cocoon of dead silence, in which no one can speak to him nor can he reply' (*Message* 22).

²⁰ Percy's conversion corresponds to a series of mid-century conversions among American

In the 1950s Percy, unsure of what profession to follow, took to writing, beginning with trying his hand at novel-writing. Taken under the wing of Caroline Gordon, the then-wife of Southern scribe Allen Tate, Percy wrote his apprentice novel, *The Charterhouse* (unpublished). Patrick Samway provides a summary of the story: the protagonist Ben Cleburne returns to Birmingham, Alabama, after an extended stay in a sanatorium. One of Ben's friends, Ignatz Kramer, is a Catholic convert.

Halfway through the novel, one of the protagonists decides to operate a filling station in a desertlike location. Two men (Ben and Ignatz?) are sitting on a patio when a man named Adam comes by. Returning from a trip to his father's house, Ben tells Ignatz that he feels spiritually dead. He proposes to Abbie and they marry. In the last section, Ben feels he has not solved his spiritual problems and seeks the help of Dr. Betty Jane, a psychiatrist. (In one revision, she appears in the first chapter.) There is a scene in a jail and a funeral (probably the death of Ben's father). At one point, Ben and Adam play cards. Though we do not know the book's outcome, it is clear that it centers on a young man who wants to develop the spiritual part of his nature.²¹

When Caroline Gordon first read it, she stated in a letter to her daughter that the work was 'the best first novel that I have ever read'.²² Gordon, who had converted to Catholicism shortly before Percy, told Percy that 'A Catholic novelist who relies more on his technique than his piety is what is badly needed right now'.²³

authors, including Caroline Gordon (1895 – 1981), Allen Tate (1899 – 1978), Robert Lowell (1917 – 1977), all of whom were drawn by the neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain, whose influence Tate claimed 'was pervasive from the time I first knew him', and whose influence on Tate's thought is traced in Peter Huff's *Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival: Trace of the Fugitive Gods* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 79. Tate became good friends with Jacques Maritain in the 1940s, and Peter Huff states that it was due in part to this friendship that drew Tate to the Roman Catholic church. (Gordon converted in 1950, Tate in 1950, also, and Robert Lowell in 1941). See also Peter Huff, 'Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival', *Humanitas*, 8.1 (1995), 26-43 (p. 36).

²¹ Patrick Samway, *Walker Percy: A Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), 145.

²² *Ibid.*, 160.

²³ Tolson, *Pilgrim*, 220. Samway writes that, 'For the record, Gordon made her credo very clear: all novels must be about love; and love between a man and a woman is an analogue of divine love. She stated explicitly that this love is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus, the Christ. 'Your business as a novelist is to imitate Christ. He was about His Father's

When Percy's younger brother Phin Percy tried to read the novel, however, Phin said, 'It wasn't badly written [...] but it just didn't go anywhere. It was boring as hell'.²⁴

Tolson explains,

The novel that Phin had attempted to read dealt with a young southerner of a good family named Ben Cleburne, a troubled young man who, as the novel begins, is completing a stay in a fancy mental institution, the 'Retreat', located in a mountain town unmistakably patterned after Sewanee. Cleburne has been in the care of a psychiatrist named Dr. Betty Jane (patterned, one imagines, after Janet Rioch [Percy's own New York psychiatrist during his medical school years and after]), who judges Ben's relationship with his father 'unsatisfactory'. Ben knows that there is some truth to this, but the diagnosis seems in some deeper way to miss the point.

Percy later wrote a second novel, *The Gramercy Winner*, also unpublished, which has the DNA of Percy's other novels. Using Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* as a kind of template, Percy composed his second unpublished novel, *The Gramercy Winner*, about a tubercular young man named Will Grey recuperating in the Adirondacks.²⁵

In the novel the narrator explains,

If there was anything remarkable about his past life it was that absolutely nothing had happened to him now. Though he had never felt ill, nor had a single symptom, and now felt better and weighed more than he ever had before, yet here he lay and had lain for six months. Except for visits from his parents and his sister, he had during this time seen four people, his doctor, the nurse, the cleaning girl and the barber. But time went quickly dreamily by. He listened to his radio, read a bit, looked out his window, but always he was brought back to the oddity of his predicament. It was the oddest thing in the world that that [sic] beyond the green hills, a little to the south, ten million people were at this moment busy at work in New York and across the world armies were locked in battle.²⁶

Even in the description of Grey, one hears hints of the voice of Binx Bolling, as

business every moment of His life. As a good novelist you must be about yours: Incarnation. Making your word flesh and making it dwell among men' (Samway, *Walker Percy*, 164).

²⁴ Tolson, *Pilgrim*, 213.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁶ Percy, *Gramercy*, 10.

well as the precise and economic tone of *The Last Gentleman's* narrator. Like Percy's other works, *The Gramercy Winner* is rich in dialogue, featuring the same high-minded reflections on 'everydayness' and the adulation of science. Also, the narrator notes that the 'pure scientist who listens to Wagner', like Father Smith's views of Robespierre or Stalin in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (129), is both a theorizer of human nature and a sentimental lover of humankind, and as such poses a threat to human life and freedom.²⁷

In the epilogue of *The Gramercy Winner*, Scanlon, a friend of Grey's, and something of a lapsed Catholic, baptizes Grey:

And once when the Night Supervisor intervened (Doctor or no Doctor) it was not Scanlon but William who ordered her out, and in the only discourtesy of his illness threatened to get up and walk out with Scanlon himself if she didn't leave. She heard them converse by the hour-- Dr Scanlon mostly, his voice low and emphatic, discursive-- as if he were imparting information, data, of great value and usefulness, William interrupting once in a while to put a short sharp question. It was as if one were going somewhere and the other were giving him instructions for the journey. It was all inexplicable, because Dr Scanlon was not on the case and he had not been a particularly close friend of William's. And with it all Dr Scanlon behaved rather strangely, guiltily, avoiding family and friends and slipping in and out as if he had something to conceal. Sometimes-- and this was what the Night Supervisor found most unbearable-- they spoke in tones of unmistakable levity and even laughed out loud. Two nights before William died, in making her routine night rounds she had come in and caught Dr Scanlon bending over William, baptising him with a glass of water. William's eyes were open and he looked equably at her and appeared on the point of saying something, but he did not and it was immediately thereafter that he lapsed into the coma from which he did not recover.²⁸

Of Percy's craft, Jay Tolson says,

Unlike his friend Shelby Foote and most other southern writers, he was not a natural storyteller. Dialectic and argument—those most unsouthern modes of discourse—were his strengths, and accommodating them to fiction would be his greatest challenge. Considering the effort this would require, it is hardly surprising that in 1954 he would

²⁷ Ibid., 163.

²⁸ Ibid., 336.

turn, with considerable relief, to the writing of reviews and philosophical essays, and that for the rest of his career he would alternate between fiction and nonfiction. But those first six years of apprenticeship were devoted exclusively and arduously to the craft of fiction.²⁹

Percy's first attempted novels were heavily didactic, and featured what Tolson calls 'an almost puritanical contempt for the artifice of art, and in that state of mind he would crave a more direct medium for expressing what he had to say'.³⁰ In the mid-1950s Percy wrote philosophical and semiotic essays, several later collected in his 1975 book *The Message in the Bottle* that explores humankind's unique abilities as symbol-making creatures. Percy finally anchored himself in the world of fiction with the publication of *The Moviegoer* in 1961, which won the National Book Award in 1962. Following *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy produced five more novels and published the non-fiction mock self-help book, *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), before his death in 1990 from prostate cancer.

Percy left a rich heritage of novels and non-fiction that continue to attract readers and scholars today. From *The Moviegoer* onward, Percy's novels developed in style and form but retained a distinct concern for the individual human being who feels lost in the modern world, but who attempts to make a meaningful life in the suburbs, business offices, and car dealerships, and on the golf courses of the American South.

0.4 - Percy's Philosophy of Composition

In examining Percy's path to novel-writing, two thinkers emerge as major influences in shaping his vision of the role of the Catholic writer: Kierkegaard and Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). While Kierkegaard and Maritain represent two disparate theological spheres—the former a nineteenth-century Lutheran and existentialist, the latter a twentieth-century Roman Catholic neo-Thomist—in different ways both thinkers argue for

²⁹ Tolson, *Pilgrim*, 211.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

the liberation of the Christian artist from the need to sermonize or proselytize in his or her art.

Kierkegaard's essay 'On the Difference Between an Apostle and a Genius' and Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* (1923) suggested a framework to Percy that freed his vision as a novelist yet imparted some religious focus, whether existential or neo-Thomistic, that would give direction to Percy's concerns as a writer. As Percy explained in a later interview (1986), Kierkegaard's essay, 'On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle' confirmed,

Something I suspected but that it took Søren Kierkegaard to put into words: that what the greatest geniuses in science, literature, art, philosophy utter are sentences which convey truths *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is to say, sentences which can be confirmed by appropriate methods and by anyone, anywhere, any time. But only the apostle can utter sentences which can be accepted on the authority of the apostle, that is, his credentials, sobriety, trustworthiness as a newsbearer. These sentences convey not knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* but news. (*Conversations* 137)

Percy's training as a scientist was affirmed by Kierkegaard's sanction of the validity of a *certain* kind of truth—the truth that can be verified by reason and empirical investigation—while ratifying Percy's religious belief in revelation as based in an authority outside of human reason. The consequence of such a philosophy was a liberation from the role of evangelist or moralist, and as Percy stated of the role of the novelist, clearly echoing Kierkegaard, 'A novelist least of all has the authority to edify anyone or tell them good news, to pronounce Christ King' (*Conversations* 64). The novelist can relate experience to his audience, can depict life as it is for him or her, and awaken the reader to the wonder of the created order as only a keen observer could, but it is not the duty or even the capacity of the novelist to present the gospel, or attempt to make a convert of the reader.

In turn, reading Maritain further liberated Percy from the kind of fiction that required him to preach the gospel: Maritain's aesthetic philosophy, as laid out in his work

Art and Scholasticism, argues that the artist's work, in this case the novelist's work, is not beholden to the standards of the author's personal ethics, or the ethics prescribed by the Catholic church. In other words, the novelist can depict the world as he or she finds it, in all of its ugliness and depravity, without censoring the content to reflect what the world *should* or ought to be like: 'If you want to make a Christian work', says Maritain, 'then *be* Christian, and simply try to make a beautiful work, into which your heart will pass; do not try to "make Christian"'.³¹ Ross Labrie writes in 'The Catholic Literary Imagination', that 'Following St. Thomas Aquinas, Maritain pointed out that the work of art had as its purpose its own proper good as distinct from the ethical and other goods sought or achieved by human beings including the Catholic writer'.³² Additionally, in *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain argues that the artist 'approache[s] the world as a "creative mystery"', which, through the process of art, eventually [draws] the artist upward from the visible world toward an ontological interest in being itself'.³³ From perceiving the immediate presence of the physical world, one is led to an interest in higher things, not just a meditation on the things of sensory phenomena themselves.³⁴ Percy's interest in phenomena in the texture of reality is thus coextensive with both his neo-Thomistic Roman Catholicism and his existentialistic leanings, as both neo-Thomism and existentialism, as provisionally defined above, perceive the physical world as the only grounds upon which a fruitful investigation into *being* can be based.³⁵ Significantly, the

³¹ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. by Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974 [1923]), 66.

³² Ross Labrie, 'The Catholic Literary Imagination', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 17.3 (Summer 1999), 9-20 (pp. 13-14).

³³ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

³⁴ In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain states that '[T]he moment one touches a transcendental, one touches being itself, a likeness of God, an absolute, that which ennobles and delights our life; one enters into the domain of spirit. It is remarkable that men really communicate with one another only by passing through being or one of its properties' (32).

³⁵ Mark Wrathall and Hubert Dreyfus distill the phenomenological approach of such disparate existentialist thinkers as Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus, and state that the shared approach of these thinkers includes the following: 'A concern with providing a description

existentialist writer's interest in communicating felt experience in a novel dovetails with Maritain's observation that through the visible, tangible world one can gain entrance into a spiritual reality.

Peter Huff notes the common denominators in the numerous conversions to Roman Catholicism during the Catholic Literary Revival:

Though the converts of the Revival sought the Catholic faith for a variety of reasons, their individual experiences usually revolved around a cluster of classic concerns at odds with the trends of modernity: the search for beauty in a world of industrial ugliness, the desire for mystery in a world of cold rationalism, the pursuit of truth in a world of relativism, and a hunger for infallible authority in a world of sure uncertainty.³⁶

Catholicism afforded Percy a means of balancing his scientific perspective of the world and the existentialist rejection of a reductionist view of man as either an organism in an environment (B.F. Skinner), a socially constructed being locked in economic struggle (Marx), or the site of all manner of psychological neuroses (Freud). Through Percy's affinity for both Roman Catholicism and existentialism he was able to read the world through a lens that saw it as inherently mysterious, yet sustained scientific inquiry about it as worthwhile and valid. Concerning the existentialists, particularly Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel, Camus, and Sartre, Percy argues that they attempt to answer the question:

What is it like to be a man in a world transformed by science? [The existentialists] have put tremendous stress on the *concrete* predicament of a man's life. How is this related to my novelwriting? Perhaps a novel is the best way to render this concreteness. The writing of novels should be a

of human existence and the human world that reveals it as it is', 'A heightened awareness of the non-rational dimensions of human existence, including habits, non-conscious practices, moods, and passions', 'A focus on the degree to which the world is cut to the measure of our intellect, and a willingness to consider the possibility that our concepts and categories fail to capture the world as it presents itself to us in experience', and 'A belief that what it is to be human cannot be reduced to any set of features about us (whether biological, sociological, anthropological, or logical). To be human is to transcend facticity'. Hubert L. Dreyfuss and Mark A. Wrathall, eds., *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 5.

³⁶ Huff, *Allen Tate*, 14.

very serious business, and I think it has a future. In some ways we are (as novelists) at a point in history like the revolution in physics which occurred around 1900. (*Conversations* 12)

Despite his affinity for the existentialists, Percy is quick to note that they are not without their ‘flaws’, one of which is ‘their contempt for science’ (*Conversations* 12). As a physician, Percy is not one to dismiss casually the value of the physical sciences, even though they may contribute at times to the abstraction of human experience, or taken too broadly when seen as the ultimate measure of the created order. As a trained pathologist, Percy sees the scientific method as another means of meaning-making. As Linda Hobson claims,

It is important to remember that Walker Percy the novelist is also Dr. Percy the scientist, who uses art to reveal truths about the human predicament. Percy sees that science, by itself, can never say anything meaningful about the individual but only about how the individual is *like* other men; but, he affirms the value of science in its own place. But when science is made into a religion and its laws used to say something about *a man*, it goes wrong.³⁷

While Kierkegaard and Maritain provide Percy with a theoretical means of liberating the role of the Christian novelist from the duty to proselytize, Kierkegaard in conjunction with another existentialist thinker, the Roman Catholic Gabriel Marcel, provide Percy with a vocabulary to construct his vision of the American South as a place of widespread and conventional and culturally received belief. Percy’s satiric vision focuses on the regrettable disparities he sees between Christianity and Christendom, paralleling the gradients of faith and belief that Gabriel Marcel delineates in his Gifford Lectures from 1949 and 1950, later published as *The Mystery of Being*.³⁸

0.5 - Defining Belief in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel

³⁷ Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 11-12.

³⁸ Volumes one and two published in 1950 and 1951, respectively.

The Catholic Revival began in the 1890s with the death of Cardinal Henry Newman and extended to the beginning of Vatican II (1962-1965). The era produced an outpouring of Catholic literature, philosophy, and theology, highlighted by the literary and philosophical works of G.K. Chesterton, George Bernanos, Hilaire Belloc, and Evelyn Waugh. Neo-Thomism dominated Catholic philosophy in this era, led in large part by the writings of French convert to Roman Catholicism Jacques Maritain.³⁹

R. Scott Appleby loosely outlines the tenets of Maritain's neo-Thomism:

Neo-Thomism, adhering in its basic contours to the principles of Aquinas, presented itself as the irreplaceable remedy to the several serious intellectual errors of modern epistemology (theory of knowledge). Modern thinkers, confronted by evolution, dialectical materialism, the psychology of the subconscious, and other destabilizing ideas suggested by the discoveries or theories of modern science, had become distracted and misled by the seemingly 'realistic' options of skepticism and irrationalism. Boldly, neo-Thomism offered renewed confidence in the powers of rightly ordered human reason, defiantly reaffirming its ontological reality—its participation in 'being itself'.⁴⁰

Gabriel Marcel's theories, however, elude such a summary; the difficulty in distilling the philosophy of Marcel is a result of his exploratory method of treating philosophical themes, rather than setting forth a clearly defined set of logical propositions. Marcel's arguments wander, fade, disappear, and resurface pages later, and at times resemble, particularly in *The Mystery of Being*, extended monologues on issues that have preoccupied Marcel personally, rather than arguments with a clear sense of their rhetorical goals. Notoriously unsystematic, Marcel's philosophy has been labeled as *anti-Thomistic*, which locates him in counterpoint to the dominant Catholic philosophy of the early-to-mid

³⁹ Huff, *Allen Tate*, 11.

⁴⁰ R. Scott Appleby, Patricia Byrne, and William L. Portier, eds., 'Scholasticisms and Thomisms', *Creative Fidelity: American Catholic Intellectual Traditions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 30-31.

twentieth century, particularly the neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain.⁴¹

In Marcel's *The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality*, Marcel distinguishes between belief, opinion, and conviction—distinctions which provide categories for this discussion of participative and conventional belief in Percy's novels. In Marcel's formulation, belief (or faith) is distinguished from opinion and conviction. Opinion has to do with an issue or concern that is outside of oneself, detached from any intimate existential concern (*MB* 2 68). Oftentimes it is based upon an absence of information. Conviction is an unshakeable opinion, but one that is still external, not intimate, and can also be held upon an absence of information. Belief, however, places an individual at the disposal of what he or she affirms. A person may *have* an opinion and discard it the next day, but a person *is* a belief: he or she represents the belief by his or her activities.

Percy's protagonists effectively embody the challenge of *belief*, the rigor of being ontologically linked with a principle or idea that gives definition to one's very being, one's actions, and, hardest of all, one's future: Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman* finds that his identity as a Southern Gentleman is more than a label that he assumes passively. He cannot quite shake it off, and it burdens him as he attempts to reconcile his desire to sleep with Kitty and his belief that one should never 'mistake a lady for a whore' (*LG* 100-101). Lance's quest to discover his betrayers in *Lancelot* does not require of him any certainty of its rightness, or any certainty of its outcome, but a persistent sense of obligation, of fidelity, to his aims.

Now the believer may look like someone who is convinced that God exists but, Marcel insists, belief and conviction involve 'two completely different vistas' [*II*, 78] or perspectives. He characterizes conviction as closed. 'It implies a kind of inner closure' he writes, for it states that 'whatever happens or whatever may be said cannot alter what I think'. Faith, on the other hand, is open [*II*, 86] for it involves *believing in* something or someone, not *believing that* (or being convinced that) a certain creed or set of propositions are true. That is, faith consists of placing

⁴¹ Seymour Cain, *Gabriel Marcel* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1963), 11-12.

oneself 'at the disposal of something' [II, 77], of 'giving oneself to, rallying to;' it involves 'an existential index', namely, a person's concrete here and now pledge to give oneself to and 'to follow' something or someone. Since belief gives one's self, 'the strongest belief, or more exactly, the most living belief, is that which absorbs most fully all the powers of your being' [II, 78].⁴²

So how does conviction fit into the schema concerning distinctions between participative and conventional belief? I extend this notion of *conviction* a bit further, conceiving of it as an indifferent commitment—one in which nothing is really at stake. Conviction, as Anderson claims 'does not involve a pledge of one's self or a giving of one's self or a commitment to follow anything; it simply pronounces an unchangeable judgment about something'.⁴³

On the other hand, Marcel identifies the 'rallying to' as a primary feature of a serious belief. In Percy's novels, his protagonists emerge from comfortable, abstracted, and detached forms of belief while in the *process* of observing others, like Lonnie and Sutter, whose beliefs, regardless of content, are serious because played-out on the level of everyday practice. While Percy's protagonists arrive at different points of repudiation, semi-conversion, or conversion to Catholic belief, they have all moved away from the static, conventional forms of belief that marked them at the beginning of their respective journeys, and are processing the weight and significance of a commitment to *believe*.

Both Marcel and Percy place characters in their fictions in situations where this crisis is played out. As Mary Deems Howland states in her study *The Gift of the Other* (1990),

In both his philosophical essays and his plays, Marcel focuses on the day-to-day encounters that the individual has with other individuals. Pointing to our tendency to cut ourselves off from others and our concomitant need for other people, Marcel stresses the value of the ordinary interchanges that people experience in the family, the

⁴² Thomas C. Anderson, *Commentary on Gabriel Marcel's The Mystery of Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006), 129.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 130.

business world and the church.⁴⁴

Marcel's distinction between opinion, characterized by detachment, and belief, characterized by commitment, is central thematically in Percy's body of work, where his protagonists are bombarded by competing worldviews. Moreover, his protagonists wrestle not only with others' beliefs that they encounter, but also with the nature, structure and process, of participative belief. According to Marcel, in the instance of a truly meaningful and committed belief, one extends oneself as a credit for this belief (*MB* 1 134-135). As moviegoers, outsiders, scientists, and amnesiacs, Percy's protagonists embody and depict a collision with the world-committed nature of belief. Since their habitual mode of existence is defined by detachment and solitariness, when they encounter those that stand out as true believers—specifically in Percy's first two novels—as individuals who have committed themselves to a belief that takes governance over how they live their lives, Percy's protagonists begin to come to a recognition of the rigorous nature of participative belief. Marcel's diagnosis of the spectator-attitude, which stands off from its own commitments and beliefs, accurately describes early characterizations of Percy's protagonists:

It would, at root, be just as if I lived a sort of self-enclosed existence, and without coming out of my enclosure, I were to pronounce a certain judgment, which did not pledge me to anything. Again, we might put it that from this point of view *to believe* is essentially *to follow*; but we must not attach a passive meaning to that word. The metaphor of *rallying* may very profitably be used to fill out that of credit. If I *believe in*, I *rally to*; with that sort of interior gathering of oneself which the act of rallying implies. From this point of view one might say that the strongest belief, or more exactly the most living belief, is that which absorbs most fully all the powers of your being. (*MB* 2 77-78)

Each character is presented with a challenge, whether to decide what to do with his life within the week (Binx), or to solve the question of the existence of evil, and by extension the existence of God (Lance); and each subsequently engages in a search that

⁴⁴ Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990), 4.

brings him face to face with the demands of participative belief: what one believes, if meaningfully considered and treated, must be lived in consonantly with one's behavior. Percy's characters are rarely confident or aggressive in the communication of their beliefs (and while Lancelot is a clear exception to this rule, his nihilism also comes to the fore during the latter part of his narrative, as well). There is, as Marcel defines it in the above excerpt, always an element of being on a journey for Percy's protagonists. Marcel's view of salvation also takes the shape of a pilgrimage, of an unfinished journey. In the concluding pages of his second volume of *The Mystery of Being*, Marcel writes:

Salvation can also be better conceived by us as a road rather than a state; and this links up again with some profound views of the Greek Fathers, in particular St. Gregory of Nyssa. I must add that if there is a sense in which salvation is indistinguishable from peace, it is a living peace that is in question; it is certainly not a spiritual stand-still, our being as such getting congealed in the contemplation of some fixed star. (*MB* 2 182 - 183)

Percy repeatedly emphasizes his debt to Marcel, but there is no established connection between their views of meaningful belief—although their mutual concern with language evacuation lays the groundwork for such an exploration as the one featured here. Percy's novels highlight an essential element in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, that participative belief is central to the quality of the inner, conscious life of an individual, dictating the way and degree to which a human exists in the world and responds to it. The thread common to Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Percy is the emphasis on faith as a lived experience, as subjective in the Kierkegaardian sense—a belief that shapes the interior reality of the individual, and in turn becomes a transformative force in the individual's life *in the world*, with others, as an individual before God. Thus the term participative belief does not represent a new understanding of Marcel, but provides a distinction from the other less substantive, less authentic forms of belief in Percy's novels. Just as Kierkegaard had to distinguish between Christendom and Christianity, and Marcel between opinion, conviction, and faith (*MB* 2 126-127), so too do Percy's novels implicitly distinguish

between the various constructions of belief, whether religious or otherwise.

Chapter 1 examines how the beliefs of several passionate individuals are foregrounded in Percy's first two published novels, *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*. These 'religious' characters, both atheists and Roman Catholics, model participative belief for Binx and Will, and challenge the protagonists to examine what they believe and move away from their spectatorship. By the end of both works, neither Binx nor Will converts to Roman Catholicism or completely repudiates any religious belief, but both emerge from out of their respective spectator-attitudes.

Chapter 2 explores how Percy's technique in exploring participative belief shifts in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot* by using first-person narratives where the protagonists are more conversant in the content of their beliefs, and both recognize the disjunct between what they believe and how they express that belief in their lives. Both Tom More and Lance Lamar Andrewes attempt to awaken from the deadened, abstracted existence of their former lives and move toward a more meaningful engagement with their beliefs.

Chapter 3 showcases the increasingly direct and even polemical (particularly in *The Thanatos Syndrome*) way that Percy addresses his cultural-historical concerns. In *The Second Coming*, Will Barrett, the protagonist of the novel, launches into long-winded polemics against the equal inanity of believer and unbeliever in the South. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, I examine how the voice of Percy the moralist and essayist merges with that of Percy the novelist, and Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome* sounds more like a voice for critiquing the cultural-historical concerns of Walker Percy than the voice of a fictional character.

Chapter 4 observes how Percy's non-fiction satire, *Lost in the Cosmos*, guides the ideal reader-protagonist by means of its stories—and accompanying quizzes—from conventional belief to participative belief by linking decisions with momentous, life-changing consequences. I engage with two critics, Andrew Hoogheem and Michael Allen

Mikolajczak, who read *Lost in the Cosmos* as a work that stymies the attempts of the individual to find a secure, comfortable totalizing discourse.

Finally, in the conclusion of this study, I summarize the findings of the study, and offer a reading of Percy that places him in a postsecular body of twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. Consistent throughout all of Percy's novels is the conflict between participative belief and conventional belief, and the means of measuring the protagonists' journeys, via weighing their spectator-attitudes and involvement.

1. From Spectators to Participants: Meaningful Belief in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*

1.1 - Conventional and Participative Belief in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*

Binx Bolling, the twenty-nine-year-old protagonist of Percy's *The Moviegoer*, climbs into his bed one evening and turns on his radio for what he calls a 'nightcap of a program'. Every night at ten o'clock, dutiful as a monk saying his evening prayers, Binx listens to the radio program *This I Believe*, hosted by Edward R. Murrow (108). The program features what Binx considers the 'highest-minded people' in the nation, contributing statements of what they believe and value, abstract ideals such as love, freedom, democracy, or forgiveness, punctuated at intervals with the affirmation, 'This I believe'.

The testimonies on the show are well-intentioned but exceedingly idealistic, and in Binx's estimation universally safe: none of the statements is likely to offend listeners or challenge any notions that the audience may have about politics, society, or religion. Binx is ambivalent toward these declarations: despite the universal 'niceness' of the contributors

and their sentiments, Binx adds that the ‘believers are far from unique themselves’, and ‘are in fact alike as peas in a pod’ (109).

In response to the contributions, Binx provides his own declaration of belief, a testimony to his wry perspective and role as sharp social observer, and submits the following: ‘Here are the beliefs of John Bickerson Bolling, a moviegoer living in New Orleans’, it began and ended, ‘I believe in a good kick in the ass. This—I believe’ (109). Binx soon regrets his letter, and is relieved when his tongue-in-cheek submission is returned.

Binx observes that these believers, although culled from a diverse cross-section of American citizens, are of a uniform mind; the very language used in *This I Believe* favors the abstract, and each phrase accommodates the political and social status quo. His observations about the submissions he hears on *This I Believe* raise several questions about the nature of belief: What does it mean to believe? When one says that one believes something, or believes in something, how does that belief affect the ways in which one lives and acts in the world? Does believing mean being a member of a church, or voting for a candidate who ascribes to one’s favored political platform—or, as Binx’s droll commentary about *This I Believe* implies, has the word ‘believe’ lost its meaning in a world where everyone seems to believe the same things?

As Peter Hawkins notes, in Percy’s fiction and essays, ‘The gospel has become like a word repeated in rapid, mindless succession; it no longer means anything, having fallen victim to its own inflation or become unrecognizably blurred through inferior reproduction’.⁴⁵ Words, phrases, and concepts may all grow stale in an environment of mass exchange. Hawkins notes that the gospel has undergone such a devaluation, but as demonstrated in Percy’s use of the radio program *This I Believe*, so has the word ‘belief’. The terms that Percy uses in describing this phenomenon are ‘failure’ and ‘devaluation’,

⁴⁵ Peter Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2004), 54.

likening the absence of meaning in the language of Christianity in Christendom to hyper-inflation in an economy. Percy states in 'A Novel About the End of the World' that '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 chip, which is the same as starting with none' (*Message* 116).

Binx's observations about *This I Believe* capture the extent of this devaluation of language, which has seeped into the usage and understanding of the words *believe* and *belief*. Those involved in this devaluation are not just Christians, but non-believers as well. Regardless of the Christian or non-Christian content of the belief, the majority of Christians and non-believers in Percy's novels are uniform in how they treat belief, utilizing similar language that is so overused and stale that it is, in reality, meaningless.

In an interview, Percy states:

For instance, the ordinary words of the Creed: 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty . . . ' and so forth, this gets rattled off, and Binx has been hearing this, and the words become a simulacrum. And the trick of the novelist, the task of the artist, is always to somehow renew language, make it fresh, make it strange, if you like, pathological, if you like, anything in order to transmit meaning, and to renew the process of communication. (*More Conversations* 168)

In Percy's first two published novels, *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* (1966), the protagonists, Binx Bolling and Will Barrett, inhabit a South where a nominal form of Protestantism dominates the religious landscape, along with a few pockets of scientific or atheistic humanism. By setting his protagonists in the center of a world of evacuated language, widespread despair, and suffocating malaise, Percy creates a context for Binx and Will to observe those that, in stark contrast to the conventional belief that predominates the South and the U.S., believe with depth and sincerity. These 'religious' characters in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* live out a *participative belief*, not a

conventional or culturally inherited belief; they are concerned with how belief is lived out in the fabric of one's everyday life, decisions, and outlook on the world. These characters challenge Binx and Will by directly asking them what they believe, and by indirectly modeling participative belief wherein what they believe is always at work in how they act in the world.

Gene Reeves writes that for Gabriel Marcel 'faith is an act of personal participation by a concrete person in which the believer is not distinct from that in which he or she participates. In true faith the act of faith and the object of faith cannot be disconnected'.⁴⁶ Although Marcel uses this in the context of Christian faith, the way belief animates and transforms one's actions is also depicted in the way some of Percy's Stoic or atheistic characters actively believe, living out their beliefs. For example, Sutter Vaught's deeply held nihilism is distinct from the blandly vacuous Christian belief others around him possess, and creates a noticeable counterpoint to the conventional belief held by the majority of Percy's secondary characters. Sutter is depicted wrestling with what his unbelief means—in relation to suicide, attempts at transcendence through orgasm, all connected inextricably with grand metaphysical issues and, simultaneously, with ordinary, everyday concerns.

Unlike characters such as Sutter and Lonnie, though, who have arrived to some degree at a station of belief, Binx and Will must undertake journeys toward meaningful belief. This chapter examines the way that Binx and Will progress from being bemused observers of the world—a characteristic diagnosed by Marcel as symptomatic of a spectator-attitude (*BH* 20-21)—to individuals engaged in the affairs of others, who begin to recognize that belief is a lived project, fraught with uncertainty. In the course of their journeys and encounters with religious characters who model participative belief, the two

⁴⁶ Gene Reeves, 'The Idea of Mystery in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel', *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Schlipp, Paul Arthur and Lewis Edwin Hahn, eds. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1984), pp. 245-271 (p. 252).

protagonists begin to perceive what it means to believe in a ‘religious’ way, demonstrating an active concern in questions which Percy’s calls ‘explicit and ultimate concern[s]’ (*Message* 102).

In their journeys, Binx and Will demonstrate a movement away from observing the world from a privileged, ‘angelic’ perspective—a perspective inherent to what Percy calls a ‘scientist-knower’ who observes and studies the world with supposed pure objectivity (*Message* 21)—toward living alongside others. Binx and the young Will begin to question their own inherited beliefs, and while neither Binx nor Will arrive at fully-formed religious belief, both have moved out of the detached spectator-mode of abstracted belief, and begin living out the implications of their emerging beliefs. What one sees in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, rather than conversions or religious certitude is the movement away from the spectator-attitude toward one more involved in the ramifications of being in the world. For Binx, this movement means marriage to Kate and reassurance of the twins that they will see Lonnie again; for Will, it means taking care of Jamie and attending to him on his deathbed, and preventing Sutter from committing suicide.

At the beginning of both novels, Binx and Will are detached, distant, and abstracted. Binx provides cerebral and free-floating narration that digresses from topic to topic, and identifies other characters as types or abstractions. Will, in turn, is first seen in the novel with a telescope in Central Park, observing birds, buildings, and people. Both Binx and Will struggle to fit into groups, and both identify what they consider the artificiality of public communication. By identifying, and thus separating groups from one another, diagnosing behaviors, and passing judgment on friends, family, and passersby, Binx and Will isolate themselves—mirrored as well in their preoccupation with the means of distancing, whether by moviegoing, people-watching, eaves-dropping, or telescopic observation. Percy states that Binx ‘comes out of his life-long trance of moviegoing and sees somebody who needs something’, that by the end of the novel he ‘gets out of

himself', (*More Conversations* 220) and that it is only 'by a movement, 'transcendence', toward God' that Binx and Will, along with his other protagonists, are able to 'become themselves, not abstracted like scientists but fully incarnate beings in the world' (*More Conversations* 148).

In *The Moviegoer*, Aunt Emily's Stoicism, shaped by the Roman Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, is not just a theoretical belief that exists at a disconnect from her everyday life, but a way of life that distinguishes her from the rest of her socially and morally decaying scene in New Orleans (54). As Lewis P. Simpson writes, 'Aunt Emily [...] represents the southern culture of memory as characterized by a Stoic nobility of behavior joined to a gentility of manners. But her nephew, Binx Bolling, rejects her attempts to suggest that he recover the ideal of honor and self-discipline held by this culture'.⁴⁷ Lonnie's devout Roman Catholicism also stands in counterpoint to the casual religiosity of his own family. While 98% of Americans claim to believe, according to Binx, most characters in Percy's novels demonstrate little real interest in the way that questions of God's existence or non-existence affect how one lives in everyday life. In *The Last Gentleman*, Sutter's nihilism, for example, takes form in his repudiation of both his life and his role as a doctor, his subsequent pursuit of transcendence through orgasm, and the many journal entries he pens to make sense of his decision.

However, transformational elements of participative belief are embodied in Aunt Emily's, Lonnie's, Val Vaught's, and Sutter Vaught's expressions of belief. All four characters see *what* they believe as necessarily linked with *how* they exist in the world. For these aforementioned characters, the existence or non-existence of God circumscribes the ethical contours of their lives, and none of their scenes passes without Aunt Emily, Lonnie, Sutter, or Val's openly wrestling with the implications of their beliefs, registered on the page through their inner or oral dialogues and through Sutter's journal.

⁴⁷ Lewis Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 249.

The events contained in both novels are framed as interludes for these characters: *The Moviegoer* takes place the week before Binx's thirtieth birthday, when he will have to tell his Aunt what he wants to do with his life and then commit to following up. At the beginning of *The Last Gentleman* Will Barrett is a humidification engineer (janitor) in New York City, although he is soon employed instead by the Vaught family as a caretaker for the youngest member of the family, Jamie, who is terminally ill. Both Binx and Will know that their current employment and daily habits are temporary, and eventually they will have to make a decision about what they want from life. Neither novel concludes with any definitive recognition on the part of the protagonists of a system of belief or faith. Rather, *The Moviegoer* concludes with Kierkegaardian silence for Binx and *The Last Gentleman* with bewilderment for Will. The conclusions of both novels, however, are marked by a latent possibility for further development in the intellectual and spiritual lives of these protagonists.⁴⁸

While Binx's avowed philosophy (a blend of Kierkegaardian existentialism, hedonism, and agnosticism) is presented in pieces throughout the novel, Aunt Emily's articulation of her Stoic philosophy is clear, direct, and communicated with precision—as is Lonnie's sacramental Catholicism. The articulation of Binx's beliefs takes form across the entire course of the novel, developing in Kierkegaardian fits and starts, in dialogues between himself and others; but at the conclusion of *The Moviegoer*, it is not entirely clear what it is that Binx believes or consciously affirms.

⁴⁸Several critical works make the claim that Binx and Will make a kind of Kierkegaardian leap into the religious phase, end up adopting the Catholic faith, or make a clear movement toward Catholic belief: Gary M. Ciuba, *Walker Percy's Revelations* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 95-95, 129-130; Martin Luschei sees Binx as making the Kierkegaardian leap, but Will as incapable of witnessing the religious significance of Lonnie's baptism, in *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 106-110, 166-168; Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 43-45, 65-66; Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990), 42-44, 61-62.

Will encounters an array of characters that embody different beliefs in his cross-country journey through the United States, from New York City to the South, and then westward to Santa Fe, New Mexico; however, it is Sutter Vaught and Val Vaught, the two eldest children of Mr. Vaught, the Birmingham car dealer who employs Will to take care of Jamie Vaught, that challenge Will to wrestle with his own beliefs. Will turns mainly to Sutter to help him understand his own ethical quandary, whether to fornicate or not to fornicate, whether to be a scoundrel or a proper Southern gentleman. Val, in turn, presents her Catholic vision of the world to Will when he visits her at the school where she teaches disadvantaged youths, and even asks Will to take measures to have Jamie baptized should he die while away from the care of the rest of the family (*LG* 210-213).

Will is less expressive in communicating his religious and philosophical beliefs. He stammers that he is an Episcopalian, but he is unsure of what that means for his life. Like Binx, the articulation of Will's beliefs takes discernible form over the course of the novel, and only through his dialogues with Sutter and Val. Just as Binx gives the reader a clue as to a potential shift in his beliefs at the end of the novel, captured in his response to Lonnie's siblings as they inquire about Lonnie's death, so too does Will give the reader a touchstone concerning his beliefs in how he responds to the baptism and death of Jamie, as well as the pursuit of Sutter's car.

1.2 - Percy's *The Moviegoer*

In the first-person narration of *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling records the events of the week leading up to his thirtieth birthday. With Ash-Wednesday just a week away and Mardi Gras drawing to a close, Binx is pressed by his Aunt Emily, the sole surviving Bolling apart from Binx himself, to decide what he wants to do with his life. At the present, Binx is a successful bond salesman living in Gentilly, Louisiana, a quiet suburb of

New Orleans. Binx is quite good at making money and adept at his work, but he is pressured by his Aunt Emily to pursue science or medicine. Binx, however, doubts if he has a mind for science. Aunt Emily's stepdaughter, Kate Cutrer, suffers from depression, and Aunt Emily charges Binx with cheering her up.

Binx begins with a story about a note he receives from his aunt:

This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what this means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can mean only one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks. It will be extremely grave, either a piece of bad news about her stepdaughter Kate or else a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do. (3)

Binx's narration wanders between his present experience and his memories, just as he freely moves from location to location in the course of the novel. He begins in Gentilly, and observes the Mardi Gras parades, takes his secretary down to the Gulf to visit his mother and his half-siblings, departs for Chicago for a business trip, and ultimately returns to the New Orleans region. In the course of these travels, however, Binx moves from being a detached observer of the various beliefs of those he encounters, to one who recognizes the inadequacy of his spectator-attitude.

Not until the end of the novel, however, does Binx truly emerge from his self-imposed exile of scientific objectivity and detachment, and begin to see that what one believes and how one believes are inextricably bound in meaningful belief. Only when his Aunt Emily berates Binx for taking Kate with him to Chicago without alerting anyone in the Cutrer family does Binx begin to truly assess his beliefs. When Lonnie dies in the Epilogue, the reader glimpses a Binx that has matured. Gone are the references to films and movie stars; absent is the self-consciousness of the Binx from the early chapters of the novel. In their place is a Binx who, while evasive on the content of his religious beliefs, has emerged from his solipsism.

Prior to the conclusion of the novel, Binx is an avid consumer and observer, dedicated to his own pleasure. He flirts with his secretary—a serial activity—and fantasizes about fellow female passengers on his bus ride into work. Binx takes pride in being a ‘model tenant and a model citizen’ (6), delights in films, and boasts of his malaise-proof MG which speeds down the highway like a ‘bright little beetle’ (122). Several critics have linked Binx’s consumptive habits, whether his fascination with things or social status, with those of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage, a link which Percy himself affirmed. Kierkegaard, according to Bradley Dewey, was ‘convinced that there were available to us only three basic ‘stages’ or ‘spheres’ or types of life-styles: the esthetic (egoistic, immediately pleasure oriented), the ethical (mainly secular, conventionally law abiding), and the religious (committed to a complex theological ethic)’.⁴⁹ As well, Linda Hobson argues that ‘Binx is, in fact, caught up in the aesthetic sphere of what Kierkegaard calls the objective-empirical, or the value system of the consumer society’.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, Binx is not portrayed as a blind or witless consumer, but as a young man who is self-consciously engaged in an existential quest. In seeming contrast to the hedonistic lifestyle that he sustains, Binx is also engaged in what he calls ‘the search’.

Addressing an imagined response from the reader, Binx says,

What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn’t miss a trick. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto

⁴⁹ Bradley R. Dewey writes, ‘Percy’s novels are inhabited by paradigms of each Kierkegaardian life-style as well as those en route from one stage to another. Binx in *The Moviegoer* begins as an esthetic seducer of secretaries and moves at the end of the book into the ethicality of marriage and medical school’. ‘Walker Percy Talks About Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview’, *The Journal of Religion*, 54.3 (1974), 273-298 (p. 297). Also collected in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, pp. 101-128.

See also Luschei, *Walker Percy*, 77, where the author writes ‘Binx inhabits the aesthetic sphere defined by Kierkegaard’.

⁵⁰ Hobson, *Understanding*, 30.

something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. (13)

A life of pleasure, consumption, and attempts at self-actualization is most noxious when it is not properly recognized as despair, but embraced wholesale. The everydayness, the sunkennes in the despair of the everyday, prevents people from seeing the world in its richness and newness; anyone who sees the world afresh will engage in a search—like Roquentin seeing his hand anew, searching and exploring for the first time.⁵¹ The epigram from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* that opens *The Moviegoer* signals the novel's interest in life in death: ' . . . the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair'.⁵²

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus writes,

Nevertheless, Christianity has in turn discovered a miserable condition that man as such does not know exists. This miserable condition is the sickness unto death. What the natural man catalogs as appalling—after he has recounted everything and has nothing more to mention—this to the Christian is like jest. Such is the relation between a child and an adult: what makes the child shudder and shrink, the adult regards as nothing. The child does not know what the horrifying is; the adult knows and shrinks from it. The child's imperfection is, first, not to recognize the horrifying. So it is also with the natural man: he is ignorant of what is truly horrifying, yet is not thereby liberated from shuddering and shrinking—no, he shrinks from that which is not horrifying. It is similar to the pagan's relationship to God: he does not recognize the true God, but to make matters worse, he worships an idol as God.⁵³

For Binx, despair is being consumed by the everyday, unaware of the constant newness and ontological wonder the world can inspire. In the context of *The Moviegoer*, the despair of which Binx speaks is tied to the everydayness that he perceives in the Southern and American routines of comfortable middle-class existence, of being a good

⁵¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007 [1938]), 4.

⁵²Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 8.

⁵³Ibid., 9.

citizen, going to work, attending church and social functions, and pursuing life-goals, all of which are examples of death-in-life (18, 102).

Toward the end of the novel, Kate and Binx attempt to make love on their train trip home from Chicago. The novel concludes with Binx and Kate sitting outside of a church on Ash-Wednesday, which is incidentally Binx's birthday. Witnessing an African-American man emerging out onto the street with what may be an ashen cross or a trick of shadow on his forehead, Binx claims that it is 'impossible to say' which (235). The novel thus ends on a note of uncertainty, of tentativeness as to the end of Binx's 'search' and whether God is, in fact, present in Gentilly, Louisiana. Not until the Epilogue does the reader get a glimpse of Binx two years later, married to Kate, and enrolled in med school. In the Epilogue, Binx says,

As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than the edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself—if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification. (237)

Thus, in Binx's characteristically elusive way, he avoids commenting further on any of the existential questions that preoccupy him through the course of the novel. However, he does add that since he is a member of his mother's family ('and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion'), he avoids open discussions of religion. Binx continues, claiming that 'Reticence, therefore, hardly having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time as any to make an end' (237). Binx and his Aunt Emily are on good terms at the end of the work, despite a falling out that led to Aunt Emily declaring that she and Binx are nothing alike in their outlooks on the world.

Percy claims that he was interested in 'having a conflict, a confrontation of two cultures—the Greco-Roman Stoicism of Binx's father's family and the Roman

Catholicism of Binx's mother's family—and seeing what happened when these two met' (*Conversations* 219). Binx's relationship to his Aunt's Stoicism is nuanced—while Aunt Emily is certainly a powerful guiding force in his life, her Stoicism and philosophy of life is not. If it does influence Binx in any way, it is due to his Aunt's role as a governing authority in his life, one which was established in his youth and sustained throughout his life by her rhetoric and powerful personality.

While the collision of two belief systems, Stoicism and Roman Catholicism, might have been the embryonic conflict in Percy's composition of the novel, *The Moviegoer* unfolds as a work that has less to do with the collision of two ideologies than with the relationships, roles, influences and struggles that come to life out of the choices that individuals make—including their choices in belief and religion. Kobre argues,

The conflict of voices that sounds in Binx's narrative is ultimately evidence of his tenuous position in a complicated ideological universe. For all his cleverness and his pretense of stability, Binx is buffeted by philosophical and cultural forces that he cannot comfortably reject or assimilate. So, characteristically, he takes a middle course. He adopts a disengaged, ironic posture that admits no allegiances to any ideology but his own bemused skepticism (and, at times, to that vague enterprise he calls 'the search' [...])⁵⁴

Only Aunt Emily and Lonnie emerge as powerful forces in engaging Binx's view of the world through dialogue. Several of the secondary characters in *The Moviegoer* reflect the nature of what can be called 'the believing South', where Christianity is, at the time of the events portrayed in *The Moviegoer*, an essential part of the cultural fabric of the American South.

Binx's Catholicism is cultural and inherited: Binx identifies himself as, nominally, a Catholic (48), although he is unwilling to admit to truly believing any of it or give it sway over the direction of his life; after all, Binx cannot confirm the existence of God with any certainty. Additionally, Binx does not adhere to his Aunt's Stoicism, as demonstrated

⁵⁴ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 23-24.

by his relationships with women and his love affair with the romance of Hollywood cinema. In fact, in his engaging in a 'search', Binx implicitly rejects both of these, as they both preclude the kind of search upon which Binx has set. Binx claims that his 'father's family think that the world makes sense without God and that anyone but an idiot knows what the good life is and anyone but a scoundrel can lead it'. Furthermore, Binx adds that he does not know either his mother's family, who think Binx has lost his faith, or his father's family, with their Stoic sensibility, 'are talking about'. Binx concludes that the 'best [he] can do' is lie in his cot, 'locked in a death grip with everydayness' (146).

Binx acts as the template for all of Percy's subsequent protagonists: he is emotionally distant, at least initially in the novel, introspective, curious, abstracted, and favors viewing the world from a distance. The terms of Binx's search, as well as his existential concerns with meaningful belief, are echoed in all of Percy's protagonists. Binx's vocabulary is noticeably existential and, more specifically, Kierkegaardian: throughout the novel, Binx elaborates on his terms 'the malaise', 'the search', 'repetition', and 'rotation', terms that provide Binx the means to name the death-in-life of his fellow inhabitants of Elysian Fields, and the means that Binx has discovered to circumvent the malaise.⁵⁵ Binx, however, is less directed in his explorations; Binx does not aim to discover whether God does or does not exist, as Will in *The Second Coming* does, but he maintains that something is missing in modern life that he hopes to discover.

The opening pages of *The Moviegoer* form a collage of scenes and images from Binx Bolling's life, snapshots of his relatively quiet and uneventful life in Gentilly, Louisiana. In Binx's steady narration of these images and brief snippets of stories, all

⁵⁵ In 'The Moviegoer and American Fiction', Tony Tanner places Binx in succession with Huck Finn and Nick Adams, whose authors, like Percy himself, 'stress in their various ways is the radical importance of a true way of seeing; the generous, open, even naïve, undulled and reverent eye—as opposed to the self-interested squinting and peering of the greedy utilitarian social eye, and the cold myopia of the scientific, analytic eye. Their idea is an eye of passive wonder'. Tanner, 'The Moviegoer and American Fiction' *Walker Percy: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 9-19 (p. 14-15).

presented in a stream of recall and free-association, Binx communicates his own detached style of thought, which wanders from one idea to the next. Nonetheless, several crucial characteristics help develop the thesis on belief. The first is that Binx considers everything with an almost comic unseriousness, as he flits from subject to subject, spending little time expanding on the significance of his memories or considerations. The abstracted Binx tells a story from his youth when he was at the hospital, visiting his dying brother. Aunt Emily had taken the young Binx outside and explained to him that his brother was dying. Binx remembers the sense of place in this memory, recalling the fleshy, meaty smell in the air and the row of houses with porches near the hospital. Aunt Emily instructs Binx to be strong and act like a soldier: ‘Scotty is dead. Now it’s all up to you’ (4).

But Binx does not linger on the memory of his brother or his brother’s passing, and immediately recalls a movie that he recently viewed at the cinema. In attendance with Binx was Linda, his then secretary (who is now no longer in his employ, having been replaced by Sharon, another eligible young woman). Binx summarizes the plot of film, which concerns a man who lost his memory in an accident, and his new life after the fresh start:

He found himself a stranger in a strange city. Here he had to make a fresh start, find a new place to live, a new job, a new girl. It was supposed to be a tragedy, his losing all this, and he seemed to suffer a great deal. On the other hand, things were not so bad after all. In no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian. (4-5)

Binx expresses admiration for the amnesiac plot device, one which Percy would use in *The Last Gentleman*, *The Second Coming*, and for a mock-quiz in *Lost in the Cosmos* (17-19). The man who loses his memory, according to Binx, has an instant solution to the malaise: the man who loses everything—family, job, identity—is free to begin a fresh start, away from the suffocating malaise of the everyday and the banal.

Binx reflects on his occupation as a stock and bond broker, and notes that ‘It is true

that my family was somewhat disappointed in my choice of a profession. Once I thought of going into law or medicine or even pure science. I even dreamed of doing something great. But there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings [...]’ (9). Binx muses that such a life would include leaving work at five o’clock, having children, and living a quiet, ordinary life.

Binx speaks with a healthy dose of irony of having, until recently, read ‘only ‘fundamental’ books, that is, key books on key subjects, such as *War and Peace*, the novel of novels; *A Study of History*, the solution of the problem of time; Schroedinger’s *What is Life?*, Einstein’s *The Universe as I See It*, and such’ (69), when Binx claims to have attempted to understand the universe from a privileged a-historical, unworlded position where he could understand it with pure objectivity. Binx spent a summer doing research on ‘the acid-base balance in the formation of renal calculi’ (51), but that while he was meant to be engaged in the process of the experimentation, he was mesmerized by the sight of dust floating in the beams of sunlight as they entered the laboratory. The story aptly captures a crucial nuance in Binx’s character: he is distant, analytical and detached, and simultaneously prone to be arrested by moments of visceral or sensual beauty. Binx can also provide harsh assessments of friends and family, not necessarily in the intensity of the assessments, or their severity, but in the matter of fact and solemn way that Binx offers descriptions of them, claiming to understand their inner-logic.

Later, Binx reflects that

My mother’s family think I have lost my faith and they pray for me to recover it. I don’t know what they’re talking about. Other people so I have read, are pious as children and later become skeptical (or, as they say on *This I Believe*: ‘in time I outgrew the creeds and dogmas of organized religion’). Not I. My unbelief was invincible from the beginning. I could never make head or tail of God. The proofs of God’s existence may have been true for all I know, but it didn’t make the slightest difference. If God himself had appeared to me, it would have changed nothing. In fact, I have only to hear the word God

and a curtain comes down in my head. (145)

Significantly, Binx adds that ‘If God himself had appeared to me, it would have changed nothing. In fact, I have only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in my head’ (145). Binx observes that the language of Christendom is so exhausted with overuse that proofs of God’s existence, even the very appearance of God in space and time, would awaken nothing in Binx. In making such a claim, Binx relates a perennial concern in Percy’s novels, that the American Christian novelist is like a ‘starving Confederate soldier who finds a hundred-dollar bill on the streets of Atlanta, only to discover that everyone is a millionaire and the grocers won’t take the money’ (*Message* 117). The individual who accepts the sovereignty of science in all realms of life, the authority of the scientist, sociologist, and psychologist in explaining and validating everyday experiences, is one who ‘could not take account of God, the devil, and the angels if they were standing before him, because he has already peopled the universe with his own hierarchies’ (*Message* 113).

In such a world of widespread vacuity, what is needed is conflict to draw out some kind of life or verve. Whenever Binx ‘feel[s] bad’, he goes to the library to read periodicals, wherein proceed the spirited debates between political liberals and conservatives. Binx is ‘enlivened by the hatred which one bears the other. In fact, this hatred strikes me as one of the few signs of life remaining in the world’ (100). At the library, Binx is seen by Nell Lovell, the wife of Eddie, and Nell approaches Binx. She has read a lauded novel that ‘takes a somewhat gloomy and pessimistic view of things’, and claims that after reading it, she does not feel ‘a bit gloomy!’ Since Nell and Eddie’s kids have grown and left the home, Nell and Eddie have adopted new hobbies to fill the time. Both reevaluated their moral values and life principles, and both have found them resilient. Nell and Eddie, claims Nell, share the same goal in life, which is to ‘make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off’. Binx’s response is

gentle and affirming, but as soon as he has agreed that books and people are ‘endlessly fascinating’, he notes that a rumble in his belly heralds a ‘tremendous defecation’ (101).

Binx is an effective guide to introduce the audience to the peculiarities of Elysian Fields and its customs and inhabitants, and by extension New Orleans and the South itself. Binx’s own actions within his immediate settings are, quite often, unclear. Binx floats and observes. As John Edward Hardy notes, from the very first page of the novel, the reader is impressed by a man ‘so intensely preoccupied with his personal situation that he is all but totally indifferent to his environment’, and that the first paragraph of the novel presents action that is ‘entirely cerebral’, with no reference to the physical location of its narrator.⁵⁶

Binx’s cerebral narration recalls Roquentin in Sartre’s *Nausea* or Mersault in Camus’ *The Stranger*, both of whom, however, are unsympathetic in their distance from the world to which they provide commentary—neither Roquentin nor Mersault endear themselves to their audience, or acknowledge the audience in the way that Binx does. Binx, in several ways, and in contrast to Roquentin or Mersault, is sympathetic and likable, insofar as he interacts with family and friends with a kindness that tempers his detached commentary with humanity. The crucial distinction is that while Binx speaks of people (along with himself) as Hollywood types—a ‘do-gooding Jose Ferrer’ (74) or acting like ‘Joan Fontaine visiting an orphanage’ (138), among several others—he does so with an accompanying sense of humor, in the friendly and affable way that he interacts with Kate, his Aunt, his mother, Uncle Jules and Lonnie. Binx admits to not having friends, and claims that the last time he had friends was ‘eight years ago’, although the claim does not strike one as an appeal for pity but just one of Binx’s many matter-of-fact declarations. He is honest, forthcoming on issues of his own insecurity and fear of exposing his own ignorance (14). Binx even directly addresses his audience, saying, ‘What

⁵⁶John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 27.

do you seek—God? you ask with a smile’, personifying the audience to whom he speaks (13).

Binx also explains that he is a lover of movies, and that he is at his happiest when he is in a movie, even in a bad one (9-10). But something has changed in Binx’s life, and Binx directs the reader to a recent dream about his experience in the Korean War to capture this catalyzing moment:

My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search. I dreamed of the war, no, not quite dreamed but woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside-down for me, as I shall explain later. What are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best. My shoulder didn’t hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. Naturally, as soon as I recovered and got home, I forgot all about it. (10-11)

In order for one to be awakened to the strangeness of existence, the banality of life must be ruptured by catastrophe or personal injury. Percy returns to the pattern frequently: first comes some form of tragedy, death, or apocalyptic possibility, and then comes the recognition of the strange, ineffable presence of the world—reminiscent of Sartre’s Roquentin as objects penetrate his sight, inducing nausea.⁵⁷ In the place of nausea, however, is a sense of wonder, even renewal. The possibility of not-being or non-existence, awakened in the individual, restores the world to the strange presence of its being.

Kate Cutrer, while a central character in the novel, acts less as a means of locating Binx on this journey, and more as a mirror for Binx’s crisis. It must be noted that most of Percy’s female characters, especially the love interests and spouses of his protagonists,

⁵⁷ Sartre, *Nausea*, 10, 122, 125, 127, 129.

tend to be thinly scripted and two dimensional.⁵⁸ Not until Allie in *The Second Coming* does Percy develop a female character more fully. Kate, as well, is in a suspended state, like Binx; she is not as secure in her beliefs as the other characters I examine here (Aunt Emily, Binx's mother, and Lonnie), for, similar to Binx, she is enduring an existential crisis—questioning her beliefs, forming her own idea of the world, and attempting to make sense of her place in it. Suicidal and emotionally fragile, she is a sicker form of Binx; just as baffled by the way that others live their lives so effortlessly, yet unable to adapt successfully to that way of life.

While Kate is an important character in the progression of the plot of the novel, and a significant factor in Binx's growth as an individual, she does not play a central role in drawing Binx into religious or metaphysical dialogue or reflection. Aunt Emily and Lonnie, in contrast, express specific and identifiable theological systems—both of which vie for Binx's subscription.

Martin Luschei writes,

Kate's objectivity is that of the amateur-analyst-expert and perilously close to that of the patient Percy has written of who 'does not conceive of a higher existence for himself than to be "what one should be" according to psychiatry'. Kate is pursuing a kind of vertical search, seeking a summit from which she can look back upon herself abstractly without being obliged to experience her life.⁵⁹

What the other characters examined here do is to draw Binx to an awareness of how belief can be lived-out and expressed. In contrast, Kate's step-father, Uncle Jules, is an example of a Percy character that seems uninterested in existential questions. According to Binx, Uncle has the gift of 'believing that nothing can really go wrong in his household', and that 'It is his confidence in Aunt Emily. As long as she is mistress of his house, the worst that can happen, death itself, is nothing more than seemly' (34). Uncle

⁵⁸ Specifically, see Kitty Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*; Ellen Oglethorpe in *Love in the Ruins*; Margot and Anna in *Lancelot*; and Ellen again in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

⁵⁹ Luschei, *Sovereign Wayfarer*, 91.

Jules fits nicely in this category of conventional or cultural belief, since his religious beliefs are assured, but do not act as a preoccupation or burden. This identification of his Uncle's mindset—that with Aunt Emily at the helm of the family nothing could go wrong—could just as easily be a reflection of Binx's own opinion of Aunt Emily. Upon Binx's entrance into the Cutrer abode, his Aunt playfully chides Binx as 'the last and sorriest scion of noble stock' and Binx muses that in 'a split second I have forgotten everything, the years in Gentilly, even my search. [...] This is where I belong after all' (26). Aunt Emily has the effect on Binx of disarming his abstract searching and providing him with a sense of ease and belonging. Yet it is Aunt Emily who will challenge Binx to choose a path for himself.

In *The Moviegoer*, Aunt Emily stands as the head of the remnants of the Bolling family, the chief representative of more than just the Bolling name, but a heritage, a mindset, and an entire way of life. Although she is no longer a Bolling in name, having married into the Cutrer family, she nevertheless remains very much a Bolling in nature and disposition. From the beginning of the novel, Aunt Emily's influence is the most persuasive in directing Binx's thoughts and dictating his actions. Binx admires his aunt's clear and concise mode of understanding the world, which is dictated by the tenets of Roman Stoicism—her particular affinity is for Marcus Aurelius, whom she quotes to Binx in a personal note. According to Aunt Emily, the world is of itself meaningless and cruel, and the only form of support and value is found in humans maintaining codes of dignity and honor that create and provide stability in an otherwise unstable world (54). Most of Binx's interaction with Aunt Emily is one-sided; Aunt Emily speaks, Binx listens. When Binx is summoned, he comes immediately. Kobre writes,

Here, Binx tries to appropriate his aunt's voice and values, so much so that he speaks without irony of 'my duty in life', using the kind of exhortatory phrase that comes naturally to Emily. But the terse sentences he uses to sum

up this potential life suggest no joy or satisfaction.⁶⁰

Both assume that they understand one another. Toward the end of the novel, Aunt Emily begins to question the foundations of their relationship. After Binx's trip with Kate to Chicago, in which they have sex with one another, the complexity of Binx's relationship with Aunt Emily comes into full view. Aunt Emily's presence is most strongly felt in the first quarter of the novel, and then again in the final quarter. In the first segment, Binx is deferential and respectful, and there is no conflict between the two of them. However, nearing the conclusion of the novel, once Binx has failed to notify Kate's family of their trip to Chicago, Aunt Emily's disillusionment with Binx's values triggers a series of accusations that set the world of Binx's beliefs and values apart from those of his Aunt Emily. Aunt Emily has a penchant for the dramatic, for the almost theatric self-aggrandizement of her Stoic philosophy that is, in her view, part of a noble, receding culture of the past. Near the end of the novel she spares none of the dramatic flair in her criticism of what she perceives as Binx's hedonism.

Nevertheless, early in the work, Aunt Emily finds in Binx a source of strength and endurance for her own beliefs. While Binx is indeed dependent on Aunt Emily's philosophical guidance, she too considers Binx to be a 'good stalwart shoulder' (221). William Dowie writes that Aunt Emily has the 'power to inspire and comfort she embodies. Binx knows what to do when he is with her; he forgets when away. Her presence radiates the call to a community of good fellowship and shared vision'.⁶¹ Binx experiences relief, comfort, and gratitude for her care after his father was killed in the war, and the education she provided in his youth (26).

The immediate presence of Aunt Emily in the narrative prefigures the prominent role that she will play in the novel, particularly in the role of an intellectual guide, albeit

⁶⁰ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 30.

⁶¹ William Dowie, 'Walker Percy: Sensualist-Thinker', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 6.1 (1972), 56.

one that Binx fails to imitate or diligently follow. In the very opening of the novel, Binx relates the contents of a note he received from Aunt Emily. The note concerns his cousin Kate, who is engaged to be married to a respectable young man. Binx, who according to Aunt Emily is one of the only people that relates to Kate and can talk to her, is being summoned. Even before the reader has learned about his immediate family, the reader is introduced to Aunt Emily and her history. She features prominently in his youth, illustrated in her challenge to an eight year old Binx to be a ‘soldier’ when his older brother Scotty died (4). As Kobre writes, ‘Binx’s struggle with his aunt’s values is ultimately the novel’s dialogic core’.⁶² Later, Kobre continues: ‘Almost everything that Binx does, everything he thinks or says, is in some way a reaction to his aunt’s Stoic philosophy and the obligation that she sees for him’.⁶³ Even in his physical description of her, Binx says that she is ‘soldierly both in look and outlook’, and that with her ‘blue-white hair and keen face and terribly gray eyes, she is somehow at sixty-five still the young prince’ (27).

While Binx understands that something is amiss in the world, that he is attuned to some of the trends in human interactions that others are not privy to, his own musings tend to fade into the background when he listens to his Aunt Emily explain her Stoic philosophy and the accompanying obligations in life and duty. While Aunt Emily’s outlook is somewhat bleak, according to Binx she finds some form of comfort in understanding ‘the chaos to come’, and that it ‘seems so plain when I see it through her eyes. My duty in life is simple. I go to medical school. I live a long useful life serving my fellowman. What’s wrong with this? All I have to do is remember it’ (54). Luschei argues,

Emily’s virtues are admirable and we can feel the author’s sympathy for them, [...] the final question in the boy’s mind is pertinent to the whole novel. It is easy enough to follow the old forms, to act like a soldier. Is that all one needs to do?⁶⁴

⁶² Kobre, *Walker Percy’s Voices*, 35.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁴ Luschei, *Sovereign Wayfarer*, 67.

Aunt Emily tells Binx that he has ‘too good a mind to throw away’, that

‘I don’t quite know what we’re doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe it with every fibre of my being. A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man’.

Binx reflects on this, stating, ‘She is right. I will say yes. I will say yes even though I do not really know what she is talking about’ (54). For Binx, the ‘search’, ‘repetition’, and ‘rotation’, and the ideas that preoccupy him through his daily routine, lose their priority when he is in Aunt Emily’s presence. Aunt Emily’s vision for Binx’s life makes sense to Binx when he is with her, but not when they are apart. Binx is smart enough to grasp the thesis of her claim above, but when he says that he does not ‘really know’, one must inquire in what way is Binx unable to comprehend this claim. Most likely, Binx is unsure or doubt that such a view of the world is tenable. Regardless, Binx does not elaborate. Binx admits that he will say yes, regardless of whether he agrees or understands, and underlines his deferential, or even apathetic, attitude. He has the disposition to neither contradict nor sincerely affirm, another characteristic of an abstracted, non-commitment to a personal belief.

Aunt Emily offers a room in her house for Binx to stay in. When Binx suggests that he may move from Gentilly altogether, Aunt Emily encourages Binx to wander and explore, for she believes that his explorations are a means of purging his youthful restlessness. She encourages Binx to take a *Wanderjahr*, much like one that his father took after completing college. Binx is discouraged, realizing that his Aunt does not understand the nature of his wandering, that to describe the search to her would be futile: ‘My idea of a search seems absurd’ he thinks (54). Aunt Emily believes that if Binx can overcome this wanderlust, then he can engage his ‘scientific calling’, which was born of their

conversations when Binx was a boy and they would discuss philosophy and history, ‘discovering Euripides and Jean-Christophe’. Binx replies, ‘You discovered them for me. It was always you that—’ and suddenly Binx lets off, finds himself ‘sleepy’, and Binx proceeds no further in his response. His Aunt makes Binx promise her that by his thirtieth birthday, one week from the day, Binx will tell her what he plans on doing with his life (55-56).

Later, when Binx returns from Chicago, he meets the disapproval of his Aunt, who was not informed of Kate’s whereabouts after her (alleged) attempted suicide. Aunt Emily was distressed over Kate’s safety and well-being, but this event revealed the nature of her relationship with Binx, which now, according to Aunt Emily, was nothing more than a ruse.

Aunt Emily says to Binx,

‘I am not saying that I pretend to understand you. What I am saying is that after two days of complete mystification it has dawned on me what it is I fail to understand. That is at least a step in the right direction. It was the novelty of it that put me off, you see. I do believe that you have discovered something new under the sun’. (219)

His Aunt continues and further implicates Binx in his irresponsibility. She claims he is a foreigner to the family system of values. She argues that, while in ‘past history people who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly’, Binx has managed to discover ‘an alternative which no one has hit upon. It is that one finding oneself in one of life’s critical situations need not after all respond in one of the traditional ways. No. One may simply default. Pass. Do as one pleases [...]’ (220). Aunt Emily’s tirade cuts Binx to the core. As she is suggesting, Binx has acted outside of the cultural values of his family. Rather than adopt the stalwart Southern Stoicism that has been a part of Bolling tradition, Binx has opted out. Binx and Aunt Emily are, according to Aunt Emily, more distant than two strangers, since the common ground that was assumed to exist between them was nothing more than a farce. Aunt Emily goes even further,

lamenting,

‘The fact that you are a stranger to me is perhaps my fault. It was stupid of me not to believe it earlier. For now I do believe that you are not capable of caring for anyone, Kate, Jules, or myself—not more than that Negro man walking down the street—less so, in fact, since I have a hunch that he and I would discover some slight tradition in common’.
(222)

Aunt Emily then asks if he was ‘intimate with Kate’, to which Binx replies, ‘Not very’ (222). Binx’s enigmatic response is an invalid answer according to Aunt Emily; the question, in her opinion, is a yes or no question. Binx’s equivocal response can be understood best in the context of an earlier reflection made by Binx: In the post-Christian landscape which is neither entirely pagan nor entirely Christian (as Binx claims on the train, when he accounts for the failure of his flesh), Binx claims:

The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit (for despising is not the worst fate to overtake the flash, but until this moment seen through and canceled, rendered null by the cold and fishy eye of the malaise—flesh poor flesh now at this moment summoned all at once to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope—quails and fails.
(200)

For Binx, however, the question of intimacy, and whether or not he had it with Kate, is far more complex than Aunt Emily perceives, and demands more than a simple yes or no. The exchange captures the gap in values and meaning (both ethical and linguistic) that exists between these two characters. William Rodney Allen argues that Aunt Emily, who resides in Kierkegaard’s ethical stage, does not understand Binx’s search. For Aunt Emily, ‘belief in right and wrong as black and white categories leads her to conclude that Binx is “not capable of caring for anyone”’.⁶⁵ For Aunt Emily, it is a yes or no, either/or scenario; for Binx, however, the question raises questions of connotation—and additionally, the very meaning of human intimacy. Does a sexual

⁶⁵ William Rodney Allen, *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 41-42.

relation constitute intimacy, or does intimacy require sexual intercourse to be consummated? Characteristic of Binx's habit of searching for the true significance behind the facade of common experience, Binx perceives that the failed sexual encounter with Kate is indicative of a graver problem: the inability of his aunt's system (as well as that of the believing South) to make sense of the world, and particularly sexual relations.

Binx does offer a brief defense of his actions and claims that Aunt Emily's positive impact on his life was substantive, not illusory:

‘You say that none of what you said ever meant anything to me. That is not true. On the contrary. I have never forgotten anything you ever said. In fact I have pondered over it all my life. My objections, though they are not exactly objections, cannot be expressed in the usual way. To tell the truth, I can't express them at all’. (224-225)

Binx's inability to express his own objections is particularly helpful in understanding Binx's relationship with his Aunt and for understanding Binx. While Binx does wax poetic on ‘the search’, ‘the malaise’ and ‘everydayness’, along with asides about Kierkegaard (13, 237), he fails to articulate his responses to the different philosophical and ideas that he encounters in his week-long journey. Binx does not explicitly critique his Aunt's Stoicism, at least not as a system for understanding the world, and he does not respond to the legitimacy of Lonnie's Roman Catholicism or his mother's religious unseriousness. What Binx does, however, is describe and report, and occasionally offer his perspective on them in the fashion of a spectator observing from the sidelines.

Aunt Emily asks Binx if their conversations in the past, if their mutual appreciation of the *Crito*, of music and appreciation of ‘goodness and truth and beauty and nobility’ meant nothing in the end. Binx does not respond, but thinks ‘There is nothing for me to say’. When Aunt Emily inquires if he loves the very things that embody the Stoic outlook, or if he lived by them, Binx's laconic reply is ‘No’. Aunt Emily then inquires as to what Binx does love, value and ‘live by’. Again, Binx is silent. ‘What do you think is the purpose of life—to go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along?’ Binx says

'No' (226).

It is not until two pages later that the reader uncovers the extent of emotional upset behind Binx's laconic 'No'. Binx says,

Today is my thirtieth birthday and I sit on the ocean wave in the schoolyard and wait for Kate and think of nothing. Now in the thirty-first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies--my only talent--smelling merde from every quarter, living in fact in the very century of merde, that great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall--on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (228)

As Binx remarks, a staggering percentage of people are kind, warm and believe in God, but all of them are dead. Falling prey to desire is the only option left in this century of merde, he argues. Binx's glumness here is uncharacteristic of him—the fallout from his brow-beating by Aunt Emily. The effect of Aunt Emily's reaction on Binx demonstrates the extent of her influence in Binx's world, and the areas where her Stoic philosophy failed to shape or govern Binx's life. It is only now that Binx and his Aunt are beginning to develop an awareness of the radical divide between their worldviews. Binx was never entirely comfortable carrying the Bolling mantle, and it is here that the reader realizes the true extent of Binx's discomfort with his role as the last Bolling. The challenge by Aunt Emily shakes Binx loose from his state of comfort and abstraction, and forces him to take stock of his beliefs, his life, and what he intends to do about both.

Binx's mother, unlike the aristocratic, noble-minded Aunt Emily, is a woman preoccupied with the domestic—when first seen in the novel she is attending her children, busied by the work of the domestic and the everyday (137-140). Later she is seen fishing,

wearing a baseball cap and donning one of her husband's 'army shirts' (148). Binx identifies in his mother what he considers to be a chronically unserious mindset toward all religious and metaphysical matters, cultivated by her since the death of her son, Duval. But Binx's diagnosis of his mother's outlook as unserious must strike the reader as itself ironic, since Binx's approach to all matters religious and metaphysical is marked by an, at times, cavalier detachment. Even Binx's intensely held beliefs about the 'search' are often temporarily obscured or forgotten by encounters with Aunt Emily or his romantic interludes. Nevertheless, Binx considers his mother to possess a near-patronizing attitude toward Binx's curiosity in academic interests. As Binx says,

By the surest of instincts she steers clear of all that is exceptional or 'stimulating'. Any event or idea which does not fall within the household regimen, she stamps at once with her own brand of the familiar. If, as a student, I happened to get excited about Jackson's Valley Campaign or Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, it was not her way to oppose me. (138)

Rather, Binx claims, his mother would regard it as a 'kind of wondrous Rover boy eccentricity' (138). Binx states that 'The Smiths, except Lonnie, would never dream of speaking of religion--raising the subject provokes in them the acutest embarrassment: eyes are averted, throats are cleared, and there occurs a murmuring for a minute or two until the subject can be changed'. Yet, as Binx notes, the family will argue extensively about which Mass to attend and how to get there. Binx concludes by saying 'certainly if they spoke to me of God, I would jump into the bayou' (159), perhaps relieved that the Smith's form of religion is uninterested in the Catholic economy of salvation, and more concerned with the process of getting to Mass in the most efficient manner.

Lonnie, Binx's half-brother, who is ill and wheel-chair bound, has received the Catholic sacrament of extreme unction after a bout with pneumonia. When Binx finds out, he asks his mother why he was not called. She responds, 'He wasn't in danger of death. The extreme unction was his idea. He said it would strengthen him physically as well as

spiritually. Have you ever heard of that?’ (142). Binx considers her tone regarding religious and metaphysical issues to be ‘light’ and ‘allusive [...] with the overtones neither of belief nor disbelief but rather of a general receptivity to lore’. Binx continues:

Sometimes when she mentions God, it strikes me that my mother uses him as but one of the devices that come to hand in an outrageous man’s world, to be put to work like all the rest in one enterprise she has any use for: the canny management of the shocks of life. It is a bargain struck at the very beginning in which she settled for a general belittlement of everything, the good and the bad. She is as wary of good fortune as she is immured against the bad, and sometimes I seem to catch sight of it in her eyes, this radical mistrust: an old knowledgeable gleam, as old and sly as Eve herself. Losing Duval, her favorite, confirmed her in her election of the ordinary. No more heart’s desire for her, thank you. After Duval’s death she has wanted everything colloquial and easy, even God. (142)

What Binx perceives to be an absence of vitality in his mother’s religious beliefs is perhaps what convinces him to reflect that ‘Neither my mother’s family nor my father’s family understand my search’ (145). As different as these two families may be, they both are incapable, according to Binx, of understanding the open and exploratory nature of the search. The goal of Binx’s search is unknown, but the cause is clear: a sense that there is something strange and perhaps magical about life (10-11, 13).

Lonnie first appears in the novel when Binx visits his mother’s home on the Gulf Coast. Lonnie greets him in his wheelchair and goes into a fit of excitement upon seeing Binx. Lonnie is fourteen, small, but the oldest of the Smith children since the eldest child, Duval, drowned. Binx confesses that Lonnie is his favorite sibling, and that, like Binx, ‘he is a moviegoer’. Binx states that he and Lonnie are close because Binx does not feel sorry for him, and hints at envying Lonnie’s ‘gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men’s indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ’ (137).

Binx admits that he would willingly trade places with the boy, and envies Lonnie for having the ‘gift of believing’. In this way, Binx demonstrates admiration rather than incredulity for Lonnie’s Catholic faith. In ensuing conversations with Lonnie, however,

Binx does not provide commentary on the content or veracity of Lonnie's beliefs. Compared to the ample characterization that he provides for his mother and aunt's beliefs, Binx provides very little commentary to help one locate him in relation to Lonnie's beliefs; Binx spends more time participating in game-like intellectual discourse with Lonnie. The interaction between Binx and Lonnie mirrors Will Barrett's relationship with his psychiatrist in *The Last Gentleman*, who notes that Will is cautious and detached like a 'Southern Belle' at a dance (*LG* 32). Frequently, Binx and Will enter into relationships as games, and their interactions follow certain patterns: Binx thinks of his romances with his secretaries in terms of romantic films or television shows, with Binx playing the role of the romantic lead; Will fits into groups (albeit uneasily) by being a gentleman, adopting the mannerisms and slang that he identifies with each sub-culture or region while maintaining the Stoicism of the Southern Gentleman.

As Binx and Lonnie dialogue, the rest of their family is out on the boat or water-skiing. When Binx learns that Lonnie has been fasting, and that his confessor has allowed Lonnie to fast, even in his condition, Binx asks Lonnie why. Lonnie claims that it is to conquer an habitual disposition to envy his dead brother; Lonnie confesses that he is still glad that Duval is dead. Binx rejoins that Lonnie should be glad, since Duval is in heaven. In response, 'Lonnie grins at me with the liveliest sense of our complicity: let them ski all they want. We have something better'. Binx adds that Lonnie is aware that the two of them have engaged in a game and that 'he knows that I know it, but he does not mind' (163).

These brief interactions between Binx and Lonnie reveal as much about Binx as they do about Lonnie. Binx enters into this dialogue willingly, but never reveals his own philosophical or religious opinions. Binx's beliefs remain undisclosed by the end of this brief exchange. When Lonnie confesses to having hoped for Duval to lose in basketball, Binx counters:

'That's not hurting Duval'.

'It is hurting me. You know what capital sin does to the life

of the soul’.

‘Yes. Still and all I would not fast. Instead I would concentrate on the Eucharist. It seems a more positive thing to do’.

‘That is true’. Again the blue eyes engage mine in lively converse, looking, looking away, and looking again. ‘But Eucharist is a sacrament of the living’.

‘Don’t you wish to live?’

‘Oh sure!’ he says laughing, willing, wishing even, to lose the argument so that I will be sure to have as much fun as he. (164)

By the epilogue of the novel, Lonnie has died and Binx has changed considerably. Binx mentions no movie stars, remains silent on the conclusion of his ‘search’, makes no mention of ‘everydayness’ or the ‘malaise’, and even admits that he has nothing more to say on the topic of religion. This is a far cry from the Binx that at the beginning of the novel juxtaposes memories of his brother’s death with the details of a recently-viewed film. Something indeed has changed: The novel concludes with Binx telling Lonnie’s siblings that they will see Lonnie in heaven, and that there he will be able to walk and run like them. Then Binx, who is now married to Kate, asks her to go downtown to retrieve a file for him, giving her directions on how to catch the bus and what to ask for once she’s at the office. Kate is clearly nervous about the trip, but Binx comforts her. She asks Binx if he will think about her on her journey, and Binx says that he will imagine her sitting by the window with the jasmine in her lap (242).

Of all Percy’s novels, *The Moviegoer* features the greatest divergence in critical opinion as to the religious commitment, or lack thereof, of its protagonist. Such diverse critical understandings of the conclusion of the novel therefore calls for a special discussion of how the conclusion to *The Moviegoer* is and ought to be understood. The divergence, at its root, stems from the reading of *The Moviegoer* as a work that illustrates Kierkegaard’s stages, or by taking Binx’s discussion with Donice in the Epilogue as entirely sincere. That Binx remains silent on issues of religion only substantiates Binx and Percy’s Kierkegaardian silence. Appealing to various textual clues, Mary Deems

Howland, Martin Luschei, and Lewis A. Lawson argue that the Epilogue implicitly communicates Binx's religious conversion to Roman Catholicism, whereas Michael Kobre contends for a much more open reading of the recorded conclusion to Binx's journey.

Howland writes that Binx 'abandoned his role-playing, that he has become available to his family, and that he is now a full participant in life'. For Howland, Binx's 'return to the Catholic Church is also implied in his response to his brother Donice, who asks if Lonnie will be crippled when he arises on the last day'. Howland continues, arguing that even though Binx remains silent on the issue of his religious beliefs, 'there is every reason to believe that Binx speaks from the conviction of faith and that he now believes in the resurrection of the body'.⁶⁶

Luschei, reading *The Moviegoer* through the prism of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic-ethical-religious stages, sees the final stage in Binx's journey as a religious phase, and so concludes that Binx has converted to Roman Catholicism. Luschei also accounts for Binx's seemingly calloused response at the death of Lonnie, as recorded in Kate's accusation that Binx is 'cold-blooded' and 'grisly', (238-239) as a misperception on the part of Kate, who 'does not live in the infinite passion and cannot grasp his paradoxical religiousness'.⁶⁷

According to Lawson, multiple indicators in the Epilogue points to Binx's move from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere, and Lawson points to two facts: the first, over Lonnie's death, which indicates that 'Binx, like Kierkegaard's Abraham, seems to know now the capacity that faith has to confront the absurd'; secondly, that Binx demonstrates concern for Kate, as demonstrated by his marriage to Kate.

Lawson writes,

As for marriage, however, Percy is not romantically suggesting that Binx and Kate will live happily ever after. Existence will remain precarious for them, and neither of

⁶⁶ Howland, *Gift of the Other*, 237.

⁶⁷ Luschei, *Sovereign Wayfarer*, 109.

them is in any sense ‘cured’, but they are conscious now that they exist, for the see confirmation of their existence in the eyes of the other.⁶⁸

While Lawson sees Binx’s absence of mourning as a sign that Binx believes that Lonnie will be physically resurrected and restored in the next life, Binx’s coldness may also construe a resilient part of his personality, the detached, observing side of him that one encounters throughout the novel. Binx has indeed changed, as evidenced by his lack of reference to movie stars, his attentiveness to his half-siblings, his entrance into medical school, and his kindness to Kate. Binx has changed, but he is still in the process of changing. He is in many ways the same Binx Bolling as he has been throughout *The Moviegoer*—distant, objective, and a careful observer of the ways that humans react to tragedy. What Howland and Luschei both maintain is that Binx’s response to Donice, Lonnie’s little brother—that Donice and his siblings will see Lonnie again—should be taken at face-value. What this presupposes is that Binx here is not entertaining his half-siblings, or taking part in yet another conversation in which he is not entirely invested. But the text offers no such clarity as to whether Binx is entertaining his half-siblings, or affirming a truth that would, in some fashion, imply a conversion on Binx’s part.

In his characteristic manner of reporting the reactions of others without expressing his own feelings, Binx notes, ‘They are not sad. This is a very serious and out-of-the-way business. Their eyes search out mine and they cast about for ways of prolonging the conversation, this game of serious talk and serious listening’ (239-240). Binx, with his astute observations of human behaviour, notes the children’s reaction to Lonnie’s death, which is a ‘game of serious talk and serious listening’. Binx’s casual observation, however, is held in tension with the comfort he provides the siblings.

Kobre maintains that

⁶⁸ Lewis Lawson, *Following Percy: Essays on Walker Percy’s Work* (Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 1988), 22.

Binx is clearly moving away from the posture of objectivity in this passage. The lack of abstraction and the bitter, personal tone suggest that he no longer stands ‘outside and over against the world’ (*MB* 128) in the characteristic mode of the scientist. But despite the religious echoes in this microdialogue, he is by no means a believer either. If his life is a pilgrimage, it is shrouded in doubt, and he is as yet a pilgrim only the sense that he longs for direction and faith.⁶⁹

If the reader suspends the Kierkegaardian prism, the signs of Binx’s growth and maturation, from his reassurance of the twins and his marriage to Kate, appear less as clear-cut indicators of a religious conversion, and more as symbols of Binx’s move away from the detached, spectator-attitude that he adopted for most of the novel. Even if one applies the Kierkegaard’s stages as a theoretical overlay, as Luschei does, Binx’s personality, including his habits and patterns of distancing, must be taken into account before committing to an interpretation that asserts Binx’s religious conversion. Ultimately, what the reader has access to is a changed Binx—a young man more mature and involved in the lives of his family, but one that has not committed himself with total certainty to a religious belief.

1.3 - Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*

Barrett’s journey in *The Last Gentleman* begins when he spots the lovely young Kitty Vaught in Central Park. Barrett, a twenty five year old Alabama native, lives in New York City and watches for a peregrine falcon through his newly-purchased telescope. When he sees Kitty Vaught through the lens he immediately falls in ‘love, at first sight and at a distance of two thousand feet’ (7). After following her to a hospital, he is mistaken for

⁶⁹ Kobre, *Walker Percy’s Voices*, 75. Kobre later adds ‘Much has been said in the criticism of Percy’s work about Binx’s transformation at the end of *The Moviegoer*. In *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, for example, Luschei speaks of Binx making Kierkegaard’s ‘leap of faith’ (106). I want to emphasize, however, how Binx’s transformation is embodied in Percy’s language, in the play of voices that characterize his narrative. Moreover, Binx’s transformation, which is accomplished through a dialogic process, is itself unalterably joined to an affirmation of the abiding value of dialogue’ (76).

a doctor by Kitty's father, Mr. Vaught, who is there with his family to visit his youngest son, Jamie, who is ill with a rare, terminal form of mononucleosis. The rest of the novel concerns Will's pursuit of Kitty, his various roles in care-taking for Jamie, his theological dialogues with Sutter and Val (in which he plays the role of the listener), and the recovery of the memory of his father's suicide. Taken together, these ingredients create a picaresque novel with a troubled, amnesiac protagonist at its center.

Something powerful stirs in Will when he first sees Rita and Kitty in Central Park, and soon after he launches into a search for the lovely Kitty that tangles him in the affairs of the Vaught family. The next few sections of the novel are a whirlwind of activity: Will Barrett becomes the caretaker of the teenage Jamie Vaught. Through a communication error, Will misses his ride South with the Vaughts, who depart for their Carolina home without Will in tow. Will hitchhikes from New Jersey and is picked up by Forney Aiken, a journalist who had his pigment artificially altered, passing as an Africa-American to explore issues of race in the South. Later picked up by a carload of female Texas golfers, Will journeys southward to Williamsburg, Virginia. In Virginia Will finally overtakes the Vaughts and rejoins them on their trip home. At the Vaught home in North Carolina, Will meets the other two Vaught children: Val Vaught, a nun; and Sutter Vaught, a failed doctor turned coroner, whom Will believes can help him with his fugues and upside-downness.

Will experiences flashbacks of the circumstances surrounding his father's death, and so restores the memory of his father's suicide. Sutter departs with Jamie for Santa Fe, New Mexico, and leaves behind a journal of his religious and philosophical musings, and as Will pursues Sutter and Jamie, he reads regularly from Sutter's journal. At the end of the novel, Will chases after Sutter's car as Sutter begins to drive away, intent on killing himself.

Will's wanderings in both North and South reflect a world in unconscious Kierkegaardian despair. In Percy's art, the despair is refracted through the ostensibly

serious conversations that mask the vapid and banal. All attempts at life-affirmation and self-actualization in *The Last Gentleman* are depicted as comically misguided. Forms of self-help that only further alienate those that attempt to understand themselves and the world through it. In *The Last Gentleman*, as Will journeys South, he encounters these despair-ridden conversations most concretely in the form of dialogues with Forney Aiken and Forney's daughter, along with Sutter's ex-wife, Rita.

While these conversations aptly capture Percy's concept of Kierkegaardian despair, they also dramatize the conventional belief that characterize conversations about metaphysics in Percy's fictive world. What Forney, Mort Prince, and Rita all affirm, in their separate ways, is a way of life that does not recognize the need for the 'Good News' (Lonnie and Val Vaught), or the absence of a transcendent meaning (Aunt Emily or Sutter).

In an interview with Linda Hobson, Percy states,

Well, you remember what Kierkegaard said that the man who is closest to salvation and to believing the Good News is the man who is in despair and who is aware of it. The man who is farthest from salvation is the man who is in despair and who is not even aware of it—but the twentieth-century man who has all the worldly goods and all his needs satisfied, yet who has seen them turn to ashes in his mouth he could be in a state where he is open to hearing the Good News. (*More Conversations* 92)

Forney Aiken is alarmed that Will has not read a recent novel entitled *Love*. Mort Prince, the author of *Love*, is a close friend of Forney. Forney tells Will, 'You know what that guy told me with a straight face. I asked him what this book was going to be about and he said quite seriously: it was about –ing. And in a sense it is!' Forney assures Will that it is a 'beautiful piece of work and about as pornographic as Chaucer' and 'deeply religious'. Forney continues that the work is religious in the sense that it is a work of 'yea-saying rather than a nay-saying'. Forney adds: 'Mort has one simple credo: saying Yes to Life wherever it is found' (137).

That very evening, Will sits in his bed and reads the entirety of *Love*:

Love was about orgasms, good and bad, some forty-six. But it ended, as Forney had said, on a religious note. ‘And so I humbly ask of life’, said the hero of his last partner with whose assistance he had managed to coincide with his best expectations, ‘that it grant us the only salvation, that of one human being discovering himself through another and through the miracle of love’. (138)

In another of Mort Prince’s novels, a young American veteran named Mark travels to Italy in ‘quest of his own identity’. Once in a foreign country Mark discovers that he is ‘an American after all’, and by the conclusion of the work, he learns that ‘if a man does nothing else in life, said Mark to himself, he can at least tell one other man (that all men are brothers) and he another and he in turn another until at last amid the hatred and the dying all men shall one day hear and hearing understand and understanding believe’ (139-140). The content of Prince’s novel echoes the content of Binx’s conversation with Nell Lovell, which triggered in Binx the need to defecate (*MG* 101). Will exhibits no such response to Forney’s summary of the novel, but the flippancy of the conversation communicates the same tenor of scepticism inherent to Binx’s visceral response.

Rita, like Forney and Mort, embodies a post-Christian system of belief that finds the cure for any human ailment in the advances of science, sociology, and psychology. Throughout Percy’s six novels, however, such belief is characterized by the casual way that its proponents believe it.

Kitty explains Rita’s philosophy to Will:

‘Rita believes in reverence for life’
‘Rita says that anything two people do together is beautiful if the people themselves are beautiful and reverent and unselfconscious in what they do. Like the ancient Greeks who lived in the childhood of the race’.
‘Is that right?’
‘Rita believes in reverence for life’.
‘She does?’
‘She says—’
‘What does Sutter say?’

‘Oh, Sutter. Nothing I can repeat’. (179)

In Will’s journey south, his encounters with victorious, rich, Christian Southerners presents a landscape populated with believers whose beliefs are equally stale and substanceless. Will has grown used to the ‘post-Protestant Yankees’ of the North, and once in his native South, where ‘everyone went to church and was funny and clever and sensitive in the bargain’, Will’s ability to read people is temporarily disrupted. In a few days, Will is able to effectively read people and situations, and ‘soon he was able to listen to funny stories and tell a few himself. (187)

Sutter and Val are critical of the way that metaphysical concerns, particularly questions of God’s existence or non-existence, are treated so casually by secular humanists like Rita or the happy members of Southern Christendom. Sutter identifies Rita’s system of belief as ‘death’. Rita’s concerns for Jamie are that Jamie ‘achieve as much self-fulfillment as he can in the little time he has’, and that he experience ‘beauty and joy’. Sutter’s laconic response is, simply, ‘That is death’ (244).⁷⁰ Later, in his journal, Sutter will equally chastise the Protestant Christians of the South.

Like Aunt Emily and Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*, Sutter and Val articulately voice the concerns and preoccupations of serious atheism/Stoicism and Roman Catholicism. Will meets both Val and Sutter for the first time (207 and 216, respectively), and Will later denounces both, beleaguered by these strange, challenging characters: ‘To the devil with this exotic pair, Sutter and Val, the absentee experts who would deputize him, one to practice medicine, the other to practice priestcraft. Charge him indeed. Who were they to charge anybody?’ (393). The fact that both of them interact directly, and indirectly through Sutter’s notebooks, is also helpful in gaining a foothold on understanding the forces that

⁷⁰ Later, Sutter will tell Rita, ‘As you say, we were self-actualizing people and altogether successful, though somewhat self-conscious, in our cultivation of joy, zest, awe, freshness, and the right balance of adult autonomous control and childlike playfulness, as you used to call it. Though I don’t mind telling you that I never really approved your using technical terms like ‘penis envy’ in ordinary conversation—’ (246).

are competing for Will's belief. Will believes that Sutter knows something about his condition (218), and consequently requests Sutter's help in resolving the question of whether he should be a Southern Gentleman (and not 'fornicate'), or repudiate the mantle altogether. Will's reverence for Sutter approaches a level of almost religious veneration. The reader is not told why (by either Will or the narrator), but the detached, confident, cavalier style of Sutter Vaught has an irresistible draw for the chronically self-questioning Will Barrett. Sutter, like the grandiloquent Aunt Emily for Binx, with his personality, wit, and adept manipulation of language, is able to draw the Will into his orbit with his personality. Sutter, like Aunt Emily, is also clear in the articulation of his philosophy, although it is through the notebooks that one is able to glimpse the depth and seriousness of Sutter's thought.

Sutter claims, *contra* Val,

Where I disagree with you, Val, is in you people's emphasis on sin. I do not deny, as do many of my colleagues, that sin exists. But what I see is not sinfulness but paltriness. Paltriness is the disease. This, moreover, is not a mistake you are obliged to make. You could just as easily hold out for life and having it more abundantly as hold out against sin. Your tactics are bad. Lewdness is sinful but it derives in this case not from rebellion against God (Can you imagine such a thing nowadays—I mean, who cares?)—but from paltriness. (292)

In Sutter's journal, Sutter and Val are provided the literary device with which to articulate their philosophical and theological beliefs. However, there is no such forum for Will to express what he believes or what he repudiates, whether philosophically or theologically. The end of the novel, particularly the moments following Jamie's baptism and death, operates as the reader's entrance into the nature and condition of Will's religious beliefs—specifically, if he has on some level converted to Roman Catholicism, completely rejected the Catholic faith, or moved in a different theological direction entirely. The implication of Will's pursuit of Sutter, and his cry of 'Wait', is that Will has succeeded in preventing Sutter from killing himself, precisely where Will failed in

preventing his own father from doing so. Nonetheless, Will expresses uncertainty as to what transpired in Jamie's hospital bedroom, and the question of Will's religious belief, whether in the embrace or rejection of Catholicism or Stoicism, remains unanswered.

The changes that the event inculcates in Will are neither clear nor definite, and the audience must draw a conclusion based on limited evidence. Similar to the conclusion of *The Moviegoer*, the novel concludes with the protagonist on the verge of something, but tragically outside of reach of the 'something' for which he is searching.

The first forty pages of *The Last Gentleman* compress the life (thus far) of William Barrett into a series of events and encounters, from his youth in the South to his college years at Princeton, and his subsequent time in New York City—a clear counterpoint to the immediacy of the present in the beginning of *The Moviegoer*, where Binx's past and present coalesce in his digressive musings. The opening chapter of the novel provides a clear sense of Will's past as a native from the South, the reason for his habitation in New York City, and the peculiar affliction that Will bears. The problem for Will is that he doesn't know what he is to do with his life—neither in the sense of having a clear sense of his overall purpose in life, nor at the level of the everyday, during the moments of unrest, boredom and ennui. He scores high on psychological aptitude tests, 'especially in the area of problem-solving and goal-seeking'. However, the narrator explains that Will's problem is that 'he couldn't think of what to do between tests' (9).

The novel opens with the following lines,

One fine day in early summer a young man lay thinking in Central Park. His head was propped on his jacket, which had been folded twice so that the lining was outermost, and wedged into a seam of rock. The rock jutted out of the ground in a section of the park known as the Great Meadow. Beside him and canted up at mortar angle squatted a telescope of an unusual design. (3)

Will is a humidification engineer at Macy's, which translates, the reader is told, as janitor. But Will, after giving up his psychiatric treatment, muses:

I am indeed an engineer, he thought, if only a humidification engineer, which is no great shakes of a profession. But I am also an engineer in a deeper sense: I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge I have so arduously gained from five years of analysis. (41)

The novel opens with a cluster of images of distance and failed communication: the falcon that Will hopes to photograph has ‘abandoned its natural home’; Will is described as ‘being of both a scientific and a superstitious turn of mind and therefore always on the lookout for chance happenings which lead to great discoveries’; and when Will glimpses a woman reading a paper, and ‘over her should he read: “. . . parley fails”’ (5). The motif of distance and observation in *The Last Gentleman* corresponds with Binx’s moviegoing in *The Moviegoer*. *The Last Gentleman* repeats the depiction of the protagonist as a spectator—an individual in whom Marcel’s spectator-attitude is made concrete by the personal temperament of the character and the individual’s use of devices of distancing. Will’s journey follows the same course as Binx’s, from detached observation to commitment and engagement.

Patricia Lewis Poteat writes,

Priding himself on being ‘scientifically minded’, Will confuses an appropriate detachment from old perspectives and old conceptual tools with the inappropriate and godlike detachment of the Cartesian philosopher-observer. Of course, the unassuming engineer would never consciously aspire to such dizzy heights; he has enough trouble just remembering who and where he is. Nevertheless, almost everything about him—his aimless and solitary life; his amnesia; his most prized possession, a powerful, German-made telescope; his peculiarly abstracted ‘love’ for Kitty Vaught; and perhaps most telling, his favorite role, that of an English detective consummately skilled in the art of dispassionate observation—attests to his fundamental ontological state as one who watches and listens and sees but who never commits himself through speech and action to another person.⁷¹

⁷¹ Patricia Lewis Poteat, *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age: Reflections on Language*,

From the opening pattern of distance, the reader realizes that Will's separation from the world places him at a distinct advantage and, simultaneously, disadvantage, from his socially adjusted counterparts. Because of his hyper-awareness of social conventions and artificial social interactions, Will has to adopt roles in order to interact with others. The narrator explains,

As everyone knows, New York is noted for the number and variety of the groups with which one might associate, so that even a normal person sometimes feels dislocated. As a consequence this young man, dislocated to begin with, hardly knew who he was from one day to the next. There were times when he took roles so successfully that he left off being who he was and became someone else. (20)

In one scene that exemplifies Will's role as an observer, on a rainy weekday afternoon Will Barrett visits the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Instead of inspecting the paintings, however, Will spends the afternoon watching people look at the paintings—Will is intrigued by the lighting in the museum, the arrangement of the paintings, and the ways in which the works of art are displayed for visual consumption; Will's interest is not in the paintings themselves, but the way that they are viewed. He concludes that in such an environment, the paintings cannot be seen, since they are placed in such an environment of exchanges that they become invisible, similar to Percy's argument in 'The Loss of the Creature' that one cannot see the Grand Canyon because it has been 'appropriated by the symbolic complex' which has taken shape in the viewer's mind (*Message* 47). It is only when a construction accident loosens a Diego Velasquez painting from the wall and sends it crashing to the floor does the painting become visible, according to Will. When Will looks at the Velasquez, the narrator tells us that it was 'glowing like a jewel!' It was as if the 'painter might have just stepped out of his studio and the engineer [Will], passing in the street, had stopped to look through the open door. The paintings could be seen' (28).

Argument, and the Telling of Stories (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 55.

Will's interest in observing others in the act of *looking* or *observing* demonstrates his proclivity for spectatorship. Will's interest is not in the paintings or the people, but in the act of observation of the paintings, as he perceives it. Additionally, this attitude of abstraction corresponds with Will's fascination with his telescope:

It must be admitted that although he prided himself on his scientific outlook and set great store by precision instruments like microscopes and chemical balances, he couldn't help attributing magical properties to the telescope. It had to do with its being German, with fabled German craftsmen, gnomish slow-handed old men in the Harz Mountains. These lenses did not transmit light merely. They penetrated to the heart of things. (29)

The allure of the device is found in its ability to 'recover objects' that had been lost; buildings that had grown invisible in the mass of visual clutter (embodied in the towering structures of New York City), are able, once again, to be seen as they are. Again, like the Velasquez painting, vision acts as a central concern. Will is interested in seeing things as they are, apart from the encumbrances that prevent a realistic vision of things. Just as Binx, injured and bleeding from a gunshot wound, is able to *see* a dung beetle crawling in the dirt inches from his face in a trench in Korea, so too can Will see through to the reality of objects when something, whether a peculiar event (a crash in the museum) or through a concentration of vision (as provided by the lens of a telescope). Both trends highlight Will's inability to live with and among others in the natural way he desires ('Oh, why ain't I like them', he asks [266]); but this strangeness to Will's ways provides him a unique vision. The further afield he is from the norm, the more pronounced his vision becomes.

In Will one can detect more naiveté, less real-world shrewdness than in Binx. Will has not attained the financial or romantic success that Binx has; Will is more maladjusted, sicker than his counterpart in *The Moviegoer*. The narrator states,

To be specific, he had now a nervous condition and suffered spells of amnesia and even between times did not quite know what was what. Much of the time he was like a

man who has just crawled out of a bombed building. Everything looked strange. Such a predicament, however, is not altogether a bad thing. Like the sole survivor of a bombed building, he had no secondhand opinions and he could see things afresh. (11)

Will is able to identify trends and patterns that are otherwise invisible to the average citizen or consumer because of his amnesia. Will's trouble 'came from groups' (13), from understanding how people manage to belong to certain groups, whether religious or regional, and how one fits in to those groups without standing outside as an observer.

Once he has finally met Kitty and her family, he proceeds to follow Kitty and Rita from their meeting spot in the park and eavesdrops on a conversation that they have at a nearby cafe. Will had been debating the merits of just calling her directly, but thought that, 'The worst way to go see a girl is to go see her. The best way is not to go see her but to come upon her. Having the proper date with a girl delivers the two of you into a public zone of streets and buildings where every brick is turned against you' (61). The observation echoes the museum scene in the novel, where Will explains that one cannot see that which conforms to a pre-formed symbolic complex. Will thus proceeds to position himself near their table, within ear-shot but out of view, and listens to Kitty and Rita talk about Kitty's interest in the troubled young Will Barrett. After their conversation concludes, Will says,

My need for eavesdropping is legitimate enough, he said to himself, screwing up an eye. What with the ravaging particles and other noxious influences, when one person meets another in a great city, the meeting takes place edge on, so to speak, each person deprived of his surface as to be all but invisible to the other. Therefore one must take measures or else leave it to luck. (64)

Such measures involve meeting people (or things) indirectly, in ways not mediated by ordinary social convention. For Will, this manifests itself in the form of storms, tragedies, accidents, and other unplanned events that disrupt the white noise of modern

social interaction.

Later, Will listens unnoticed to yet another conversation between Kitty and Rita, as Kitty and Rita recline in their beds in the Trav-L-Aire camper: 'It had come over him again, the old itch for omniscience. One day it was longing for carnal knowledge, the next for perfect angelic knowledge. Tonight he was not American and horny but English and eavesdropper' (170). Eavesdropping is linked to this 'angelic' knowledge that provides Will with a means of keeping the demands of direct interaction with others at a distance. Will can pine for Kitty and maintain a comfortable, 'angelic' range.

Will's religious and cultural inheritance are that of a 'Southern Gentleman', a man who lives a life guided by a sense of duty and *noblesse oblige*, a distinct sense of honor and principle, and a knowledge of the difference between ladies and whores, and the fortitude to treat them accordingly. The Southern Gentleman is the scripted role that Will struggles to perform throughout the novel. When he finds himself sexually drawn to another young woman on his journey south in pursuit of the Vaughts, he comes 'to himself all at once' and 'socked himself in the head' (135). Will muses, 'Here you are in love with a certain person and bound south as a gentleman like Rooney Lee after a sojourn in the North, and at it again: pressing against girls like a horny dolphin and abusing your host besides. No more humbuggery!' (135-136).

Will is preoccupied by the question of how to reconcile his role as a Southern Gentleman, which prohibits sexual relations with 'ladies' (166-167, 174, 180), and his desire to sleep with Kitty. The narrator explains:

What he wanted to tell her but could not think quite how was that he did not propose country matters. He did not propose to press against her in an elevator. What he wanted was both more and less. He loved her. His heart melted. She was his sweetheart, his certain someone. He wanted to hold her charms in his arms. He wanted to go into a proper house and shower her with kisses in the old style. (71)

As the novel progresses, the reader learns that Will's preoccupation with being a

Southern Gentleman is attached most intimately to the suicide of his father, who ‘was killed by his own irony and sadness and by the strain of living out an ordinary day in a perfect dance of honor’ (10). Will is part of a long line of Southern Gentlemen, and as the last living male of the Barretts, he is placed in a peculiar place of responsibility to carry on the Barrett name. One has to wonder if Will is up to the task, especially when Will’s confrontation of a fellow student who did not reciprocate a ‘hello’ (203) is juxtaposed with the standard Stoicism of his forebears. Like his father, Will must reconcile the values of his heritage and family, yet face the bitter fact that in Percy’s fiction such values are vacant of any enduring, self-sustaining value. The upshot of the Southern Stoic philosophy is, in Percy’s novels, a tragic perspective that leaves one with the burden to live a noble life in an ignoble world; either a stiff upper lip in the face of the cruelty and absurdity of life, or the ultimate form of repudiation of the crass and shameful world, suicide. ‘As for the present young man, the last of the line, he did not know what to think. So he became a watcher and a listener and a wanderer. He could not get enough of watching’ (10).

At the Vaught mansion, Will explores his room, which is adjacent to Sutter’s. He notices that there is a hole in the wall that provides a view into Sutter’s bedroom. ‘I’m not well, reflected the engineer, and therefore it is fitting that I should sit still, like an Englishman in his burrow, and see what can be seen’ (191). After eavesdropping on Sutter and Val’s exchange by peering through old bullet holes in the wall between his room and Sutter’s, Will speaks openly with Sutter and shares the details of his amnesia. Will suggests that Sutter may be able to help him. When Sutter replies that he is not a specialist in the field (he’s a pathologist), Will responds:

‘I know that’, said the engineer, sitting down wearily. ‘But I have reason to believe you can help me’.
‘What reason?’
‘I can tell when somebody knows something I don’t know’.
‘You think I know something?’
‘Yes’.
‘How can you tell?’
‘I don’t know how but I can’. (218)

In the rest of their exchange, Sutter is able to draw more information from Will than Will's psychiatrist was able to extract after five years of psychoanalysis. Because of his suspicion that Sutter knows something about Will's condition (his fugues, his upside-downness, his moral quandaries), Will entreats Sutter to help him. Sutter asks Will if he is a homosexual, Will responds that he is not; Sutter then asks if Will likes girls, and Will says that he likes them 'very much'. When Sutter pursues further, asking if Will is sexually active, Will goes silent, and indicates with the shake of his head that he is not comfortable speaking about the subject (220). Immediately following, Sutter asks,

'Do you believe in God?'
The engineer frowned. 'I suppose so. Why do you ask?'
'My sister was just here. She said God loves us. Do you believe that?'
'I don't know'. He stirred impatiently.
'Do you believe that God entered history?'
'I haven't really thought about it'. (221)

Will is aware that there is something of immense value, '*Something [that] is going to happen*', for which he must wait. Whatever it is that will happen presently escapes his grasp, but he knows that 'It is for me to wait. Waiting is the thing. Wait and watch'. Will compares himself to Jamie, for whom Will could imagine science and study engrossing him for the rest of his life. Will envies Jamie for this, for Will knows that he himself cannot be so distracted from his search for meaning by the Theory of Large Numbers while living 'in this queer not-new-not-old place haunted by the goddess Juno and the spirit of the great Bobby Jones' (241).

At the end of the novel, after Jamie has experienced his deathbed conversion and baptism, Will cries out *Wait* to Sutter. The waiting that Will engages in during the body of the novel evolves into a cry out for participation with others, as opposed to the spectatorship of the voyeur. Hobson notes that '*Wait* is also a word to describe the knight of faith, one who is open to patient trust that God has his best interests at heart. Such a man is not a striver after secular truth, but a 'watcher and a listener and a wanderer' (10),

three words which describe Will's character precisely at the end of the novel'.⁷²

When Will visits Val in Tyree, Georgia on his journey to find Jamie and Sutter, he enters a conversation with Val about her conversion to Roman Catholicism. Val's story takes place in a library at Columbia, where Val was studying at the time. The nun who shares her cubicle in the library looks at Val and tells Val that she looks 'half dead'. Val tells Will, 'I said yes, I am half dead. She said why? I said I don't know. She said how would you like to be alive. I said I'd like that. She said all right, come with me. That was it'. Within a period of six weeks, Val received instruction, went to confession, was baptized and confirmed, and made her vows. 'They thought I was crazy. The Bishop of Newark required that I get a statement from my doctor that there was no insanity in the family'. (300)

Will's first encounter with Val Vaught takes place at the Vaught mansion, on a patio that overlooks the adjacent golf course. Val tells him that 'in the past' people would tell stories of their childhood, and recall the 'old houses' and 'dirt farms', of what is now a bygone age. What Val remembers, however, is the golf course and the swimming pool. Will regards her and her strange, oddly casual attire:

But perhaps she was not a proper nun after all, wearing as she did not a proper habit but a black skirt and blouse and a little cap-and-veil business. But beyond a doubt she was a Vaught, though a somewhat plumpish bad-complexioned potato-fed Vaught. Her wrist was broad and white as milk and simple: it was easy for him to imagine that if it was cut through it would show not tendon and bone but a homogenous nun-substance. (207-208)

Despite the swiftness and assuredness of her conversion and her sudden entrance into the Sisterhood, Val remains a Pascalian self-doubter. Val says to Will, 'I'll pray for

⁷² Hobson, *Understanding*, 66. Hobson continues, 'He has wandered all over the country, ending up in the desert; he has watched Jamie be baptized and die; and now he will presumably listen to Sutter intersubjectively as the two friends 'name' their pain and thus reverse the pernicious effects of the ravaging particles. It is only by naming one's pain and malaise to another, Percy believes, that a bond can be formed that is strong enough to withstand the fallout of everydayness in the postmodern age' (66).

you . . . Will you pray for me to receive sufficient grace in order not to hate the guts of some people, however much they deserve it?' (301). Val models the participative form of belief that stands in contrast to the conventional, certain belief of Percy's Southern Christendom. Val's form of belief, which fits the model of meaningful belief, is not a security, but a struggle.⁷³

Like Binx, Val's confessional style is spare, honest. She explains that she does not understand how she can believe 'the whole business', 'God, the Jews, Christ, the Church, grace, and the forgiveness of sins', and still feel such hatred for her fellow human beings. 'Christ is my lord and I love him but I'm a good hater and you know what he said about that. I still hope my enemies fry in hell. What to do about that? Will God forgive me?' (301).

Val, the central Roman Catholic in *The Last Gentleman*, is not the amiable Lonnie of *The Moviegoer*. Val is the eldest Vaught child, a nun, a teacher, and at constant odds with Sutter's ex-wife, Rita. Val is self-conscious of the incongruity between what she believes and how she acts, and is troubled by this gap in faith and practice. When Will meets her, his 'radar' can't place her, and he is 'obscurely scandalized' by the incongruity between her ease speaking of Jamie's illness and her religious office (208-209). Val acknowledges her own challenge of relating to and caring for others, reflected in a question she once asked Rita (related by Kitty), 'Is it possible to come to believe in Christ and the whole thing and afterwards be more hateful than before?' (116). Despite the brief amount of time that Val is physically present in the text, she is a latent force in Will's actions throughout the course of the novel; her request to have Jamie baptized, should his

⁷³ Percy claims that 'Val was in a rather bad way and in a very receptive state. She had come to a kind of *cul de sac* in her life and was ready to hear the news. But she just happened to meet this Sister and the Sister says, 'Well, look, here's the news. I'll tell you the news. Come with me'. So off she goes' (*Conversations* 114-115).

health decline unexpectedly, preoccupies Will up to the concluding scene of the narrative. For Val, the request is more than just a formal concern; it is an issue that concerns life, death, and spiritual damnation (73, 208-211, 301).

Despite the clear disparity in the content of their theological beliefs, Sutter and Val have a major theological concern in common: Christendom has been the downfall of Christianity, and with it, meaningful belief. By constructing a region (and nation, even) of such widespread belief, the terms of belief and faith have been evacuated of any meaning. Val, according to Sutter, 'did not mind at all if Christendom should be done for, stove in, kaput, screwed up once and all'. Sutter adds, 'She believes that then, if we go the route and run out of Christendom, that the air would be cleared and even that God might give us a sign'. (377-378). In describing Sutter Vaught, Percy states that Sutter 'understood the good news, the Gospel, he knew exactly what was going on in that baptism when the priest baptised Jamie. But Sutter was an unbeliever, he didn't accept it. With him it was an either/or, either belief or unbelief, and he was an unbeliever. His sister Val was a believer. Sutter was in despair' (*Conversations* 204).

When Will firsts sees Sutter at the Vaught's mansion, Will thinks, 'He was a Vaught, with the black brow and the high color and the whorled police-dog eye, but a very finely drawn Vaught. Motionless as he was, he gave the effect of restiveness and darting. He was both merry and haggard. Sutter, the engineer was to learn, always looked as if he had just waked up, with one side of his face flushed and creased and his hair brushed up against the grain by the pillow' (206).

Sutter, the brilliant doctor-turned-coroner, has squandered his talent in medicine in favor of drink and chasing women. Writing regularly in a small notebook, Sutter records his thoughts in an aphoristic style, discussing case studies, and occasionally responding to Val's Catholic sacramentalism, directing several entries of the journal to Val personally.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ See *LG* 281-282, 292, 307-309, 345-346, 348, 353-354.

They are rich counterpoints—distinct in the contents of their beliefs, but as the novel makes abundantly clear, unified in the participative form of their beliefs. For Sutter, as for Val, what and how one believes are central to the way that one lives, and even dies. To both characters, belief and practice are united, and what one believes, to both characters, is a matter of life and death. For Sutter, a truly meaningful belief deals with the question of suicide.⁷⁵ For Val, a Roman Catholic, the question of spiritual damnation.

Kobre writes that in Bakhtinian terms, ‘the casebook functions as internally persuasive discourse for Will, not because he accepts all of Sutter’s ideas without question but because Sutter’s words goad him to think anew’.⁷⁶ Hobson explains that the thesis of Sutter’s journal is that those who study the world with detached objectivity engage in transcendent activity, seeing the world with themselves excluded, and must engage in sex in order to re-enter the world. Sex, however, only acts ‘a short time as a cure for the malaise’. Ultimately, suicide is the most ‘transcending step of all’.⁷⁷

It is through Sutter’s notebooks that the reader is offered a chance to familiarize him or herself with Sutter’s philosophical predilections.⁷⁸ Despite the hostility to the ‘Jew-Christ-Church business’, Sutter is often the most articulate voice in presenting the Christian understanding of the world in *The Last Gentleman*, even more so than Val. As Sutter states concerning Val’s Catholicism, ‘I can understand this even though I could never accept the propositions (1) that my salvation comes from the Jews, (2) that my salvation depends upon hearing news rather than figuring it out, (3) that I must spend eternity with Southern Baptists’ (307). Percy’s outspoken atheist Sutter is the clearest

⁷⁵ See *LG* 282, 307-308, 345-346, 372-373.

⁷⁶ Kobre, *Walker Percy’s Voices*, 100.

⁷⁷ Hobson, *Understanding*, 50-51.

⁷⁸ Sutter’s notebook shoulder remind one of Binx’s own musings recorded in his notebook. They are similarly structured aphorisms, often concluding with a comic remark that provides the existential weight of the note with the levity of humor. Binx states in *The Moviegoer*: ‘Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God’s ironic revenge? But I am onto him’ (*MG* 146).

voice in the novel in articulating the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Ironically, Sutter provides a better diagnosis of the frustration of meaningful belief in a region inundated with over-determined religious terminology.

After witnessing the baptism and death of his younger brother, Sutter appears shaken emotionally but unflagged in his philosophical convictions. His concluding lines in the novel do not conclusively point to either conversion or suicide on Sutter's part, although Will's pursuit of Sutter's car seems to indicate that Sutter will not commit suicide, at least not in the foreseeable future.

Sutter, as an atheist, is one of the most 'religious' of Percy's characters in these first two novels, 'religious' in the same sense that Percy uses the term in 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World' (*Message* 102-103). While Sutter openly denies the legitimacy of Val's sacramentalism, the dedication with which he adheres to his belief is religious in that it concerns ultimate, metaphysical issues. Sutter even writes to Val that he is more religious than Val with her Catholic faith, because he has rejected the triumphant, Republican, Christian South in its entirety.⁷⁹ The constant portent of suicide only intensifies the life and death stakes for Sutter's beliefs. Sutter's understanding of the world bears several similarities to Binx's, if not in content, then in structure: Binx organizes the world according to horizontal and vertical axes (*MG* 70, 81-83), while Sutter frames the relation of man to the world as situated between polarities of transcendence and immanence (*LG* 353, 372-373); both are fundamentally the same, distinguishing between a Cartesian objectivity (transcendence) and an existential focus of one's place as a creature embedded in the physical world (immanence). Sutter's religious sensibilities are perhaps best captured in the way he articulates the division between engaging the world like a scientist (transcendence) or a libertine pornographer

⁷⁹ Sutter tells Val that 'The reason I am more religious than you and in fact the most religious person I know: because, like you, I turned my back on the bastards and went into the desert, but unlike you I didn't come sucking around them later' (*LG* 308).

(immanence).

Will's desire to speak with Sutter stems from his belief that Sutter has something important to share with him, some information that will help Will understand his own condition (his funks, his memory loss), and his question about whether he should bother with being a Southern Gentleman and forego sexual relations with reputable young women or not. Will seeks not only Sutter's help in finding his own place in the world, but also to learn what it is that Sutter believes, as he says to Sutter, 'to ask what it is *you* cleave by' (225). The irony of the scene is captured in Will's asking Sutter to give him, Will, freedom by instructing him in what he must do. It is a paradox that Percy is fond of, and returns to throughout his novels.⁸⁰

The reader learns that Sutter has attempted suicide in the past. In addition, Sutter has also intimated to Will that once Jamie has passed, he will finish the job that he once botched. Sutter writes a note to Val in his notebook, commenting on the difference in ideology between himself and the Catholic Val: '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' (282).

For Sutter, there are three ways to live one's life: the first is the rational humanist route; the second is the 'Christian among Christians in Alabama' way; the third is 'to die like an honest man', which is the Stoic option (379). Sutter demands to know what Will wants or needs from him, but Will claims that he does not know:

'What do you take me for, some pissant wise man, ole rebel Sutter whom the yokels back home can't stand and who therefore by your peculiar logic must be onto something just because they're not? You know something, Barrett? There's one thing I've never been able to get the straight of, and that is what it is you want of me. I suspect it is one of two things.

⁸⁰ Val is presented with the doctrine of Christianity and feels overwhelming freedom in being told what to do if she wanted to 'live' (300). Sutter, however, cannot believe because it would mean that salvation comes from hearing news 'rather than figuring it out..'. (309).

You either want me to tell you to fornicate or not to fornicate, but for the life of me I can't tell which it is'. (381)

Just as *The Moviegoer* presents a riddle in the form of Binx's response to the twin's question about Lonnie's physical resurrection, along with Binx's brief musings on religion, so too does one encounter an enigmatic conclusion to *The Last Gentleman*. Will, as he is pursuing Sutter's car after Jamie's baptism and death, implores Sutter to tell him what happened back in the hospital room. Will asks, '...what did you think? I could tell you were thinking something'. Sutter responds, saying, 'Do you have to know what I think before you know what to think?' Next comes Will's telling response, his first vocal disagreement in the presence of another, and perhaps the first indication of Will's acquisition of an autonomous self-hood, 'That does not mean that I would necessarily agree with you', indicative that Will has, since the beginning of the novel, begun to develop his own mind apart from those that have played such a formative role in his development (407). Sutter does not answer Will's question—or even attempt to inquire further to clarify the specific object of inquiry, whether Will is asking about Jamie's death or baptism, the role of the Priest in Jamie's final moments, or Sutter's response to the event.

For Will, the significance of this state is further delineated in his role in *The Second Coming*. Questions of suicide, the ghastly truth behind his father's death, and a code of personal ethics in the believing culture of the American South continue to call upon Will's character for response and resolution. In the third chapter of this project, I explore the relation between *The Last Gentleman* and its sequel, *The Second Coming*, and explore the implications of the new discoveries and problems that Will Barrett must face. Optimistic interpretations of the conclusion of *The Last Gentleman* are confounded by comments such as that made by Mr. Vaught to Will: 'Son, when you reach my age I hope you will not wake up to find that you've gone wrong somewhere and that your family have disappointed you' A quote which, when the novels are read in relation to one another,

and we consider the state of Will Barrett's life in the beginning of *The Second Coming*, takes on new, profound significance (81).

1.4 - Conclusion

The Moviegoer and *The Last Gentleman* exhibit several narrative patterns that will appear in the remaining four novels of Walker Percy, and in his non-fiction satire, *Lost in the Cosmos*. The first pattern is the protagonist's location in a larger environment of vacuous belief, where nearly everyone believes something, but acts as though such belief does not inform their lives, decisions, or outlook on the world. The second is that emerging from such an environment are the voices of 'religious' characters: Aunt Emily and Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*, Sutter, and Val in *The Last Gentleman*, who cling to their respective worldviews with a passionate, inward conviction that shapes their lives and their decisions. Finally, specific only to Percy's first two works, as discussed here, are the journeys of Binx and Will, who prefer to stand on the margins of experience and watch and observe, but who then become increasingly involved in the lives of others by the prompting of 'religious' characters who model participative belief.

At the end of both novels, Binx and Will are committed, on some level, to seeing to the formation of a lived expression of their beliefs, of what they tentatively affirm, even if it is without the kind of security and certainty of some of Percy's other 'religious' characters. In the end, Binx and Will have changed dramatically from the abstracted, distanced observers of the lives around them to young men at the least potentially approaching serious religious commitments.

Binx in the early portions of the *The Moviegoer* is enamoured with imitating film characters in his daily interactions with co-workers and lovers, and Will in *The Last Gentleman* falls in love at a distance of two thousand feet and proceeds to eavesdrop on

the Vaughts, both characters thus displaying patterns of distancing that they desert by the end of their respective stories. By the conclusions of these two novels both characters have made great strides in becoming involved in the lives of their family and friends, and while not converts or 'religious' in the same way as, say, Aunt Emily or Sutter, are growing as characters and moving from their roles as spectators to roles as participants.

The potential for spiritual renewal and rebirth for both Binx and Will, however, is tempered with a strong dramatic sense that nothing is guaranteed for either Binx or Will: the questions that preoccupy them, from the existence of God, the tenability of the Catholic faith, to the way Binx and Will should behave with women, have not been entirely solved. Binx remains silent on the issue of religion and God, although he does affirm, seemingly paradoxically, that his siblings will see Lonnie again in a future life. Will is well aware that something of great import took place at Jamie's death-bed baptism, but he requests Sutter to parse the significance of the event for him, indicating that he has not gained epiphanic knowledge or religious certitude.

Perhaps in keeping in line with his conception of what a work of art should and should not do, namely, that a novel has no place proselytizing or preaching the gospel, but should rather be truthful in its depiction of human experience, Percy does not unequivocally depict a religious conversion in *The Moviegoer* or *The Last Gentleman*. Both conclusions remain ambiguous as to where Binx and Will will arrive in their religious commitments. Has Binx converted to Roman Catholicism, or is he somewhere on the road to Catholicism, but not there yet? Will the young Will Barrett interpret Jamie's conversion and baptism as a sign of God's grace, as a demonstration of Jamie's fear of his own death, or will Barrett continue to be befuddled by the event?

Binx, notably, does not express his beliefs in the same mode as Aunt Emily and Lonnie, who are assured and confident in the content of their belief and how that belief should be lived out: For Aunt Emily, it is through a stiff upper-lip in the face of the

absurdity of life and the inevitable defeat of honour by ignominy; for Lonnie, it is in the practice of extreme unction to purify himself of his jealous thoughts about his dead brother. One can see in Percy's depiction of belief, here at the end of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, an echo of Marcel's characterization of faith, which mirrors a journey, unfinished, incomplete, and touched with uncertainty and doubt. Percy's portrayal of belief, as dramatized in the journeys of Binx and Will, reflects a concept of belief that though lived is yet uncertain.

While several critics may see the end of Binx's journey as a case of clear-cut conversion, without the application of Kierkegaard's stages to Binx's journeys, one does not arrive at the conclusion that Binx's actions in the epilogue necessarily reflect a religious conversion. Will's final status as believer or unbeliever at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, in turn, requires no such discussion, as the critics discussed here in this study agree that Will appears to have missed the potential religious significance of Jamie's deathbed conversion and baptism. Hawkins asserts that the 'heroes of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* remain very much on an open search, despite the different degrees of Catholic 'witness' in each novel [...]'⁸¹

Both Binx and Will are still pilgrims on the way. The dramatic conflict in the novel does not center on *what* one believes, but on the way that belief is carried out in the life of the believer. In this way, a leap into the religious sphere may imply that Binx is now a Roman Catholic, as Howland and Luschei claim, but when the novel is read as focusing on this conflict between conventional and participative belief, it becomes clear that the issue for Binx is whether what he affirms as his belief finds expression in the decisions he must make for his own life, in his marriage, in an occupation that makes use of his analytical mind, and his care for his half-siblings and Kate. For Will Barrett, in turn, his pilgrimage is truly beginning with his pursuit of Sutter in an attempt to prevent Sutter from killing

⁸¹ Hawkins, *Language of Grace*, 64-65.

himself just as Will's father did, years ago.

2. Accounts of Participation and Uncertainty: Belief in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*

2.1 - Conventional Belief in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*

Walker Percy's third novel, *Love in the Ruins* (1971), opens with Dr. Tom More's harrowing prognosis of the condition of the United States:

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

Tom's conclusion that 'the center did not hold', with its clear echo of Yeats' 'The Second Coming', sounds less like a doctor diagnosing a sick patient, and more like an Old Testament prophet pointing to the impending judgment of a God who no longer favours His people. Dr. Thomas More is more than just a doctor in this novel, particularly in these opening pages. In prose commanding and authoritative, he is a Jeremiah who sees destruction on the horizon, and proclaims that 'principalities and powers are everywhere victorious'. An even more 'present danger', however, troubles Tom. A fallout of 'noxious particles' will settle in the area in the next few hours, and only Tom has the means to inoculate people from the fallout, which if unprevented will 'worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself' (5).

Tom is implicated in the disaster, however, as he designed the device that will, indirectly, cause the catastrophe: In the hopes of healing the Cartesian mind-body split abstracting humans from their own bodies and setting their souls adrift like a ghosts in machines, Tom invented the MOQUOL (More's Qualitative Quantitative Ontological

Lapsometer), designed to measure and treat the ‘deep perturbations of the soul’ (29). The device is capable of measuring the consistency of one’s idea of self with his or her actual self, and later in the novel, even treat such perturbations through the dispersal of ions into the brain. But the device has fallen into the hands of the Mephistophelean Art Immelman, who intends to use the MOQUOL for a more sinister purpose. Tom explains that in Immelman’s possession, the device will cause nothing short of a catastrophe: ‘If a man is already prone to anger, he’ll go mad with rage. If he lives affrighted, he will quake with terror. If he’s already abstracted from himself, he’ll be sundered from himself and roam the world like Ishmael’ (5).

Tom’s vision of the future of the United States is pessimistic, but Tom’s concerns extend to more than just the nation’s economic, political, and cultural future. The vision of the South in *Love in the Ruins* is comical, full of caricatures of various social and cultural groups of the 1960s and 70s. While Tom addresses several topical issues—lapsed sexual values in the U.S., rampant materialism in the upper-middle class, liberalization of post-Vatican II Catholicism, racial strife in the South—that reflect Percy’s satiric depiction of the United States in the 1970s, *Love in the Ruins* is, on a separate level, a work that addresses the belief and faith of one man, Dr. Thomas More, in the midst of a culture that is falling apart. The novel’s concerns remain very much with the Kierkegaardian ‘individual human being—before God’,⁸² and more specifically Percy’s interest in dramatizing the participative dimension of belief remains central.

In Percy’s fourth novel, *Lancelot* (1977), the reader can also identify Percy’s prevailing interest in the quality of belief among citizens of ‘Southern Christendom’. Belief is less grounded there in any kind of meaningful religious commitment, as Percy uses ‘religious’ in ‘Notes for a Novel about the End of the World’. Instead, faith is

⁸² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. by Edward V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 83.

supplanted by a conventional and cultural belief system, wherein material prosperity and conservative political values are defining, overt expressions of this belief.

In Chapter 1 of this study I examine how participative belief is modelled for Binx and Will. For this chapter, I must begin with a question that takes into account the distinct characteristics of Tom and Lance, both of whom are older than Binx and Will by roughly twenty years. Tom and Lance are also more conversant in the content of their belief, and wrestle with what it means to truly believe, independent of any models of participative belief. In both *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*, Percy introduces a new set of protagonists, both of whom distinguish themselves from either Binx or Will by articulating the content of their own respective belief systems: Tom affirms the basic tenets of Roman Catholic doctrine, and Lance affirms a revived, militant Stoicism that borders on nihilism. Both Tom and Lance acknowledge the implications of what they believe, and how that belief should be lived out in a consonant way. For Tom it is an issue of failing to live out Christian practice, and for Lance it is an issue of awakening from an abstracted death-in-life and putting to work in his life his newfound philosophy of Stoicism. Tom and Lance embody characters who have a clearer sense of what they believe theologically than either Binx or Will, and both Tom and Lance have philosophical programs in which they are personally invested, whether to heal the Cartesian split or to bring about a new era of history where the principles of Stoicism govern all. As Gene Reeves states, for Marcel, ‘In true faith the act of faith and the object of faith cannot be disconnected’,⁸³ suggesting that in true faith or belief the object of faith, the content, permeates one’s life.

Tom and Lance grow increasingly involved in living out the implications of their beliefs over the course of their journeys. For Tom, the growth does not emerge until the end, when he attempts to wrest Ellen from the hands of Art Immelman; for Lance, the

⁸³ Gene Reeves, ‘Marcel’s Idea of Mystery’, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schlipp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1984), pp. 245-271 (p. 252).

change is a process featured in his quest to discover evil, and his attempt to live out his Stoic philosophy in a consistent fashion. Both Tom and Lance, significantly, verbalize the disjunct between what they believe and how it *ought* to be lived, if lived out consistently with their professed beliefs. In *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*, one sees Tom and Lance emerging from their respective states of abstraction, moving away from the spectator-attitude, and growing involved in living out an expression of their respective beliefs about the nature of the world. Tom and Lance are less elliptical in expressing the conflicts at work in what it means to believe in a meaningful way, demonstrating an implicit shift in Percy's craft toward more direct explorations of meaningful belief.

The development of Tom and Lance in their journeys can be measured by the protagonists' dialogues that shift from terse, laconic discussions to open recognition of unrealized longings and personal moral failures, as well as by the decisions they make to enact their beliefs. Their respective modes of distancing—from Tom's MOQUOL to Lance's eavesdropping and surveillance tapes—can be used to measure degrees of spectatorship and participation. As for all of Percy's protagonists, the issue of an abstracted spectator-attitude is a very real danger, significant for Tom as a scientist and Lance as a man who loses his grip on reality. Martin Luschei writes,

Self-objectification is an occupational hazard of the scientist, who as scientist, Marcel notes, is concerned with 'an order of truths which he must consider as wholly outside of, and completely distinct from, his own self'. That is the 'strange greatness of his task . . . that he really is lifted out of himself in this way . . . the self has, in so far as it possibly can, vanished away'.⁸⁴

Initially, both Tom and Lance are unremittingly cerebral and abstracted, from the way they read and subsequently categorize those they encounter to the way that they refrain from expressing their internal moral and spiritual quandaries to anyone but their immediate audience. However, by the conclusion of both novels, both characters make

⁸⁴ Martin Luschei, *Walker Percy: Sovereign Wayfarer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 31.

steps in treating others less as embodiments of ideas and more as individuals: in *Love in the Ruins*, specifically, Ellen Oglethorpe, whom Tom earlier categorizes as a ‘beautiful but tyrannical Georgia Presbyterian’ (155), will later commit himself to in marriage, and Father Smith whom Tom pigeonholes as a mad priest, later is regarded as a spiritual authority who can guide Tom to a potentially sincere confession; in *Lancelot*, Anna ceases to be an abstract embodiment of Lancelot’s ideal ‘woman’, and asserts herself as an individual being to Lancelot, as does Percival, who becomes audible to the reader only in the final lines of the work.⁸⁵

Like his predecessor from *Love in the Ruins*, Lance is positioned at the outset of the novel as an observer. While Tom holds a vantage point overlooking the freeway, Lance looks through a narrow prison window out upon a graveyard. In both cases, the narrators have experienced the death of a wife; the loss of a child—Tom through death, Lance through the revelation of Siobhan’s true parentage—and the disruption or destruction of their secure if disinterested, apathetic understanding of the world. When Lance questions the existence of good and evil, he muses, ‘There I was forty-five years old and I didn’t know whether there was ‘evil’ in the world’ (139), just as Tom wondered how a forty-five-year-old man could feel little more than longing for a woman half his age: ‘How stands it with a forty-five-year-old man who can fall in love on the spot with a twenty-year-old stranger, a clear-eyed vacant simple Massachusetts girl...’ (55).

Lance’s quest is paradoxical: while he affirms that all is nothing, more or less, he persists in a quest of structured unbelief, much like Hazel Motes in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, that attempts to undermine the classic structure of a Christian pilgrimage by

⁸⁵ Howland argues that there is no change in Lancelot in the novel, that Lance is left at a liminal state at the end of the work: ‘Although the structure of the novel seems to indicate that we are to be most interested in Lance the monologist (after all, Father John’s words are not recorded until the final two pages of the novel), the theme of intersubjectivity requires that we pay close attention to Percival/John. For Lance does not change during the course of telling his tale’. Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel’s Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy’s Novels* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990), 90.

refuting the claims of Christianity or repudiating the work of Christ.⁸⁶ Persistent through both novels, however, is a crucial element of uncertainty as the conclusions, similar to those of Percy's first two novels, end with a mixture of promise and ambiguity. It is unclear whether Tom has reconciled early questions about believing, and whether from the perspective of the reader he will remain a good Roman Catholic in the years following the last page of the novel. As well, in the conclusion of Lance's story, when Percival finally speaks, it is unclear what conclusion Lance will draw after discovering no 'evil' at the end of his quest. Will Lance perhaps be receptive to the gospel message of love and humility that Percival holds? The novel ends before Lance's decision to accept or repudiate is made.

Mary Deems Howland stresses that 'If Lancelot opens himself to the grace embodied in the one person with whom he has ever really shared himself, he may discover the kind of intersubjective love that will lead him to Marcel's 'absolute Thou', whose representative John has rededicated himself to being'.⁸⁷ Similarly, Michael Kobre writes that

Thus, though this tour de force is dominated by Lancelot's anger, it is ultimately redeemed by the presence of his friend and listener, Percival, who continually draws both Lancelot and Percy himself away from the simple truths of satire and polemic. As Percival speaks at the conclusion of the novel, we seem to enter a different realm, where the course of our lives is always a mystery and anything is possible.⁸⁸

In the final scene of *Love in the Ruins*, Tom More—still wearing his sackcloth from mass—is grilling food and smoking a turkey for the Christmas Day meal. Tom is married to Ellen Ogleshorpe now, and they have two young children, both of whom are sleeping. In the chilly evening air Tom is 'dancing around to keep warm, hands in pockets. It is Christmas and Tom says 'the Lord is here, a holy night and surely that is all

⁸⁶ See Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990 [1952]).

⁸⁷ Howland, *Gift of the Other*, 108.

⁸⁸ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 168.

one needs'. But the note of God's sufficiency to meet his needs is quickly met with Tom's desire to have a drink, and he grabs 'the Early Times from a clump of palmetto', and takes six drinks in as many minutes (402). Tom still remains a 'bad Catholic'. That is to say, while Tom appears to have settled into the domestic roles of husband and father, and he has redeemed his standing as a 'good doctor' with his patients, he still wrestles with the affective dimension of confession. Tom cannot feel 'sorry' for his sins, although he can manage a modicum of 'shame' (397-399). Breaking a six-month sober streak, Tom discovers that his desire to drink outweighs his fear of Ellen's wrath or disappointment, and the reader is left to decide if Tom will return to alcohol and womanizing.

Lancelot, in turn, ends with the apocalyptic strain that is so prevalent in Percy's fiction—Lancelot proposes to begin a new life out of the ruins of the old, building from the metaphorical ashes somewhere in Virginia, an allusion to the virginity of Anna, who, Lance says, has been cleansed by sin and brutality. But in terms of the beliefs of its protagonist, *Lancelot* concludes with a mixed affirmation of belief. Lance asks Percival:

One last question—and somehow I know you know the answer. Do you know Anna?
Yes.
Do you know her well?
Yes.
Will she join me in Virginia and will she and I and Siobhan begin a new life there?
Yes.
Very well. I've finished. Is there anything you wish to tell me before I leave?
Yes. (257)

Percival's affirmative reply to each of Lance's questions acts in counterpoint to Lance's questioning and uncertainty. Both novels—not just *Lancelot*—conclude with a heavy dose of uncertainty. The reader is compelled to ask, *Will Tom relapse back into his old ways? Will his life in Feliciana Parish and his relationship with Ellen remain so Edenic? And also, Will Lance begin a new life with Anna in Virginia? What will that life*

look like? Has Percival's 'yes', the concluding word of the novel, resonated with Lance in such a way as to stir him from Stoicism to Catholicism?

Such questions open the text up to further questions—none of which are resolved in the conclusion of the novel. Tom and Lance are uncertain of what life holds, particularly what they will believe, embrace, reject, repudiate or pursue in the coming years. This uncertainty is a central fact of participative belief—the individual who attempts to believe with the very fibre of his or her being, to believe in more than just the cognitive or objective dimension, will find that certainty is not guaranteed. In Percy's depiction of a life of serious belief, one will have doubts, questions, and uncertainty; the pilgrim will fall back into easy human habits of solitariness and scepticism along his or her journey, though when or where is uncertain. The sole certainty is that the pilgrimage is a worthy one, albeit one of constant struggle.

2.2 - Percy's *Love in the Ruins*

Like Percy's two previous novels, *Love in the Ruins* begins with the protagonist situated as a distanced spectator, as Tom More, the narrator of the novel, explains that he is waiting 'for the end of the world'. Tom waits in a grove of pines overlooking the freeway and the Howard Johnson motel, where his three love interests, Moira, Lola and Ellen, are hidden away. Tom claims that he is 'safe here for the moment...flanks protected by a rise of ground on the left and an approach ramp on the right' (3), where he can 'command three directions of the interstates and by leaning over the lip of the culvert can look through to the fourth, eastern approach' (4). Tom is physically primed to survey the local region, and so provide an overview of the various factions and groups that have taken to warring with one another.

From his vantage point, Tom notices the 'yellow brick barn-and-silo of Saint

Michael's', which once was a large parish, but has since been abandoned. 'The stained glass is broken out. Cliff swallows nest in the fenestrae of its concrete screen' (5). From the sight of the broken-down structure, Tom explains the current state of the Catholic church: 'Our Catholic church here split into three pieces: (1) the American Catholic Church whose new Rome is Cicero, Illinois; (2) the Dutch schismatics who believe in relevance but not God; (3) the Roman Catholic remnant, a tiny scattered flock with no place to go' (5-6). One group, the American Catholic Church, 'emphasizes property rights' and 'plays *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the elevation'. The Dutch schismatics broke away from the Catholic Church in order for its priests to marry. The Roman Catholics are 'scattered and demoralized'. The one faithful priest in the region now has a second job as a fire-watcher, and watches for brushfires and 'signs and portents in the skies' (6).

Additionally, Tom can see Paradise Estates (where he currently lives), a pleasant housing development where liberal and conservative are able to live in 'dwell side by side in peace' (18). In the distance is the federal complex of 'Fedville', which includes a medical school, NASA facility, Behavioral Institutes, Geriatrics Center, and the 'Love Clinic', a lab where scientists study the sexual behavior of couples and individuals in acts of intercourse and masturbation (14). Farther away is the 'vast Honey Island Swamp', where the 'dropouts and castoffs of and rebels against our society' dwell, as well as

Ferocious black Bantus who use the wilderness both as a refuge and as a guerilla base from which to mount forays against outlying subdivisions and shopping plazas; all manner of young white derelicts who live drowsy sloth-like lives, sustaining themselves on wild melons and catfish and green turtles and smoking Choctaw cannabis the livelong day. (15-16)

The world of Percy's *Love in the Ruins* is, according to Tom More, a world of divisions, of class, racial, and political conflicts: 'Americans have turned against each other; race against race, right against left, believer against heathen, San Francisco against Los Angeles, Chicago against Cicero' (17). During this time of a national emotional

duress, the liberal suffers from aggressive bowel complaints while the conservative is prone to uncontrollable, apoplectic rages: Dr. Tom More's ambition is to heal the social polarization by means of his MOQUOL—a device which, in treating the individual and welding the Cartesian split between body and soul, will resolve the social and political conflicts that have arisen—thus restoring each individual to wholeness, neither abstracted from the self (angelism) and perceiving the self as a part of a system of beings, nor as a non-reflective being that buries itself in satyriasis (bestialism), but as a wayward pilgrim that is neither beast nor angel, but fallen human, broken but still bearing the image of its Creator. The U.S. has come to this unfortunate collapse, according to Tom, not because

Of Leftism, Knotheadism, apostasy, pornography, polarization, etcetera etcetera. All these things may have happened, but what finally tore it was that things stopped working and nobody wanted to be a repairman. (62-63)

The 'repairman', clearly, is Tom, along with his invention, the means by which to weld the split in man's psyche. But in the course of the novel, Tom's device falls into the hands of Art Immelman. The device, in conjunction with the salt deposits in the Feliciana Parish region, will create a chemical chain reaction that will, ultimately, 'worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself'. The outcome will be catastrophic: A man, Tom claims, will go mad from anger if he is already prone to it, or be overtaken with fear if he is prone to anxiety. Moreover, if a man is abstracted, he will, ultimately, 'be sundered from himself and roam the world like Ishmael' (5).

The paradox of Percy's Southern Christendom in *Love in the Ruins* is that while conservative wars with liberal, white despises black, and atheist resents Christian, there is relative uniformity among the behavior of these disparate groups. Tom claims that conservatives and liberals are separated only by 'minor differences':

When conservative Christian housewives drive to town to pick up their maids in the Hollow, the latter ride on the back seat in the old style. Liberal housewives make their maids ride on the front seat. On Sundays Christian businessmen dress up and take their families to church, whereas

unbelieving scientists are apt to put on their worst clothes and go bird-watching. As one of my behaviorist friends put it, 'my cathedral is the blue sky and my pilgrimage is for the ivory-billed woodpecker', the fabulous and lordly bird that some say still inhabits the fastness of the swamp. (20)

Like Sutter's criticism of Val that she 'did not mind that the Christers were like everybody else, if not worse' (*LG* 377), Tom recognizes that very little separates the Christian from the unbeliever, and most of the differences are codified in cultural terms rather than in religious belief. Nearly everyone in *Love in the Ruins* believes in a conventional, perfunctory way. The landscape of the novel boasts golf tournament banners that advertise 'Jesus Christ, the Greatest Pro of Them All' (83-84), and characters like Dr. George 'Dusty' Rhodes, the father of Lola Rhodes, one of Tom's lovers, is the president of the 'American Proctological Society'. The banner of the A.C.C., the American Catholic Church, displays a 'blue banner beside the crucifix' that 'shows Christ holding the American home, which has a picket fence, in his two hands' (181), and Monsignor Schleifkopf teaches on 'how Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, believed in Christ and gave him his tomb. He preaches on the resurrection of Lazarus, who was also well off' (182).

The nuances to Southern Christendom, present in both *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, have been traded in favour of a more exaggerated, comic caricature, perhaps an act in Percy's craft of shouting for the 'hard of hearing' and drawing 'large and startling figures' for the 'almost-blind' as O'Connor said of her own writing, employing grotesque characters and scenarios for her satiric purpose.⁸⁹ The vision of the South, however, remains roughly the same in terms of its depiction of widespread (but meaningless) belief, as it does in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, with the exception of the level of caricature, as secondary characters of the novel form a more exaggerated and comic picture. While Sutter Vaught acts as a foil for the 'Republican Victorious Christian' South of the mid-twentieth-century in *The Last Gentleman*, the

⁸⁹ Flannery O'Connor, 'The Fiction Writer and His Country', *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 34

Southern Christendom of Percy's *Love in the Ruins* needs no such spokesperson, as the comedy is more direct, more explicit: there is little need for a Sutter Vaught to identify the challenge (and irony) of finding true, meaningful belief in a region of widespread religiosity. Tom, moreover, is present only in the most basic physical sense, reacts throughout the novel with detachment, and lacks the vitriolic commentary of Aunt Emily or Sutter Vaught, or, later, Lancelot. In the end, the believers and unbelievers alike are certain in what they believe despite the very casual way they enact that belief, and the Sunday morning churchgoers are not terribly unlike their unbelieving counterparts who go bird-watching at dawn on Sundays.

Percy's catalogue of belief includes the easily lampooned characters and the 'religious' characters; the former includes characters like Max and Ellen, who, though affable, remain unremarkable characters in Percy's fictive landscape. Max and Ellen are less comical versions of the vapid groups of unbelievers in *Love in the Ruins*. Both act with conviction but without the same intensity of Aunt Emily or Sutter, for example. They remind the reader of Binx's mother, or even Uncle Jules in *The Moviegoer* and the Vaughts from *The Last Gentleman* in the calm, self-assured manner in which they believe. Tom More's fondness for providing a working index of character types in the novel reflects what Marcel diagnoses as the spectator-attitude in *Being and Having* (BH 20-21): conservatives suffer from 'unseasonable rages, delusions of conspiracies, high blood pressure, and large-bowel complaints', while liberals are subject to 'sexual impotence, morning terror, and a feeling of abstraction of the self from itself' (20). The stance or attitude of the observer is more pronounced in Tom than in Binx or Will, perhaps due in part to Percy's comic vision of the American South in the novel, drawn more distinctly for comic and satiric effect, but also to represent the abstracted and 'angelic' side of Tom's consciousness.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ However, angelism and bestialism are not mutually exclusive: 'It is not uncommon',

Kobre writes,

What accounts for this style of characterization? In a sense, it represents Tom's way of seeing himself and others. As a scientist, he is trained to see not what is unique about his patients' problems but what is common to them. A symptom or behavior can only be understood through the principle of classification: how is it like other symptoms?⁹¹

As in the first two novels, several characters in *Love in the Ruins* emerge as embodiments of unique forms of belief, although most correspond with a conventional or uninvested belief than a participative form. Of the most prominent and relevant to this study are Ellen Oglethorpe, Max Gottlieb, Samantha, and Father Smith. There are, of course, others, such as Tom's mother, who is a 'Catholic gnostic' whose capacity as a New-Age crystal-baller has secured her a local reputation as a 'seer and prophetess'; or Doris, Tom's deceased ex-wife who was spiritual but not religious, and ran off with an 'English heathen' who was after her money; however, my focus will remain with the three that are closest to Tom—Ellen, Max, Samantha, and Father Smith, since these provide a clearest working index of the forms of belief in the novel. Max and Ellen are both secure and assured in their views of the world. The agonies of the Catholic faith for Tom, this consistent pang of conscience that wars with his sexual desire, create a counterpoint to the way Max and Ellen's beliefs are comfortable and compatible with the way they live.

Ellen is the only one of More's three primary love interests, the other two being Lola Rhodes and Moira, that does not sleep with Tom. She is a cultural Christian, whose 'Presbyterianism' is a cultural indicator rather than a theological one: For Ellen, God is an unnecessary component in her personal codes of ethics, including her sexual habits, for as Tom says, Ellen is 'embarrassed by the God business', and further adds that she is 'right', and that she 'doesn't need God'. After all, 'What does God have to do with being honest,

says Tom, 'to see patients suffering from angelism-bestialism. A man, for example, can feel at one and the same time extremely abstracted and inordinately lustful toward lovely young women who may be perfect strangers' (27).

⁹¹ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 117.

hard-working, chaste, upright, unselfish, etcetera' (157). Tom, in contrast, 'believe[s] in God, the Jews, Christ, the whole business. Yet I don't do right. I am a Renaissance pope. An immoral believer. Between the two of us we might have saved Christianity. Instead we lost it' (157).

Max Gottlieb, in turn, is an 'unbeliever, a lapsed Jew, believes in the orderliness of creation, acts on it with energy and charity. I the believer, having swallowed the whole Thing, God Jews Christ Church, find the world a madhouse and a madhouse home. Max the atheist sees things like Saint Thomas Aquinas, ranged, orderly, connected up' (105). Even though Max, like Ellen, acts with 'energy and charity', there is nevertheless something settled, easy, and casual about the way that he believes. Dr. More's wording echoes that of Sutter Vaught, the collection of 'God Jews Christ Church' as the substantive centre of the Christian faith. More captures the disparity between his own faith and works by noting the charity of Max, an atheist, who acts without the demands of faith or participation. Nevertheless, Max does not exhibit participative belief because for him, goodness and virtue and his own decisions are not informed by a weighty preoccupation.

Samantha, like Lonnie in *The Moviegoer*, is an ill but resolute Catholic youth who in the course of the narration dies, but in the meantime provides a testimony to what a true adherent of the Catholic faith will look like. The dying Samantha asks her father if he has lost his faith. The young girl, Tom says, resembles a 'Picasso profile' as the neuroblastoma has 'pushed one eye out and around the nose-bridge'. Samantha inquires why her father doesn't attend mass any more, and warns Tom that he's in 'greater danger' than Doris, who is protected by 'invincible ignorance' (373). Samantha embodies a firm, resilient religious fortitude that Tom initially lacks or openly wrestles with. In a Southern landscape which is populated by 'Christian Kaydettes', Christian proctologists, what Hester calls the 'Christian flag-wavers' (367), a fractured Catholic church, and bird-

watching atheists, characters such as Samantha and Father Smith treat the issues of belief as of the utmost importance, central to the way that one lives one's life.

Unlike the gentle and reasoned Max Gottlieb, Father Smith appears touched by madness. Even so, Father Smith strikes upon a significant theme in Percy's oeuvre, which is that the language of Christendom has failed Christianity. Tom shares a comic anecdote where Father Smith, opening mass with the claim that 'the channels are jammed and the word is not getting through', is misunderstood by the congregation as a reference to a technical issue with the loudspeaker. Later in his rectory, he mutters 'something about 'the news being jammed' –whereupon the housekeeper, thinking he meant the TV, turned it on'. Tom muses that 'no matter what one says, no matter how monstrous, garbled, unfittable, whoever hears it will somehow make it fit' (184). For Father Smith, as he will later claim in *The Thanatos Syndrome* to even greater effect, the message of the gospel cannot be communicated to the audience because of the white noise of Christendom.⁹²

In the opening pages of the novel, Tom addresses the disconnect between what he consciously affirms as truth, and the way he has behaved since his daughter's death, a self-revelation that is unveiled in pieces until the final pages of the novel, where Tom attempts to confess his sins to Father Smith. Tom's account of his own personal shortcomings includes admissions of alcoholism, depression, morning terrors, sudden elations, and abstracted lusts for complete strangers. Even so, Tom claims that he is a 'genius nevertheless who sees into the hidden causes of things' and quite capable of accounting for humankind's current psychic catastrophe (11). In a conversation with Max Gottlieb, Tom acknowledges the 'tug of war' between 'belief and action' (118), and with Father Smith he admits that, while he hasn't lost his faith, fails to feel sorry for his sins, or 'much of anything' at all (375-376).

⁹² In Chapter 3, I will briefly outline the relation between these two novels, specifically how the world of *The Thanatos Syndrome* is different from that of *Love in the Ruins*, and how Tom's religious concerns shift significantly in the second novel from those in the first.

To take Tom's claim of an inability to feel anything at all at face-value would be a mistake, as Tom oscillates between an abstracted, distanced view of the world and passionate 'heart-wrenching longings that have no name' (23)—what Tom suffers from is an inability to love his fellow man and reconcile his Roman Catholic faith with the way that he acts in the world. Moreover, Tom's explicitly Roman Catholic (albeit inconsistent) worldview informs his approach to questions of ethics and belief—and perhaps is most striking in his anthropology, which acknowledges humankind's fallen state, and maintains against the scientific consensus of the time that humans are not chemicals, matter, and 'juices', but a 'vortex, a traveling suck in [their] juices' (152).

According to Tom, humans are generally doomed to inhabit one side of an angelic - bestial spectrum, where one either orbits 'the earth like Lucifer and his angels' (angelism), or is so immersed in the immanent world of sensual pleasure that one is nothing more than an animal (bestialism). The cure for Tom personally, he claims, is the Eucharist: it took 'nothing less than touching the thread off the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her in the morning' (243). Through the ingestion of the Eucharist, Tom experiences both the transcendent and the immanent—the God of the universe present in a small wafer of bread. But Tom has ceased eating the body of Christ and no longer attends Mass or goes to confession.

Tom says that the 'best of times' were his evenings with Samantha as the two walked home after receiving communion:

I rejoicing afterwards, caring nought for my fellow Catholics but only for myself and Samantha and Christ swallowed, remembering what he promised me for eating him, that I would have life in me, and I did, feeling so good that I'd sing and cut the fool all the way home like King David before the Ark. (12-13)

Luschei argues that Samantha's death gave Tom 'an excuse to drink and go into decline. As his intelligence became more and more 'duly darkened', he became mired

deeper and deeper in the comic religious state in which he still lives, saying the right thing and doing the wrong. The religious theme surfaces more and more as memories of Samantha and Doris are prompted by events'.⁹³ Indeed, the memory of communion and his daughter reveals a deep well of nostalgia, inextricably bound with the religious theme of belief and practice in radical disconnect.⁹⁴ Yet even so, Tom is well aware that he cared 'nought for...fellow Catholics but only for' himself. The narrative only touches on the death of Tom's daughter, never fully developing the stages leading up to her death, nor the death itself or the aftermath, as if Samantha's passing were too painful to relate. The reader is only privy to brief glimpses of his relationship to his daughter. Even so, the death of Tom's daughter can be seen as the dramatic fulcrum of the work, to which Tom's Catholic faith has since been shaken; in the end, the memory of his daughter's deathbed plea for Tom to keep his faith also gives Tom the strength to drive away Art Immelman (374-376).

As More confesses at the beginning of the novel, his trouble, as he sees it, comes in the form of three shortcomings. Comparing himself with his namesake, Sir Thomas More, Tom says,

Why can't I follow More's example, love myself less, God and my fellowman more, and leave whiskey and women alone? Sir Thomas More was merry in life and death and he loved and was loved by everyone, even his executioner, with whom he cracked jokes. By contrast, I am possessed by terror and desire and live a solitary life. My life is a longing, longings for women, for the Nobel Prize, for the hot bosky bite of bourbon whiskey, and other great heart-wrenching

⁹³ Luschei, *Sovereign Wayfarer*, 219-220.

⁹⁴ Later, Tom reminisces about his time with Samantha: 'Here I went to mass with Samantha, happy as a man could be, ate Christ and held him to his word, if you eat me you'll have life in you, so I had life in me. After mass we'd walk home to Paradise through the violet evening, the evening star hard by the red light of the TV tower like a ruby and diamond in the plush velvet sky, and I'd skip with happiness, cut the fool like David while Samantha told elephant jokes, go home, light the briquets, drink six toddies, sing *Tantum Ergo*, and 'Deh vieni alla finestra' from *Don Giovanni* and, while Samantha watched *Gentle Ben*, invite Doris out under the Mobile pinks, Doris as lusty and merry a wife then as a man could have, a fine ex-Episcopal ex-Apple Queen from the Shenandoah Valley' (135).

longings that have no name. Sir Thomas was right, of course, and I am wrong. But on the other hand these are peculiar times (23)

Next, Tom traces the rise and fall of his scientific prowess, the loss of his daughter, Samantha, and the end of his marriage, as well as his leaving off of ‘eating Christ in communion’, and in its place taking to the sipping of Early Times and ‘seeking the company of the fair sex’ (24). After recounting his time spent in a mental hospital, Dr. More summarizes the recent trends in his patients, and so reflects his role as a diagnostic character—swiftly categorizing his patients, abstracting them into types. Tom begins with P.T. Bledsoe, a ‘generous Knothead, good hunting companion, churchgoer, deacon, devoted husband and father’, who is ‘subject to seizures of rage and blinding headaches and is convinced of several conspiracies against him’ (30-31); the second, Ted Tennis, an abstracted graduate student who is having trouble performing sexually with his wife (32-33); third, Charley Parker, the golf professional, whose ‘deep pineal, the site of inner selfhood, was barely ticking over a miserable 0.1 mmv’ (as read on Tom’s MOQUOL), and who tells Tom that, despite all his success and recognition, was struck that morning by the question, “Who in the hell are you? What does it all mean?” (39); and finally Chuck and Ramona, a ‘love couple’ who need Dr. More to look at their sick infant. Tom’s final patients in this section of the novel provide a scene of dialogue that glimpses Tom’s own unhappiness. Says Tom, ‘They’ve given up city, home, family, career, religion, to live a perfect life of love and peace with a dozen others on a hummock with nothing else for a shelter in the beginning than an abandoned Confederate salt mine’ (47). Tom tells Chuck that he would not mind living a simple life out here in the salt mine, and Chuck suggests that Tom move out to join them. In an exchange that explores both Tom’s unhappiness and the form of unserious belief that Chuck embodies, Chuck tells Tom that in the swamp they are ‘basically religious’, and that they have ‘God every minute’. Chuck asks Tom, ‘Don’t you see that I am God, you are God, that prothonotary warbler is God?’ to which Tom

laconically replies, 'No'.

'Will you answer me honestly, Doc?'

'All right'.

'What is your life? Are you happy?'

'No'.

'What is wrong?'

'It's hard to say'. For some reason I blush under Hester's clear gaze.

'But you don't have a good life'.

'No'.

'Then why don't you live it?'

'I don't know'. (53)

Despite Tom's certitude in his own invention and its viability for curing humankind's psychical ills, Tom is either unsure of the cause of his own unhappiness, or unwilling to share the root cause with others. The latter is a sounder conclusion, considering that Tom consciously traces his lack of faith to the death of Samantha and his wife's subsequent desertion. The dialogue between Tom and Chuck serves as an early indicator of the detachment of Tom and his separation from the casual religiosity that pervades Feliciano. The narrative then slides back in time to the week 'between Christmas and New Year', when Tom 'became ill, suffering simultaneous depressions and exaltations, assaulted at night by longings, succubi, and the hideous shellfire of Verdun, and in the morning by terror of unknown origin' (97). Next, Tom sees that he has cut his own wrists and is bleeding. Like Binx in Korea and Will in the hurricane, it is in a moment of crisis, of threat to life and limb that true sight becomes available to the individual, and the world appears to shine with newness. In a world populated by Chucks and Hesters, a crisis is necessary to clear away the white noise. But Tom will find solace in science, not in his Catholic faith.

Tom continues: 'Seeing the blood, I came to myself, saw myself as itself and the world for what it is, and began to love life. Hm, better stop the bleeding in that case. After all, why not live? Bad as things are still when all is said and done, one can sit on a doorstep in the winter sunlight and watch sparrows kick leaves'. By sticking his wrists 'in each arm like a hobo', Tom is able to stanch the bleeding, and walks to the home of Max

Gottlieb. After Max sews up his wrists, Tom requests to be committed to the federal hospital (97). Tom spent ‘the best months’ of his life in the psychiatric ward in the hospital, where, he claims to have come to understand an intriguing paradox, what Tom calls his ‘great principle’:

It is easy to understand how men do their best work in prison or exile, men like Dostoevsky, Cervantes, Bonhoeffer, Sir Thomas More, Genet, and I, Dr. Thomas More. Pascal wrote as if he were in prison for life and so he was free. In prison or exile or a mental hospital one has time to watch and listen. (106)

Later discharged from the Ward, Tom finds the outside world troubling: ‘Here came old friend, morning terror, cork-screwing my spine. Dear God, let me out of here, back to the nuthouse where I can stay sane. Things are too naked out here. People look and talk and smile and are nice and the abyss yawns. The niceness is terrifying’ (107). So Tom turns to his science—and after a few drinks at the Little Napoleon, he orders one hundred of his lapsometers from a manufacturer at Osaka Instruments. Tom returns to his abstracted state, favours the study of humans from the comfort of scientific certitude than being involved with others in interpersonal communion.

At his first appearance, Max wears an immaculate white lab coat, depicted by Tom as a kind of secular Christ, albeit one that is interested in science, objectivity, and does not share the same metaphysical convictions as Tom More. Tom describes his posture as that of a ‘young prince’ (although ‘when he rises, like Toulouse-Lautrec he doesn’t rise much’) (108). Tom calls Max a prodigy, and compares the Max surrounded by other medical professionals as ‘the young Jesus confounding his elders’ (109). In passing, Max says that ‘Belief. Truth values. These are relative things. What interests me is—’ (113), emphasizing his compassionate, tolerant worldview. When Tom explains his theory of the impending doom of the U.S. and the ‘soul of Western man’, Max responds, ‘Well now. The soul of Western man, that’s a large order, Tom. Besides being rather uh

metaphysical—' Max continues that he gets 'uncomfortable when politics gets mixed with medicine, to say nothing of angels' (115).

Tom and Max have a comfortable, honest relationship, as demonstrated in their forthright verbal exchanges, and aside from Tom's dialogues with Father Smith, his interchanges with Max exhibit the most honest dialogues on Tom's belief in the novel. When Max Gottlieb, who is both 'Victorian and anatomical' when it comes to discussing sexual issues, tries to get at the heart of Tom's guilt over sex, he formulates the hypothesis that Tom's depression, and suicide attempt, stem from a deeply rooted Catholic attitude toward sexuality. Tom's suicide attempt did draw him personally closer to Max and introduced him to Ellen Oglethorpe, his future wife.

It is 'Miss Oglethorpe, a handsome strapping nurse', with whom the reader is now familiar, who tends to Tom in the hospital when he is 'by turns exalted, depressed, terrified, lustful' (109). Everything then gives way to a moment of spiritual clarity for Tom: lust is replaced with sorrow, and Tom prays to be 'merry and loving' like his ancestor, Sir Thomas More, and desires to recognize that it is God 'in the beauty of the world' that he loves, and that 'it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels' (109).

Max identifies a recent instance of such Catholic guilt, where Tom had a tryst with Lola Rhodes in a golf bunker following a Christmas party. Max asks Tom,

'Are you speaking of my fornication with Lola in number 18 bunker?'

'Fornication', repeats Max, nodding. 'You see?'

'See what?'

'That you are saying that lovemaking is not a natural activity, like eating and drinking'.

'No, I didn't say it wasn't natural'.

'But sinful and guilt-laden'.

'Not guilt-laden'.

'Then sinful?'

'Only between persons not married to each other'.

'I am trying to see it as you see it'.

'I know you are'. (118)

The dialogue between Max and Tom offers an entrance into the conditions of Tom's crisis—how to be a believer when his actions and decisions do not incarnate the belief he cognitively affirms? Tom claims that the guilt arises not from reflecting on the sexual act itself, but upon realizing that he feels no remorse at all. Max, baffled by Tom's guilt, asks Tom why he is hung-up on the guilt over sexual intercourse when there is, ultimately, no guilt over the sex itself, but only the absence of compunction. Tom replies that if he felt guilt, he would be able to be rid of it through the sacrament of penance. For Tom, the issue is that he does not feel guilt, and without compunction, he cannot be forgiven.

So Max sets to Tom the question of *why*: why continue to sleep with women if Tom 'believe[s] it is sinful?' Why does he not promise 'to try not to do it again' and follow through with such a commitment? Tom replies simply, 'Because it is a great pleasure' (118).

'I don't follow'.

'I know'.

'At least, in the matter of belief and action, you are half right'.

'That's right'.

'But here remains the tug of war between the two'.

'There does'. (118)

Next, Max offers a hypothetical scenario in which Tom has the option of two women: one who is a 'lovely person, a mature, well-educated person who is quite fond of you' and another that is 'a popsy in a motel room'. Tom admits that he would prefer the latter (119).

'Exactly!' cried Max triumphantly. 'You prefer

'fornication', as you call it, to a meaningful relation with another person qua person'.

'Right, and you're saying the other case is not fornication'.

'Yes'.

Thus Max devised a specific test to reveal me to myself, I flunked the test, was in fact revealed to myself. But nothing came of it. (120)

The exchange brings about no transformation in Tom. Tom recognizes that such knowledge of his own moral failures should bring about the impetus for transformation and change, but Tom fails to follow this knowledge with action. The exchange between Tom and Max echoes the opening, where Tom says ‘I believe’ but ‘does not’. Significantly, the lack of transformation in Tom reflects a common theme in Percy’s fiction—that it is only through catastrophe or crisis that change is made possible.

Not only does the sudden imposition of catastrophe renew one’s sight, just as Tom’s suicide attempt awakened him to the beauty of living, but it also draws one to the realization that one’s place in the world is not of privileged subject set over and against objects (Descartes) or mere object among other objects (scientism and positivism), ultimately humans are neither angel nor beast, but Marcellian pilgrims. Marcel writes that ‘the soul [...] is the traveler; it is the soul and of the soul alone that we can say with supreme truth that ‘being’ necessarily means being on the way’ (*en route*).’⁹⁵ Like Percy’s shipwrecked man who encounters a dogfish washed up on shore, the disruption of the ordinary allows sight in a circumstance where forces of banality and malaise would otherwise obscure.⁹⁶

Later, in a realization similar to Tom’s epiphany after seeing the blood running from his wrists after his suicide attempt, Tom’s chest begins buzzing and he is convinced that he is having a heart attack. Suddenly he is wracked with guilt at his hedonistic life:

A vice clamps under my sternum and with it comes belated contrition. God, don’t let me die. I haven’t lived, and there’s the summer ahead and music and science and girls – No. No girls! No more lewd thoughts! No more lusting after my neighbors’ wives and daughters! No hankering after strange women! No more humbug! No more great vaulting lewd daytime longings, no whispering into pretty ears, no more assignations in closets, no more friendly bumping of nurses from behind, no more night adventures in bunkers and sand traps, no more inviting Texas girls out into the gloaming; ‘I

⁹⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. by Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010 [1952]), 5.

⁹⁶ Found in ‘The Loss of the Creature’ in Percy’s *The Message in the Bottle*.

am Thomas More. You are lovely and I love. I have a heart full of love. Could we go out into the gloaming?’ No more. (246)

The buzzing dissipates, and Dr. More realizes that it is his phone vibrating in his pocket that triggers his panic, not a heart-attack. No sooner than he has the epiphany does Tom return to his philandering ways: in the next section, Tom is at the Howard Johnson to check up on Moira, and is soon in Moira’s arms, the couple listening to Montavani as they make love (259). The transition from high-minded declarations that foreswear women and lust to his tryst with Moira is jarring, as one moment he calls upon Sir Thomas More, and the next he is, with Moira, ‘locked about one another’ and goes, in a poetic euphemism, ‘spinning down old Louisiana misty green, slowly revolving and sailing down the summer wind’ (259). The move from high-minded thoughts to sexual abandon highlights a feature of Tom’s character, that his will is at war with itself: he abstractedly desires contrition and love for his fellow human but is unable to summon it in himself. In short, Tom may want to cease his philandering, but he derives too much enjoyment from it to do so.

Max’s earlier diagnosis of Tom’s unhappiness as an issue of belief and action resonates with a later scene, where Tom confesses that he did not want Samantha to go to Lourdes: ‘Why not? I don’t know Samantha’s reasons, but I was afraid she might be cured. What then? Suppose you ask God for a miracle and God says yes, very well. How do you live the rest of your life?’ (374). Tom recognizes that should God deliver on a promise—or at least cure Samantha—this would mean that Tom would have no excuse but to live his life in a consistent fashion with his beliefs.

Significantly, the memory of Samantha’s death emerges at the moment of Tom’s confrontation with Art Immelman, and Tom is able to draw the strength to call upon his famous forebear, Sir Thomas More, and cry ‘*Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence*’, and so drive Art Immelman away from Tom and Ellen (376). The chapter swiftly draws to a

close, and the next section, which takes place on Christmas Eve five years later, finds Tom and Ellen married, living a financially poor but rewarding life with their two young children, Meg and Thomas More Jr.

By the end of the novel, Tom has settled down to a life of domestic routine. Even so he is haunted by the same ‘cosmic-sensual longing’ that followed him since his childhood. Tom is overcome by longing, a ‘desire that has no name’, for his secretary, for liquor, and for youth (372). The resurgence of desire indicates that although Tom has, in the space of five years, grown more pious, he remains a character haunted by longings that are not dissolved by marriage and domestic routine.

Later, Tom attends confession and confesses to Father Smith: ‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned’, I say and fall silent, forgetting everything’. Father Smith groans when Tom tells him that his last confession was eleven years ago. Tom claims that he can make his confession in a single sentence, and Father Smith appears to cheer up: ‘I do not recall the number of occasions, Father, but I accuse myself of drunkenness, lusts, envies, fornication, delight in the misfortunes of others, and loving myself better than God and other men.’ When Father Smith inquires if Tom has ‘contrition and a firm purpose of amendment’, Tom claims that he does not know. Father Smith asks: ‘You don’t know? You don’t feel sorry for your sins?’ to which Tom replies, ‘I don’t feel much of anything’.

Father Smith, like Max Gottlieb who attempts to make sense of the disconnect between Tom’s beliefs, his desire to obey the precepts of Roman Catholicism, and his lack of resolution in following through with reforming his behaviour, tries to understand. But unlike Max, who is reluctant to pursue metaphysics—and instead looks to environmental factors to understand Tom’s malaise—Father Smith traffics in sin, confession, resolution, and absolution.

Father Smith, very directly, asks Tom,

‘You have not lost your faith?’
‘No’.

‘You believe in the Catholic faith as the Church proposes it?’

‘Yes’.

‘And you believe that your sins will be forgiven here and now if you confess them, are sorry for them, and resolve to sin no more?’

Tom answers in the affirmative, and when Father Smith says, ‘Yet you say you do not feel sorry’ Tom again answers in the affirmative, and quickly apologizes for not feeling sorry. ‘The priest sighs. ‘Will you pray that God will give you a true knowledge of your sins and a true contrition?’ Tom says that he will (375-376).

Instead of concluding with an earnest confession, the story closes with Tom’s confession of an absence of contrition. Tom has not arrived at a resolution to the divide between belief and works, but has come to a recognition that what he can offer here is his own inability to feel the way he wants to feel. Allen Pridgen interprets Tom’s promise to ‘pray for a knowledge of his and others’ sins’ as a tacit promise accepting ‘the existence of a knowledge not available through the exercise of his intellect, and he is assuming that he will be changed significantly by it’. Pridgen adds that, ‘Tom is assuming that he is capable of feeling a sorrow for the condition of all humankind, and even believes this sorrow is something he should desire’.⁹⁷ Even so, the nature of Tom’s response is tentative—optimistic but inconclusive. Percy tempers the optimism of the conclusion with lingering doubts about Tom’s return to the church: the obstacles to a complete and unfettered personal piety and return to the church are Tom’s ego and confidence in himself as a scientist, his affinity for alcohol, and his lack of feeling, although his recognition of the absence of remorse demonstrates Tom’s moral progression.

In the epilogue, Tom and Ellen are married, and here Tom continues his personal comparison with his noble forebear, Sir Thomas More:

In my second wife I am luckier than my kinsman Thomas
More. For once I have the better of him. His second wife

⁹⁷ Allen Pridgen, *Walker Percy’s Sacramental Landscapes: The Search in the Desert* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), 187.

was dour and old and ugly. Mine is dour and young and beautiful. Both made good wives. Sir Thomas's wife was a bad Catholic like me, who believed in God but saw no reason why one should disturb one's life, certainly not lose one's head. Ellen is a Presbyterian who doesn't have much use for God but believes in doing right and does it. (363)

Tom and Ellen, in the final lines of the novel, are found in bed 'where all good folk belong' (403). The final scene demonstrates a growth out of a distance and the spectator-attitude towards one of participation—as Pridgen states: 'Tom's new inclination to look beyond the closed world of the feelings in him and outward to where he exists with others in incarnational time and space is indicated when he announces to himself while dancing around in the cold darkness at the barbecue grill. . . .'⁹⁸ Tom has not arrived at firm, resolute religious belief, but he is working toward it, despite his personal shortcomings.

2.3 – Percy's *Lancelot*: The Religious Quest for Evil

Come into my cell. Make yourself at home. Take the chair; I'll sit on the cot. No? You prefer to stand by the window? I understand. You like my little view. Have you noticed that the narrower the view the more you can see? For the first time I understand how old ladies can sit on their porches for years. Don't I know you? You look very familiar. I've been feeling rather depressed and I don't remember things very well. I think I am here because of that or because I committed a crime. Perhaps both. (3)

So opens Walker Percy's fourth and most experimental novel, *Lancelot*, an extended, sometimes raving monologue by its titular character, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, a Southern lawyer who murders his wife and her lover after discovering his wife's infidelity. The novel is structured like Camus' *The Fall*, with a confession of a man to an unseen listener.⁹⁹ To this point, Percy had never written a protagonist so utterly hostile to the Christian faith. The fateful climax of the novel, which features the destruction of Lance's Southern mansion in Louisiana and the death of three of the novel's characters, is

⁹⁸ Ibid., 189.

⁹⁹ See Camus, *The Fall*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991 [1956]).

developed from a single discovery, incidental and nearly inconsequential, that eventually drives Lancelot on his monomaniacal quest.

Jay Tolson explains Percy's internal struggle that gave rise to the novel:

Percy was in fact writing a kind of Jungian drama between a self and a counterself, the self, one might say, and its shadow. Both figures bear biographical resemblances, superficial and deep, to Percy (and to various ancestral Percys). Lance, like Percy, has worked for civil-rights causes, drinks more than is good for him, feels increasingly contemptuous of the modern age and increasingly purposeless in his own life.¹⁰⁰

Howland writes that '*Lancelot*, Percy's fourth novel, is his most unremittingly bleak. For the first time, Percy clearly presents a model of what the world would be like without intersubjectivity'.¹⁰¹ In 'Tradition in Amber: Walker Percy's *Lancelot* as Southern Metafiction', Susan Donaldson notes that Lance's narration is 'a portrait of corrosive solitude and alienation'. Most of the detail in the novel, argues Donaldson, 'serves to underscore the distance lying between him and Percival, his silent, appalled listener, a listener, not incidentally, with whom the reader is implicitly allied through the use of second-person address'.¹⁰²

Lance tells his story from within the cell of a prison or psychiatric ward, and his audience consists of an old friend by the name of Percival, who is now a Priest-Psychiatrist. Lance claims that Percival reminds him 'of something in between, one of those failed priests who go into social work or 'counselling', or one of those doctors who suddenly decides to go to the seminary. Neither fish nor fowl' (4-5). The two were close friends in college, although each in possession of different qualities, talents, and background. While Lance was a minor college campus celebrity (Rhodes Scholar, all-

¹⁰⁰ Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, 403.

¹⁰¹ Howland, *Gift of the Other*, 86.

¹⁰² Susan V. Donaldson, 'Tradition in Amber: Walker Percy's *Lancelot* as Southern Metafiction', *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, ed. by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) pp. 65-73 (p. 67).

S.E.C. halfback who returned a punt for 110 yards), Percival passed most of his college career in anonymity. Percival, unlike Lance, was tall, lanky, ‘melancholy and abstracted’ (15).

Lance explains that the Priest was once ‘simply Harry’, and then he was known by a series of nicknames, including Percival and Parsifal. Lance adds that he has heard that Harry adopted the name John when he became a priest. Lance asks if the namesake is John the Baptist or John the Evangelist—in other words, is Percival the loner prophet who announced the coming of Christ, or the writer of Revelation and one of the twelve disciples of Christ (10)? In the context of this study, the names Lance and Percival reinforce the novel as a quest narrative. The quest of Lance is metaphysical in nature; Lance searches for something, although it is not a grail but evil itself. Lance’s name is also a reminder of the conventional belief from which Lance emerges—the name is, initially, the extent of his religiosity. The name is a reflection of his father’s fondness for the ‘legendary and mythical’, and the middle name, Andrewes, was secondary and ‘tacked on [...] to give it Episcopal sanction’ (116).

Ciuba writes,

Although Lancelot Andrewes Lamar explains away his Anglican namesake as his father’s attempt to gain Episcopalian sanction for such a knight praenomen, the seventeenth-century divine bears witness to how Lancelot misses Christ’s daily second coming because he sins against the first.¹⁰³

In the years preceding his crimes, Lancelot had slipped into a kind of death in life, a Kierkegaardian despair that is universal among Percy’s protagonists in the initial stage of their journeys. Lance even claims that when he found out that Margot had been unfaithful that ‘the usual emotions which one might consider appropriate—shock, anger, shame—[did] not apply’. Lance adds, ‘True, there is a kind of dread at the discovery but there is

¹⁰³ Gary Ciuba, *Walker Percy's Revelations* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 200.

also a curious sense of expectancy, a secret sweetness at the core of the dread' (41). Lance claims that he lived in a state of 'comfort and abstraction' (66), not having truly seen himself in years. But upon discovering his wife's infidelity, Lancelot is shaken from his slumbers.

Kathleen Scullin writes,

Abstracted and isolated, Lancelot telling his story begins to sound like the Sartrean consciousness that Percy illustrates in 'Symbol as Hermeneutic' with this sentence: 'There is consciousness of this chair'. In contrast, Percy would say, 'This *is* a chair for you and me' (*MB*, 282). Lancelot describes sex as nothing more than 'the touch of one membrane against another' and the act of murdering Jacoby by cutting his throat as nothing more than 'steel molecules entering skin molecules, artery molecules, blood cells' (*L*, 17, 254). He sees himself in the future keeping moral watch over the faceless others '[who] won't have anything to say about it' (*L*, 179). Lancelot's actions, his story, all seem to have somehow just happened; he does not seem to have experienced them or to have been brought to a sense of interconnectedness by them.¹⁰⁴

Lance believes in a 'new life', a 'third world', which he calls the 'unknown world of the future', a time and place to begin apart from the corruption and vapidness of the modern world. Lance discovers that a fellow patient, a young woman named Anna, was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of sailors in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Attempting to make contact with Anna, who resides in the adjacent cell, Lance establishes a system of knocks to correspond to letters in the alphabet, and attempts to make contact with the silent, withdrawn Anna. Over the course of the novel, Lance develops his theory that Anna may, in fact, be the 'new woman' who will along with Lance begin things anew in an Eden founded on Stoic principles.

Lance has already experienced one 'new life', when he 'walked out of that dark parlour after leaving the supper table', but now 'believe[s] there will be a third new life,

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen Scullin, 'Lancelot and Walker Percy's Dispute with Sartre over Ontology' in *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1991), pp. 110-118 (p. 113).

just as there are three worlds, the old dead past world, the hopeless screwed-up now world, and the unknown world of the future' (63). After this epiphany, following the discovery of his wife's infidelity, Lancelot catches sight of himself in the mirror, and describes himself in the third person, as if seeing his face and body for the first time:

He did not look familiar. There was something wary and poised about the way he stood, shoulders angled, knees slightly bent as if he were prepared for anything. He was mostly silhouette but white on black like a reversed image. His arms were long, one hanging lower and lemur-like from dropped shoulder. His head was cocked, turned enough so I could see the curve at the back. There was a sense about him of a vulnerability guarded against, an overcome gawkiness, a conquered frailty. Seeing such a man one thought first: Big-headed smart-boy type; then thought again: But he's big too. If he hadn't developed his body, worked out, he'd have a frail neck, two tendons, and a hollow between, balancing that big head. He looked like a smart sissy rich boy who has devoted his life to getting over it. (64)

Here Lance repeats a common trend in Percy's fiction—the movement from a state of abstraction to one of potential action. Like Binx Bolling who initiates a search and sees everything as 'unfamiliar' and 'full of clues' (*MG* 11), Lance takes notice of things that he had never noticed before. After having spent his time drinking and smoking, Lance finally quits both when he discovers Margot's unfaithfulness:

What next? What's coming up? My tongue was ready to taste, my muscles were ready to contract, my liver hummed away, my genitals prickled. Then I realized why I drank and smoked. It was a way of dealing with time. What else to do with time? A fearful thing: a human body of ten billion cells ready to do any one of ten billion things. But what to do? (123)

Lance's quest began with an idle glance at his daughter's application to a horse camp in Texas is the catalyst that triggers the 'worm' of curiosity inside him; the newfound interest in his daughter's blood type leads him to pick through his own records for his and his wife's blood types in search of something to either quiet or substantiate this menacing intuition. Upon further examination, Lance declares, 'The equations do not solve. [...] My blood type and Siobhan's blood type did not compute' (29). Lance's

suspicions are confirmed, and he realizes that between his blood type and his wife's, Siobhan's blood cannot possibly belong to him—but to another man.

Lance's investigation continues:

My third and indispensable item came from a shot in the dark. The dark of the dead file where I kept old income tax data and work sheets. A shot in the dark, not really a lucky—unlucky?—shot, but rather the only shot I had. My worm of interest tingled and guided me like a magnet to a manila folder neatly lettered DEDUCTIONS, 1968. (31)

Due to his meticulous record-keeping, Lance is able to uncover the truth: The title of the folder, ironically titled 'deductions' to reflect Lance's deductive method, which contains the (tax-deductible) record for his wife's expenses for the summer of what would be Siobhan's conception. Lance now knows that he is not the father.

Most of the action of the novel takes place during the filming of a movie being produced at Belle Isle and surrounding locales. Margot and Raine are the stars of a film which concerns 'some people who seek shelter in the great house during a hurricane, a young Cajun trapper, a black sharecropper, a white sharecropper, a Christlike hippie, a Klan type, a beautiful half-caste but also half-wit swamp girl, a degenerate river rat, the son and daughter of the house'. Lancelot follows with the remark that he is 'still unclear about the plot' (26). The film's plot resonates with other narratives within Percy's novels, such as *Love*, Mort Prince's novel in *The Last Gentleman*, which present religious belief conventionally, and apart from such categories of God, heaven, hell, redemption and sin—categories which, in the dialogues of Sutter, Lonnie, Aunt Emily, and Tom, inject urgency into religious belief and expression. Lance, in turn, creates a film of his own: Lancelot plots his revenge and enlists the help of Elgin, his servant, to rig security cameras at the motel where Merlin, Jacoby, Raine, and Margot are staying during the filming of the picture. When Lancelot views the reel that observed Margot's room, he discovers that Margot is not only sleeping with Merlin, but with her new lover Jacoby as well

The scene echoes an earlier moment in *Lancelot* when Percival first visits Lance, and Lance directs Percival's attention to a business sign that is only partially visible from Lance's cell window. Lance can only make out the first few letters of each word on the sign (on line one, 'Free &'; on line two, 'Ma'; and on line three the letter 'B') and he says that he has looked at the sign for a year and attempted to imagine the whole of the sign from the fragments: 'What does it say? Free & Easy Mac's Bowling? Free & Accepted Masons' Bar? Do Masons have bars?' (4). As well, later in the novel (but chronologically prior), Lance must piece together the true parentage of his daughter (from a single alphabet letter), and the dynamics of his wife's marital infidelity (whom she is sleeping with and why) from the blurred visual and distorted audio tracks of the surveillance recording.

Elgin has placed motion-activated cameras in two rooms of the nearby motel where the film crew is staying. When Elgin delivers the recordings of an evening tryst between two sets of lovers, Lance mentally prepares himself for what he is about to find. Outside is the thundering approach of a hurricane. Lance then views the recordings prepared by Elgin: 'The videotapes, which came out as a movie on my tiny Trinitron and which I watched as gravely as I used to watch afternoon reruns of *Gunsmoke*, I think of now as a tiny theatre set down in a great skyey afternoon loud with the rattle of blackbirds' (185). The figures on the screen are blurred, 'tiny figurines' 'reddish, like people in a film darkroom' (185). Lance reflects, 'Didn't Elgin say the figures were nothing but electrons?' implying that both the recorded figures and the individuals showcased are nothing but matter. Binx, Will, and Tom have their devices and means of distancing the world. Lance, though he has moved from his abstracted state, still utilizes surveillance tapes as a mode of discovery.

Margot and Merlin speak about a mysterious third-party, and it is unclear to *Lancelot* if the third-party is Lance, 'deceived husband', or Jacoby 'new lover?' (188-

189). Percy records the conversation in the format of a film script, parodying how Lance has, incidentally, become the true filmmaker of the novel. The content of the dialogue is composed of muffled voices, severed words, incomplete sentences, and Lance must conjecture as to the final meaning of each verbal exchange.

MERLIN: Oh, Jesus—I'd kike—oars.
(Oh, Jesus how I'd like to be up yours?)
MARGOT: (*An indifferent murmur.*)
MERLIN: Besides that—a basic incap—intimace—
(Besides that he has a basic incapacity for intimacy?)
MARGOT: I don't care.
MERLIN: What a lousy trucking fire engine.
(What a lousy fucking triangle? I am reasonably sure of this reading: that it was not Elgin's equipment but Merlin himself who scrambled 'fucking triangle' to 'trucking fiangle' (fire engine). A joke. Yes, I am 99 percent sure.)
MARGOT: Do you believe I still—you?
(Do you believe I still love you?)
MERLIN: Oh, Chr—
(188)

Jacoby then enters, Merlin departs, and Margot and Jacoby talk and soon 'make a Y connected as far as the waist'. Lance says 'They turn, their hair blowing sideways in an electronic wind. There are two sockets of light on Margot's back. They are, I recognize, the two dimples on either side of her sacrum' (190). Conspicuously absent from Lance's recollection of the scene is any pathos or recognizably human emotional response.

After a short break (what Lance calls an 'INTERMISSION') where Lance walks outside and observes the blackbirds scatter before the oncoming storm, Lance returns and views the recordings of the second. From the perspective of the hidden surveillance camera, the bodies of Lucy, Raine, and Dana form 'three red figures on the pink bed. Pieces of bodies, ribs, thighs, torsos, fly off one body and join another' in the sea of black and white static of the recording (191). Again, Lancelot breaks from his viewing to watch the birds wheeling in the mounting wind. Lance notices the crows flying north to escape the storm, and recalls a time when he shot a crow with a .22 rifle, and 'Surprised, he fell at my feet with a thump. A ruby drop of blood hung from his black bill' (193).

Consistent with his dispassionate observation of the surveillance tapes, Lance steps outside and coolly observes how the townspeople take delectation in the promise of impending disaster. Even at this juncture in the story, Lance has not abandoned this predilection for observing and reporting. Lance records in detail the way the townspeople shopped ‘seriously-happily’ for ‘battery radios, batteries, flashlights, Coleman lamps, kerosene lamps, kerosene, candles, canned goods, powdered milk, dried apricots, Hershey bars, raisins’ (193). The attention to detail of the purchases of the shoppers builds off Lance’s cool narration of the sex acts performed by his wife and daughter.

Lance continues his preparation for ushering in his private apocalypse. Lance gives Elgin \$75,000 and tells him to finish his degree at M.I.T, get married, buy a house in Concord, and leave within the hour (198-199). Lance sends his daughter away with his father-in-law to Odessa, Texas, and plans the next step in his revenge. Surprisingly, Lance is relieved to see Merlin leave town before a hurricane strikes the region: ‘For once I astonished myself: I wanted [Merlin] to leave! I wanted him to get away, escape, the man who made love to my wife in the Roundtownner Motor Lodge in Arlington, Texas, on or about July 15, 1968, and begot my daughter Siobhan’ (201). Lance’s rage, which has since evolved from a sweet ‘dread’ (41) in his stomach to something much greater, is now directed not at the man who slept with his wife and fathered his child, but elsewhere. By sparing Merlin, Lancelot demonstrates that his quest for revenge is of a higher-order—it is a religious quest, in fact, and not just a crime of passionate revenge.

Lancelot crawls beneath the Belle Isle mansion and creates a ‘ninety-degree elbow and three ten-foot sections of the Gerona which reached to within a foot of the main intake duct of the new fifteen-ton Carrier’, which allows gas to flow into the air system of the mansion (229). Next, Lancelot finds a drugged but conscious Raine Robinette in one of the bedrooms. Lancelot lights a kerosene lamp in the room, and Lancelot and Raine have sex—both were ‘alone and watchful’, says Lancelot, feeling abstracted and detached, a

combination of drugs and the air pressure from the impending hurricane, ‘that is, each of us was alone and watchful of the other’ (236). Then Lancelot proceeds to his wife’s room where he hopes to catch Margot with Jacoby. ‘What new sweet-horrid revelation did I expect to gain from witnessing what I already knew? Was it a kind of voyeurism? Or was it a desire to feel the lance strike home to the heart of the abscess and let the pus out?’ (236). The door opens slowly and Lance enters the room.

Yet again, a barrier imposes itself between Lance and the world: As he looks down at the bed where his wife and Jacoby are having sex, Lance says, ‘It was like a cathedral, a Gothic bed, posts as thick as trees, carved and fluted and tapering to spires and gargoyles above the canopy. The headboard was as massive and complex as an altar screen. Panels of openwork braced posts and rails like flying buttresses’ (237). Lance places his ear to the panelling and compares himself to ‘an unconsecrated priest hearing an impenitent confession’, listening as the voices of Margot and Jacoby rise and fall ‘in a prayer-like intonation’ (238). Lance here fulfils the role of his namesake, the Anglican Divine, but with an inverted purpose; rather than absolve or bless, Lance condemns and murders.

In the room, Lance’s ‘eyes began to make things out’, and he sees Jacoby’s back and a ‘white thigh and knee angled out’ (239). Lancelot squeezes the two prone figures together and begins strangling them. Lance releases them, and Janos leaps to his feet to fight Lance. Lancelot pins Janos to the ground. Sensing that he’s losing the fight, Janos begins frantically to ask Lance questions, and squeaks out his two last words: ‘I want—’ However, says Lance, in an eerie matter-of-fact statement, ‘We’ll never know what he wanted because his head was bending back and I was cutting his throat’ (242).

The lamp goes out and Lancelot relights it:

Without a sound the room flowered. All was light and air and colour and movement but not a sound. I was moved. That is to say, for the first time in thirty years I was moved off the dead centre of my life. Ah then, I was thinking as I moved, there are still great moments. I was wheeling slowly

up into the night like Lucifer blown out of hell, great wings
spread against the starlight. (246)

In the concluding chapter of *Lancelot* Lance is preparing for release from the prison hospital ward, being ‘psychiatrically fit and legally innocent’ (249). His love interest, Anna, told him to ‘shove off’ when he told her his theory of *woman* (that a woman exists solely to be violated by a man), but later hinted that she may join him in Virginia where he will be starting his new life (251). Lancelot sets out a ‘simple scholastic syllogism’, where he summarizes his understanding of the world. When he follows the syllogism with a question, inquiring ‘But I can see in your eyes it doesn’t make any difference any more, as far as what is going to happen next is concerned, that what is going to happen is going to happen whether you or I believe or not and whether your belief is true or not. Right?’ that Percival finally speaks, saying only ‘Yes’ (256). Lancelot then presents a series of brief questions, ranging from whether Percival will leave to lead a church in Alabama and whether Anna will join Lance in Virginia, to each Percy replies ‘Yes’ (257).

Whereas the Southern religious landscape of *Love in the Ruins* is comically exaggerated, the landscape of *Lancelot* is filtered through the rage and focus of Lancelot’s moral vision. *Lancelot* features less by way of Tom More’s fastidious details about Pro-Am golf tour banners and former priests reading *Christianity without God*, and more by way of comments that feature an angry Lancelot, telling Percival ‘Damn you and your God’, accusing the Roman Catholics for having ‘fucked up good and proper, fucked us all up, for sure fucked me up’ (188) in its attitude toward sex. Like Tom, Lance identifies numerous political and religious groups and organizations, many of which employ a passionate and serious level of discourse, but whose proponents, when they appear in the novel, seem as dead as the most vapid of Percy’s secondary characters.

According to Lancelot, the Southerner is also morally culpable for the moral decrepitude of the South: ‘The Southerner started out a skeptical Jeffersonian and became

a crooked Christian. That is to say, he is approaching and has almost reached his essence, which is to be more crooked and Christian than ever before' (236). Lancelot continues:

Washington, the country, is down the drain. Everyone knows it. The people have lost it to the politicians, bureaucrats, drunk Congressmen, lying Presidents, White House preachers, C.I.A., F.B.I., Mafia, Pentagon, pornographers, muggers, buggers, bribers, bribe takers, rich crooked cowboys, sclerotic Southerners, rich crooked Yankees, dirty books, dirty movies, dirty plays, dirty talk shows, dirty soap operas, fags, lesbians, abortionists, Jesus shouters, anti-Jesus shouters, dying cities, dying schools, courses in how to fuck for schoolchildren. (236-237)

More personally, Lance reflects that Percival has always been the only person with whom he could be totally honest and forthright. 'Christ', says Lancelot, 'why is it that I could never talk to anybody but you? Well, you're here now and I can use you'. Lance's observation that Percival is an effective means for drawing Lance into self-disclosure reveals something that is very telling: Percival acts as a sounding board for Lancelot, and Percival is someone with whom Lancelot can get closer to 'it, the secret I know yet don't know', which leads Lancelot to resolve to 'start behind it and work up to it, or I'll start ahead of it and work back' (62). The narrative thus functions in the same way, moving back in time, forward to the present, always leading to the novel's fateful climax. Scullin describes Lance as 'again numb and abstracted. He barely recognizes people, does not want to talk, cannot remember, cannot feel. But in telling his story, Lancelot again seems to come to himself'.¹⁰⁵

Similar to *Love in the Ruins*, the abstracted, solipsistic narrator of the novel is both an observer and speaker, not an observer and listener, as Binx and Will are in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*. Even so, like Percy's Binx and Will, Lance is knocked free from routine by a discovery of immense importance. Whereas in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* Binx and Will were careful observers (and recorders) of various religious conversations, Lancelot is the conversation in *Lancelot*, and as such,

¹⁰⁵ Scullin, 'Lancelot and Walker Percy's Dispute with Sartre over Ontology', 112.

there is no room for the religious conversations of others. Since there are no characters in *Lancelot* who could be seen as embodiments of participative belief, outside of the two primary characters, I will limit my focus in this section to Lancelot and Percival. Outside of Lancelot's monologue, no conversations about belief take place. In the novel, Merlin, Jacoby, and Raine refrain from any theological discussions.

Even so, like Tom More's brief exchange with the 'love couple' Chuck Parker and Ramona, and the attractive 'post-Protestant, post-rebellion, post-ideology' Hester in *Love in the Ruins* (48-52), Lance does engage in a brief early dialogue in *Lancelot* where he converses with Raine. Lucy, Lance explains, admires Raine for her 'beauty, fame, and that special 'niceness' which Lucy could scarcely believe, Raine's way of remembering the film crews' names, the film crews' wives' names, servants' names, and even the servants' children's names, taking time with her, Lucy's, friends' (111). But this 'niceness' obscures an inner vacuity, according to Lance: 'Her depths were vacant. But she flirted with me and that was pleasant. Her single enthusiasm, beside her niceness, was her absorption with a California cult called I.P.D., or something like that—Ideo-Personal-Dynamics, maybe' (111).

Lance carefully observes Raine as she explains the basics of her I.P.D. philosophy. Like Tom before him, Lance listens, offers brief, laconic responses, but never discloses his own honest, personal reactions to the content of the dialogue.

'Did you know your magnetic field is as unique as your fingerprints?'

'No'.

'It is more exact than astrology because though we are both Capricorns, we are different'.

'Yes'.

'Many people are skeptical of astrology but there is scientific proof of this'.

'I understand'.

'Don't you see the possibilities?'

'Possibilities?'

'For the future, for mankind, for preventing wars'.

'How's that?' (112)

Lance diagnoses Raine's enthusiasm as part of a pervasive condition among actors: actors are subject to any new faddish religion or self-help movement, are constantly being carried away by their enthusiasm by the new and contemporary, and have little interest in the kinds of philosophies that are long-standing or would provide grounding. 'The actors' Lance says, 'took a light passing interest in everything, current events, scientology, politics. They were hardly here at all, in Louisiana that is, but were blown about this way and that, like puffballs, in and out of their roles, 'into' Christian Science, back out again' (112). One can see that this critique is not limited to Lancelot's view of the world, but one that is endemic Percy's oeuvre. Lance continues, 'The trouble was that even when she was on this, her favorite subject, her voice went flat and trailed off. Her eyes were steady but unfocused. I had the feeling she wasn't listening to herself. Could it be that her I.P.D. was a trick too, not a trick she played on my but on herself, a way of filling up time?' (113). Raine's beliefs are not only conventional, but certain. Emotional and existential strain that characterizes the belief of Percy's meaningful 'believers', but for Raine her beliefs are nothing more than a 'light passing interest'.

While Lance's life was characterized by 'comfort and abstraction' before the discovery of his wife's infidelity and his consequent quest, after the discovery his life is shaped by the impulse to conform his life (and the world) to what he believes. Kieran Quinlan writes that Percy 'wanted to bring the Stoic ethic to its logical conclusion to show its dangers'.¹⁰⁶ In the process of relating his story to Percival, one is able to see Lancelot's development from an abstracted, distanced observer of the world to one who is personally interested in the outworking of his belief *in* the tissue of his world. The question of evil, of God's existence or non-existence, all intertwined in his quest, become the central inquiry that touch upon all of his experience, exempting nothing—whether his childhood memories, his theology, his life with his wife and daughters, as well as shaping his own

¹⁰⁶ Kieran Quinlan, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 162.

future, whether it will be spent bringing about an apocalypse or renouncing his quest (255-257). Nevertheless, Lance's attempts to merge his vision of a Stoic utopia with the modern cesspool of corrupt Christians and amoral unbelievers does not preclude his own persistent favor of abstraction and distance. Lance remains partial to watching from the margins until the climax of the novel, where he blows up Belle Isle and murders his wife, her lover, and Jacoby.

But how to reconcile Lance's awareness of the utter insignificance of his wife's transgression with his knowledge that all humans are merely matter? Lance links the question of God's existence to the existence of absolute good and absolute evil, and, more intimately, to the question of whether his wife's infidelity can be accurately construed as true, actual sin. Lance inquires why his wife's infidelity became the 'sole obsession of my very life, to determine whether or not Margot slept with Merlin when in fact I knew she had, or at least with somebody not me?' Lance adds, 'You tell me, you being the doctor-scientist and soul expert as well, merchant of guilt and getting rid of it and of sorting out sins yet knowing as well as I that it, her fornication, anybody's fornication, amounts to no more than molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves—no different in kind from that housefly scrubbing his wings under my hair' (89).

'In Lance's view', according to Hardy, 'the prevailing secular doctrine, according to which there are no such things as crime and criminals, has its analogy in modern theology, Catholic as well as Protestant'. Crime has been 'philosophically eliminated', along with 'sin'. Hardy writes,

Not only has crime been philosophically eliminated, but so has sin. This is Lancelot's great theme in his haranguing of Percival, the theme of the Quest which he says he conceived in pursuit of proof of his wife's infidelity. He came to think of his investigation as a search for the Unholy Grail, an appropriate modern inversion of the quest undertaken by his legendary medieval namesake.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 146.

What Lancelot here sets forth in the pages of *Lancelot* is not quite a confession, according to his logic, but a ‘secret’, since a confession presupposes a system of sin and goodness, both of which Lancelot doubts or denies. Thus, ‘It is not a sin’, says Lance, because,

I do not know what a sin is. I understand that before you can sin, you must know what sin is—Bless me, Father, for I have done something which I don’t understand. I know what a trespass or an injury or an insult is—something to be set right. So I’m telling you this and, confession or not, I consider you bound by the seal of friendship if not the confessional (155).

Lance declares that it is ‘strange’ that a ‘discovery like this, of evil, of a kinsman’s dishonesty, a wife’s infidelity, can shake you up, knock you out of your rut, be the occasion of a new way of looking at things!’ Only after discovering his wife’s infidelity and the true parentage of his daughter that Lancelot discovers his ‘own life’, and sees it ‘clearly for the first time’ (51). The crux of the novel is Lancelot’s question of undertaking ‘a search not for God but for evil’ (51), which pursues the line of logic that ‘in times when nobody is interested in God, what would happen if you could prove the existence of sin, pure and simple’. Lancelot explains that such a proof of sin would be ‘a new proof of God’s existence! If there is such a thing as sin, evil, a living malignant force, there must be a God!’ (52). Lance continues, ‘But what if you could show me a *sin*? a purely evil deed, an intolerable deed for which there is no explanation? Now there’s a mystery. People would sit up and take notice. I would be impressed. You could almost make a believer out of me’ (52).

Lance and Percival have responded to modern life quite differently. While the battle-lines for Lancelot have been clearly drawn, and where Lancelot has emerged from a state of death-in-life to one of new, enlivened sight and purpose, Percival has grown less and less assured of his own purpose in the world: ‘Why so pale and sad’, asks Lancelot of Percival, ‘After all, you’re supposed to have the good news, not me. Knowing you, I think

I know what ails you. You believe all right, but you're thinking, Christ, what's the use?' Lancelot suggests that a life of spiritual clarity, where lines between belief and unbelief, and the usage of meaningful religious language was 'easier in Biafra' than 'in plain old Louisiana, U.S.A.?' (84). Lance's stab at Percival's faith here connects to several of Percy's themes, the first and foremost—living a meaningful life during 'peacetime' can be just as chaotic, frustrated and disjointed, if not *more so*, than living a meaningful life during wartime.

Clear, unambiguous conflict creates a place where belief and unbelief have meaning. But in Percy's South, where the Protestant Christianity seemingly has no borders or boundaries—Christianity is a geographic fact, more so than a feature of individuals and communities—one cannot make meaningful distinctions. As Lancelot claims, 'During the sixties I was a liberal. In those days one could say, 'I was such and such'. Categories made sense—now it is impossible to complete the sentence: I am a—what? Certainly not a liberal. A conservative? What is that?' (58). Lance tells Percival that 'the trouble is that in your old tolerant Catholic world-weariness, you lose all distinctions. Love everything. Yes, but at midnight all cats are black, so what difference does anything make? It does make a difference? What? You opened your mouth and then thought better of it—' (131).

Lancelot outlines his argument for his inverted quest: As the 'Knight of the Unholy Grail', Lancelot recognizes that a quest for good is meaningless when everyone is 'wonderful'. What one truly needs, contends Lancelot, is a quest for a pure sin, for true evil, which serves not just his own curiosity, but would serve 'God's cause', as well, claims Lancelot: 'Because the Good proves nothing. When everyone is wonderful, nobody bothers with God. If you had ten thousand Albert Schweitzers giving their lives for their fellow men, do you think anyone would have a second thought about God?' (138). Lance claims that even Hitler was not evil; there's still the case to be made, says Lance, that Hitler was 'a madman', and that, in the end, 'nobody was responsible', that 'everyone was

following orders'. One might even go so far as to claim that 'there was no such order, that it was all a bureaucratic mistake' (138). In a post-religious age, 'terrible things happen but there is no 'evil' involved', says Lancelot: 'People are either crazy, miserable, or wonderful, so where does the 'evil' come in?' (139).

Nonetheless, Lancelot is overwhelmed by the moral decrepitude he sees around him. He claims that he 'could stand it', it being the moral decay of the U.S., if 'Christ were kind and all that stuff' that Percival believes (or once believed) were in fact true (154). Lance claims that he 'cannot tolerate this age', even though he perhaps would have become a Catholic had the church remained 'true to [itself]'. Lance accuses the church of having 'the same fleas as the dogs [it has] lain down with'. Lance rhetorically inquires if it is better to live in a 'cocksucking cuntlapping assholelicking fornicating Happyland U.S.A. Or a Roman legion under Marcus Aurelius Antoninus', or if it is better to die 'with T.J. Jackson at Chancellorsville or live with Johnny Carson in Burbank?' (157-158).

Lance will be released in a month or two, and he explains what he hopes to do when he begins his new life. Lance will build; he will create a new order. Lance's affection for Catholicism, if he harbors any, can be said for a militant form associated with Richard Coeur de Lion a Acre, who 'believed in a God who said he came not bring peace but the sword'. The solution Lance presents is a new order, one not based on Catholicism or 'any ism at all', but a brand of Stoicism marked by 'that stern rectitude valued by the new breed and marked by the violence which will attend its breach' (158). The echoes of Aunt Emily's advice to Binx strikes through Lance's monologue.

Ultimately, there are only three options, argues Lancelot. The first is the 'great whorehouse and fagdom of America', which Lancelot has raged against throughout the novel. The second is the 'sweet Baptist Jesus', and if 'heaven is full of Southern Baptists, I'd rather rot in hell with Saladin and Achilles'. In conclusion, Lance offers a final way:

There is only one way and we could have had it if you
Catholics hadn't blown it: the old Catholic way. I Lancelot

and you Percival, the only two to see the grail if you recall. Did you find the Grail? You don't look like it. Then we knew what a woman should be like, your Lady, and what a man should be like, your Lord. I'd have fought for your Lady, because Christ had the broadsword. Now you've gotten rid of your Lady and taken the sword from Christ. (176-177)

Lance mocks the assertion that children are pure and innocent, unbesmirched by the kind of sexual desire and longing that Christianity labels lust or sin. Lance explains that while Christ instructed women and men to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven, Christ was either sorely mistaken or a liar:

Yet God himself so arranged it that you wake up one fine morning with a great thundering hard-on and wanting nothing more in life than a sweet hot cunt to put it in, drive some girl, any girl, into the ground, and where is the innocence of that? Is that part of innocence? If so, he should have said so. From child to assailant through no doing of one's own—is that God's plan for us? Damn you and your God. Between the two of you, you should have got it straight and had it one way or the other. Either it's good or it's bad, but whichever it is, goddamn say so. Only you don't. You fuck off somewhere in between. You want to have it both ways: good, but—bad only if—and so forth. Well, you fucked up good and proper, fucked us all up, for sure fucked me up. I'll take the Romans or the old Israelites who didn't worry about women. David had three hundred women but wanted another one. God didn't hold it against him. (176)

Virginia is the perfect location for Lance's new rebuilding. Neither 'North nor South', Virginia is an 'island between two disasters'. While the Northerner is a 'pornographer', an 'abstract mind with a genital attached', he is simultaneously abstracted: 'His soul is at Harvard, a large abstract locked-in sterile university whose motto is truth but which has not discovered an important truth in a hundred years'. On the opposite side of Virginia is the South. The Southerner 'started out a skeptical Jeffersonian and became a crooked Christian'. Lancelot then sketches the 'New Southerner', who is 'Billy Graham on Sunday and Richard Nixon the rest of the week'. 'He calls on Jesus and steals, he's in business, he's in politics' (219-220).

In the final pages of the novel, Lancelot sketches his thinking in a 'simple

scholastic syllogism'. He claims that 'we are living in Sodom', and he proposes not to 'live in Sodom or to raise my son and daughters in Sodom'. Next, he states that 'Either your God exists or he does not', and if he does in fact exist, he 'will not tolerate Sodom much longer'. Either God will destroy Sodom, or he will allow a foreign country to destroy it 'just as he turned the Assyrians loose on the Jews, and Sparta on Athens'. Moreover, if God does not exist, then Lance will take the place of God, and with his righteous indignation and 'if it takes the sword, we'll use the sword' in order to 'start a new world singlehandedly'. In his final assertion, Lance says to Percival that he will 'wait and give your God time' (256). He asks Percival, 'So you plan to take a little church in Alabama, Father, preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives? (256)

While Lance actively denies the existence of God, he wants to play God, to set the cosmic rules that morally order the world. As well, he actively borrows from the Judeo-Christian concept of sin and purification. In the end here he decides to give God time; indicative of the fact that he has not totally rejected the existence of God, yet has not relinquished his theories and entered into faith—rather, Lance tarries somewhere in between. As seen in Percy's other protagonists, the quest for meaning and meaningful belief does not end in a road to Damascus experience. In the early novels, particularly, Percy thrives at composing liminal states for his protagonists, where they stand at the cusp of a great decision. There is still openness and possibility for him to either reject or accept Catholic dogma.

After Lancelot presents his syllogism, the silent Percival finally speaks:

You speak! Loud and clear! And looking straight at me!
But I can see in your eyes it doesn't make any difference any
more, as far as what is going to happen next is concerned,
that what is going to happen is going to happen whether you
or I believe or not and whether your belief is true or not.
Right? (256)

So the novel concludes with the final affirmation by Percival, and a hint of

softening in Lance's rage of vision. Both characters are poised at positions of life-altering decisions.

Walker Percy has often spoken of the limits of the Christian novelist's role. He is not 'authorized', it is not his business, as artist, to bring the Good News to his readers. Whether or not that is necessarily and universally true, it is true of *this* novel that Percy has stopped short of having Percival 'speak the Word' for which both the reader and, in the reader's imagination, Lance may be thirsting. And in thus 'stopping short' it seems to me Percy has, regardless of considerations of religious truth, observed a principle of the art of fiction which *is* universally supreme. I mean the principle of dramatic consistency.¹⁰⁸

Concerning *Lancelot*, Howland argues that Percival 'stands ready to offer Lancelot the forgiveness that he needs, to be John, the bearer of the good news of Christ's redemptive love'. Howland continues, writing that perhaps Lance will turn to the 'human community', but what is certain is that 'John himself is a changed man', and that 'John is apparently willing to be the 'other' that Lancelot so badly needs'. Howland reinforces the tentative nature of Lance's questions: Lance may turn to God and convert to Roman Catholicism under the tender guidance of Percival, or Lance may reject the message of love that Percival embodies.¹⁰⁹

Kobre concludes that by the end of the novel *Lancelot* does not recognize 'the full extent of his own delusion. Rather, as Percival's voice is at last heard on the final pages of the novel, the single-mindedness of Lancelot's vision begins to give way, just as the absolute dominance of his dramatic monologue is ended'. However, similar to Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman*, Lancelot, argues Kobre (quoting Bakhtin), remains at a 'unfinalizable—and *unpredeterminable*—turning point for his soul'. Additionally, Kobre claims, 'We do not know if Lancelot will ever embrace that view of if he will ultimately turn away from it, only that he seems to see it, to know it is out there'.¹¹⁰ Hobson

¹⁰⁸ Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy*, 185.

¹⁰⁹ Howland, *Gift of the Other*, 107-108.

¹¹⁰ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 165.

maintains that the irony of Lance's concluding state, being so close to both despair and to faith, 'creates a dramatic tension', and that 'Only on the last two pages of the novel is faith again a possibility for this madman'.¹¹¹ Lancelot appears so close to welcoming or repudiating the message of Percival, but like Percy's first two novels, particularly, what is on the page is just shy of a clear indication of which route the protagonist will take.

Ciuba writes that, significantly, '*No* is not the last word of the novel', and that 'the novel's very open-endedness prevents Lancelot's nihilism from seeming conclusive'. Ciuba adds, 'Rather, the final pages intimate a completely opposite vision of the apocalypse, which may bring hope to Percy's bleakest fiction and his darkest prophet. There is yet the possibility that the love of Anna and Father John may save Lancelot from the ruins and at last lead him to revelation'.¹¹²

2.4 - Conclusion

While questions of belief were more subtly raised in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, teased out through dialogues between the protagonists and 'religious' characters, *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot* feature a more direct acknowledgment by first person narrators when it comes to addressing what they believe, what they consider their own shortcomings, and how what they believe about the world can be registered in their own behaviour. The endings of both novels feature protagonists who, while well into a journey where meaningful, lived-out belief is a preoccupation, there remains unanswered questions as to the content of their belief and the future direction their lives will take.

¹¹¹ Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 103. Hobson also adds, 'Despite his evil deeds there is one point in Lance's favor. Because he believes that evil and sex are 'more than just categories', he is ironically as close to growing into faith as lapsing into despair, a fact that creates a dramatic tension' (103).

¹¹² Ciuba, *Revelations*, 191.

The religious landscape of Percy's *Love in the Ruins* is more comical and satirical than either *The Moviegoer* or *The Last Gentleman*. *Love in the Ruins* effectively establishes a picture of the South that is patriotic and Republican, where a poster flying at the front of a church depicts Christ against a background of the American flag holding a white picket fence in His right hand (181), reminiscent of the South Will encounters in *The Last Gentleman* which is 'happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican (185). *Lancelot*, in turn, features a darker vision of what Lance perceives to be the depraved underbelly of life in the South.

In *Lancelot*, however, the satire of *Love in the Ruins* gives way to a more cynical vision of Southern life and culture, as communicated in Lance's acidic denunciations of a campy religiosity that is a mask for a much deeper-rooted corruption and depravity. In *Lancelot*'s New Orleans, the stench of fish and decay is, for Lancelot, a sign of the moral turpitude of a city (and nation, by extension), where religious figures such as Billy Graham bed down with the Richard Nixons of the world and get up with the same set of fleas. While *Lancelot*'s representation of religion in the South is less comic than *Love in the Ruins*, Lancelot's rage toward the failures of Christendom is more intense than Tom's. The style of Tom's narration in the opening chapter of the novel oscillates between the grandiloquent Jeremiad which sees destruction and desolation at every turn (and admits his own culpability for the imminent disasters to befall the nation), and the softly-spoken intimate details of his own personal, religious, and ethical failings. While the chapter opens with his dramatic socio-political diagnosis of the United States at large, it concludes with a tender question, a moment of vulnerability that reveals the personal details not of the prophet or scientist or doctor, but of the middle-aged man who has more questions than answers. When making a house-call at a campsite in an overgrown Louisiana marsh, Tom is transfixed by the beauty of a young woman and asks, 'How stands it with a forty-five-year-old man who can fall in love on the spot with a twenty-year-old stranger, a clear-

eyed vacant simple Massachusetts girl, and desire nothing more in this life than to move into her chickee?’ (55).

The disillusionment of both Tom and Lance, their despairing view of the cultural and religious situation in the South at the time of their journeys, is due to the unending parade of practitioners of conventional belief. The characters that ‘believe’ are comfortable in their beliefs and secure in what they believe, without doubt or uncertainty, and believe with a sense of finality and conclusiveness. Tom and Lance, in turn, are unique characters within this landscape of conventional believers, since both Tom and Lance are interested in possessing a meaningful belief, made all the more difficult in a world where everyone more or less ‘believes’, whether in Christianity, atheism, or the principles of communism, conservatism, or liberalism. In these two novels, Tom and Lance are personally invested in seeing their beliefs embodied in the ways that they live and exist in the world.

Due to Lance’s isolation, whether in his prison cell or in his abstracted life as a moderate in all things, the voices of remarkable ‘religious’ characters are absent from the novel. It is not until Percival shows up to hear Lance’s story that Lance has a sounding-board against which he can narrate the struggles of a religious quest. While Binx and Will each had outspoken religious-minded friends or family members, Lance has no such advantage. And while the action in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* is linked directly with dialogues about the implications of specific beliefs, in *Lancelot*, such dialogues must take place through Lance’s expansive monologue, as he attempts to reconcile what he believes about the world, the existence of God, the existence of good and evil, with the reality of his mundane, life-less existence at Belle Isle, which, until Lance begins to enact his quest, is at a radical disconnect from the concept of a meaningful quest for truth.

While there is a clear sense of these two protagonists emerging from their lives of comfort and abstraction, and religious promise is codified in Lance's final questions to Percival and Tom's confession to Father Smith and marriage to Ellen, the element of uncertainty remains very much in play. The questions remain whether Tom's confession has effectively reconciled him to moral action, or if he will continue in his philandering and self-abstracted ways of viewing the world and others. In addition, has Lancelot, in hearing Percival's voice, grown more receptive to hearing the message of the gospel, or will he in turn reject that and continue on his journey to create a new stoic age? The novels do not resolve such questions, but locate both protagonists at liminal states, just like Binx and Will at the end of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, respectively, where the movement away from abstraction and conventional belief is a move toward participative belief, but a move also to struggle, risk, and uncertainty.

3. Polemics of Belief: *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*

3.1 Conventional Belief in *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*

In Percy's *The Second Coming* (1980), the narrator of the novel breaks from nearly two-hundred pages of mild yet insistent commentary and exclams of the novel's protagonist, Will Barrett,

Madness! Madness! Madness! Yet such was the nature of Will Barrett's peculiar delusion when he left his comfortable home atop a pleasant Carolina mountain and set forth on the strangest adventure of his life, descended into Lost Cove cave looking for proof of the existence of God and a sign of the apocalypse like some crackpot preacher in California. (198)

Will's 'peculiar delusion' is that he is living in the 'Last Days', and that the departure of the Jews from North Carolina is an indication of God's absence from the modern world. An additional symptom of this putative madness is Will's newfound project to determine, once and for all, the existence or non-existence of God. In an attempt to force God's hand, assuming He does exist, Will withdraws from the world, climbs down into a cave in Lost Cove, North Carolina, with nothing but a flashlight and two pocketfuls of Placidyl capsules to ease his death pangs, and begins his experiment: if God shows Himself and saves Will from certain death in the cave, Will will believe; if Will is not saved by the intervention of God, he will die alone in the cave, and thus will have escaped the madness of the vacuous Christian belief and the equally empty unbelief in his native South, as well as the psychological weight he feels from his father's suicide.

If he dies, God's existence—or at the very least God's active role in Will's life—will be disproven: 'My death', claims Will, 'if it occurs, shall occur not by my own hand but by the hand of God. Or rather the handlessness or inaction of God' (186). Will calls his project 'the ultimate scientific experiment', since his experiment demands a resolution, 'in contrast to dreary age-old philosophical and religious disputations which have no resolution'.¹¹³ While scientists and philosophers have undertaken the same project to prove or disprove God's existence, they have never staked their very lives on the outcome. Will wonders if it is 'possible to believe in God like Pascal's cold-blooded bettor, because there was everything to gain if you were right and nothing to lose if you were wrong?' Will admits that he 'cannot be sure' that the Christians 'don't have the truth', yet acknowledges no assurance as to the outcome of his experiment, other than the certainty that it will solve the riddle once and for all (188-191).

Will's previous attempts to believe were, Will claims, responses to his father's suffocating form of Stoicism: Will 'even tried to believe in the Christian God because' his

¹¹³ Will uses the word 'ultimate' since 'God is the subject under investigation' (186).

father did not, although Will admits that he was unsuccessful in believing (72-73). A major obstacle to knowing whether God does exist and then to becoming a Christian believer comes to him in the form of the noisome, obnoxious believers in the South: Will claims that ‘One might even become a Christian if there were few if any Christians around. Have you ever lived in the midst of fifteen million Southern Baptists?’ (188-189).

Like Sutter Vaught of *The Last Gentleman* (1966), Will acknowledges his inherent frustration in finding meaning in a belief when the ostensible believers care little about what they believe, and treat the truth they claim to possess as casually as a worn-out, exhausted thing. In *The Last Gentleman*, Sutter reflects in his notebook:

Christ should leave us. He is too much with us and I don't like his friends. We have no hope of recovering Christ until Christ leaves us. There is after all something worse than being God-forsaken. It is when God overstays his welcome and takes up with the wrong people. (LG 372)

Over twenty years later in *The Second Coming*, Will muses that he managed to get away from the South in the years following the events of *The Last Gentleman*, and subsequently married a ‘rich hardheaded plain decent crippled pious upstate Utica, New York, woman’, Marion, and practiced law on Wall Street. Will escaped from the Southern Christendom depicted in *The Last Gentleman* and the stringent emotional burden of Stoic manhood, that blighted his father’s life and led to his suicide; Will, consequently, lived ‘an ordinary mild mercantile money-making life, [did] mild sailing, mild poodle-walking, mild music-loving among mild good-nature folks’. Later, Will returned to the South, Marion died, and Will took up golfing.

Will’s newfound moderation in all things from money-making to music-loving plays in counterpoint to the passionate, all-consuming and fierce belief of both Sutter and Val Vaught, who in *The Last Gentleman* saw the mildness and moderation of modern twentieth-century life as nothing more than death-in-life. Will adds a moment later that, ‘In all honesty it was easier to believe it in cool Long Island for all its very outrageousness

where nobody believed anything very seriously than in hot Carolina where everybody was a Christian and found unbelief unbelievable' (156). Like *Lancelot's* Percival, whom Lance claims found it easier to believe in war-torn Biafra than in the United States (*L* 84), Will articulates the struggle to believe when everyone else is, ostensibly, a believer, albeit a conventional one.

Before he enters the cave, Will reflects that the two options left open to him are those of unbelief and belief, and he adds that the respective unbelievers and believers of both categories strike him as absurd: 'There are only two classes of people, the believers and the unbelievers. The only difficulty is deciding which is the more feckless' (188). The present-day believer confounds Will, and presents him with a 'a mystery', since, 'if the good news is true, why is not one pleased to hear it?' Moreover, 'if the good news is true, why are its public proclaimers such assholes and the proclamation itself such a weary used-up thing?' (189).

Will's barbed reflections on modern belief are counterpoised by an even more excoriating verdict on modern unbelief. The 'present-day unbeliever',

Is crazy because he finds himself born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, shits, fucks, works, grows old, gets sick, and dies, and is quite content to have it so. Not once in his entire life does it cross his mind to say to himself that his situation is preposterous, that an explanation is due him and to demand such an explanation and to refuse to play out another act of the farce until an explanation is forthcoming. (189)

The unbeliever, Will continues, 'takes his comfort and ease, plays along with the game, watches TV, drinks his drink' and will go to war to 'relieve the boredom and the farce', acting as though the end were not in fact near, and that he were not nearing death and personal extinction (189-190).

Furthermore, he says:

The more intelligent he [the unbeliever] is, the crazier he is and the bigger an asshole he is. He becomes a professor and forms an interdisciplinary group. He reads Dante for its mythic structure. He joins the A.C.L.U. and concerns himself with the freedom of the individual and does not once exercise his own freedom to inquire into how in God's name he should find himself in such a ludicrous situation as being born in Brooklyn, living in Manhattan, and being buried in Queens. He is as insane as a French intellectual. (189-190)

Both the believer and unbeliever act in the world with a clear disconnect from what they believe: the believer claims to live a life informed by the Christian faith, but fails to live as though there were anything remarkable, strange, or personally urgent about the claims of the gospel; the unbeliever, in turn, never inquires into the implications of living a Godless, unsponsored existence. This concern, an 'exercise' in one's freedom 'to inquire', resonates with Percy's own claim in 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World' about the transformation of one's life in the face of knowledge concerning one's place in the world (109). A woman or man may experience the world as essentially familiar, the sum of one's daily experiences may appear commonplace or banal, but for one to truly be open means to see, like Binx in the trenches of Korea watching a dung beetle scratch through the soil, the absurdity and means opening oneself up to the wonder of *things*—the sheer strangeness of existence.

In each novel, the protagonist evolves from being an abstracted individual to one who is a participant in the world around him, from being a spectator who understands the world from a distanced perspective to being a man who, while not necessarily a convert or entirely secure in his beliefs, has grown increasingly involved in living out the implications of his beliefs within his own life. However, in *The Thanatos Syndrome* the move is not quite as pronounced, as the same indicators marking the progression of Percy's previous protagonists are not central to *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and one has the distinct impression that the novel is going to say what it has to say on cultural-historical

topics such as abortion and euthanasia, with or without a nuanced change in belief dramatized by its protagonist.

Linda Hobson notes,

Since plot is more important than character here, the narrative pushes straight through time and is easy to read, with few flashbacks, little internal philosophizing, and no obvious debts to Kierkegaard or Dostoevski. Percy's observant narrator owes more to Jonathan Swift's satiric voice in *Gulliver's Travels* or Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee* as he travels from place to place in Feliciano and reflects the sexual, sartorial, and political vagaries of the humans and humanoids he comes across.¹¹⁴

Nisly acknowledges that Percy's attack on cultural movements becomes more pronounced in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, but argues that at the heart of the attack is not a demand for social reform but the need for God in the life of the individual. Even so, when one attends to the examination of belief in the novel, and the reader undertakes an examination of how concerns with belief are treated or articulated within Percy's work, the attack becomes more pronounced and indicative of a radical shift in Percy's novelistic technique. In *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, participative belief is modelled by secondary characters. In *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*, participative belief is dramatized as a project by the protagonists in pursuing a meaningful and lived expression of belief. But in *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, characters like Will and Father Smith give voice to direct and heavy-handed excoriations of their fellow believing or unbelieving citizens of the United States. The respective voices of both Will and Father Smith noticeably parallel Percy's comments about belief within his essays. Tom's development as a character in Percy's final novel exists to ratify the religious and political worldview of Father Smith. Father Smith sounds more like a mouthpiece for Percy than a fleshed-out character. Thus, edifying is Percy's narrative mode here rather than his previously stringent mode of drama, of showing rather than telling.

¹¹⁴ Linda Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 151.

Jay Tolson accounts for the increasingly polemic tone in *The Thanatos Syndrome* by linking its composition to Percy's declining health:

Percy wrote the novel 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.¹¹⁵

Although *The Second Coming* also appears to fall prey to urgent moral arguments, *The Thanatos Syndrome* is even more direct in its rhetorical aims. In comparison with Will's dramatic development as a character in *The Second Coming*, along with his almost certain conversion, Tom's trajectory seems muted, and oddly anti-climactic as he never visibly wrestles with his lack of faith or the ramifications of his unbelief.

Moreover, there is a noticeable absence of any vocal and/or credible atheists, Stoics, or sceptics in either *The Second Coming* or *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In *The Moviegoer*, Aunt Emily represents, along with Sutter in *The Last Gentleman* and Lance in *Lancelot*, characters with 'religious' concerns and interests. Not even the later Tom More of *The Thanatos Syndrome* represents zealous agnosticism or atheism, but instead a kind of abstracted, distanced spectator. Ultimately, these two late works demonstrate a shift in Percy's fictional treatment of religious belief which reflects a sole interest in Christian belief, to the exclusion of 'religious' but non-Christian forms of belief that are characterized and voiced in his earlier novels.

Marcel returns to the concepts of spectatorship and participation—as articulated in *Being and Having*—in the first volume of *The Mystery of Being*, and provides the following examples of spectatorship (or the spectator-attitude):

The spectator is present on the scene, his dominating motive is a curiosity which has no touch of anxiety, still less of

¹¹⁵ Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1992]), 453.

anguish, about it, for he knows very well that he is not himself caught up in anything that is happening on the stage; however bloody the conclusion of the tragedy may be, he feels sure that he himself can leave the theatre peacefully, catch his bus or ride his tube, and arrive home in time for a cup of tea, having, on the way home, brushed away whatever emotions the play may have aroused in him, rather as one brushes dust off a coat. (*MB* 1 121-122)

Marcel adds, 'In distinguishing between *homo spectans* and *homo particeps*, I wanted to put my emphasis on the fact that it in the latter case there is self-commitment, and in the former there is not' (*MB* 1 122). This distinction between the individual as spectator and the individual as participant was drawn carefully in Percy's early novels, particularly as a means of exploring how belief is a commitment and engagement, not a standing-off of the individual from the world or the individual's beliefs. There is, however, a distinct shift in Percy's craft in *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Percy abandons the indirect mode of satirizing or critiquing the conventional belief of Southern Christendom (and the accompanying conventional unbelief of the same region) in favour of a more direct and discursive approach, where belief and unbelief are addressed in long-winded monologues. The monologues themselves resound as reverberations from earlier monologues by characters such as Lance and even the entries of Sutter Vaught's journal, but the issue in Percy's final two novels is that no other competing voices emerge in the narratives, as they did in the earlier works.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth writes that an author can 'achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible if he allowed himself or a reliable spokesman to speak directly and authoritatively to us'. Percy does not utilize the authorial 'silence' that Booth writes 'leaves his characters to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories'. Instead, in the figures of both Will Barrett in *The Second Coming* and Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy appears to provide two very direct voices that

articulate philosophical and sociological concerns that have earlier been communicated by indirection and narrative structure in the earlier novels.¹¹⁶

In continuity with Percy's earlier novels, both *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* open with their respective protagonists taking note of the distinct peculiarities that are emerging in their recreational and professional routines. For Will Barrett in *The Second Coming*, it stems from an internal crisis, a repressed memory, which had recently surfaced relating to his father's first attempt at suicide. Will feels 'depressed without knowing why'. He perceives that the world grows more 'senseless and farcical with each passing day': 'The first sign that something had gone wrong', says the narrator, 'manifested itself while he was playing golf. Or rather it was the first time he admitted to himself that something might be wrong' (3).

For Dr. Tom More in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the oddities he perceives develop out of the social fabric of his home region, Feliciana Parish. Initially Tom sees 'little things, certain small clinical changes', such as the sexually uninhibited behaviour of women who once behaved guardedly, and the disappearance of 'cortical inhibitions, superego, anxiety' (33) in several of his patients. Later in the novel Tom realizes these symptoms are indicative of a much larger, and more sinister, plot to bioengineer the behaviour of the surrounding population. The story begins with Tom's following description:

For some time now I have noticed that something strange is occurring in our region. I have noticed it both in the patients I have treated and in ordinary encounters with people. At first there were only suspicions. But yesterday my suspicions were confirmed. (3)

The openings to both novels swiftly establish Will and Tom as, once again, outsiders in their respective communities. Like Percy's other protagonists, they position themselves as objective spectators, to whom the patterns of twentieth-century suburban

¹¹⁶ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983 [1961]), 273.

appear strange and absurd. The language is undeniably part of Percy's idiom: something, claims the narrator, has 'gone wrong' in Will's case, and in Tom's, something 'strange is occurring', both locutions reflecting a clinical detachment from people that Binx, Lance, Will, and Tom also suffered.¹¹⁷ Similar to Percy's protagonists from earlier novels, the protagonists of *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos* move away from Marcel's spectator-attitude and toward participative belief, where what they believe is at work in how they live their lives. Thus, Percy retains this aspect to his craft, even if this movement excludes the dialogue about meaningful belief for those outside of Christian belief.

In these two novels emerges yet again the central figure of the outsider, the observer positioned outside of the community of a culturally encysted Christendom. From this awkward perspective the protagonist must wrestle with the demanding existential nature of participative belief—with what it means to truly participate in a belief meaningfully. Michael Kobre argues that in Percy's fiction, the individual is existentially 'unfinalized' and second, the individual is a 'wayfarer' or 'pilgrim'. Kobre continues: 'Both visions emphasize a certain inevitable incompleteness, an openness to all possibilities. In both, humanity is always 'on the move', on a search that will end only at death'.¹¹⁸

3.2 - Percy's *The Second Coming*

In the final pages of *The Last Gentleman*, shortly after the death of Jamie Vaught in a New Mexico hospital, the bewildered Will Barrett stops Sutter Vaught as Sutter is climbing into his car. Sutter sits in the driver's seat of his Edsel, ready to drive to his ranch where he intends to kill himself, when Will asks,

¹¹⁸ Michael Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 193.

‘What are you going to do now?’
 [Sutter replies:] ‘I’m going to have a drink’.
 ‘No. I mean, what are you going to do?’
 There was no answer. [...]

‘Are you going home, I mean’.
 ‘I told you, Barrett, I’m going to the ranch’.
 ‘Dr. Vaught, don’t leave me’.
 ‘What did you say?’
 ‘Dr. Vaught, listen to me. I’m going to do what I told you I
 planned to do’.
 ‘I know. You told me’.
 ‘Dr. Vaught, I want you to come back with me’.
 ‘Why? To make this contribution you speak of?’
 ‘Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett—’ and he actually
 pointed to himself lest there be a mistake, ‘—need you and
 want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed
 you. Jamie had Val too’. (408-409)

Will Barrett’s claim that he, Will, needs Dr. Sutter Vaught demonstrates that the Will of the early pages of *The Last Gentleman*, the young man who intended to ‘engineer the future’ of his own life ‘according to the scientific principles’ and ‘self-knowledge’ he gained in psychoanalysis (41), is now uncertain of his experiment to scientifically structure his own life, and is open to the need for others in interpersonal, intersubjective relationships. Will has since abandoned eavesdropping and his telescope, the means by which he held the world at arm’s length. On the concluding page of the novel, Will calls out ‘Wait’, as Sutter is driving away, and when Sutter’s Edsel stops suddenly, Will runs to the car: ‘Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds’ (409). The bounding Will is now moving, quite literally, in a way suggestive of growth and maturation. No longer should the reader suppose that Will is going to stand in the hazy distance and observe others live their lives while he continues to exist in a fantasy world of his own making; rather, this Will Barrett is now certain of an immediate goal, to be with Sutter, to prevent him from killing himself, perhaps even to divine the religious import of Jamie’s baptism.

The tenor of the concluding lines in *The Last Gentleman* is one of hope, tempered with uncertainty; though Percy himself claimed that Will had ‘missed it’, missed the

significance of the baptism of Jamie (*Conversations* 67-68), the final pages of the novel are undeniably hopeful in their promise of a new life for Will. What is implied here is that Will's new life includes more than watching strangers through telescopes—a new life that includes a new job working for Mr. Vaught at the automobile dealership, perhaps even a marriage to Kitty Vaught. Even though this type of life may end in the kind of death-in-life that Sutter has earlier identified, it involves less isolation than Will's time in New York. Will has, for the time being, delayed Sutter's death by suicide, and he has succeeded where he failed with his own father, who had taken his own life when Will was just a boy.

Nevertheless, it appears that Will is on the cusp of some profound realization or religious awakening, although the question that occurs to him as he chases Sutter's car is never clarified, and one is left wondering what question so struck Will with its urgency that he ran after Sutter's Edsel. The novel places the reader in a curious interpretive position: what to make of Will's sudden clarity, both of its content and cause? Additionally, what will happen when Will Barrett climbs into Sutter Vaught's Edsel and they return, supposedly, to the ranch?¹¹⁹ The novel never answers these questions, leaving such conjecture to the reader.

Such questions accompany the conclusion of *The Last Gentleman*, so when one arrives at the opening pages of *The Second Coming*, there emerges a clear gap between the promises of enlightenment and belonging for Will, as prefigured in his chase after Sutter's Edsel, and the bitter, alienated Will one meets in the opening of *The Second Coming*.

Linda Hobson observes,

After having read *The Second Coming*, however, one sees that the ordeals in the attic room and in New Mexico did not

¹¹⁹ Though the conclusion to *Love in the Ruins* features more clarity concerning the current status and future of the protagonist's beliefs—Tom is happy and in the end of the story a Catholic—it too ends with an ambiguous position toward the fate of Dr. Tom More: After driving Art Immelman from Feliciana Parish and marrying the lusty Presbyterian Ellen Oglethorpe in *Love in the Ruins*, Tom More relaxes into the routine of work, weekend barbecues, mass, and frequent love-making with his wife, but finds himself breaking months of sobriety in the final pages of the book.

‘take’, and Will has spent his adulthood in New York living an everyday life, filing briefs and walking his dog in Central Park, but still avoiding finding out the meaning of his father’s death. All of this backsliding makes the ending of *The Last Gentleman* seem anticlimactic when seen from the perspective of the later novel.¹²⁰

In the opening of *The Second Coming*, Will Barrett is golfing when he first realizes that something not yet discerned is amiss:

One moment he was standing in the bunker with his sand-iron approaching the lie of his ball. The next he was lying flat on the ground. Lying there, cheek pressed against the earth, he noticed that things looked different from this unaccustomed position. A strange bird flew past. A cumulus cloud went towering thousands of feet into the air. Ordinarily he would not have given the cloud a second glance. But as he gazed at it from the bunker, it seemed to turn purple and gold at the bottom while the top went boiling up higher and higher like the cloud over Hiroshima. (3)

After the sighting of these towering clouds, which prefigure some future cataclysm, or perhaps a catastrophe that has already befallen the U.S. or western consciousness, Will is impressed with the ‘farcical’ nature of the lives lived around him: ‘True, most people he knew seemed reasonably sane and happy. They played golf, kept busy, drank, talked, laughed, went to church, appeared to enjoy themselves, and in general were both successful and generous. Their talk made a sort of sense. They cracked jokes’. Even so, it is possible that ‘an entire people, or at least a majority’, says Will, ‘deceive themselves into believing things are going well when in fact they are not, when things are in fact farcical’ (4). Eventually, Will Barrett decides that the only sensible response to the absurdity of life is suicide: ‘There at any rate stands Will Barrett on the edge of a gorge in old Carolina, a talented agreeable wealthy man living in as pleasant an environment as one can imagine and yet who is thinking of putting a bullet in his brain’ (14).

In a 1981 interview, Walker Percy states that in writing *The Second Coming*,

¹²⁰ Hobson, *Understanding*, 127-128.

I found the South, and particularly North Carolina, a valuable setting because of the peculiar confluence of two things that have happened in the South in the past ten or twenty years: number one, what's been called the power shift—the shift of power and money to the South. For the first time since the Civil War, the South is getting rich. And the other thing is the tremendous re-Christianization of the South—high-powered evangelical Christianity.¹²¹

Like Percy's other novels, *The Second Coming* features the familiar pattern of a protagonist moving from a moment of epiphany to a kind of 'search', although here in *The Second Coming*, there is an explicit aim to this search: the discovery of the existence or non-existence of God. The best way to determine whether or not God exists, and whether He will answer Will's demands for Him to make Himself known, is to climb into a cave and allow himself to either die, and thus disprove God's existence, or be delivered by a miraculous means, and so prove God's existence once and for all. However, in the course of getting lost in a cave, Will develops an excruciating toothache, and ends up falling from the cave and through the glass ceiling of a greenhouse where Allie Huger, a twenty-something escapee from a mental institution, has made her temporary home.

Like Percy's other novels, however, Percy uses an outsider—and in this novel, a pair of outsiders—to act as the foil for the vacuity of the South. Allie Huger, who is in the process of relearning all of the unspoken rules and mores of social convention, particularly those of spoken language, tends to Will's injuries, and eventually the two fall in love. Will Barrett finds something of a kindred spirit in Allie, who, like Barrett, sees the world as an inherently strange and mysterious place, and cannot make sense of the seemingly farcical

¹²¹ Percy continues, 'Thus, it's of value to me to take a man like Will Barrett and set him down in the South: he finds himself in what the psychiatrists call a 'double bind'—a no-win situation. From the beginning, and all through his life he has experienced a loss of sovereignty which has occurred in the lives of most of us as well, even though we appear to be freer, to have more, to be more individualistic, to have access to more than any people on earth. Despite this, a loss of sovereignty has occurred so that we are more subject to invisible authority—scientists and so forth. We now think of what one should do in a certain situation, not what I should do. Will Barrett is a man who, whatever his faults, has reclaimed sovereignty; he demands to know what it's all about—and he always has' (*Conversations* 218).

nature of others' lives. All the while Will and Allie make others uncomfortable by their eccentric ways of posing deeply existential and theological questions in the middle of casual conversation. Both Will and Allie exhibit corresponding concerns with living a meaningful, routine life: Will claims, 'Peace is only better than war if peace is not hell too. War being hell makes sense' (21), and Allie, in turn, suggests that in her experience after electro-shock therapy there will be 'something good about having gone through the bad experience, the buzzing, for the last time and having survived—the bad maybe even being the condition of the good, I don't know. Like that man who crawled out of the plane crash in West Virginia last summer, remember?' (29).

The story of *The Second Coming* unfolds in a pattern familiar to Percy's novels. The novel features a recognition of the malaise that infects twentieth-century life, and a search for a way out of the life of despair. In the scenes leading up to Will's plunge into the greenhouse, Will makes several traumatizing or alarming discoveries: Will's father, who committed suicide when Will was a boy, tried to kill the young Will during a hunting trip. During the trip, both Will and his father were injured by alleged misfires from the senior Barrett's shotgun. Will begins to piece together the truth behind the accident, and discovers that his father tried to kill Will before attempting to take his own life. Both Will and his father survived, and Will's father claimed the injuries were accidental. Soon after, Will's father succeeded in killing himself. Will also learns that his daughter, Leslie, is to be married, and hopes to use her mother's money for a love and faith community, along with the help of Episcopalian priest Jack Curl. With the exception of Allie, all of the characters that emerge in the narrative are shallow, vapid, and receive little if any sympathy from *The Second Coming's* narrator. The texture of Percy's South in *The Second Coming* is one of widespread, vacuous religiosity. It is in this novel that Percy presents his most explicit denunciation of the vacuity of belief (and unbelief) in the South

by means of a letter from Will to Sutter, and a lengthy internal monologue after he has recovered from his fall from the cave.

Allie has inherited prime North Carolina real estate that Kitty and her husband hope to acquire by keeping Allie in the hospital, but Allie escapes. When Will is hospitalized later in the novel, he is approached by the Episcopalian Priest Jack Curl who also wants the funds for the community. Will recovers, and hits upon an alternative to the love and faith community, and invites some of his fellow hospital inmates to work with him building a housing development on Allie's property, thus using both Allie's recent inheritance, Will's own funds, and puts to work the friends Will has made in the hospital who are bored with their lives of convalescence.

Near the conclusion of the novel, Will proposes to Allie. Will says, 'It is possible that though marriage in these times seems for some reason to be a troubled, often fatal, arrangement, we might not only survive it but revive it' (343). By the end of the novel, the two characters have made plans to marry. Will approaches Father Weatherbee and poses several questions about possible signs from God, questions that provide a sense of Will's intellectual and spiritual trajectory, and his new openness to the possibility that Allie is a sign from God.

Father Weatherbee, an 'ancient emaciated priest whose clerical collar and lower eyelid drooped' (311), an odd and eccentric man, acts like Percy's other clerics, like Father Smith in *Love in the Ruins* and Val Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*. Weatherbee does not have the confidence or assertiveness of Val, and he is much quieter than Father Smith—and so when Will approaches Father Weatherbee, the old priest watches Will cautiously.¹²²

¹²² Allen Pridgen writes, 'Will knows that it is possible that the redemptive love that made its descent into flesh in the Incarnation, the First Coming, may be continuously announcing its presence here and now in the sacramental world, even in the impotent but possibly holy faces of suffering and homeless men like Father Weatherbee' Pridgen,

But before Will and Allie become engaged, they must both navigate through the morass of Southern Christendom. Early in the novel when a Christian evangelist approaches Allie, Allie calmly observes the economy of verbal exchanges between the evangelist and those to whom she hands out tracts:

The woman, still smiling, was handing her a pamphlet. Anxious to make up for not being able to recognize the woman, she began to read the pamphlet then and there. The first three sentences were: *Are you lonely? Do you want to make a new start? Have you ever had a personal encounter with our Lord and Saviour?* While she was reading, the woman was saying something to her. Was she supposed to listen or read? (33)

Allie notices that some 'ignored [the evangelist], veered around her. Others took the pamphlets politely and went their way. Still others stopped for a moment and listened (but did not read), heads down and nodding. But for her, questions asked were to be answered, printed words were to be read' (33). But Allie provides a unique way of seeing afresh that which has grown stale:

She took words seriously to mean more or less what they said, but other people seemed to use words as signals in another code they had agreed upon. For example, the woman's questions and commands were evidently not to be considered as questions and commands, then answered accordingly with a yes, no, or maybe, but rather to be considered like the many signboards in the street, such as Try Good Gulf for Better Mileage, then either ignored or acted upon, but even if acted upon, not as an immediate consequence of what the words commanded one to do. (34)

Even the words of the Christian evangelist, allegedly the 'good news', are equated with the tawdriness of advertising. Will has a parallel experience in his encounter with the local Episcopalian priest, Jack Curl. Jack hopes to speak to Will about Marion's desire to build a local love-and-faith community, but all that Will can hear is the stale verbiage of Christendom:

Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), 142.

A clock struck. The sun was setting.

‘I am talking about Marion’s dream of a community of people living out their lives married, together, not burdening anybody, a true love-and-faith community lived according to the rhythm of God’s own liturgical year’.

God, love, faith, marriage. The old words clanged softly in the golden air around them like the Westminster chimes of St. John’s steeple clock. (127)

The ‘old words’ are characterized as lifeless as the aged structure of St. John’s cathedral—and one has a clear sense that the language of grace and the institution so central in its promulgation (the church) have no resonance in the language thus employed. In another example, Will sees a car with the following pasted in all capital letters on its bumper: ‘A Mazda passed with a bumper sticker which reads: YOUR GOD MAY BE DEAD BUT I TALKED TO MINE THIS MORNING’ (293). The North Carolina of The Second Coming is the ‘rich reborn Christian Carolina with its condos and 450 SELs’ (131-132).

Will wonders what options for belief he has in North Carolina: ‘Is there another way? People either believe everything or they believe nothing. People like the Christians or Californians believe anything, everything. People like you and Lewis Peckham and the professors and scientists believe nothing. Is there another way?’ (132). Jack Curl, who consistently attempts to lure Will into the Episcopalian church, tells Will that he has a ‘religious retreat’ planned, and describes the trip as a ‘weekend with God in a wonderful setting’. Among the attendees, he tells Will, will be ‘Protestants, Catholics, Anglicans, unbelievers, Jews—all wonderful guys’.

Jack Curl embodies the ecumenical, non-abrasive priest who forms a counterpoint to the dogmatic, touched-by-madness priests and nuns of Percy’s other novels, including Father Boomer and Val from *The Last Gentleman*, Father Smith from *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and Father Weatherbee in his brief appearance in *The*

Second Coming.¹²³ When Will tells Jack that Leslie instructs him to ‘have a personal encounter’ with Jesus, Jack replies, with ample tenderness to avoid offense:

‘There you go’.
‘There I go what?’
‘There are many mansions and so forth. It’s not my gig but if it’s hers, more power to her’. (135)

When Will asks Jack if he believes in God, Jack is taken aback:

‘How’s that?’ asked Jack quickly.
‘You know, God’.
In the fading light the chaplain looked at him closely, smiling all the while and narrowing his eyes in an especially understanding way. But Jack Curl wished that Will Barrett would not smile. The chaplain’s main fear was not of being attacked or even martyred—he thought he could handle it—but of being made a fool of. It was one thing to be hauled up before the Grand Inquisitor, scorned, ridiculed, tortured. He could handle that, but suppose one is made the butt of a joke and doesn’t get the joke? He wished Will Barrett, who seldom smiled, would stop smiling. (136)

Even when Will shares the foundational reasons for his experiment, Jack Curl remains cautious and distant, either unable to grasp the import of Will’s experiment or afraid of being the butt of a joke, as Jack muses that ‘the trouble with Barrett’s queer question and peculiar smile was that you couldn’t say what he was doing’ (136). For Will, the question of God’s existence (or non-existence) is situated at the centre of his experience, and his view of the world and the actions of others as ‘farcical’ stems from what he perceives to be the absence of God. Those that continue about their business as if the world were not strange and odd strike Will as mad. Will wonders, ‘Was there an unspoken understanding between all of them that what they were doing, knocking little balls around a mountain meadow while the fitful wind bustled about high above them, was after all preposterous but that they had all assented to it and were doing it nevertheless and because, after all, why not? One might as well do one thing as another’ (48).

¹²³ The narrator claims that ‘it made [Jack Curl] uneasy to talk about religion’. Marion Peabody, Will’s now-deceased wife, used to terrify the chaplain ‘with her raging sarcastic attacks on the new liturgy and his own “social gospel”’ (138).

Later, Will states that he is ‘surrounded by two classes of maniacs’, and focuses not only on what he perceives as the absurdity of daily modern life, but the absurdity of the way the believers and non-believers alike live their lives. The first group, ‘the believers’, says Will, ‘think they know the reason why we find ourselves in this ludicrous predicament yet act for all the world as if they don’t. The second are the unbelievers, who don’t know the reason and don’t care if they don’t know’ (190). The problem with the believers, according to Will, is the disconnect between the good news they claim to have and the way they live their lives, which stands in stark contrast to the former. The unbelievers, moreover, are morally indicted by what Will considers to be their lack of interest in the veracity or falsity of the claims of the believers. Both categories fail to reconcile the nature of what they believe with *how* they believe it, and neither acknowledges belief as an active stance in the world rather than a hermetically sealed-off portion of one’s existence.

When Kitty outlines her theory of why Allie is unable to live an ordinary, comfortable life, she tells Will that it has to do with Allie’s sins in a previous life, the narrator says that her ‘belief in such matters was both absolute and perfunctory’. As well, adds Will,

There was a plausibility to it. Things fell into place. Mysteries were revealed. Why could he not be a believer? Who were the believers now? Everyone. Everyone believed everything. We’re all from California now. Yet we believe with a kind of perfunctoriness. Even now Kitty was inattentive, eyes drifting as she talked. In the very act of uttering her ultimate truths, she was too bored to listen.
(287)

Lewis Peckham, a friend of Will’s and a golf professional, falls readily into the conventional unbeliever category, as he holds to a self-congratulatory unbelief, but seems uninterested in living out his unbelief in a consistent way. Compared to Percy’s Lancelot, or O’Connor’s Misfit or Hazel Motes, for example, Lewis appears as shallow in his unbelief as the casual believers lampooned in Percy’s novels who believe with a kind of

‘perfunctoriness’, as Will thinks of Kitty. Lewis claims that, as a non-believer, he ‘sees things the way they are’, like the ‘one-eyed in the land of the blind’. Lewis tells Will:

‘The trouble is you and I share something that sets us apart’.
‘What’s that?’
‘We’re the once-born in a world of the twice-born. We have to make our way without Amazing Grace. It’s a lonely road but there are some advantages along the way. The company, when you find it, is better. And the view, though bleak, is bracing’. (151)

Neither the easy-going Episcopalian ways of Jack Curl nor the self-congratulatory atheism of Lewis Peckham suit Will Barrett, who asks himself, ‘Why was Lewis’s belief so unpleasant?’ But quickly adds, nevertheless, that ‘It was no better than the Baptist’s belief. If belief is shitty and unbelief is shitty, what does that leave? No, Lewis was even more demented than the believers. Unbelieving Lewis read Dante for the structure. At least, believers were consistent. They might think Dante is a restaurant in Asheville but they don’t read Marx for structure’ (151).

Kobre observes,

In different ways, almost all of the people with whom he comes in contact are as lost as Lewis [Peckham]. Whether it is a minister’s, Jack Curl’s, pathetic attempt to be hip, wearing ill-fitting jumpsuits and peppering his speech with awkward expressions like ‘It’s not my gig’, or Kitty’s newfound faith in astrology, or even his daughter Leslie’s severe insistence that true faith consists of a ‘personal encounter’ with God absent of ‘church, priests, or ritual’, all Will sees when he looks around him are false self-conceptions and various forms of spirituality that are equally self-involved.¹²⁴

In *The Second Coming* one finds the clearest expression in Percy’s oeuvre of the uniform and near-universal vacuity of what passes for meaningful belief in the South. *Love in the Ruins* satirizes everyone across the political spectrum by presenting comic caricatures of the embodiments of various political and theological systems. Tom makes little comment by way of criticizing these caricatures, and the satire of the novel is found

¹²⁴ Kobre, *Walker Percy’s Voices*, 177.

in the comic gestures of the secondary characters. In *The Second Coming*, however, it is Will Barrett who alerts the reader to who and what is being satirized, which I explore in the upcoming pages.

In addition to the more pronounced critique of the inanities of widespread belief and unbelief, of all Percy's novels *The Second Coming* also features the most direct discussion and exploration of the issue of suicide. More so than in any other work of Percy's, the question of suicide haunts the pages of *The Second Coming*. While suicide preoccupies Sutter and Sutter's journal, and Will thinks back to his own father's suicide, here in *The Second Coming* the novel opens with the question of suicide, and holds fast as a preoccupation for Will's possible answer to his malaise. Out on the golf course with Lewis Peckham and Will's in-laws at the beginning of the novel, Will hears a sound that 'reminded him of an event that had happened a long time ago', intentionally abstruse, to call to mind the ghost of a memory that cannot quite be pinned down or identified. The memory is of 'the most important event in his life, yet he had managed until that moment to forget it' (3). All that is clear to the audience is that this is something of great import to the protagonist, but little else. In the Stoic belief system, there is nobility to suicide: if God does not exist, and if the world no longer values a code of dignity and propriety, then why not take one's life? In *The Last Gentleman* Will's father, Will claims, could not dance the Stoic dance in an ironic world (*LG* 10).¹²⁵

Soon after the shadow of this memory emerges in Will's conscious, it occurs to him that 'he might shoot himself'. Initially, it is just a thought, seemingly random. Then it is one that 'he entertained ironically', and then a 'course of action which he took seriously and decided to carry out' (4). Camus observes that such existential questioning can arise

¹²⁵ The opening scene of *The Second Coming* echoes the questions that open Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where Camus writes that there 'is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy'. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1991 [1942]). 4.

from an awareness of the deadness of one's existence. The description is a fitting description of Will, as Camus writes, 'But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins'—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness'.¹²⁶

Later, when Will holds the muzzle of a Luger against his temple, he thinks, 'Yes, that is possible, he thought smiling, that is one way to cure the great suck of self, but then I wouldn't find out, would I? Find out what? Find out why things have come to such a pass and a man so sucked down into himself that it takes a gunshot to know him out of the suck [...]'. Will then wonders if, perhaps, the Jews are 'a sign' of some kind (14). Will's hand is stayed, therefore, by the question of the cause of humankind's unhappiness.

By the middle of the novel, Percy connects the seemingly disparate threads of Will's father's suicide, the question of belief in the North and in the South, and the presence (or absence) of the Jews as a possible sign from God, and connects them by the midpoint of the novel. When Will envisions his deceased father in the clearing where the hunting accident, years ago, took place, Will says to his father:

Ever since your death, all I ever wanted from you was out, out from you and from the Mississippi twilight, and from the shotguns thundering in musty attics and racketing through funk-smelling Georgia swamps, out from the ancient hatred and allegiances, allegiances unto death and love of war and rumors of war and under it all death and your secret love of death, yes that was your secret. (72)

Will tells his father that he, Will, went 'as far' as he could go, 'married a rich hard-headed plain decent crippled pious upstate Utica, New York, woman, practiced Trusts and Estates law in a paneled office on Wall Street, kept a sailboat on the North Shore, played squash, lived at 76th and Fifth, walked my [his] poodle in the park' (72). Unlike his father, for a time Will escaped the Southern Christendom and the burden of Stoic manhood, and

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

was able to 'get away from all that live an ordinary mild mercantile money-making life, do mild sailing, mild poodle-walking, mild music-loving among mild good-nature folks'.

Moreover, he 'even tried to believe in the Christian God because you didn't' in an effort to strike upon opposite predilections of his father so as to avoid killing himself, although he quickly admits that he was unsuccessful in believing in the Christian God (72-73).

In the imaginary exchange, Will's father explains the root of his unhappiness:

'The trouble is', the man said, 'there is no word for this'.
'For what?'
'This'. He held both arms out to the town, to the wide world.
'It's not war and it's not peace. It's not death and it's not life.
What is it? What do you call it?'
'I don't know'.
'There is life and there is death. Life is better than death but
there are worse things than death'.
'What?'
'There is no word for it. Maybe it never happened before
and so there is not yet a word for it. What is the word for a
state which is not life and not death, a death in life?' (126)

Will responds, saying, 'Right: you said I will not put up with a life which is not life or death. I don't have to and I won't' (131). But Will does not opt for suicide, but inquires further as to how he can resolve the question of suicide, of God's silence, and the difficulty of believing. Will asks, 'Wasn't it possible to believe in God like Pascal's cold-blooded bettor, because there was everything to gain if you were right and nothing to lose if you were wrong?'

Marion, along with Will and Marion's daughter, Leslie, embody representative forms of belief: Marion, the 'old-style Episcopalian who believed that one's duty lay with God, church, the *Book of Common Prayer*, family, country, and doing good works' (158); Leslie, the 'new-style Christian who believed in giving her life to the Lord through a personal encounter with Him and who accordingly had no use for church, priests, or ritual. She believed this and Jason believed a California version of this' (158). Nevertheless, Marion believes in the matter-of-fact way of Binx Bolling's mother in *The Moviegoer*. Christian belief is not one of several options, but the only option for Marion.

In order to allow his family to collect his life insurance, Will has to ensure that his death is an ‘act of God’, and not perceived as suicide. Will explains the plan to Sutter Vaught in a lengthy letter that not only sets forth Will’s plans for carrying out his investigation into God’s absence, but also the fundamental struggle of believing in a climate of widespread belief. Will wonders, ‘Is there another way? People either believe everything or they believe nothing. People like the Christians or Californians believe anything, everything. People like you and Lewis Peckham and the professors and scientists believe nothing. Is there another way?’ (132). ‘Is this an age of belief, he reflected, a great renaissance of faith after a period of crass materialism, atheism, agnosticism, liberalism, scientism? Or is it an age of madness in which everyone believes everything? Which?’ (159). If everyone does indeed believe everything, then belief itself as a once meaningful category is stripped of weight and meaning.¹²⁷

Will admits that he ‘cannot be sure’ that the Christians ‘don’t have the truth’. ‘But’, he adds, ‘if they have the truth, why is it the case that they are repellent precisely to the degree that they embrace and advertise that truth? One might even become a Christian if there were few if any Christians around. Have you ever lived in the midst of fifteen million Southern Baptists?’ (188-189). In a series of Nietzschean aphorisms that lampoon believer and unbeliever alike, Will asserts the following:

As unacceptable as believers are, unbelievers are even worse, not because of the unacceptability of unbelief but because of the nature of the unbelievers themselves who in the profession and practice of their unbelief are even greater assholes than the Christians. (189-190)

¹²⁷ ‘So here he was, the engineer, as Will Barrett used to think of himself in the early days when he wandered around in a funk in New York trying to ‘engineer’ his own life, now years later, after a fairly normal life, a fairly happy marriage, a successful career, and a triumphant early retirement to enjoy the good things of life. Here he was, more fucked out and nuttier than ever, having experienced another of his ‘spells’ as they used to be called in his childhood, which were undoubtedly a form of epilepsy to say the least and perhaps a disorder a good deal more serious’ (180).

Despite Will's claims to having designed the 'ultimate scientific experiment' that would surely result in a clear resolution of the question of God's existence, Will is forced out of the cave by nausea and pain from a toothache: 'A clear yes or no answer may not be forthcoming, after all. . .'. Will states that there is 'one sure cure for cosmic explorations, grandiose ideas about God, man, death, suicide and such—and that is nausea'. Furthermore, 'A nauseated man is a sober man. A nauseated man is a disinterested man' (213).

Once Will has recovered under Allie's care, Allie asks Will where he is going and what he is planning to do. Will replies, 'What is expected of me. Take care of people who need taking care of. I have to see how my daughter is. I have an obligation to her. I have not been a good father. Then we'll see' (265). Will has taken to his obligations after he has resolved to be more of a man of action; he then muses that not to 'know the name of the enemy is already to have been killed by him' (271). 'Why do men settle so easily for lives which are living deaths? Men either kill each other in war, or in peace walk as docilely into living death as sheep into a slaughterhouse' (271).¹²⁸

Will inquires as to how everything in life may seem pleasant and all manner of things well, but there nevertheless remains a sense of something missing. 'What is this sadness here?' asks Will. 'Why do folks put up with it?' Will then adds,

The truth seeker does not. Instead of joining hands
with the folks and bowing his head in prayer, the
truth seeker sits in an empty chair as invisible as
Banquo's ghost, yelling at the top of his voice:
*Where is it? What is missing? Where did it go? I
won't have it! I won't have it! Why this sadness
here? Don't stand for it! Get up! Leave! Let the boat*

¹²⁸ 'Though it was she who had been the mental patient and he the solidest citizen of the community, early retiree, philanthropist, president of United Way, six-handicap golfer, surely it was he not she who was deranged now, who, after holing up in a cave for two weeks, now paced up and down the parking lot of the Linwood Country Club in the pre-dawn darkness, kicking a German car, while sane folk snored in their beds' (271).

*people sit down! Go live in a cave until you've found
the thief who is robbing you. But at least protest.
Stop, thief! What is missing? God? Find him! (273)*

Will's plea that the truth seeker should 'at least protest', and search out the God that may or may not exist, acts as the clearest formulation of Percy's emphasis on participative belief within the region of widespread conventional belief. Nowhere else in Percy's fiction does a protagonist make such a direct petition to live out a search, particularly a search where everything is at stake. In Marcel's version of meaningful belief, the emphasis is on a lived-expression of one's philosophical or theological concerns. One's theoretical commitments ought to transform the way one lives one's life. Marcel uses the phrases to 'pledge myself fundamentally', to 'place myself at the disposal of something', and even to 'rally to' one's belief (*MB* 2 77-78). In the above excerpt, Will gives voice to this impulse to pursue the truth relentlessly, and to explore the ramifications of God's existence or non-existence.

While *The Second Coming* does not feature a 'religious' voice other than what is inflected in Will's growing concern with God's presence or absence, it nevertheless underlines this central theme in Percy's work, which is the need for pursuit, concern, action, or practice, rather than placated resignation or indifference to metaphysical questions. Will establishes himself as one of Percy's religious-minded individuals, for whom a pursuit, without the comfort of certainty and conventional belief, is uncertain. In this way, he resembles Tom and Lance, but he separates himself from either in his impassioned denunciations of various belief systems and philosophical or cultural movements.

In a passionate monologue, Will launches into a denunciation of all the forms of death that, now named by Will, cannot overcome him: Will says, 'Here are the names of death, which shall not prevail over me because I know the names'. The newfound resolution replaces Will's own theological experiment in the cave, and will, by the end of

the novel, be replaced in turn by a turn toward an intersubjective option (in union with Allie). All the forms of belief and unbelief that Will lays out are varieties of ‘belief’ that are experienced as ‘death in life’ rather than inward and transformative beliefs.

Will declares,

Death in the guise of Christianity is not going to prevail over me.
Death in the guise of old Christendom in Carolina is not going to prevail over me.
Death in the form of the new Christendom in Carolina is not going to prevail over me.
Death in the guise of God and America and the happy life of home and family and friends is not going to prevail over me.
Death in the guise of belief is not going to prevail over me, for believers now believe anything and everything and do not love the truth, are in fact in despair of the truth, and that is death.

Will decries all forms of belief that require identification with an –ism or movement, indicating that the dominant forms of belief and unbelief, as he has seen them, have been dead, vacuous, and empty. Will’s declarations outline a project to be an active seeker, not one who settles into the scripted comfort of an –ism or movement that resists the impulse to search and question. Gary Ciuba writes, ‘Placed almost at the center of the novel, [the letter to Sutter] presents a comprehensive verdict on [Will’s] age. If the believers are intolerable, the unbelievers are insane’.¹²⁹

Will mobilizes participative belief and channels it through his extended monologue. In Will’s equation, Christianity equals death—but so does a cultural atheism. One must remember that both forms of Christianity and atheism that Will encounters in *The Second Coming* are conventional, not meaningful, dynamic, or participative. In Will’s monologues, Will criticizes all forms of conventional belief (or unbelief), and demands a form of belief that is serious, passionate, and inward. By the end of the novel, however, the only voice to answer this call for a participative belief is the Christian believer,

¹²⁹ Gary Ciuba, *Walker Percy’s Revelations* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 214.

embodied in Father Weatherbee. No atheists give voice to compelling versions of participative belief, as they do in *The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentleman*.

Next, Will connects suicide with the issue of a meaningful belief, as he states ‘Death in the guise of unbelief is not going to prevail over me, for unbelievers believe nothing, not because truth does not exist, but because they have already chosen not to believe, and would not believe, cannot believe, even if the living truth stood before them, and that is death’ (272-273). This is an observation which is echoed by Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, that no one would believe the existence of heaven, hell, and sin, even if proven beyond a reasonable doubt, because something in modern human consciousness has made such belief impossible (117-118). ‘Death in the form of isms and asms shall not prevail over me, orgasm, enthusiasm, liberalism, conservatism, Communism, Buddhism, Americanism, for an ism is only another way of despairing of the truth’ (273).

Nevertheless, even though the literal leaps and bounds of Will from the finale of *The Last Gentleman* are now being realized figuratively in his intellectual and spiritual movement, in Will’s pursuit of truth Percy tempers this movement with a complicating detail: Will discovers that his fugues, collapses, and bouts of amnesia are, perhaps, due to Hausmann’s Syndrome, a ‘petit-mal temporal-lobe epilepsy which is characterized by typical symptoms’, that his doctor says can be easily controlled by medication (302). The discovery introduces the possibility that all of Will’s so-called delusions are, perhaps, the symptoms of chemical imbalance, and nothing more. Will’s second doctor, Dr. Ellis, states, ‘As I recalled, Dr. Hausmann listed such items as depression, fugues, certain delusions, sexual dysfunction alternating between impotence and satyriasis, hypertension, and what he called *wahnsinnige Sehnsucht*—I rather like that. It means inappropriate longing’ (302). Moreover, ‘It is nothing other than the hydrogen ion, a single nucleus of one proton, not even an electron. Isn’t that intriguing? That the most complex symptoms,

wahnsinnige Sehnsucht, inappropriate longings, depression and such, can be cured by a single proton? Apparently it all comes down to pH' (303).

So is the 'Jewish question' Will perceived an apprehension of an un-subsumable sign from God, or, in fact, an effect of chemical imbalance? Dr. Ellis asks a series of questions, each designed to test Will's sanity:

'The hydrogen ion may even solve the Jewish question. As a matter of fact, why don't we try it for size—you're on hydrogen now, your blood pH is exactly seven point four, normal. Is Groucho Marx dead or alive?'

'Dead'.

'Right. Now what happened to the Jews in North Carolina?'

'The Jews?' he said, frowning.

'Yes, the Jews'.

'Why, nothing. They're going about their business as usual, I suppose'.

'Right. And what about that Jewish girl in high school you were raving about last night?'

'What Jewish girl?'

'What about the Jewish exodus?'

'What exodus?'

'What about your business in Georgia?'

'What business?' (305)

A moment later the narrator states, 'Yes, he felt exactly as he felt when he was drafted in the army, a dazed content and a mild curiosity. His life was out of his hands' (305).

How odd to be rescued, salvaged, converted by the hydrogen ion! a proton as simple as a billiard ball! Did it all come down to chemistry after all? Had he fallen down in a bunker, pounded the sand with his fist in a rage of longing for Ethen Rosenblum because his pH was 7.6? (306-307)

Will even wonders if his longing for Allie had been 'a hydrogen-ion deficiency, a *wahnsinnige Sehnsucht*?' (307). Point by point, Will reverses his earlier theory that the exodus of Jews from North Carolina was a theological sign. As it turns out, all of Will's theological and philosophical preoccupations can be dissolved by medication, indicating

that his malaise was not existential but chemical.¹³⁰ Will muses that he had thought he had ‘survived, and [...] did, almost’. He adds,

But now I have learned something and been surprised by it after all. Learned what? That he [Ed Barrett] didn’t miss me after all, that I thought I survived and I did but I’ve been dead of something ever since and didn’t know it until now. What a surprise. They were right after all. He was right. D’Lo was right. What a surprise. But is it not also a surprise that discovering you’ve been dead all these years, you should now feel somewhat alive? (324)

Will notes, ‘Ah, but there is a difference between feeling dead and not knowing it, and feeling dead and knowing it. Knowing it means there is a possibility of feeling alive though dead’ (324), echoes the epigraph in *The Moviegoer* that states that the ‘character of despair’ is that it is ‘unaware of being despair’. Will forgets to take his acid and consequently his pH level is high: ‘Again the past rose to haunt him and the future rose to beckon to him. Things took on significance’ (326).

Will re-joins Allie and they consider the possibility of a future life together. Will then hears the voice of his father, beckoning him to ‘Come, close it out before it closes you out...’ (337), and Will, in an act symbolic of his total repudiation of his father’s Stoic, suicidal legacy, removes the guns from the trunk of the Mercedes and pitches them into the gorge behind the Holiday Inn.¹³¹

Kobre states, ‘As he stands in a cold, clammy rain, laughing and dancing and kicking the tires of his Mercedes, his condemnation of the various forms of death—whether the bourgeois pieties of ‘Christendom’, rampant consumerism, astrology and other New Age faiths, or the obligations of marriage and family—and his insistence that

¹³⁰ In his essay ‘The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry’, Percy inquires: ‘Is psychiatry a biological science in which man is treated as an organism with instinctive drives and needs not utterly or qualitatively different from those of other organisms? Or is psychiatry a humanistic discipline which must take account of man as possessing a unique destiny by which he is oriented in a wholly different direction?’ (SSL 251-252).

¹³¹ As Kobre writes, ‘More so than anywhere else in Percy’s fiction, in *The Second Coming* his character’s struggle to sort through the voices that echo in his consciousness is a life-or-death matter. For if Will does not reject his father’s voice, he will succumb to the same despair that drove Ed Barrett to suicide’. Kobre, *Walker Percy’s Voices*, 170.

there is a third choice open to him, in addition to ‘death in life’ or a shotgun barrel in the mouth, are so impassioned and trenchant that we want to believe in Will’s victory over what he calls his own ‘death genes’ (274)’.¹³² Howland, in turn, writes that ‘The action, then, that begins with Will’s discarding the weapons culminates in his declaration that he will have it all, an exultant affirmation of life and love. Will’s quests have become one in this final passage. Will Barrett *wills* to have it all, Allie and marriage, the human intersubjective relationship, a community of people, and Father Weatherbee’s God, the One who has given him Allie to love’.¹³³

All signs point to Will growing involved in the lives of others, but questions of his beliefs remain unresolved and unanswered. Although Will tells Father Weatherbee that he is ‘not a believer’ and does ‘not wish to enter the church’ (357), he nevertheless claims that the Jews may be a sign of God’s continued presence on the Earth:

‘It may be true that they have not left North Carolina altogether as I had supposed. Yet their numbers are decreasing. In any event, the historical phenomenon of the Jews cannot be accounted for by historical or sociological theory. Accordingly, they may be said to be in some fashion or other a sign. Would you agree?’ (357)

Barrett then launches into the clearest formulation of the trajectory of a belief that any of Percy’s protagonists has yet set forth:

‘What I am suggesting is that though I am an unbeliever, it does not follow that your belief, the belief of the church, is untrue, that in fact it may be true, and if it is, the Jews may be the clue. Doesn’t Scripture tell us that salvation comes from the Jews? At any rate, the Jews are the common denominator between us. That is to say, I am not a believer but I believe I am on the track of something’. (358)

¹³² Ibid., 185.

¹³³ Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel’s Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy’s Novels* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990), 129.

Will is determined to see his pursuit arrive at some answer, some alternative to the options he has since seen in the novel from the adherents to conventional belief, whether Kitty or Jack Curl or Lewis Peckham. Nonetheless, there is no clear, unambiguous sign that Will will, in fact, convert to Roman Catholicism.

Kobre argues that Bakhtin's concept of unfinalizability dovetails with Percy's concept of the individual as *homo viator*: Both visions emphasize a certain inevitable incompleteness, an openness to all possibilities. In both, humanity is always 'on the move', on a search that will end only at death'.¹³⁴ Kobre continues, writing,

So it is fitting that the dominance of this vision at the end of *The Second Coming* should seem to cap the novelist's triumph over the moralist. For in renouncing his father's voice and perspective and instead assimilating Allie's, Will rejects the moralist's finalizing vision, which labels and judges, in favor of a more open, ambiguous vision. And though *The Second Coming* is in part a product of the moralist's vision—particularly in its depiction of the shallow, venal types who surround Will for much of the novel—its conclusion happily leaves us in a more ambiguous realm of indeterminacy and hope.¹³⁵

3.3 – Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome*

While *Love in the Ruins* opens with the grandiloquent declaration, 'Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A'. (3), the sequel, *The Thanatos Syndrome* begins with Tom's description of a peculiar pattern of behaviour emerging in the Feliciana Parish region: 'For some time now I have noticed that something strange is occurring in our region'. Tom continues, 'I have noticed it both in the patients I have treated and in ordinary encounters with people. At first there were only suspicions. But yesterday my suspicions were confirmed' (3). Tom says,

It began with little things, certain small clinical changes which I observed. Little things can be important. Even more important is the ability—call it knack, hunch, providence,

¹³⁴ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 193.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

good luck, whatever—to know what you are looking for and to put two and two together. A great scientist once said that genius consists not in making great discoveries but in seeing the connection between small discoveries.

Contrasted with his dramatic monologue about the end of the Western World in *Love in the Ruins*, one notices that the Tom of *The Thanatos Syndrome* is focused not on the cultural and religious landscape of the U.S. (and the South, specifically, as in *Love in the Ruins*), but on the very immediate details of a pathology case in Feliciana Parish. The contrast in the opening of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, when compared to the opening of its predecessor, signals a departure for both Tom as a character and Percy as an author. *The Thanatos Syndrome* unfolds from the opening page as a detective story, albeit one with strong political overtones.

A reader familiar with the grandiose prose of Tom's Jeremiad in the opening pages of *Love in the Ruins* will perhaps be surprised by the opposite pattern in the beginning of this novel. Rather than beginning with a grand, sweeping purview, accounting for the cultural dissolution of the United States, Tom in *The Thanatos Syndrome* begins with small, immediate details that he will eventually connect to a conspiracy, and an issue central to what Linda Hobson identifies as the Gnostic tendency in the U.S. to see human beings as perfectible through science.¹³⁶ In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy's vision becomes increasingly political, peaking in a sustained comparison between mid-twentieth-century American culture and the cultural currents at work in Weimar Germany. Kobre, as well, notes that 'Percy's last novel is a cautionary tale about the triumph of scientific abstraction in the late twentieth-century'.¹³⁷

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Tom no longer waxes-poetic on issues of Cartesian solipsism, angelism, bestialism, or liberal and conservative complaints. Tom is more direct, less confessional in his self-introduction. Tom introduces himself as the 'only poor

¹³⁶ Hobson, *Understanding*, 140.

¹³⁷ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 194.

physician in town, the only one who doesn't drive a Mercedes or a BMW', and continues on to bemoan the supersession of psychiatry and 'old-fashioned shrinks' by 'brain engineers, neuropharmacologists, chemists of the synapses'. After all, says Tom, 'If one can prescribe a chemical and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, why take on such a quixotic quest as pursuing the secret of one's very self?' (13). Tom has left his work in brain chemistry and adopted a role as a psychiatrist, as one who traffics in language rather than using his MOQUOL to measure the soul. Tom has only recently returned to work after spending time in prison for selling amphetamines and barbiturates to truck drivers in order to supplement his income.

The plot of *The Thanatos Syndrome* concerns Tom's discovery of the source behind the loss of inhibitions among his fellow citizens of Feliciana Parish. Several of his patients exhibit a reduction in sexual inhibitions, and are now able to compute complex equations with little difficulty – the side-effect being that there is a clear loss of the 'self', according to Tom (21-22). As his marriage begins to crumble, due in large part to the mutual infidelity of both Tom and his wife, Ellen, Tom continues his search to uncover the cause of the strange behaviour. In his investigations, Tom is aided by his cousin, Dr. Lucy Lipscomb. The two discover that Bob Comeaux and John Van Dorn are conducting an ambitious social experiment by putting high-sodium in the drinking water of Feliciana Parish, and this is leading to the strange shifts in behaviour of the region's inhabitants. Comeaux is the director of the Quality-of-Life Division at Fedville, and Van Dorn is an entrepreneur who designed the cooling towers at the nearby nuclear facility.

Comeaux and Van Dorn have discovered, thanks to Tom's scientific work in *Love in the Ruins*, that by putting high-sodium in the local water, they can curb the violence, depression, and malaise of the local population. The high-sodium also increases cognitive abilities, while decreasing sexual inhibitions. Comeaux wants Tom to come work at Fedville. Bob is aware that Tom is a brilliant pathologist, and it has come to his

knowledge that Tom is already beginning to suspect that something is amiss in Feliciana Parish. It is not until much later in the novel, however, that one realizes that Comeaux is behind the sodium experiment, along with Van Dorn.

Eventually, Tom comes to discover that the local boarding school, where his two children attend, has been harbouring a dark secret: the men and women running the school, including the locally and nationally esteemed Van Dorn, have been sexually molesting the children. The perpetrators make the children ingest the high-sodium water, which reduces their sexual inhibitions. By the end of the novel, Tom has brought to justice those involved in the cases of child molestation, and he and Ellen are reunited once again. The end of the novel features Tom at Mass, where the awkward, outspoken Father Smith launches into a long monologue about tenderness leading 'to the gas chamber', a clear allusion to O'Connor—although in a 1989 interview with Scott Walter, Percy says it was an unconscious allusion (*More Conversations* 229)—and the final pages feature Tom back in his office, practicing psychiatry once again.¹³⁸ Tom's patient Mickey Lafaye, who was his first patient to appear in the novel, returns for a psychiatric session, signaling the return of Tom's practice, perhaps even the reappearance of a stable income and steady home life.

Paul Elie writes of *The Thanatos Syndrome*,

The biggest breakthrough is Percy's discovery of plot, as significant a discovery as the discovery of the present tense in *The Moviegoer*. There is no telling whether he set out to write a thriller and supplied a plot or found plot inexorably leading him forward. Either way, one can feel a broad and

¹³⁸ Paul Elie writes, 'The remark—which is woven through the book—is a direct quote from Flannery O'Connor's essay about Mary Ann Long. In the absence of faith, O'Connor proposes, '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'. Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 458.

felicitous territory opening up before him as he submits to the discipline of making the parts depend on one another.¹³⁹

Francois Pitavy argues that, ‘On formal grounds, *The Thanatos Syndrome* is not Percy’s best piece of fiction’ (177), and that ‘despite its formal flaws, *The Thanatos Syndrome* may be regarded as Percy’s most didactic and also most ambitious piece of fiction; and precisely because of them, the author’s intentions stand out the more clearly’.¹⁴⁰ *The Thanatos Syndrome* paints a comic picture of Southern Christendom, although the comical element is not nearly as distinct as its predecessor, *Love in the Ruins*, where the comic and satiric vision of Percy was so pronounced that one had little difficulty discerning that everyone across the American political and religious spectrum, liberals and conservatives, Christians and atheists alike, were being lampooned. Here in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, however, the picture of Southern Christendom is less comic—the hint of science-fiction that flavoured *Love in the Ruins* is gone, as is More’s brilliant invention, the MOQUOL, and the novel is darkened considerably by the cases of sexual molestation. There is, nevertheless, continuity between the works—although no bubble cars, vehicles with one moving part, or a euthanasia clinic known as ‘Happy Isles’.

The continuity between the novels comes in the form of recurring characters last seen in *Love in the Ruins*. Some of the characters have, along with Tom, grown more jaded and less idealistic. Tom notes this trend in two of his ‘old friends’: ‘Ex-Jesuit Kev Kevin and ex-Maryknoller Debbie Boudreaux, who had long since abandoned belief in God, Jesus, the Devil, the Church, and suchlike in favour of belief in community, relevance, growth, and interpersonal relations, have now abandoned these beliefs as well’ (349). Both Ellen Oglethorpe and Max Gottlieb from *Love in the Ruins* appear in *The*

¹³⁹ Ibid., 457. Elie also writes that the structure of *The Thanatos Syndrome* owes a debt to films like *The China Syndrome*.

¹⁴⁰ Francois Pitavy, ‘Walker Percy’s Brave New World: *The Thanatos Syndrome*’, *Walker Percy: Philosopher and Novelist*, ed. by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 177-188 (p. 178).

Thanatos Syndrome, although both play minor roles during the action of the novel, just as Sutter plays a minor role in *The Second Coming*.

The other characters from *Love in the Ruins* that acted as counterpoints to Tom's religious self-consciousness have grown mute in *The Thanatos Syndrome*: Ellen Oglethorpe, once a cold Presbyterian, has since 'experienced a religious conversion', and, 'disaffected when the Southern and Northern Presbyterians, estranged since the Civil War, reunited after over a hundred years', joined an independent Presbyterian group, then became an Episcopalian, and is now with a 'Pentecostal sect'. Max Gottlieb, in turn, is no longer the atheist who sees the world so elegantly designed (like St. Aquinas, Tom said in *Love in the Ruins* (105)), but acts only as an occasional sounding-board for Tom and Comeaux.

Ultimately, Tom's journey in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is less explicitly religious than Will's in *The Second Coming*, as Tom never tries to force God's hand in revealing Himself, nor does he wrestle with the nature of belief or unbelief in such open terms as Will. The only time that Tom addresses his religious affiliation is briefly at the beginning of the novel, when Tom claims that he is 'only a Catholic in the remotest sense of the word', since he hasn't given 'religion two thoughts or been to Mass for years' (45-46). Tom has lapsed in his faith since his sincere but half-formed confession at the end of *Love in the Ruins*. Other than this brief aside, Tom never reflects on his own beliefs or religious questions, the work nevertheless features a clear of interest in the challenge inherent in modern (twentieth-century) belief, as language has undergone deprivation of meaning, according to Father Smith (117).

While Will operates as the catalyst for questions concerning belief in *The Second Coming*, it is up to a secondary character, Father Smith, to lay out the concerns with belief in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Father Smith emerges as the sole strong 'religious' voice from the homogenous wasteland of Southern Christendom. Father

Smith's belief, however, is more politically-oriented than, say, Val's, Lonnie's, or even atheists like Sutter and Lance. Val and Lonnie, despite the potential political and social implications of their beliefs, were interested in personal salvation and the individual before God. Father Smith, in contrast, expresses his anxiety about the possibility, or impossibility, of meaningful belief on a much larger scale, where the preservation of culture is at stake.

In one of the novel's more explicitly polemical scenes, Tom visits Father Smith in the fire watch-tower where Father Smith has sequestered himself to scan the horizon to watch for fires and perhaps witness the end of the world. The conversation that ensues between Tom and Father Smith touches on Percy's perennial theme of evacuated language. Father Smith says that he can longer preach since 'the words' no longer 'signify'. 'The words of the sermon, of the mass', asks Tom, 'don't signify?' While Father Smith concedes that 'the action [of Mass] does', in fact, still signify, it is the language that he considers to be the victim of a 'depriver'.

Father Smith asks Tom, 'Do you think it is possible that words could be deprived of their meaning?' Father Smith lists the words he fears have been evacuated: Words such as 'Tom, U.S.A., God, Simon, prayer, sin, heaven, world'.

Father Smith contends,

'It is not a question of belief or unbelief. Even if such things were all proved, if the existence of God, heaven, hell, sin were all proved as certainly as the distance to the sun is proved, it would make no difference, would it?'
'To whom?'
'To people! To unbelievers and the so-called believers'.
(117-118)

There remains a possibility for meaningful communication, however. One sign remains unevacuated of meaning, according to Father Smith. Father Smith presents his hypothesis that the Jews are an active sign of God's continued presence in the world. According to Father Smith, the word 'Jews' is a sign that remains unevacuated. He then

tests Tom by asking him to participate in a free-association exercise: Father Smith says ‘Irish’ and ‘Jews’, and asks Tom to respond with the first thing that comes to his mind.

Father Smith notes Tom’s reply and says,

‘What you associated with the word sign *Irish* were certain connotations, stereotypical Irish stuff in your head. Same for Negro. If I have said Spanish, you’d have said something like guitar, castanets, bullfights, and such. I have done the test on dozens. Thus, these word signs have been evacuated, deprived of meaning something real. Real persons. Not so with Jews’ (122)¹⁴¹

When one utters either the word ‘Jew’ or ‘Jews’, according to Father Smith, one associates particulars with the word, not stereotypes or abstractions. This means that while the majority of language has been vacated of meaning by overuse, there remains one sign that retains its meaning.¹⁴²

Father Smith adds,

‘Since the Jews were the original chosen people of God, a tribe of people who are still here, they are a sign of God’s presence which cannot be evacuated. Try to find a hole in that proof!’ (123)

Tom, however, does not find Father Smith’s argument compelling, and he worries that the priest is mentally unstable. Tom tells Father Smith that he will report that to the priest’s superior that Father Smith is too ill to be of use at the local church, and Father

¹⁴¹ Father Smith claims that the Jews are the only ‘sign of God’ which has not lost its meaning (123). Pitavy writes, ‘Contrary to what Father Smith implies, however, the depriver is no Satan. The *diabolos*, the slanderer of sense, who divorces the word from the thing, or the signifier from the signified, and man from himself, is man himself’ (Pitavy, ‘Walker Percy’s Brave New World’, 177).

¹⁴² Poteat continues, writing, ‘They remind us that to stand ‘before God’ is to be held accountable, accountable to the transcendent God *and therefore* to men. Simply put, the covenant makes it incumbent upon us to acknowledge our fellows as neighbors who, like ourselves, are accountable to God. This acknowledgment is not an abstract exercise but implies responsible action toward particular, historical others, each of whose face is a ‘sign’ of the covenant. Ellen. Chandra. Hudeen. Max Gottlieb. By contrast, when the covenant comes so attenuated that it no longer ‘signifies’, the imperative for responsible action is radically undermined and no longer governs our relation to our neighbor. What we have in its place is abstract feeling. What we have in its place is tenderness’. Patricia Lewis Poteat, ‘Walker Percy’s Brave New World: *The Thanatos Syndrome*’, *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, pp. 210-224 (p. 215).

Smith says that he appreciates Tom's 'frankness'. Father Smith then asks if he can be frank, in turn, to Tom. Father Smith's argument then takes a dramatic turn. In an excerpt that exemplifies the polemic of the novel, Father Smith states,

'You are a member of the first generation of doctors in the history of medicine to turn their backs on the oath of Hippocrates and kill millions of old useless people, unborn children, born malformed children, for the good of mankind—and to do so without a single murmur from one of you. Not a single letter of protest in the august *New England Journal of Medicine*'. (127)

Later, Tom visits Father Smith for a second time, after Tom has learned more about the nefarious activities of Comeaux and Van Dorn. In 'Father Smith's Confession', a fourteen page section that features Father Smith's story of visiting cousins in Germany in the 1930s, the younger Father Smith witnesses a debate between his cousin, Dr. Hans Jäger, a professor of psychiatry, and some of Dr. Jäger's colleagues.

There was much lively discussion in Dr. Jäger's house after the meetings, laughter, music, jokes, drinking, horseplay, and some real arguments. They were excited about a book, a small book I had never heard of, not by your Dr. Freud, but by a couple of fellows I never heard of, Drs. Hoche and Binding. I still have the copy Dr. Jäger gave me. It was called *The Release of the Destruction of Life Devoid of Value*.

A debate ensues, featuring arguments for and against the elimination of people who are 'useless', who suffer from 'mongolism, severe epilepsy, encephalitis, progressive neurological diseases', and other ailments (246). Father Smith concludes with the following:

'This is my confession. If I had been German not American, I would have joined him. I would not have joined the distinguished Weimar professors. I would not have joined the ruffian Sturmabteilung. I would not have matriculated at the University of Tübingen or Heidelberg. I would not have matriculated at Tulane, as I did, and joined the D.K.E.s. I would have gone to the Junkerschule, sworn the solemn oath of the Teutonic knights at Marienberg, and joined the Schutzstaffel. Listen. Do you hear me? *I would have joined him*'. (248-249)

At the end of his self-labelled confession, Father Smith connects his experiences in Germany to Tom's present predicament with Comeaux and Van Dorn.

'One question, Tom'.
'Yes?'
'What do you think?'
'Of what? The Nazis?'
'No. Your colleagues. The Louisiana Weimar psychiatrists',
he says ironically.
'I don't understand'.
'Never mind', he says quietly. (252)

John Edward Hardy, too, argues that Father Smith's confession 'smacks strongly of authorial *intrusion*'. Hardy adds that the reader 'may feel at first a bit put-upon in suspecting him of using Father Smith as a polemic mouthpiece'.¹⁴³

As William Rodney Allen argues, 'The powerful narrative-within-the-narrative entitled 'Father Smith's Confession' is unquestionably the centerpiece of Walker Percy's last novel . . .'.¹⁴⁴ Allen later adds that the confession's 'grim insistence that abortion is the logical precursor to genocide is both unfounded and at odds with novel's comic, even farcical ending'. Ultimately, says Allen, *The Thanatos Syndrome* demonstrates a 'shift in Percy's later writing away from fiction as philosophical quest and toward fiction as religious polemic'.¹⁴⁵

Tom asks Father Smith why he became a priest, to which Father Smith replies simply, 'What else?' Moments later, 'In the end one must choose—given the chance'. When Tom asks 'Choose what?' Father Smith replies, 'Life or death. What else?' (257). In an essay titled 'Why Are You a Catholic?', written three years after *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy writes that in light of all the alternatives, the Roman Catholic faith is the only viable option for preserving culture and the dignity of the individual (*SSL* 307). The

¹⁴³ John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 245.

¹⁴⁴ William Rodney Allen, "'Father Smith's Confession" in *The Thanatos Syndrome*', *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, ed. by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 189-198 (p. 189).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

arguments of the essay are strikingly similar to the arguments voiced by Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Percy writes that the late twentieth-century is ‘the most scientifically advanced, savage, democratic, inhuman, sentimental, murderous century in human imagination’ (309). Percy continues, writing that ‘Darwin, Newton, and Freud were theorists’, as were Marx, Stalin, Nietzsche, and Hitler. The latter group, however, specifically Hitler and Stalin, applied their theories of humankind politically and by consequence eliminated millions of people.

Before his ‘Confession’ in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Father Smith asks Tom a series of questions that utilize the same logic:

‘If you are a lover of Mankind in the abstract like Walt Whitman, who wished the best for Mankind, you will probably do no harm and might even write good poetry and give pleasure, right?’

‘Right’.

‘If you are a theorist of Mankind like Rousseau or Skinner, who believes he understands man’s brain and in the solitariness of his study or laboratory writes books on the subject, you are also probably harmless and might even contribute to human knowledge, right?’

‘Right’.

‘But if you put the two together, a lover of Mankind and a theorist of Mankind, what you’ve got now is Robespierre or Stalin or Hitler and the Terror, and millions dead for the good of Mankind. Right?’

‘Right’, I say indifferently. (129)

Father Smith’s argument proceeds from the premise that if one loves humankind in the abstract and is a theorist of humankind, one will end up a Robespierre, Stalin, or Hitler. The logic is that if one wants the absolute best for all humans, some portion of the population will have to suffer—and in Father Smith’s illustration, be done away with completely.

In ‘Why Are You a Catholic?’ Percy echoes Father Smith’s statement with a similar critique of American culture, stating that although Americans are ‘the nicest, most generous, and sentimental people on earth’, they have killed ‘more unborn children than any nation in history’. Percy adds, ‘Don’t forget that the Germans used to be the

friendliest, most sentimental people on earth', and that euthanasia, which is beginning to be performed in the United States, was not instituted by 'Nazis [...] but by the friendly democratic Germans of the Weimar Republic' (SSL 310).

Poteat writes,

Like Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, Father Smith is 'onto something'. What he is onto is not simply the machinations of the dangerously tenderhearted Comeaux and the demonically sensuous Van Dorn. Rather, in his own addled way, Father Smith diagnoses a complex cultural pathology of which the plots of Comeaux and others are but one outward and visible sign. The Holocaust, aimed at wiping out 'the only sign of God which has not been evacuated', is another (TS, 123). This pathology is nothing less than the death of spirit in Western culture. This is the subject of *The Thanatos Syndrome*.¹⁴⁶

Tom remains on the margins of this debate, however. Not until the conclusion of the work does he implicitly reject Van Dorn and Comeaux's visions of humanity and tentatively embrace Father Smith's. Father Smith's argument does not reflect the same form of participative belief that one sees in Val or Lonnie, for whom their moral failings are central concerns. Rather, Father Smith's confession implicates Tom, Van Dorn, Comeaux, and even modern medicine and attitudes toward abortion and euthanasia more than his own complicity with the Weimar psychiatrists and scientists. Notably, Tom does not join the conversation or argue with Father Smith. There is no room in these exchanges for Tom to register his own moral failings. Father Smith's confession dominates the novel's dialogue about the nature of meaningful belief and steers it away from the question of personal repentance, as seen in *Love in the Ruins*, toward larger, cultural-historical concerns, such as abortion and euthanasia.

¹⁴⁶ Poteat, Patricia Lewis, 'Pilgrim's Progress; or, A Few Night Thoughts on Tenderness and the Will to Power', *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, ed. by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, pp. 210-224 (p. 211).

At the beginning of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Tom is very much the outsider and spectator that typifies Percy's protagonists: during his time in prison, Tom came to the conclusion that 'most prisoners are ideologues', that 'both sides had compelling arguments' for and against 'religion, God, Israel, blacks, affirmative action, Nicaragua'. For Tom, however, it was always 'more natural [...] less boring, to listen than to argue'. The rage and emotion of the arguments intrigued him more than the content of the arguments. The debates over religion, race, and politics rarely arrive at any meaningful conclusion, both sides preoccupied with making their own points rather than listening to the opposing argument. 'It crossed my mind' says Tom, 'that people at war have the same need of each other. What would a passionate liberal or conservative do without the other?' (34). Both parties desperately need one another, says Tom, for if antagonism disappears, if the conditions for conflict are removed, 'an abyss opens'. Perhaps, people are afraid 'that if one does not argue there is nothing left'. In conclusion, Tom surmises, 'Is it not the case that something is better than nothing, arguing, violent disagreement, even war' (35). Tom, however, remains aloof and distant in such arguments, whether in listening to Father Smith's confession, or in his confrontation with Van Dorn (301-303).

So who is the Tom More of *The Thanatos Syndrome*? Tom claims that, like his fellow psychiatrists, and their shared mentor, Dr. Freud, the root of human suffering is in the psyche, and that through 'talking and listening', one can get at the root. But the art of psychiatry is obsolete in a world of neuropharmacology and 'brain engineers', according to Tom (130). Kobre writes that the shift in Tom's orientation, from the creator of the MOQUOL in *Love in the Ruins* to a practicing psychiatrist in *The Thanatos Syndrome* 'conveys the deeply human quality of Tom's orientation', although there is nothing at the conclusion of *Love in the Ruins* that would indicate this shift—the transformation is 'forced', according to Kobre:

Tom's new-found orientation is not a consequence of his prison stay, because the unpopularity of traditional analysis

first drove him to sell drugs. Nor is there anything at the end of *Love in the Ruins* to hint at the direction Tom's medical ethos will take when Percy returns to the character approximately fifteen years later.¹⁴⁷

At the conclusion of the novel, Tom confesses that he doesn't know what he thinks about his wife's speaking in tongues and newfound 'happiness with her Lord and Saviour', yet says that he accepts 'that she believes she has' been born-again (353).

The Thanatos Syndrome features fewer moments of religious self-inquiry than *The Second Coming* or any of Percy's previous novels do. Rather, *The Thanatos Syndrome* is driven by its plot and the unravelling of the mystery presented to Tom, not a 'search' (Binx in *The Moviegoer*), a quest for a father figure (Will in *The Last Gentleman*), a scientific and religious quest to heal the Cartesian split (Tom More in *Love in the Ruins*), an inverted quest for evil to prove or disprove God's existence (Lance in *Lancelot*), or the quest for God's existence in Southern Christendom (*The Second Coming*). In this way, *The Thanatos Syndrome* sets itself apart from all of Percy's earlier novels, and demonstrates a movement away from the idea-driven narratives of his other novels, and focuses on the specific action of determining the root cause (and reasons) behind the sodium-ion placed in the water system of Feliciana Parish.

Tom spends little time dialoguing with those that embody invested beliefs—with the clear exception of Father Smith, whose own criticisms of American culture are less specific than they are in *Love in the Ruins*. Tom makes no pronouncements on belief, either of his own or that of others to the extent that he does in *Love in the Ruins*. Nor are there the ample characterizations in *The Thanatos Syndrome* as there are in *Love in the Ruins*: no posters in front of churches that picture Christ holding a white-picket fence in his hand, or references to Christian Proctological Associations. (83-84) *The Thanatos Syndrome*, in turn, features only the briefest conversations between Tom and Bob, and later Tom and

¹⁴⁷ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 198-199.

Van Dorn, where the terms of the debate—between Christian and secular humanist—are set.

The clear formulation of Father Smith's religious and cultural vision stands in contrast to Tom's own articulation—or absence of articulation—of his beliefs. In the only scene where Tom directly addresses his current religious beliefs, Tom is visited by Kev Kevin and Debbie Boudreaux. Tom's 'two old friends' are now married in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and come visit Tom for marriage counselling. Kev now possesses a 'faddish Hinduism', and Debbie's speech is now inundated with 'everlasting talk about dialoguing, creativity, community, intersubjectivity, centeredness (her favorite word, *centeredness*' and 'her new word, *empowerment*'. Tom muses, 'What would happen . . . if I asked them what they thought about God and sin?' (81). Tom is alarmed by the direction of his own thoughts, since he has 'had not two thoughts about God for years, let alone sin. Sin?' Tom reflects that his time in prison 'restored my humanity if not my faith', but that, significantly, 'I still don't know what to make of God, don't give Him, Her, It a second thought, but I make a good deal of people, give them considerable thought. Not because I'm more virtuous, but because I'm more curious. I listen to them carefully, amazed at the trouble they get into and how few quiet People are braver than one might expect' (81).

Tom explains that once upon a time he would have used his lapsometer to diagnose and treat his patients, but that 'there's such a thing as the psyche, I discovered'. Tom continues,

I became a psyche-iatrist, as I've said, a doctor of the soul, an old-style Freudian analyst, plus a dose of Adler and Jung. I discovered that it is not sex that terrifies people. It is that they are stuck with themselves. It is not knowing who they are or what to do with themselves. They are frightened out of their wits that they are not doing what, according to experts, books, films, TV, they are supposed to be doing. *They*, the experts, know, don't they? (88)

Tom says that he became ‘somewhat simpleminded’, and developed a ‘private classification of people, a not exactly scientific taxonomy which I find useful in working with people. It fits or fitted nearly all the people I knew, neurotic people, so-called normal people’ (88). Tom adds, ‘According to my private classification, people are either bluebirds or jaybirds. Most women, it turns out, are bluebirds. Most men, by no means all, are jaybirds’ (88).

Tom continues,

It is not for me to say whether one should try to *be* happy—though it always struck me as an odd pursuit, like trying to be blue-eyed—or whether one should try to beat all the other jaybirds on the block. But it is my observation that neither pursuit succeeds very well. I only know that people who set their hearts on either usually end up seeing me or somebody like me, or having heart attacks, or climbing into a bottle. (89)

Other than this brief aside about his belief, however, the novel lacks the kind of self-inquiry that characterized Tom in *Love in the Ruins*, where he says, ‘I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all’ (6). In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, there is a diminished interest in personal belief and an increased interest in Christianity as the means to fight over-abstraction and what Percy perceived to be the western drive toward death and destruction.

At the conclusion of the novel, Father Smith stands before his congregation and declares that ‘The Great Prince Satan, the Depriver, is here’ to alarmed murmurs from the audience. Father Smith excoriates the doctors who perform abortions and those that have disposed of the ‘old, young. Born, unborn’, doctors who were, he concedes, ‘good fellows’ who had ‘their good reasons’. Nevertheless concludes that even good intentions and human tenderness can and do lead to ‘the gas chamber’ (359-360). There are two kinds of people, declares Father Smith, the one are ‘decent, tenderhearted, unbelieving,

philanthropic people' and the 'others are some preachers who tell the truth about the Lord but are themselves often rascals if not thieves'. Father Smith then states, 'What a generation! Believing thieves and decent unbelievers!' (360-361).

Father Smith invites Tom to help serve Mass on a routine basis, but Tom declines, claiming, 'that since I no longer was sure what I believe, didn't think much about religion, participation in Mass would seem to be deceitful' (363). Father Smith, in a comment that faintly conceals the promise of Tom's return to the Catholic Church, states 'It is only necessary to wait and to be of good heart' (363).

Perhaps in a move to sidestep accusations of polemic, the novel's Max Gottlieb hints that Father Smith is mentally ill, as Gottlieb diagnoses Father Smith with Alzheimer's, 'pointing out his strange harangues, his memory loss and disconnected speech—more and more now he is given to short gnomic utterances which grown even more gnomic and disconnected'. However, Tom disagrees, and points to the CORTscans which indicated that 'no loss of cerebral tissue and PETscans no loss of cerebral function', thus leaving the reader with an ambiguous stance toward Father Smith's rants: is the man crazy, or is he on to something? (366-367).

The conclusion of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, with Mickey LaFaye's return to treatment, provides what Hardy calls a 'beginning, not wholly ending',¹⁴⁸ and what Kobre and Howland conclude is a restoration of intersubjective relationships with Tom.¹⁴⁹ Pridgen compares the ending of *Love in the Ruins* with the conclusion of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and writes that *The Thanatos Syndrome* does not feature the same 'experience of reconciliation' for Tom as it does in *Love in the Ruins*. The details of his aid with the hospice and the mass that Tom is 'at least beginning to open himself to the possibilities of the life that Father Smith has told him lies 'out there' beyond the aesthetic windowsill of

¹⁴⁸ John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 269.

¹⁴⁹ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 216; Howland, *Gift of the Other*, 152.

minds like Van Dorn's, Comeaux's, Dr. Jäger's, and Ellen's'. Pridgen further writes that Tom becomes a 'follower, albeit a tentative and uncertain one, of the sacramental way the priest represents'.¹⁵⁰

When Mickey LaFaye returns to Dr. More's office, she is anxious and very much her old self. Kobre writes,

No longer intoxicated by the heavy sodium, she [Mickey LaFaye] suffers her old anxieties again. And yet, as noted earlier, for Tom such anxiety is not an aberration but the condition of humanity. Moreover, as Tom and Mickey take up their work again on the novel's last pages, once more trying to understand the dream that has troubled her for years, Percy again affirms the simple value of talking and listening, of dialogue. If there is hope for the human community, he seems to suggest, it is only in the interaction between one troubled human and another.¹⁵¹

Howland argues that Percy draws the reader into an intersubjective relationship by leaving the question of the mental stability of Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome* up to the reader. Howland writes, 'Percy leaves the matter open, trusting that some of his readers will become the others to whom he wants to speak'.¹⁵²

Pridgen, too, affirms the hints of Tom's restoration:

While he does not experience the reconciliation he enjoys at the end of *Love in the Ruins*, Tom's work at the hospice and his assistance to Father Smith at the mass and at the fire tower (*TS*, 363, 367) suggest that Tom at the end of the novel is at least beginning to open himself to the possibilities of the life that Father Smith has told him lies 'out there' beyond the aesthetic windowsill of minds like Van Dorn's, Comeaux's, Dr. Jäger's, and Ellen's.¹⁵³

The Thanatos Syndrome features fewer conversations about belief, about categories of belief and unbelief, and assignment of quirks or characteristics to members of Protestant denominations—features that characterize Percy's earlier work. Nevertheless, the work does represent two of Percy's perennial concerns: the evacuation

¹⁵⁰ Pridgen, *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes*, 227.

¹⁵¹ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 216.

¹⁵² Howland, *Gift of the Other*, 152.153.

¹⁵³ Pridgen, *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes*, 227.

of language and widespread, vacuous belief. The question here is not strictly Percy's cultural-historical concerns, but the techniques he employs that demonstrate a shift in his craft. Several scholars have noted this shift in Percy's craft.

L. Lamar Nisly writes,

Percy does seem in this novel to feel the need to be more explicit in his indictment of the society's wrong-headedness and in his affirmation of where people must turn to avert this crisis. Perhaps after a career of standing on the margins, satirically pointing out problems and hoping that people will choose God to fill the space that he rhetorically clears through these attacks, Percy felt the need in his final novel to be more direct about the belief people should embrace.¹⁵⁴

Hawkins observes that 'for anyone who knows Percy's work, in other words, it is impossible to ignore the evidence that the priest is actually the author in comic disguise or to escape the impression that we are being taught an old lesson'.¹⁵⁵ Kobre, as well, labels *The Thanatos Syndrome* as a 'cautionary tale about the triumph of scientific abstraction in the late twentieth century'. Further, 'Percy's last novel is clearly designed to articulate an explicit moral statement, and as a consequence the dialogic qualities of his other novels are subdued here. What takes precedence in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is not the anguished microdialogue of the protagonist—who here is an older and somewhat chastened Tom More—but the careful construction of the plot'.¹⁵⁶

What Nisly, Hawkins, and Kobre diagnose is the increasingly direct mode with which Percy addresses his concerns with various cultural and historical issues. Moreover, what one can identify in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is the absence of meaningful belief in the dialogues and actions featured in the novel. The focus is not on Tom's internal conflict, of

¹⁵⁴ L. Lamar Nisly, *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics, and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Constructions of Audience and Tone in O'Connor, Gautreaux, and Percy* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), 184.

¹⁵⁵ Peter Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2004), 80.

¹⁵⁶ Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 194.

living out a committed belief, but of the political implications of Van Dorn and Comeaux's view of humanity.

3.4 – Conclusion

From Percy's first published work, *The Moviegoer*, to his final two novels, *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy places his protagonists in landscapes of widespread conventional belief. As a novelist, Percy satirizes the vacuity of the conventional belief of the South, and while his target may remain the same throughout all of his works, his technique of dramatizing belief shifts: In *The Moviegoer*, Binx approaches the topic of vacuous belief by lampooning the submissions to the radio program *This I Believe*; Will in *The Last Gentleman* acts as a receptive audience to vapid conversations about belief with Forney Aiken and Rita, and speaks to both Sutter and Val, the novel's two 'religious' characters; in *Love in the Ruins* the satire emerges in the secondary characters who strike the audience as comic types rather than compelling, well-sketched characters. *Lancelot* departs from the established pattern of satirizing the predominantly Protestant South, although Lance, too, excoriates the Billy Grahams who have bedded down with the Richard Nixons in a clear censure of the 'happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican' South that appears in *The Last Gentleman* and elsewhere (LG 185).

Rather than employing a former mode of addressing meaningful belief, as he does in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* with modelling participative belief in religious characters, or utilizing a more direct first-person account of personal moral failures as in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*, Percy's mode in *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* shifts from dramatizing belief through dialogue, decisions, and motifs of distance, and instead relies on a more discursive and polemical method. Even in *The*

Second Coming, where Will clearly wrestles with meaningful belief in a region of universal belief, the technique employed in the novel is not one of dialogue teased out over the course of the work, but of long, expansive sections of text that lay out the novel's concerns with belief in an explicit and direct way. Here Will claims that he is surrounded 'by two classes of maniacs', the believers and unbelievers, the former who 'think they know the reason' for human unhappiness, but 'act for all the world as if they don't', and the latter, 'who don't know the reason and don't care if they don't' (190).

While Will in *The Second Coming* does, much like Tom (in *Love in the Ruins*) and Lance in their journeys, begin a project to merge what he believes with how he lives his life, his mode of doing so is overshadowed by the lengthy polemics he writes in letters to Sutter. Tom in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, in turn, does not engage in a project or quest, as earlier protagonists do, and may be overshadowed by the voice of Percy, whose cultural-historical concerns emerge in the form of Father Smith's stories, confession, and novel-ending homily. The rants of Will and Father Smith would, perhaps, be more convincing if one did not hear the voice of the novelist behind the voices of the characters. While Sutter and Lance may have engaged in long-winded rants, they nevertheless never sounded so close to the voice of Percy that one catches in Percy's essays and interviews.

In terms of dramatizing or displaying belief, the focal point for both novels is extended rants. Unlike *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, Percy's final novels do not feature modelled belief and decisions. *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* feature lengthy and direct excoriation of vacuous belief, as featured in Will's letters to Sutter in *The Second Coming*, and Father Smith's argument in *The Thanatos Syndrome* that abortion and euthanasia in the United States is a shadow of the ills of pre-Nazi Weimar Republic Germany.

The Second Coming, with Will 'surrounded by [a] 100% so-called Christian society', features the strongest exemplars of conventional belief, both within Southern

Christendom, with Jack Curl, and without, in Lewis Peckham. The technique Percy uses in earlier novels to expose the inanities of the predominant form of belief, conventional belief, of placing the protagonist in the middle of a region where attempts at uncovering or possessing meaningful belief are constantly frustrated and belied, is replaced in *The Second Coming* with a more direct technique of Will's cry of denunciation of all forms of isms and asms.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the expressions of agony over belief and unbelief in conflict, as seen in characters like Tom in *Love in the Ruins* or Will in *The Second Coming*, are notably absent. The one character that appears to be aware of the challenges of religious belief, specifically in a region of widespread belief, is Father Smith, whose homily in the novel resembles Will Barrett's long-winded denunciation of forms of belief and unbelief in the South in *The Second Coming*, in its directness and absence of competing voices from non-Catholics or staunch atheist or Stoics, and a clear lack of dramatic form captured in the action of the novel, as one saw in Percy's earlier four novels.

Even though the characterization of conventional belief is more pronounced in *The Second Coming*, and between Will and Father Smith there is no shortage of explicit denunciation of the vacuous belief of the South—and for Father Smith, the entire Western world—there remains a lack of clarity as to the final theological systems that Will and Tom embrace. While Will appears close to entering the church, and Tom returns to his practice and domestic routine, both Will and Tom do not appear as certain, assured Christian converts, but searchers on the way.

Consistent with Percy's technique in his earlier novels, however, is his use of endings that never indicate a religious conversion for his protagonists. Will is positioned at a liminal state, and appears on the verge of a conversion, although the text tempers such a religious commitment with Will's admission that he is not a believer. Nevertheless, Will

observes that what the church proposes to be true may be true. At this time he simply does not know.

Tom More occasionally helps Father Smith perform mass, and even catches himself thinking in similar patterns as Father Smith. But just as Will's sudden realizations, transformation, and projects can be dismissed as symptoms of his pH deficiency, so too can the odd theories of Father Smith, who Max Gottlieb believes has Alzheimer's: Tom says, 'I disagreed, pointing out that his CORTscans showed no loss of cerebral tissue and his PETscans no loss of cerebral function, and other tests were negative'. 'But there is no denying his strange behavior' (367).

What the reader is left with in these two final novels is a vision of belief in the twentieth-century that gains its momentum and heft not in the dramatic conflict of personalities, voices, worldviews, or conflict with the moral and spiritual failures of the self, but with a clear, direct summation of points of concern for Percy, the author, channelled through monologues by Will and Father Smith.

4. The Reader's Journey to Participation: The 'Space Odyssey' of *Lost in the Cosmos*

4.1 Conventional Belief in *Lost in the Cosmos*

In Percy's 1983 mock self-help book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy presents the reader with a series of existential quizzes, accompanied by the following description:

Twenty-Question Multiple-Choice Self-Help Quiz
to test your knowledge of the peculiar status of the self,
your self and other selves, in the Cosmos, and your
knowledge of what to do with your self in these, the last
years of the twentieth century [...] (2)

Lost in the Cosmos is both Percy's satirical response to the self-help books of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as Percy's rebuttal of the scientism of Carl Sagan and Sagan's

popular television series *Cosmos* (*More Conversations* 69, 111). For Percy, the self is fundamentally unknowable, a thesis he developed in his study of semiotics. All signs used to grasp the self will fail, since to define oneself comprehensibly requires the individual to stand outside his or her own historicity and experience, and label the self from an objective perspective.

The quizzes in *Lost in the Cosmos* include such topics as ‘The Amnesic Self: Why the Self Wants to Get Rid of Itself’, ‘The Fearful Self: Why the Self is so Afraid of Being Found Out’, and ‘The Bored Self: Why the Self is the only Object in the Cosmos which Gets Bored’. Each quiz raises a question and provides a series of possible conclusions that represent various theoretical standpoints.

For example, in ‘The Bored Self’, Percy answers ‘*Why the Self is the only Object in the Cosmos which Gets Bored*’ (70) with the following: Perhaps no one was bored before the word ‘bored’ entered the English language in the eighteenth-century, or people were bored but had no word for it; perhaps no one was bored because they lacked free time, being too busy with survival to grow discontented with life; or the self cannot be accounted for by an objective, positivistic view of the world, as the self, so resistant to definition and categorization, will always be a ‘leftover’ of any positivistic summary of the material world that alienates the self. In addition, to account for the plethora of experts in every arena of modern life, is the self bored because ‘the self yields up plenary claims to every sector of the world to the respective experts and claimants of these sectors, and that such a surrender leads to an impoverishment which must be called by some other name, e.g., boredom?’ Finally, a possible explanation of boredom is that humans once understood their place in the universe through myth and religion ‘as [...] creature[s] of God’, but since humankind ‘now has the means of understanding the Cosmos through positive science but not itself because the self cannot be grasped by positive science, [...]

therefore the self can perceive itself only as a ghost in a machine?' (70-71). The reader is then asked to take his or her pick among the options.

Lost in the Cosmos is composed of three sections, the first of which is the series of quizzes that 'demonstrate the queerness of the self', according to Michael Allen Mikolajczak in 'A Home That is Hope': Lost Cove, Tennessee'.¹⁵⁷ The quizzes are followed by a semiotic primer, which further advances Percy's thesis that language is the key to making sense of human ontology. The final section features two space odysseys that once again insert the reader into situations where the reader must decide upon a view of human nature and a corresponding course of action where the stakes are high—and the fate of humankind rests on the reader's choice.

The first story, 'Space Odyssey (I)' depicts a starship that searches for signs of intelligent life in outer space; the second, 'Space Odyssey (II)', traces the journey of a group of astronauts who investigate what may or may not be an extra-terrestrial signal, only to find no source to the message, and return to earth to find their home decimated by nuclear war. Both stories link back to the Donahue sketch, which suggests that the end of the world is nigh, and both address concerns central to *Lost in the Cosmos* and Percy's novels and essays. Such concerns include the unhappiness of twentieth-century humans, Americans specifically, despite their basic human needs being met; the oddness of human language and the uniquely human ability to traffic in symbols; and the ever-present scientist or academic who claims to understand humankind and human ills better than the individual, who relinquishes the authority of his or her predicament to one who can explain it away.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Michael Allen Mikolajczak, "'A Home That is Hope': Lost Cove, Tennessee', *Renascence*, 50.3-4 (Spring/Summer 1998), 299-316 (p. 78).

¹⁵⁸ Tom More in *The Thanatos Syndrome* explains that what terrifies people is 'that they are stuck with themselves', and that they fear 'not knowing who they are or what to do with themselves'. Moreover, Tom adds, people 'are frightened out of their wits that they are not doing what, according to experts, books, films, TV, they are supposed to be doing. They, the experts, know, don't they?' (TS 88).

Most prominent through the work is the pressing sense of humankind's misery and inability to grasp its own nature and ontology. There are numerous theories presented in *Lost in the Cosmos* that examine why the cosmos exists, why humans are the only creatures to grow depressed and commit suicide, and why the individual is in constant search of the expert or scientist who can explain to the individual why he or she feels bad in a time of plenty. Mikolajczak succinctly summarizes the condition of the twentieth-century individual with whom Percy is concerned:

The self experiences itself more often than not, in misery—as nothing, fearful, misplaced, never satisfied (promiscuous), envious, bored, depressed, and fundamentally impoverished. Yet its misery makes no empirical or rational sense. Given our washing machines, refrigerators, electric blankets, stereos and televisions, surgical and dental sophistication, capacity to circle the globe with only the minor discomfort of jet lag, the self should feel much better than it does. The source of human misery is the self: 'As soon as the self becomes self-conscious—that is, aware of its own unique unformulability in its world of signs—from that moment forward, it cannot escape the predicament of its placement in the world' (109).¹⁵⁹

And while *Lost in the Cosmos*, in some form, sets out to address the issue of the source of human misery, there remains another dimension to the work that has as of yet gone unexplored in criticism on *Lost in the Cosmos*—that is, the way *Lost in the Cosmos*, and specifically the two space odysseys that conclude the work, continues Percy's dialogue about the nature of meaningful belief, and emphasizes meaningful belief as a lived-out expression of commitment, rather than an assent to a conventional, familiar idea or dogma.

In Ralph Wood's study *The Comedy of Redemption*, the author argues that *The Moviegoer* 'aims at satirically awakening the reader, and finally the narrator himself, to

¹⁵⁹ Mikolajczak, 'A Home That is Hope', 83.

our shared but unacknowledged despair'.¹⁶⁰ Wood conceives of *The Moviegoer* as an attempt to 'awaken the reader', and as I argue, *Lost in the Cosmos* acts in a similar function of rousing the reader. In *Lost in the Cosmos*, specifically in the two space stories, Percy prods the reader with questions that link belief to action, and asks the reader to make life-changing decisions, the outcome of which are ultimately uncertain. There are several competing options, whether admitting to the need for external aid, following a fellow survivor to a new planet to begin a civilization free from organized religion, or to resurrect the Catholic Church in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. All of these scenarios are accompanied with potential answers and responses, but no single answer appears to remove any doubt or uncertainty as to the root cause of human malaise, or provides an appropriate solution to humankind's social and spiritual ills.

Regardless of whether or not the reader sides with Percy's explicitly Roman Catholic vision of the world, or whether the reader joins scientifically-minded atheists and secular humanists, the reader has made a committed decision that reflects a lived expression of his or her belief. While the reader's choice for a response may not reflect Percy's putative understanding of the human condition, the reader nevertheless embraces a choice that moves the reader toward participative belief and away from a conventional form of belief. Each response to the narratives in the space odysseys reflects an implied concern with, for example, the ramifications of God's existence or non-existence, or whether good and evil can be understood in scientific categories.

Although Percy's putative aim is to guide the reader to a recognition of need from an external source (specifically the Judeo-Christian God, initially, and then the Roman Catholic faith), Percy nevertheless packages each question and result as committed attempts to address the issue of human alienation. No single answer completely reverses

¹⁶⁰ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 158.

the alienated human condition, but each nevertheless showcases an attempt to do something meaningful about the fallen nature of humankind. In the final two space odysseys, the reader opens him or herself up to the failure of his or her choices, exposing one to the inability of the proposed solution to effectively reverse alienation, conflict, and malaise. In this way, Percy communicates a vision of meaningful belief that stands in contrast to a detached, non-committed mode of belief. The participative belief that Percy models for the reader in *Lost in the Cosmos* is one in which uncertainty attends the reader's decisions, as no choice will completely resolve or answer questions posed through the text, but only move the reader toward participation in the questions of meaningful belief.

In his *Faith and Reality*, Marcel outlines a belief that 'absorbs most fully all the powers of your being', just as Percy writes that a 'radical bond' is a 'passionate conviction about man's nature, the world, and man's obligation' in the world (*MG* 103). In their own ways, both Percy and Marcel explore meaningful belief as a belief that is not just an individual's interest in the cognitive and theoretical, but in the rooted, lived expression of that belief. In the context of *Lost in the Cosmos*, this 'passionate conviction' is, I argue, the effect to which Percy asks numerous questions, poses numerous philosophical quandaries, and links in the Space Odysseys issues of belief, whether humankind is alienated and needs help from some outside source, with carrying out that belief in a consonant way. As Marcel writes, 'If I *believe in*, I *rally to*; with that sort of interior gathering of oneself which the act of rallying implies' (*MB* 2 78). The questions at the conclusions of 'Space Odyssey (I)' and 'Space Odyssey (II)' are models for Marcel's rallying and Percy's passionate conviction. One can see such lived expressions at work in characters such as Aunt Emily, Lonnie, Sutter, Val, and Lancelot.

In order to accomplish this aim of linking belief with action, *Lost in the Cosmos* strongly posits the presence of an active reader, what Andrew Hoogheem calls a reader-

protagonist,¹⁶¹ who may be reading from one of many faith perspectives: Roman Catholic, Protestant, atheist, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or any other faith or anti-faith, for that matter. In the vision of belief present in *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy is striking through the dichotomy of belief and unbelief, and in its place constructing a dichotomy of conventional cultural and participative belief. As Gallagher states, a system ‘is only there for a detached observer, a spectator’, whereas the individual, the ‘existing self’, is not a ‘spectator but a participant’.¹⁶² As I have argued in this study, a conventional belief, as it is depicted in Percy’s fiction, is free from uncertainty or doubt. This is due to the uncommitted nature of conventional belief, which does not feature a rallying of the individual to a cause or idea, or the transformation of one’s life to the principles of a religion or philosophical system. Participative belief, conversely, features an element of risk, as the individual makes a commitment to a person, system of thought, or deity, and has placed him or herself at the call of this belief.

As Hoogheem writes, ‘Percy’s answers throughout the book are maddeningly partial and evasive; its conclusion, by contrast, is often interpreted (sometimes triumphantly) as a simple, straightforward embrace of Christianity’. Hoogheem proceeds to argue that through *Lost in the Cosmos*’s ‘running critique of metanarratives’, the work itself conflicts with a reading that concludes that *Lost in the Cosmos* is a work of religious propaganda. Hoogheem continues, ‘Indeed, perhaps troublingly so, for at first glance Percy seems to be suggesting that all the self requires in order to be found in the Cosmos is to live more simply and accept the dogmas of the Catholic Church’.¹⁶³

Certainly, the work raises the question of Percy’s ultimate rhetorical aim in raising the questions that he does, since the reader will, no doubt, be searching for the answer

¹⁶¹ Andrew Hoogheem, ‘None of the Above: Walker Percy’s Postsecular Narrative’, *R&L*, 43.2 (Summer 2011), 91–109 (p. 100).

¹⁶² Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), xi.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 101.

within each quiz that best represents Percy's own voice and vision. Percy was never shy about his Roman Catholicism or his aims in crafting fiction. That being said, the concern in this essay is not in documenting the explicit rhetorical goals of Percy, but to analyse how his technique foregrounds participative belief. I aim to set aside what may be perceived as Percy's putative aim to promote Roman Catholicism, and instead focus on the techniques that, in line with Percy's technique in the novels, shifts toward how one believes, even if that belief is closer to the impassioned atheism of Aunt Emily or Sutter Vaught, for instance, and not solely what one believes.

4.2 *Lost in the Cosmos: Martians and Time Travellers on the Phil Donahue Show*

When a Cosmic Stranger makes a surprise visit to the Phil Donahue show—which is also visited by John Calvin and Colonel John Pelham—the Cosmic Stranger presents some disconcerting news: 'I am here to tell you three things: what is going to happen, what I am going to do, and what you can do'. The Stranger then sets forth a summary of future events, which will begin with a 'twenty-megaton airburst one mile above the University of Chicago, the very site where your first chain reaction was produced'. From there, 'Every American city and town will be hit. You will lose plus-minus 160 million immediately, plus-minus 50 million later'.

Ordered to collect a specimen of the Death Dealer known as man, the Cosmic Stranger will return to his home to

'Study it toward the end of determining the nature of your disorder. [...] Then perhaps we can determine whether your disorder is a result of some peculiar earth environmental factor or whether you are a malignant sport, a genetic accident, the consequence of what you would have called, quite accurately, in an earlier time an MD—*mutatio diabolica*, a diabolical mutation'.

'Finally', says the Cosmic Stranger, 'here's what you can do',

‘It is of no consequence to us whether you do it or not, because you will no longer be a threat to anyone. This is only a small gesture of goodwill to a remnant of you who may survive and who may have the chance to start all over—though you will probably repeat the same mistake. We have been students of your climatology for years. I have here a current read-out and prediction of the prevailing wind directions and fallout patterns for the next two weeks. It so happens that the place nearest you which will escape all effects of both blast and fallout is the community of Lost Cove, Tennessee. We do not anticipate a stampede to Tennessee. Our projection is that very few of you here and you out there in radio land will attach credibility to this message. But the few of you who do may wish to use this information. There is a cave there, corn, grits, collard greens, and smoked sausage in abundance’. (55-56)

The chapter concludes with the following:

Question: If you heard this Donahue Show, would you head for Lost Cove, Tennessee?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No

(CHECK ONE)

The reader of *Lost in the Cosmos* is privy to something the audience member of the Donahue show is not, and that is that the appearance of John Calvin and Colonel Pelham is, in all likelihood, more than just a prank featuring a pair of costumed actors, but a strange time-warp that has brought together several philosophically and theologically disparate voices to speak into the madness of the twentieth-century. Consequently, the questions throughout *Lost in the Cosmos* are, like the question which concludes the Phil Donahue chapter, questions which point to the life-altering consequences of selection, whether in terms of action (packing up one’s life and moving to Lost Cove, Tennessee) or belief (seeing human alienation as a condition of economics, or seeing alienation as a sign for humankind’s need for external aid).

Other quizzes operate much in the same way: Does the reader select a letter choice and exclude other possibilities, even when the other choices may seem sensible in their own way? The question of ‘The Depressed Self’ inquires ‘Whether the Self is Depressed

because there is Something Wrong with it or whether Depression is a Normal Response to a Deranged World' (73). In this section, Percy asks whether depression is a symptom, and then provides several options: That depression is (a) due to life being more difficult, 'complex, and stressful than it has ever been', and therefore a natural response to the demands of modern life; or (e) because 'belief in God and religion has declined', and man's sense of place in the 'Chain of Being' has been lost, drawing one away from a sense of one's role and place in life; perhaps (g) because

The self, despite an embarrassment of riches, is in fact impoverished and deprived, like Lazarus at the feast, having suffered a radical deprivation and loss of sovereignty? With the multiplication of technologies and the ascendance of experts and expertise in all fields, the self has consented to the expropriation of every sector of life by its appropriate expert—even the expropriation of its, the self's, own life. 'I'm depressed, Doctor. What's wrong with me? If you are not an expert in the field, a doctor of depression, can you refer me to one?'

Or, finally (h), 'Because modern life is enough to depress anybody? Any person, man, woman, or child, who is not depressed by the nuclear arms race, by the modern city, by family life in the exurb, suburb, apartment, villa, and later in a retirement home, is himself deranged'. Again, the conclusion of the quiz is punctuated by '(CHECK ONE OR MORE)'.

If one borrows Percy's assumption that 'man is alienated by the nature of his being here', one opens *Lost in the Cosmos* as a reader who is already alienated by default in being a human being. The individual is, according to Percy 'as a stranger and as a pilgrim, which is the way alienation is conceived in my books' (*Conversations* 28-29). Therefore, anyone who picks up *Lost in the Cosmos* is alienated by default--the crucial question is, like the inquiry from PC3 to the astronaut in Percy's 'Space Odyssey (I)', whether or not the reader-protagonist recognizes her or his alienation and need for help—which I explore in the next section. Will the individual claim that humans are perfectible, given proper advances in scientific and sociological theory? Is such a comprehensive knowledge of

human beings and human behaviour possible? Or will the reader instead recognize the limits of knowledge, that one can never step outside of oneself, and see one from a truly objective vantage point. Such a realization, claims Percy, will guide the reader, although this effect is by no means guaranteed, to a place where the world is no longer viewed as an object, from which the self has been removed or abstracted.

In *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, Binx and Will move from lives of passive spectatorship, from Binx's avid film-going and comparisons with film stars, and Will's voyeurism, whether by means of the telescope or eavesdropping, to a place not entirely determined, whether a turning to Roman Catholicism or fulfilment through the embrace of intersubjective relationships, but nonetheless they have moved from their inherited, cultural belief to a more engaged mode of existence. For Tom and Lance in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*, respectively, they see the necessity of reconciling their beliefs with their actions (or works), and embody a more direct and self-aware version of participative belief: The concern of the individual for the nature and demands of his belief—particularly those that are metaphysical in nature, that feature 'a radical bond', as Percy would say in relation to a religious concern. Such concerns are captured aptly in the two Space Odysseys in *Lost in the Cosmos*. The faux-Donahue show and assorted quizzes set the stage for the final two sections of *Lost in the Cosmos*, the two space Odysseys. Percy is setting the stage for the two space odysseys with these questions. While all of the inquiries have to do with the unformulability of the self, the pattern that Percy constructs in the quizzes and sketches is that such issues of belief are not to be taken as objective questions that have no bearing on the individual and the fabric of his or her life, but as personal, urgent questions that should shape how one lives. Early decisions in *Lost in the Cosmos* have minor repercussions and relatively small stakes; later decisions in the work feature implications that are comparatively larger and grandiose.

4.3 – *Lost in the Cosmos*: ‘Spacey Odyssey (I)’

In the second to last section of *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy relates a brief ‘Space Odyssey’, wherein a starship from earth is exploring among the stars, searching for signs of extra-terrestrial intelligence. ‘The objective of the starship is to exchange information with other civilizations comparable with or superior to our own’ (203). The placement of this story in space, with the possible encounter with a great life-form, acts as a reified, dramatized version of the quest for meaning of Percy’s alienated protagonists. Here, Percy presents alienation as a life away from earth. The individual on board a starship is alienated to the degree that he or she has cut ties with the world he or she left behind on earth.

On the journey the astronauts devise a linguistic system that to communicate with the extra-terrestrials (called PC3), and assigned consciousness (‘that property of a creature by which he draws attention to something, talks about it, or thinks about it’) by what Percy provisionally calls ‘C’ (205-206). The astronauts encounter several species of extra-terrestrial, but none is capable of communicating with the astronauts—that is, until the astronauts arrive at Proxima Centauri (PC3). The astronauts are contacted by the inhabitants of the planet, and asked to maintain an orbit until the PC3 inhabitants are able to learn more about the astronauts.

The PC3 then poses the enigmatic question, ‘What’s your C-type? Are you C1? C2? C3? Over and out. Come back’ (207). The earthship asks, ‘What do you mean by type of consciousness?’ (208). PC3 establishes that its consciousness is defined and made operational by its place as a consciousness among many conscious beings in a society, its use of symbols, and intersubjectivity. PC3 asks the earthship, ‘And you?’

EARTHSHIP: We’re much the same. Now may we request permission to—

PC3: Just a moment. It is still necessary to establish your C-type. We are C1s, that is, first-order consciousness. Through the centuries we have learned by painful experience that there are at least two other C-types, C2s and C3s. C1s and C3s are benign. C2s are dangerous. Which are you?

EARTHSHIP: Say again. What's the difference?

PC3: A C1 consciousness is a first-order consciousness, or what you would call a preternatural consciousness—according to the dictionary your computer transmitted.

EARTHSHIP: It is? Say again. Preternatural.

PC3: Well, something like the consciousness of a child grown mature and sophisticated but maintaining its innocence permanently and avoiding the malformations of self-consciousness, enjoying the beauty of our planet and each other and our science and art without weariness, boredom, fear, guilt, or shame. Like what you call the Helen Keller phenomenon.

(208-209)

The next section of *Lost in the Cosmos* thus outlines the PC3's, and Percy's, conception of human alienation. The reference to Helen Keller only further substantiates this connection, as Percy in *The Message in the Bottle* anchored his definition of consciousness in the experience of entering language, illustrated by the experience of Helen Keller.¹⁶⁴ PC3 explains that a C2 consciousness, unlike the other C-types, is in trouble but has not sought help. The C3 consciousness is a C2 consciousness that has recognized its fallenness, its 'predicament', and has looked for outside help, and in turn has received aid. When the Earthship inquires as to the meaning of *help*, PC3 elaborates: 'If a C1 meets with disaster, falls into a pit of itself, and becomes a C2, it must become aware of its sickness and seek a remedy in order to be restored to the preternaturality of C1. Well?' (212).

PC3 recognizes the astronauts as C2-types, and asks if the astronauts possess any knowledge of their predicament, and what expectations they have of a solution. PC3 asks if the astronauts have sought help, if help has 'arrived', and if the astronauts accepted it.

¹⁶⁴ See 'The Delta Factor', 'Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning', 'Interpersonal Process', and 'Semiotic and a Theory of Knowledge', all collected in *The Message in the Bottle*, which explore Helen Keller's acquisition of language and Percy's theory of human consciousness.

The bold reply of the Earthship is that there is no need to ask for help: 'We help ourselves. We are the triumphant emerging species on our planet, and though we are not as far advanced as you, we are not ashamed of our scientific and technological and artistic achievements' (215). The PC3, clearly identifying the astronauts as C2-type and thus a future threat to peace, sends the astronauts to another planet inhabited by yet another C2-type.

Percy then poses the question: 'If you were the second officer on the starship, how would you answer the question: Are you a C1? a C2? a C3?' (217). The implication is that all of these responses emphasize humankind's misplaced faith in its ability to resolve whatever predicament it may encounter. While the PC3 is able to identify a fundamental fallenness and brokenness in the C2 consciousness of the astronauts, it makes no difference if the PC3 shares the need with the astronauts directly (a mirror of Percy's role as a novelist, as a Kierkegaardian 'genius' as opposed to an 'apostle'). Percy reported that Kierkegaard's distinction freed him (Percy) from having to edify the reader or proselytize. The apostle alone has the authority to preach the gospel. The genius, however, needs only be true to art and representing reality.¹⁶⁵

The rhetorical barbs are directed toward any system of thought or belief that precludes humankind's need for external (and supernatural) aid—even if such aid, perhaps, does not even exist. The crucial element is the recognition of need. Even the Baptist, who believes that Christ has saved her 'once and for all', has excluded the possibility that she is still a pilgrim, still a wayfarer in constant need of deliverance and salvation. The scientist or rational humanist, a perennial target for Percy, is, in Percy's estimation, in stubborn denial over the incapacity of humans to save themselves from violence, destruction, and Thanatos.

Mikolajczak writes,

¹⁶⁵ See the Bradley R. Dewey interview with Percy, 'Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview', in *Conversations*, 113-114.

The qualities and activities which characterize the C2 are precisely the problems of the self, the subject of Percy's book; and the reason his book can legitimately claim to be 'the last self-help book' is that if one accepts—even just semiotically—the reality of first-order and second-order consciousness, then one realizes that the way out of the self cannot be through the self.¹⁶⁶

Percy has demonstrated in the early quizzes that questions of self are the most baffling because any attempt to express or capture the nature of the self in a concept is bound to leave out the self, who appears to stand outside the formulation of the self in sign. The belief systems that erect solutions to human alienation and malaise from either denial of alienation or simple cure-alls such as self-actualization or self-discovery, are not conscious of the nature of the individual's alienated state. Mikolajczak continues, 'That this is the point of this space odyssey—to reestablish original sin as the problem of the self—is further evident in the ETI asking the crew of the earthship if it wears clothing even within the controlled environment of the ship'.¹⁶⁷

Returning to Percy's 'Notes for a Novel About the End of the World', the Catholic and the atheist, assuming both demonstrate a serious interest in the inability of science to unravel human mystery, are both closer to grasping the unformulability of the self. Both, therefore, are in a position to take belief seriously, as a preoccupation that is, at root, a personal and intimate concern, something that the individual must come to terms with—as it cannot be understood and summarily dismissed by science and reason.

The key moment in 'Space Odyssey 1' is when the PC3 asks, 'My question is this. Clearly, you are a C2. We need to know how you stand vis-à-vis your predicament, that is, knowledge of it and remedy for it. E.g., do you have such knowledge? Have you requested help? Has help arrived? Did you accept help?' (215). PC3's question echoes Will Barrett's own claim that the truth seeker pursues the truth fearlessly, asking, '*What is missing? Where did it go? I won't have it! I won't have it! Why this sadness here? Don't stand for*

¹⁶⁶ Mikolajczak, 'A Home That is Hope', 87.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

it! Get up! Leave! Let the boat people sit down! Go live in a cave until you've found the thief who is robbing you. But at least protest. Stop, thief! What is missing? God? Find him!' (273).

4.4 - *Lost in the Cosmos: 'A Space Odyssey (II)*

In Percy's second story, 'A Space Odyssey (II)', which features the subtitle 'The Self Marooned in the Cosmos: *What do you do if there is no man Friday out there and we really are alone?*' Percy again calls attention to the connection between belief and action, between adjusting the way one lives according to the metaphysical content (or lack thereof) of one's belief.

'Space Odyssey (II)' tells the story of a group of astronauts returning from an 18-year interstellar journey, the goal of which, initially, was to investigate the source of a mysterious radio signal emanating from deep within space. The ship arrives at Barnard's Star, the alleged source of the signal, but discovers that the message was nothing more than magnetic signals from the magnetic fields of the nearby planets. The 'non-message [was] fiendishly close to a message' (237). Alas, the ship has also ceased receiving transmissions from earth, and the crew ponders the fate of those left behind. Their mission a failure, with nowhere else to go, they begin the journey back to earth. Yet again, Percy utilizes the dramatic situation of people departing earth as a search—becoming Martians, as it were—in order to illuminate what may be impossible for those ensconced in the modern life to see. The sum effect is to make strange one's seemingly normal life, and to reveal that life as alienation and dislocation.

Once the starship has returned from its eighteen year voyage, somewhere between 400 and 500 years on earth will have elapsed (226). The 'social combination' chosen by NASA for the Barnard P1 mission is a team of one man and three women (227-228). The

captain, Marcus Aurelius Schuyler, is like Percy's other protagonists, a 'wayward, wintry, and sardonic man, as wintry as his namesake—he was the sort who could sit in Robinson Hall listening to a lecture on the Battle of Verdun, gaze out the window at the tender green of the spring trees, suddenly reach a decision, close his book, and walk away forever, head for Colorado to fly'. Additionally, the captain's consciousness 'was reflected and folded in upon itself. Though he might appear as stolid and as steady as one of the old astronauts or a commercial airline pilot—even a little dumb—in fact he was very much conscious of doing just that: playing the unflappable captain' (228).

Marcus is a cynic who believes, like Freud, that 'there is no end to the mischief and hatred which men harbor deep in themselves', and that in the end '*thanatos* would like win over *eros*'. According to the narrator, Marcus knows that humans love war and destruction too much and that only a miracle will save humankind, although Marcus does not 'believe in miracles'. The narrator adds that Marcus was like 'a Christian who had lost his faith in everything but the Fall of man' (229).

The crew of the ship is comprised of Tiffany, an astrophysicist-psychotherapist (who is seen reading *The Complete Works of B.F. Skinner*); Kimberly, a linguist-semiotician who is fond of studying the Vedas; and Dr. Jane Smith, a medical officer. While Tiffany is the empirically-minded behaviourist, and Kimberly's philosophy has an eastern tinge to it, Dr. Jane Smith is a Methodist (according to her flight application). On their flight to Barnard, Kimberly and Tiffany bear three children: 'Carl Jung out of Tiffany, Siddhartha and Chomsky out of Kimberly, Sarah and Mary Ann out of Dr. Jane Smith' (238).

As they approach their home planet, the four astronauts speculate as to where to go when they touchdown. Tiffany hopes to end up in Oregon, a place familiar to her where she did anthropological studies on an Indian tribe, a place untouched by the fallout; Kimberly wants to go to Uxmal and decipher the glyphs; Dr. Jane Smith hopes to return to

Lost Cove, Tennessee—the very place the Cosmic Stranger advised the audience of the *Phil Donahue Show* to find refuge from the end of the world.

Once the ship touches down in Utah, 457 years have elapsed. The landscape is one of widespread devastation and rubble from some yet-unnamed catastrophe. Despite the extensive damage to the environment, there remain traces of life: a lone aspen tree provides shade, a buzzard flies above, and a green lizard appears. The narrator says, ‘The earth was alive’ (241). Soon the crew encounters the human survivors of World War III. One survivor, Aristarchus Jones, was able to calculate the arrival of the Copernicus 4 after finding the JPL documents in Pasadena, California (241). In addition, there is the abbot, Leibowitz, along with three monks. The survivors look, the narrator says, more like ‘visitors from space than the visitors from space’ (242-243).

The Captain asks about the fate of various nations, even inquires as to the fate of Christian churches. Leibowitz replies that there are a ‘few Catholics here and there in North America, a few churches, but no bishops’.

THE CAPTAIN: The Pope?

ABBOT: Don’t know.

DR. JANE SMITH: Any Methodists?

ABBOT: Very few Methodists.

DR. JANE SMITH: (*eyeing him*): Jews?

ABBOT (*reviving*): Yeah. A young Israeli came through here several years ago looking for his family in San Francisco. (243-244)

The dialogue, embodying Percy’s characteristic idiom, reflects Percy’s preoccupation with ideas over a realist representation of the behaviour and speech of his characters. The Abbot, Dr. Smith, and the Captain sound more like inventions in Sutter Vaught’s diary—characters inquiring after the Pope when these characters care little about Roman Catholicism in any other context. Additionally, Jane’s question about the presence of Jews in the post-apocalyptic wasteland reflects the interest in Jews that permeates Percy’s fiction, since Jews are, in Percy’s work, a sign of God’s continued work in the world.

Mikolajczak explains Percy’s use of Abbot Leibowitz,

It may seem curious that Percy, with all his inventiveness, needs to lift a character from another novel, but it is significant that Leibowitz answers Aristarchus Jones' utopian proposal. Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* recounts the rebuilding of civilization in the aftermath of nuclear war; important in this activity is the Order of Leibowitz which was founded to preserve scraps of the pre-Holocaust civilization. The earth and the Order move through a second medieval period, renaissance, and modern age, only to undergo yet again almost complete annihilation. The use of Walter Miller's character is an implicit indictment of utopian schemes.¹⁶⁸

Dr. Aristarchus bears alarming news: Since the inhabitants of earth have all become infertile from the radiation, it is up to Captain Smith and his fellow astronauts to begin the process of repopulating the earth; however, even this option has to be executed within a certain window, considering that Captain Smith may become infertile, too, due to his exposure to the radiation during his brief time on earth. Both Aristarchus and Leibowitz, however, are in possession of plans. Leibowitz and Jones, in tandem, tell Marcus: 'We have two plans. Two irreconcilable plans. Each involves you. I'm afraid you're going to have to decide' (245).

Jones proposes that they use the ship to travel to Europa, which they will call New Ionia, and create a new settlement. By founding the society and science and reason, they can avoid 'repeating the mistakes of the past'. Aristarchus envisions a society that is 'sexually free and peace-loving', where the 'sciences and arts can flourish freed from the superstitions and repressions of religion'. In addition, Jones suggests that the malformed earth children should remain on earth, since they will 'perpetuate genetic effects' (246-247).

Abbot Leibowitz, in turn, explains that he believes that God exists and created the universe, that humans were created possessing knowledge, love, and most of all freedom, and that humans 'encountered a catastrophe', abused their freedom and came into their

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 89.

current alienation. Leibowitz speculates that with his freedom, man 'perhaps chose himSELF, the one thing he can never know of itself, rather than God--and has been in trouble ever since'. In order to repair the catastrophe, God intervened in history and established a covenant with the Jews, was incarnated into history, founded a church upon 'a very mediocre, intemperate Catholic, Peter, also a Jew', and that God as a consequence is now 'inextricably and permanently' linked with the Jews and the Catholic Church. Leibowitz says, 'I believe that we have the promise of God and his son that he, Jesus Christ, having come once to save us from the death of SELF in search of itSELF without any other SELF, will also come again at the end of the world' (249).

Abbot Leibowitz thus proposes that all the survivors fly to Lost Cove, Tennessee, where, as the newly appointed Pope, Leibowitz will rebuild the Roman Catholic Church. The Captain and Dr. Jane Smith will marry formally (since their marriage on board the Copernicus 4 was never officiated by a religious authority) presided over by Abbot Leibowitz, and the children will all, in turn, be baptized. On the surface, this is similar to the way that Percy constructs a conflict between Catholicism and scientific-humanism in his novels. Here Percy creates a corresponding conflict.

Abbot Leibowitz argues that as odd and 'preposterous' as the Catholic faith may be, it poses a solution to the problem of human alienation. Conversely, the atheism of Aristarchus promises no hope for the future, no answer to the question of the strangeness of human existence, and, as Abbot Leibowitz states, 'You are stuck with yourselves, ghost selves, which will never become selves. Even if you succeed, you and your progeny will go to Europa and roam the galaxy, lost in the Cosmos forever' (250-251).

The text then addresses the reader directly: '*Question:* If you were the captain, which of the two proposals would you accept? or would you accept neither? Do you have a better idea?' (251).

(a) I'd go with Aristarchus Jones and the others to
New Ionia.

(b) I'd marry Dr. Jane Smith and take her and the children to Lost Cove, Tennessee.

(c) I'd go to Qumran and fight with the Israelis.

(d) I'd go to Jordan and fight with the Arabs.

(e) I'd drop the abbot and Jane Smith in Tennessee, send the children to Europa with Jones and Tiffany, leaving me and Kimberly to take our chances in Uxmal.

(f) I'd take no chances. I'd cover all bets, even the million-to-one shot that there might be something to Abbot Leibowitz's preposterous claim. I'd go with him and Jane and the children to Lost Cove, Tennessee, wait for whatever he's waiting for, monitor my sperm count—yet keep Copernicus 4 fueled up and ready to go. (This, roughly was Dr. Jane Smith's response, in a rather vulgar aside to the Captain, after hearing the abbot's proposal, in which she lapsed into the dialect of her Southern Methodist origins: 'Well, why not? Who knows? The whole thing is preposterous, of course: two niggers and a Jew claiming to be Roman Catholics, a Jewish pope and two black monks. Popery and monkery in the middle of nowhere. But what have we got to lose? They're Christians, after all. I'll go along with it, especially the marriage ceremony and the baptism'.)

(g) Other (specify).

(CHECK ONE)

(251-252)

The questionnaire is immediately followed by a '*Thought Experiment*', a peculiar aside where the reader is asked to adopt the 'point of view' of Aristarchus Jones. The narrator of *Lost in the Cosmos* comments that of the three current options (Protestantism, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism), Roman Catholicism is 'the most preposterous of the three'. Roman Catholicism proposes that God was incarnated as a Jew, began a church founded on 'the most fallible of his friends', and 'required of his followers that they eat his body and drink his blood in order to have life in them' (253).

Although the Catholic worldview is the 'most preposterous of the three', it nevertheless addresses the sticky issue of humankind's need for a transcendent source of aid, and resonates with the pilgrim motif that permeates Percy's fiction.¹⁶⁹ In an interview

¹⁶⁹ In a 1986 interview with Charlotte Hays, Percy states, 'I was brought up by a good agnostic and scientist. I went to medical school with two Catholic students. They'd get up and go to Mass, and hang one of those garish Catholic calendars on the wall. That struck

with Bradley Dewey, Percy states ‘the offense is part of the clue’, and that ‘what offends is the singularity of it, the singularity of the Judeo-Christian claim’ (*Conversations* 126).

The reader is then asked to adopt a ‘Second Perspective’, to ‘make a 180-degree shift of point of view from the standard objective view of the Cosmos to a point of view from which you can see the self viewing the Cosmos’ (253). The narrator writes that, ‘From this new perspective, it can be seen at once that the objective consciousness of the present age is also preposterous’ (253).

The earth-self seeks to understand the Cosmos overtly according to scientific principles while covertly exempting itself from the same understanding. The end of this enterprise is that the self understands the mechanism of the Cosmos but by the same motion places itself outside the Cosmos, an alien, a ghost, outside a vast machinery to which it is denied entry. (253-254)

Thus, the two predominant worldviews in Percy’s fiction, that of the Roman Catholic and the atheist or scientific-humanist, are judged as preposterous by the narrator of *Lost in the Cosmos*. But Percy follows this immediately with the question, ‘Are these two preposterousnesses commensurate or incommensurate, related in direct proportion or unrelated?’

That is to say, which of these two propositions is correct?

- (1) As time goes on and our science and technology advance and our knowledge of the Cosmos expands, the Judeo-Christian claim becomes ever more preposterous, anachronistic, and, not to mince words, simply unbelievable.
- (2) As time goes on and our science and technology advance and our knowledge of the Cosmos expands, the gap between our knowledge of the Cosmos and our knowledge of ourselves widens and we become ever more alien to the very Cosmos we understand, and our predicament ever more extreme, so that in the end it is precisely this preposterous remedy, it and no other, which is specified by the preposterous predicament of the human self as its sole remedy.

(CHECK ONE)

me as outrageous. I was offended by Catholicism’ (*More Conversations* 126).

Next, Percy lists the details of a computer printout of ‘the theoretically ideal convert to Christianity at the end of the twentieth century’. This individual is European, at a ‘remove from historic Christianity’, who, ‘feeling himself curiously depressed despite the benefits of science and technology, despite the highest standard of living in Europe, finds solace in the twentieth-century literature of alienation, poetry, art, and film depicting just such a predicament as his’ (255). This individual is Percy’s commuter on a train (from ‘The Man on the Train’), who experiences a temporary reversal of alienation in reading the literature of alienation. The individual in question is one who is dissatisfied with his or her life and is unfulfilled by the promises of science and progress to satisfy his or her deeper, existential and spiritual needs. Everything to this point is to position the reader in a place to decide and make a commitment. Like the questions preceding and those following the story, they echo Marcel (*MB* 1 121-123).

The text returns to the question of whether the reader will travel to New Ionia or Lost Cove, Tennessee. In yet another ‘Thought Experiment’, the narrator asks the reader to imagine him or herself in two situations: the first is as Captain Marcus, who has decided to travel to New Ionia with Aristarchus Jones; the second, again adopting the role of Captain Marcus, but this time in a trip to Lost Cove, Tennessee with Abbot Leibowitz.

In the first scenario, the travellers find a world hospitable to human colonization. There is no radiation on Europa (New Ionia), and the new inhabitants will soon be able to repopulate. Aristarchus Jones delivers a ‘famous speech’ upon his arrival:

‘A new world! Now I know how the Pilgrim Fathers felt, but unlike the Pilgrims, we left the old world and the old beliefs behind. Free at last! Free at last! No thanks to God, free at last! No irate God, no irate Jews, no irate Christians, no irate Moslems, only liberated loving selves. Now we shall show the Cosmos how to live in peace and freedom. My friends, let us begin by learning to know ourselves, for only by knowing our interior gods and demons can we exorcise them. Our first group session in self-knowledge will be held tomorrow morning. Now let’s get to work’. (256)

The narrator then summarizes the flourishing of the new colony. Operating on the ‘principles of Skinner’s *Walden II* modified by Jungian self-analysis, with suitable rewards for friendly social behavior and punishment, even exile, for aggressive, jealous, hostile, solitary, mystical, or other antisocial behavior’.

The summary ends with Captain Marcus, now sixty-five, reading *Henry IV*, listening to Mozart’s fourteen string quartet, two young lovers at his side. The Captain is invited to a private tryst with the two young women. The last that the reader sees of the Captain on New Ionia is slipping into the dark of his cave with the two women.

The second scenario details the trip to Tennessee with Abbot Leibowitz:

The colony has grown to some two hundred souls, both from successful pregnancies—Dr. Jane had delivered of two more offspring, two boys, Robert E. Lee Schuyler and John Wesley Schuyler—and from an admixture of locals, strays, wanderers, refugees from the old Northeast. Mostly they are Southerners, white Celtic and Anglo-Saxon, and blacks, with a sprinkling of Hispanics, Jews, and Northern ethnics.

The Captain has formed the habit of sitting on the hillside above the cave, a warm place fragrant with rabbit tobacco and scuppernong and the pine-winey light. It is a favorite meeting place on Sunday mornings of the unbelievers—non-churchgoers and dissidents of one sort and another—while the tiny congregations of Catholics and Protestants hold services. There is even talk of a temple, but the five Jews, one orthodox, one reformed, one conservative, one humanist, and one Yemenite Israeli, cannot get together. (259)

Captain Marcus watches as the colony begins to break into factions. A refugee from Carolina proposes to Captain Marcus that they form an alliance against the Catholics, Jews, and African-Americans. Captain Marcus can only respond with laughter. When the Carolina refugee and his party ask what Marcus is laughing at, Marcus responds, ‘Nothing much [...] I was just thinking: Jesus Christ, here we go again’ (261).

The Captain appears on the sidelines in both cases, and so provides vision of the ramifications of choices. The reader-protagonist expecting an easy solution will be

stymied by the equally problem-ridden consequences of the two scenarios. The decision has been made and now uncertainty, which was present in risk, is present in hindsight. Did the reader-protagonist make the right decision? Is this a viable solution to human ills? The text does not supply answers to these questions, but leaves them for the reader-protagonist to ponder.

The narrator then asks:

‘One day, in New Ionia or Tennessee, as the case may be, a message is received on the Copernicus antenna, evidently sent many times, for, after it was recorded, it was repeated again and again. Its source was nothing else than an ETI (extra-terrestrial intelligence), the first after all these hundreds of years of monitoring’.

‘Question: Where would you rather be when the message is received—

(1) Tennessee?

(2) New Ionia?’ (262)

The message says the following:

Repeat. DO you read? Do you read? Are you in trouble? How did you get in trouble? If you are in trouble, have you sought help? If you did, did help come? If it did, did you accept it? Are you out of trouble? What is the character of your consciousness? Are you conscious? Do you have a self? Do you know who you are? Do you know what you are doing? Do you love? Do you know how to love? Are you loved? Do you hate? Do you read me? Come back. Repeat. Come back. Come back. Come back.

(CHECK ONE)

(262)

By the end of *Lost in the Cosmos*, and more specifically, the conclusion to ‘Space Odyssey (II)’, the reader-protagonist has contributed his or her decision to follow either Jones or Leibowitz. Both choices, whether to journey to New Ionia or Tennessee, lead the reader-protagonist to a fresh-start for civilization—although in both instances the new beginning ends in a resurgence of dissatisfaction and malaise for the inhabitants of either locale.

The message from the ETI asks the reader to respond to the offer of help. The offer, quite significantly, is extended only after the reader has witnessed the effect of his or her choice to follow either Jones or Leibowitz.

Mikolajczak writes,

‘The choice that Percy puts before the reader at the end of *Space Odyssey II* is one of the clearest and most decisive of the book: the utopianism of Aristarchus Jones, which is merely self-help raised to a societal degree, or the Incarnational vision of Abbot Leibowitz. However, it is critical that there be no illusion about the difference between the two. It is not a matter of science versus faith (interestingly, it is Leibowitz who plans to restore science by reviving the University of Notre Dame around a remnant of Jewish scientists). Both options rest on faith: one on the belief that humanity possesses sufficient experience, accurate understanding of human nature, and steadiness of purpose to maintain a vision through several generations; the other on the preposterous notion that God created the world and humanity, that humanity fell off from God, that God sent his Son to reclaim humanity’.¹⁷⁰

Ideally, the reader-protagonist of these two space odysseys will see the fundamental alienation and brokenness inherent to human nature, which cannot be fixed by political, social, or scientific systems. Human beings need some form of external aid, and at the very least are compelled by this knowledge to pursue action in light of this realization. The reader is not given the details of humankind’s fall or the potential solution—Percy stops short presenting his Roman Catholic solution.

Yet much more is going on here; we are not dealing with a cosmic bait-and-switch in which religious answers are first scuttled and then trotted out in slightly different guise. The repetitions of *Lost in the Cosmos* have all been ones in which the subject’s efforts to find easy self-definition have been stymied, in which totalizing discourses have all been rejected as fundamentally reductive, and their inadequacy has advanced the narrative forward even as it has harked

¹⁷⁰ Mikolajczak, ‘A Home That is Hope’, 90.

back to that before-the-beginning time in which the questions were unposed, the quest not undertaken.¹⁷¹

Both Hoogheem and Mikolajczak capture the openness of the end of *Lost in the Cosmos*, its seeming frustration of an easy answer. The sum effect of this indeterminacy on the reader is the link between engagement and uncertainty. One makes a commitment, a lived-expression of what he or she thinks is the 'true' or 'correct' choice, but such a choice is always placed alongside numerous other options and competing worldviews. In the case of the second 'Space Odyssey', the fate of humankind rests on the reader-protagonist's decision. Percy structures this balance of commitment and uncertainty in a similar way with the protagonists of his novels, who never entirely resolve their theological questions, but begin to form interpersonal and religious commitments nevertheless.

As Sam Keen writes, according to Marcel, the individual can 'adopt a purely objective stance toward' his or her situation, and treat it as a 'problem or object which [the individual] somehow could stand apart from and observe in an antiseptic fashion'.¹⁷² In the questions that Percy's poses in *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy dramatizes how such a stance misses the existential weight and demand of such questions, particularly those that implicitly reflect a metaphysical assumption about the world and one's obligation to that world.

4.5 - CONCLUSION

In the end, the reader-protagonist must make a decision about the future of humankind: In 'Space Odyssey (I)' will the reader-protagonist recognize that humankind is lodged in some kind of predicament and requires some form of external aid? Or who will the reader-protagonist follow in 'Space Odyssey (II)', Aristarchus Jones or Abbot

¹⁷¹ Hoogheem, 'None of the Above', 101-102.

¹⁷² Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 26-27.

Leibowitz? Regardless, the implication of each respective choice is of immense gravity, and each choice demonstrates a modelled deployment of each respective theoretical orientation. The reader-protagonist, stationed at a position of making a choice, recognizing that each belief is linked to a specific action, will become a participant in the narrative rather than a detached observer.

‘Space Odyssey (II)’, particularly, places the reader-protagonist in Marcus’ shoes, and requires the reader-protagonist to make a decision, whether to travel to New Ionia, where he or she will help begin a new civilization free from religion—or to Lost Cove, Tennessee, where he or she will help Abbot Leibowitz resurrect the now-defunct Roman Catholic church. Either way, the reader-protagonist is asked by Percy to make a decision with profound consequences.

What is critiqued in the two space odysseys—even more than the secularism of Aristarchus or the denial of need of external aid by the pilot of ‘Space Odyssey (I)’—is the attitude that such questions of humankind’s relation to the world, the existence or non-existence of God, and the individual’s moral and ethical obligations to the world and others, are of no great weight or consequence. In this way, conventional belief in *Lost in the Cosmos* is located in the attitude of the reader who fails to recognize and embrace the ineluctable link between belief and action.

The C3 entity in ‘Space Odyssey (I)’ and Leibowitz in ‘Space Odyssey (II)’ appear most in tune with Percy’s putative aim to give voice to humankind’s predicament, and the inability of the positivistic vision of humankind as an organism to account for human malaise in a century of health and wealth. Nevertheless, there is still an element of risk for the reader-protagonist in making a commitment to a philosophical system that will, according to the logic of *Lost in the Cosmos*, link the reader-protagonist’s belief with a corresponding act. Even the decision to follow Leibowitz, the implication of the reader-

protagonist's decision is that uncertainty is always attached to a sincere belief—at least in the lives of Percy's protagonists.

Hoogheem writes that *Lost in the Cosmos* is a 'quest narrative in which the self goes in search of itself', and that it is 'profoundly similar' to the narratives of Percy's novels, even as 'its sjuzhet (or discourse) is radically different, approaching the postmodern in its generic playfulness, perspectival fluidity, and highly developed sense of the absurd'.¹⁷³ Juxtaposed with the protagonists from Percy's novels, the reader-protagonist of *Lost in the Cosmos* and the Space Odysseys must also make a decision with what to do with his or her life. For Binx in *The Moviegoer*, the decision has to do with accepting or rejecting his Aunt's Stoic worldview, becoming a doctor, and marrying Kate. For the reader-protagonist in *Lost in the Cosmos*, like Binx, there is a direct link between one's beliefs and living out those beliefs in a consonant manner.

Percy underscores the tensive relation between uncertainty and participation by using the journey motif in *Lost in the Cosmos*. For the *homo viator*, there is no respite or deliverance from the journey until the end—death. Until that time, the journey is fraught with struggle, frustration, and uncertainty. The fate of the astronauts on New Ionia does not appear as idyllic as initially thought by Aristarchus Jones. Marcus appears to be as unhappy here in the new colony as he was on earth before the most recent world war. In turn, the other option, that of Lost Cove, seems pleasant enough, but conflicts are igniting between the various groups, and it appears that the cliques, schisms, and conflicts of history will be repeated soon enough. Hoogheem notes that the new Christian civilization is no better than the colony of New Ionia: 'The choice, rather, seems to be whether to accept or to reject utopianism of any stripe, and Percy recommends rejection in view of what he views as the reductive nature of all utopian dreams'.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 105.

In *Being and Having*, Marcel argues that the act of swearing ‘fidelity to a creature, to a group, to an idea, even to God’ is to place oneself at risk of disappointment and failure. Marcel continues, ‘Is not any promise whatever rooted in a state of mind which is entirely of the moment, and whose permanence nothing can guarantee?’ (51). The reader-protagonist, in selecting a response to the C3 consciousness, or joining either Aristarchus Jones or Abbott Leibowitz in establishing a new colony that puts their respective belief system into action, opens him or herself up to the possibility of failure, as Percy depicts each option as fundamentally flawed and broken.

Compared with the development of the anatomization and treatment of belief in his novels, as traced in this study, *Lost in the Cosmos* represents a return to the nuanced depiction of modelled belief, as seen in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, and corresponds with the attempt of the protagonists in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot* who openly wrestle with questions of their belief and the actions they carry out in the course of the novel. As a complex assemblage of questions, stories, and anecdotes, offers no certain answers, no decisions free from the uncertainty that, as with the protagonists of Percy’s novels, is always a feature of a committed belief. The aim of living out a belief cannot, in Percy’s oeuvre, be anything less than a journey in which the pilgrim must enact participative belief in decisions that guarantees nothing but doubt and struggle.

5. Conclusion: ‘This I Believe’: Meaningful Belief and Uncertainty in the Novels of Walker Percy

5.1 – The Development of Technique in Percy’s Dramatization of Participative Belief

In his essay ‘How To Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic’, Percy describes the peculiar role of the novelist in the American South:

The triumphant Christendom of the Sunbelt creates problems for the Southern novelist, whether he is [a] believer or unbeliever. If he is an unbeliever, he may feel like attacking it, but really he hasn't the heart. It's like shooting fish in a barrel. Who needs another Elmer Gantry?

Percy continues,

If he is a believer, he is in a different kind of trouble. He finds himself in bed with the wrong bedfellows. What makes it difficult for him is that they are proclaiming the same good news he believes in, using the same noble biblical words, speaking of the same treasure buried in a field, but somehow devaluing it. If these are the fellows who have found the treasure buried in a field, then what manner of treasure is it? (SSL 180)

Percy writes that since the South is 'informed as it is by a species of triumphant Christendom', the writer's instinctive response, 'Christian or not', is to undertake an attack on Christendom as Søren Kierkegaard once did. For the Christian novelist, however, an attack on Christendom requires a great deal of artistic guile, since the novelist is 'working with a prostituted vocabulary which must be either discarded or somehow miraculously rejuvenated'. Percy echoes Flannery O'Connor's injunction from 'The Fiction Writer and His Country', where O'Connor writes,

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.¹⁷⁵

Percy, similarly, argues:

The stance which comes most naturally [the writer] is not that of edification but rather that of challenge, offense, shock, attack, subversion. With the best intentions, he subverts both the Christendom and the paganism of his culture and he does so cheerfully and in good heart, because as a creature of the culture he is subverting himself, first, last, and always. (SSL 181)

In his interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy, Percy states,

¹⁷⁵ Flannery O'Connor, 'The Fiction Writer and His Country', *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 34.

In my view you have to be wary of using words like 'religion', 'God', 'sin', 'salvation', 'baptism' because the words are almost worn out. The themes have to be implicit rather than explicit. I think I am conscious of the danger of the novelist trying to draw a moral. What Kierkegaard called 'edifying' would be a fatal step for a novelist. But the novelist cannot help but be informed by his own anthropology, the nature of man. In this respect I use 'anthropology' in the European philosophical sense. Camus, Sartre, Marcel in this sense can all be called anthropologists. In American people think of somebody going out and measuring skulls, digging up ruins when you mention 'anthropology'. I call mine philosophical anthropology. I am not talking about God. I am not a theologian. (*Conversations* 79-80)

The question that I have explored in this study is how precisely Percy in his novels challenges a 'prostituted' and 'devalued' concept of belief. Moreover, what techniques does Percy employ to anatomize belief, and what vision of belief is reflected in these explorations? Does the vision of belief gained from such a study shift in the course of Percy's career as a novelist? If so, where can one see the outlines of such a shift? In order to provide an anchor to such an exploration, I utilize sections of the work of Gabriel Marcel that deal specifically with belief and religious faith. I argue that Marcel offers an insightful distinction between different categories of meaningful and unremarkable belief, and that Percy's novels implicitly reflect such categories. I conclude that Percy explores what it means to possess a meaningful belief. Percy dramatizes meaningful belief in motifs of distance and detachment, and through dialogues that expose the beliefs and religious uncertainty of various characters. Marcel's discussion of participation and spectatorship, the latter called 'the spectator-attitude' in Marcel's *Being and Having*, provides a means of locating Percy's protagonists on their journeys.

By examining how Percy's characters believe, and how they dialogue about belief, and providing an analysis how belief takes shape in Percy's novels, one will be able to see how the treatment of belief shifts over the course of Percy's career. I argue that Percy's

technique shifts dramatically by his final two novels—from a comparatively indirect form to a more direct form, where the voice of the moralist-novelist emerges more directly.

The first instance of interrogating the common usage of *belief* appears in *The Moviegoer*, when Binx Bolling recalls his nightly ritual of listening to the radio program *This I Believe*. Binx's summary of recent submissions on the program is strongly coloured by his sarcasm, as he finds nothing remarkable about claims to believe in empty platitudes such as 'justice' and 'peace'. All the claims of belief from its many contributors are conventional and unremarkable, according to Binx. In *The Moviegoer*, Aunt Emily and Lonnie, however, offer an alternative to the casual morality and cavalier belief that Binx encounters in Gentilly and on *This I Believe*. Both Aunt Emily and Lonnie discuss their own beliefs with conviction and clarity, and both articulate their respective need for a Stoic code or belief in Christ, with a sense of gravity and momentousness.

The trend in Percy's fiction to interrogate the meaning of belief continues in *The Last Gentleman* with Will Barrett, who encounters those who believe in a conventional way, and in contrast those for whom their belief is a preoccupation. Next, Tom More in *Love in the Ruins* inquires as to the probity of his own behaviour, which is at disconnect from his claim to wholly believe the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. In turn, Lance in *Lancelot* awakens from his abstracted state and enacts a quest to unearth the metaphysical truths that have evaded him. Will in *The Second Coming* cannot decide which is worse, the belief of Christians in the South, or their equally noisome counterparts, the unbelievers. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Tom is mired in a conspiracy to alter the behaviour of the residents of Feliciana Parish, and must decide if he will follow in the path of the bioengineers or the Catholicism of Father Smith. As finally explored in this study, *Lost in the Cosmos* asks the reader what he or she believes, and links that belief with action in decisions of great consequence. In all of Percy's novels, the language of Christianity has grown worn and thin, and no longer attests to a meaningful reality.

Significantly, the way to circumvent this ‘prostituted vocabulary’ is to dramatize it and express it in narrative; one must ‘sing a new song’ to rearticulate in a fresh way that which has grown stale (*Conversations* 140).

Gabriel Marcel offers several brief but insightful remarks about the nature of what he conceives to be meaningful belief. In his *The Mystery of Being*, particularly, Marcel breaks down what is commonly contained under the umbrella word ‘belief’ into several individual concepts. In his chapter of *Mystery of Being* entitled ‘Opinion and Faith’, Marcel helpfully distinguishes between opinion, conviction, and faith (or belief) (*MB* 2 68-84). In Marcel’s discussion, opinion resembles a non-committed attitude toward a subject or person, and is unremarkable. Conviction, in turn, is an encysted form of opinion, a long-held opinion that has solidified in time and is stubbornly clung to by the individual. Finally, belief is characterized by an inward and outward dimension, made visible by the action the individual takes, not just the theoretical or cognitive assent the individual may possess. Furthermore, a true belief in Marcel’s analysis does not seal one off from uncertainty or doubt. Marcel’s notes about belief and faith offer terms for conceiving of belief as a meaningful participation of the individual in the reality that he or she affirms, as a lived affirmation rather than a detached, cognitive assent to a system of thought.

Several characters in Percy’s novels possess true and meaningful belief in a Marcellian sense of the word, and these characters stand in dramatic counterpoint to the general way in which belief operates for Percy’s other characters. Significantly, the characters that believe in a meaningful and dynamic way, where their lives and decisions are constantly informed by their beliefs, are in a number of instances atheists and Stoics. In this study, I argue that Percy expresses *belief*, specifically, through drama and narrative, and rather than limiting this interest in belief to Roman Catholics alone, he dramatizes meaningful belief for atheists and Stoics, as well.

Thus, Percy's novels construct a clear distinction between what I call conventional belief and participative belief. All of Percy's novels, and his non-fiction satire, *Lost in the Cosmos*, depict a world of widespread conventional belief, and several characters in those works emerge from the stories as clear embodiments of participative belief. Participative belief may take different forms in Percy's novels, whether in secondary characters in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, or the protagonists of *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot* who, although not entirely successfully, work toward living out the implications of their respective belief systems. Even in the final two novels, which feature a more direct method of articulating the concern with meaningful belief and the evacuation of language, there is a clear distinction between conventional belief and participative belief. In all of the novels, Percy's protagonists invariably move away from abstraction and toward lives of an engaged and participative form of belief, although the protagonists never arrive at clear-cut religious conversions.

The techniques with which Percy explores meaningful belief in his novels shifts over the course of his career, and by his final two novels, *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, there is a clear movement in the narratives toward a more direct and discursive mode. Percy utilizes a polemical and direct means of relating his cultural-historical concerns about the widespread meaningless belief and unbelief in the South, explored in *The Second Coming*, and Percy's own moral concerns over euthanasia and abortion, addressed in his final novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In the final two novels, gone are the religious atheists that populated Percy's earlier novels. In both *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, large sections of monologue operate as the fulcrum upon which the drama of the novels unfold. Moreover, the monologues sound like Percy, both in syntax and content.

Lamar Nisly identifies this distinct shift in Percy's craft. Nisly writes that a 'difference in explicitness emerges over the course of [Percy's] writing'. Nisly continues,

His earlier novels are more intent on connecting with his wayfaring reader and hinting at the way to avoid despair; his later novels more clearly point toward Percy's belief that Christian conversion is the antidote to our culture's rootlessness.¹⁷⁶

Specifically, in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Nisly writes, 'Percy does seem in this novel to feel the need to be more explicit in his indictment of the society's wrong-headedness and in his affirmation of where people must turn to avert this crisis'. Nisly surmises that after years of 'standing on the margins, satirically pointing out problems', that 'Percy felt the need in his final novel to be more direct about the belief people should embrace'.¹⁷⁷

Several critics note the shift in Percy's craft,¹⁷⁸ but Kieran Quinlan argues that this shift is overstated, and that the 'propagandist' in all of Percy's fiction 'is present more than has been generally acknowledged to date'. In a footnote in *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*, Quinlan writes that

What Lewis Lawson has referred to as [Percy's] 'indirect communications' are, in fact, relatively 'direct', at least in the years after Percy has become successful and is no longer under the exacting editorial eye of Stanley Kauffmann.¹⁷⁹

Each novel, according to Quinlan, features an 'agenda—more or less explicit', that aims to lead to 'a definite conclusion every bit as much as one of [Percy's] philosophical essays'. Quinlan continues, maintaining that the 'pattern only becomes clear after *The Moviegoer*', and that Percy uses his various arguments derived from his study of

¹⁷⁶ L. Lamar Nisly, *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics, and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Constructions of Audience and Tone in O'Connor, Gautreaux, and Percy* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), 155.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁷⁸ Linda Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 149-150; William Rodney Allen, 'Father Smith's Confession in *The Thanatos Syndrome*', *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, ed. by Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 189-198 (p. 189); Michael Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 186, 193, 211, 215; Nisly, *Wingless Chickens*, 161-162.

¹⁷⁹ Kieran Quinlan, *Last Catholic Novelist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 86.

semiotics, Catholic Thomism, and existentialism ‘all in the service of some kind of affirmation of faith, usually of questionable philosophical merit’.¹⁸⁰

Whether Percy’s Thomistic or semiotic philosophies are tenable in contemporary thought is not the concern of this study, and so it is not my interest to support or challenge Quinlan on this claim, but to introduce Quinlan’s contention that after *The Moviegoer*, Percy’s novels operate toward the end of inducing an affirmation of Roman Catholicism, for either the protagonist or reader of each work. The development in Percy’s craft that I trace in this study demonstrates that Percy’s method of dramatizing belief shifts over the course of his novel writing career. Tolson comments that *The Thanatos Syndrome’s* urgency and political content reflect Percy’s growing discontent with the cultural landscape of the United States, and an awareness that he was not going to live much longer. Percy perhaps wanted to convey some of his cultural concerns with a directness that would have would affect positive cultural change.¹⁸¹

Even though the focus shifts from indirect to more direct engagement with concerns about meaningful belief, throughout Percy’s novels there remains a clear tension between conventional belief and participative belief, with the latter invariably favoured. Uncertainty remains a constant throughout his novels, however. Uncertainty takes shape in the journeys the protagonists take, the uncertainty of not knowing precisely what they believe, and the various theological and philosophical questions that go unanswered by each novel’s end. The one clear demonstration of growth is the movement of the protagonists away from the abstracted spectator-attitude that they have held in the past.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 90-91. At the end of his study, Quinlan, in turn, argues that ‘Percy is much more concerned with the social dimension of belief, even if he also has a gnostic inclination. In this, too—that is, in his non-exploration of peculiarly Catholic dilemmas—he resembles Flannery O’Connor. Once again, with Percy one is so impressed with the sense of closure that his own conversion brings that any note of spiritual intimacy and even occasional uncertainty is almost entirely lost’ (224).

¹⁸¹ *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 453.

¹⁸² William Rodney Allen observes that ‘while the endings of the first two novels are

Thus, while one can trace a clear shift in Percy's craft, in the techniques he employs to foreground issues of belief in his novels, there remains nonetheless a constant throughout, the constant presence of uncertainty in his protagonists. Percy's characters, from Binx in *The Moviegoer* to Tom in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, do not experience conversions, or arrive at certainty in their own beliefs, whether in accepting or rejecting a religious faith, but demonstrate movement away from their abstracted states. Percy's protagonists do not resolve the questions they have posed in their journeys, and the 'religious' voices that sparsely populate the landscape of Percy's fiction may understand their own beliefs, and act with consonance with their beliefs in the world of experience, but the protagonists remain unfinalized and uncertain.

In his essay, 'Notes For a Novel About the End of the World', Percy uses the word 'religious' to denote the concerns of an individual who is concerned or preoccupied with what he or she believes about the 'ultimate' issues—God's existence, for example, or the existence of good and evil—and whose actions are shaped by the attitude that he or she adopts toward such issues. This is why the passionate atheist, with whom Percy may disagree on issues of theology and ontology, can be understood as 'religious' in his fiction: the atheist, at least one who in Percy's estimation is like a Camus or Sartre, is sceptical of self-actualization, or self-help, of wanting to turn to science to save humankind. As well, the atheist knows that *if* God does not exist, then one must deploy that belief in a consistent and meaningful fashion (at least one sees this in Percy's early novels).

In the same essay, Percy compares the roles of the scientist and the fiction author. Percy writes that 'since the novelist deals first and last with individuals and the scientist treats individuals only to discover their general properties, it is the novelist's responsibility to be the chary of categories and rather to focus upon the mystery, the paradox, the

ambiguous as to the protagonist's religious belief, the subsequent novels—even *Lancelot*, ironically—end in affirmations of belief'. Allen, *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 6.

openness of an individual human existence' (*Message* 108).

Hawkins observes,

Percy's understanding of his own vocation, then, is not the preaching of the gospel, but the development of the reader's capacity to receive urgent news. His career as a writer began with the publication of a series of essays which directly confront the complexities of such communication: the mystery of words spoken, understood, and acted upon. Although the impulse of the essayist continues, and indeed openly manifests itself not only in nonfictional writing but in frequent philosophical and theological discussion within the novels, Percy has chosen primarily to work in the more indirect mode of fiction; that is, to communicate through story rather than through analyses of the 'communicated event'.¹⁸³

In a 1971 interview, Percy reports that he is 'really interested in seeing how the characters react in certain situations', and that his novels are 'a way of exploring the way things are as a discovering process'. Percy explains that while his novels aid him toward his own 'understanding of things'. Percy writes: 'I know what I believe, and my problem is the craft of novel writing, how to write the novel. There's the agony. I mean the agony is not with me a religious agony. The agony is the agony of the craft, of getting it right' (*Conversations* 44).

The 'agony of the craft', as opposed to the agony of religious or Catholic belief—or coping with doubt toward the subject of religious belief—perhaps most clearly aligns Percy with someone like Flannery O'Connor, whose stalwart faith is registered in her novels not as a wrestling with doctrine or a dialogue with doubts about Catholicism, but as a part of a project to communicate her Catholic vision of the world, transposed in dramatic form.

Across the Atlantic, the British Catholic novelist Graham Greene (1904-1991) scripted his 'Catholic' novels with religious doubt as a central feature in the trials of his protagonists. But in contrast to Greene, Percy's characters are not tormented by their

¹⁸³ Peter Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2004), 56.

Catholicism and belief in the way that Greene's Whiskey Priest in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), Henry Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), or Maurice Bendrix in *The End of the Affair* (1951) are. In Percy's novels, the protagonists never question the mercy of God, wrestle with the prospect of eternal damnation, or doubt the veracity of the claims of the gospel in the overt way that Greene's Catholics do. In turn, O'Connor's notorious unbelievers—Hazel Motes from *Wise Blood* (1952), the Misfit from 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' or Asbury from 'The Enduring Chill'—are all highly conscious of the structure of their unbelief and its ramifications, bearing their passionate unbelief in clear counterpoint to the cavalier indifference of Percy's early protagonists and his Protestant characters.¹⁸⁴

In Percy's American South, from its first depiction in *The Moviegoer* to its last in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the pervasive attitude toward religious and metaphysical questions, such as those raised by Will and Lance's respective quests to determine the existence of God (or, more specifically for Lance, evil), and metaphysics is one of indifference, of a cavalier regard to all matters that gauge or scrutinize the contours of the human soul. This indifference corresponds with the outworn language that Percy diagnoses in his essays and elsewhere. Binx and Will are disillusioned outsiders who have grown weary of the Christians of the South—Christians who are predominantly white, Republican, and generally anti-Catholic. Percy's protagonists may not wrestle with their belief or unbelief with the agonizing self-awareness of Greene's Catholics or O'Connor's atheists, but they are initially apathetic, disposed to a kind of indifference that is, at different points in their narratives, shaken off in favor of engagement with and participation in the world of choices, belief, and the lives of others.¹⁸⁵ While Percy's

¹⁸⁴ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007 [1952]); *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1983 [1955]), 9-29; *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993 [1965]), 82-114.

¹⁸⁵ '...the philosophical novelist with faith as his perspective takes his hero right up to the dramatic moment that he chooses to believe, and then brings down the curtain. . . . At the critical moment the hero chooses to see himself not as an organism among other organisms

protagonists may seem distant and detached from their beliefs—which they certainly are—they are in a very different way from the majority of Percy's secondary characters, who are indifferent, abstracted in such a way that they do not care to uncover the root cause of humankind's malaise.

As Binx, Will, Lance and Tom More enact their journeys toward participative belief at the end of their recorded journeys, there is a noticeable absence of intellectual and theological resolution: What is missing from Percy's novels is an explicit commitment to any dogma or doctrine, conversion, or resolution to the theological and philosophical questions that his protagonists pose in their journeys. Even his Catholic characters continue to search and wrestle with issues of belief: Lonnie wrestles with his sense of envy of his now-deceased brother, and that he once wished his brother to lose a basketball game (163); Val tells Will, 'Christ is my lord and I love him but I'm a good hater and you know what he said about that. I still hope my enemies fry in hell. What to do about that? Will God forgive me?' (301); Tom explains, 'I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally I do as I please. 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' (6).

The characters are first and foremost searchers, wayfarers who are constantly revising and engaging their own intellectual and spiritual commitments. Not only do Percy's Catholic characters vocalize such struggles in order to humanize them, but, as I argue, do so in order to communicate something fundamental about the nature of meaningful faith.

but as a pilgrim and a wanderer, a homeless creature on the earth, separated from other men and animals by self-consciousness and language, and separated from God by occasionally slipping back into anomie or despair. Once the hero perceives, by will and grace, that he is related to God, he becomes 'inward', and can take a humorous position toward the seemingly huge crises of life' (Hobson, *Understanding*, 23-24).

Binx seems closer to deserting his hedonism and embracing a religious commitment, although he is clearly not going to adopt his Aunt Emily's Southern Stoicism. Will, at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, appears to be on the verge of a great discovery, leaping and bounding toward Sutter's vehicle, an apparent reference to Kierkegaard's leap of faith, but Will is unsure of the significance of Jamie's baptism. However, at the beginning of *The Second Coming*, Will Barrett hasn't made quite as much progress as his first story implied. The leaps at the end of *The Last Gentleman* are realized more fully at the end of *The Second Coming*, but again, Will claims that he is not a believer even though he is adamant in his quest for God. In *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Thomas More experiences the crisis of being a 'bad Catholic' who fails to practice his beliefs—one that finds more pleasure in wine, women and song than in taking the sacraments and attending mass.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, one discovers a Tom More that is even more lost than before, estranged from the wife and family that helped shape the optimism of the conclusion of *Love in the Ruins*. There are hints and intimations as to the roles that they will adopt and the beliefs to which they are sympathetic, but Percy's characters remain in the domain of uncertainty, and what declarations of faith or belief that they do make (whether Binx's marriage to Kate but his silence on the issue of 'religion'; Will's final questions to Sutter about the significance of Jamie's baptism; Tom More's marriage to Ellen and his taking of the sacraments) are shaded with questions about the futures of these characters, and even the meaning of the recorded conclusions to their journeys.

Percy's vision of belief becomes increasingly dogmatic in his fiction, reflected in the increasingly direct techniques he uses and the absence of 'religious' atheists. The conclusion of this study argues that Percy's 'religious' characters, by the final two novels, are never atheists, Stoics, or nihilists. As a character embodying participative belief, Will is equally critical of both Christians and non-believers, but by the end of the novel he

grasps the hands of an old Episcopalian priest and claims that he, Will, ‘must have’ and ‘will have’ both Allie and God. Percy’s vision of participative belief, therefore, narrows by the *The Thanatos Syndrome*, although his protagonists may still be non-believers, or perhaps individuals on the way to faith, but never Christians or Roman Catholics who have, in some form, arrived entirely at the faith. All the protagonists have moved away from or abandoned the spectator-attitude that conceives of the world in the abstract.

5.2 - Walker Percy as a Postsecular Author

In Percy’s novels—specifically his first five novels—Percy constructs two dramatized versions of belief: the first is a meaningful and participative belief, the other is a conventional form of belief. This construction of belief re-orientates the opposition between belief and unbelief, and not only to the extent that Percy implies that everyone *believes* something, in some form, but that the real question is not whether one believes or does not, but *how* one believes. This is not to say that the content or object of one’s belief is inconsequential in Percy’s theological view—or in the views of his characters—but that in its dramatized form in Percy’s novels, particularly the early works, the way that belief is expressed is crucial in making sense of a meaningful belief. This kind of thinking coincides with the work of other thinkers, whether in literary criticism and history or in philosophy. Several works of literary history and criticism have followed the lead of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007) and begun to rethink the common oppositions between science and religion, faith and atheism, and belief and unbelief, in favour of more nuanced understandings of the relationships between orthodox religious belief and other forms of ‘belief’ and ‘unbelief’.

In these brief notes offered here, I suggest that Percy does, in many ways, belong in the body of postsecular fiction, and may operate as a fruitful partner in dialogue with

other postsecular authors. While I argue that Percy's last two novels feature a narrowing of vision in what constitutes meaningful belief, his first four novels, along with his non-fiction satire, *Lost in the Cosmos*, nevertheless retain fresh insight as to the dynamics between invested belief and incarnated action.

Several works in the last decade have begun the task of mapping out postsecular fiction, whether locating the common postsecular traits among a body of work, or suggesting a framework for postsecular readings. In this way, postsecularism can be conceived as an interpretive framework and a distinct feature of recent fiction. In 'Locating the Postsecular', Michael Kauffman writes that postsecularism complicates 'our understanding of the terms 'religious' and 'secular' by deepening our awareness of the ideological, cultural, and historical valences of those terms', as well as complicates 'our understanding of the *relationships* between the religious and the secular by moving beyond any model that posits too stark a binary opposition and towards models based on co-existence and co-creation'.¹⁸⁶

Paul McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007) suggests a framework for what constitute postsecular works, and Amy Hungerford in *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (2010) provides a historical survey of literature since 1960 that delivers insights built from some of McClure's suggestions. The journal *Religion and Literature* published a series of essays in 2009 on the issue of defining postsecularism and delineating trends of postsecular concerns, which began in a 2008 forum titled 'The Postsecular Turn in Literary Studies'.

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McClure's *Partial Faiths* explores the novels of Don DeLillo, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon, among others, in order to illustrate the general traits

¹⁸⁶ Michael Kauffman, 'Locating the Postsecular', *Religion and Literature*, 41.3 (Autumn 2009), 68-73 (pp. 68-69).

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

of postsecular fiction. McClure writes that the works of DeLillo and Morrison, for example, are postsecular because the narratives ‘trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious’. Furthermore, postsecular fiction, according to McClure, features an ‘ontological signature’ of a ‘religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real’, and demonstrates an ‘ideological signature’ of ‘dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects’.¹⁸⁸

McClure further outlines the common features of postsecular texts:

The partial conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative, zones through which the conventional protagonist passes with all possible haste, on his way to a domain of secure religious dwelling. And yet the postsecular characters deposited in these zones do not seem particularly uncomfortable there nor particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief and practice.¹⁸⁹

The title itself, *Partial Faiths*, indicates a central argument in McClure’s study, which is that the traditional conversion narrative is disrupted by the absence of a clear-cut conversion. The faith of the protagonists is ‘religious’ in only the loosest sense. Moreover, McClure writes that ‘One does not sense, in spite of the dramatic instability of the worlds thus defined, that either the novelists or their characters are anxious to ‘straighten things out’.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ McClure, John A., *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007). McClure adds, ‘Other realms become visible but either partially or fleetingly or in bizarre superabundance. Miracles and visitations suggest that the laws of nature may be contingent but without providing any clearly coded alternatives. And once again, this situation is represented with a certain equanimity’ (McClure 3).

¹⁸⁹ McClure continues, ‘In a similar manner, the break with secular versions of the real does not lead in postsecular narrative to the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos, as it often does in conventional narratives of conversion. Gods appear, but not God’ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Percy's protagonists are in many ways 'secular-minded', particularly in their lack of certitude concerning their religious beliefs—with the exception of Tom More in *Love in the Ruins*—although all of Percy's protagonists have ancestral roots in the cultural Christianity of the South. However, whether or not Percy's protagonists are not 'anxious to 'straighten things out' is up for debate.

As I explore in Chapter 1, in the Epilogue of *The Moviegoer*, Binx remains silent on the issue of religion, although there are hints and intimations as to what may or may not be an adoption of the Roman Catholic faith. *Lancelot* concludes with Lance's ambitious syllogism that posits that either his radical Stoicism is the only option, or the alternative of Percival's Catholicism. They cannot both be right, however, according to Lance. At the conclusion of *The Second Coming*, Will clutches the hands of Father Weatherbee and considers his love for Allie and the possibility of God's presence in the world: 'Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have' (360). The insistence in Will's claim to 'want' and 'must have' seems counter to the postsecular characteristic that McClure outlines, where the protagonist is not anxious for certitude. Nonetheless, the novels do not make it entirely clear where the protagonists will go from here—what they will believe, or what view of the world they will adopt—and most of their religious, theological, and metaphysical questions remain unresolved, although they appear on the path of something profound.

Percy straddles on the one hand the postsecular suspicion of totalizing narratives, and on the other presents the Roman Catholic view of all things informed by the creation-fall-redemption narrative. While Percy's avowed vision of the world—and even of his craft—is one shaped by his Roman Catholicism, his novelistic craft is in several ways postsecular: Percy's protagonists never arrive at a clear sense of their own religious beliefs, and theological questions central to their narratives are left unresolved; several of Percy's

atheists, Stoics, and backslidden Christians—Aunt Emily, Sutter, Lance and Percy’s ‘bad Catholic’ Tom More—emerge as individuals sincerely concerned with the way their beliefs do, or should, animate their actions in the world.

Andrew Hoogheem in ‘None of the Above: Walker Percy’s Postsecular Narrative’, locates *Lost in the Cosmos* in the postsecular body of literature, and offers a suggestion for expanding postsecular considerations to authors who are within ‘the context of the Abrahamic religious traditions’.¹⁹¹ Hoogheem proposes that without the inclusion of traditionally religious authors, McClure’s methodology and study ‘leaves unexplored a significant opportunity for dialogue’. Hoogheem writes that ‘the postsecular as a category ultimately will have only limited interpretive value if all it does is point to ways in which some putatively ‘secular’ novelists have dabbled in ‘religion’ or, even more amorphously, ‘spirituality’.

Hoogheem is interested in the ‘conversation partners’ that will emerge in a postsecular reading of *Lost in the Cosmos*. Potentially, the postsecular framework may reveal what he identifies as ‘unnoticed common ground’ between both ‘religious and secular imaginations’, destabilizing the binary between the religious and the secular, and so providing ‘intriguing new readings of texts whose meaning seemed exhausted [...]’ (93-94).

What conversations does this placement open Percy up to? Specifically, Percy’s novels may function as conversation partners with other twentieth and twenty-first-century works that feature protagonists who are concerned with issues of evil in the world, the existence or non-existence of God, and the meaning of a morally or metaphysically sponsored or unsponsored existence. Two Christian novelists in contemporary American fiction have foregrounded questions of meaning in the lives of their protagonists, specifically novelists like Marilynne Robinson, winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, and

¹⁹¹ Andrew Hoogheem, ‘None of the Above: Walker Percy’s Postsecular Narrative’, *R&L*, 43.2 (Summer 2011), 91–109 (p. 93).

Wendell Berry, known perhaps best for his poetry and environmental activism. In Robinson's novels *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004) and in Berry's Port William novels, specifically *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974) and *Jayber Crow* (2000), the protagonists of the works demonstrate, in some form, an interest in pressing theological questions.

In *Gilead*, the narrator and protagonist John Ames writes,

There are two insidious notions, from the point of view of Christianity in the modern world. (No doubt there are more than two, but the others will have to wait). One is that religion and religious experience are illusions of some sort (Feuerbach, Freud, etc.), and the other is that religion itself is real, but *your* belief that *you* participate in it is an illusion. I think the second of these is the more insidious, because it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer.¹⁹²

Not only do Ames' musings reflect a specific kind of dramatization of issues of belief—here, it is not exploratory or open like it is for Binx and Will, but more directed and articulate, like Tom More in *Love in the Ruins*—but it is topically relevant as it addresses what is at stake in how one understands what belief is, what belief looks like in lived experience, and how it can be meaningful.

Berry's *Jayber Crow* examines the limitations of certainty in one's treatment of theological questions. In his youth, Jayber briefly attended a Bible College where he began to doubt many of the basic tenets of orthodox Christian belief. In the novel, Jayber approaches a professor and pleads with him to answer some of the pressing theological questions that have been plaguing Jayber: How can God be good and allow so much suffering in the world? Can God's existence be proven? The professor's response is that Jayber has been given questions in this life that cannot be solved in a question and answer dialectic, but must be *lived*. Faith and belief are not always necessarily supported by rational or scientific underpinnings. Moreover, belief is not an assent to an idea, but part of

¹⁹² Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 145.

the fabric of one's life—the material that gives shape to the meaning and purpose of one's decisions. In looking back, Jayber writes,

Now I have had most of the life I am going to have, and I can see what it has been. I can remember those early years when it seemed to me I was cut completely adrift, and times when, looking back at earlier times, it seemed I had been wandering in the dark woods of error. But now it looks to me as though I was following a path that was laid out for me, unbroken, and maybe even as straight as possible, from one end to the other, and I have this feeling, which never leaves me anymore, that I have been *led*. I will leave you to judge the truth of that for yourself; as Dr. Ardmire and I agreed, there is no proof.¹⁹³

Both works significantly emphasize participation in religious belief and de-emphasize the importance of theological certitude. John Ames and Jayber Crow may emerge from different social and historical contexts—Ames as a Congregationalist pastor from the American Midwest in the mid-twentieth-century; Crow as a barber from rural Kentucky in the early-to-mid twentieth century—but both introduce questions that are of a similar class of existential and theological inquiry. In these examples, one sees protagonists who embrace a certain degree of uncertainty in their searches for meaningful belief. John Ames, Jayber Crow, and Binx Bolling all undertake quests to sort through theological questions, but without the support of certitude or a sense of closure in their quests.

The journey motif present in each work also lends itself to a similar reading. The protagonists are faced with pressing theological questions that they in varying degrees attempt to sort out. The above excerpts echo Binx Bolling's own attempt to sort out the question of the existence of god:

For as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics—which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker. For myself, I enjoy answering polls as much as

¹⁹³ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 66.

anyone and take pleasure in giving intelligent replies to all questions.

Next, Binx inquires if ‘98% of Americans have ‘already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?’ Binx responds to his own question that he does not know (14). For Ames and Crow, such questions animate the decisions the protagonists make, and the way that they choose to understand and cope with the world.

The methodology of this study may also be utilized to examine how authors such as Robinson and Berry conceptualize and dramatize faith and meaningful belief in the novel format. By analysing the diachronic development of conceptions of belief in the works of specific authors, one can identify the trends that emerge in the works of novelists concerning the nature of belief, and the possibility of meaningful, non-conventional belief.

Percy belongs in such conversations as he effectively dramatizes what meaningful belief can look like in a world that is in the middle of what Charles Taylor calls a ‘secular age’, where a Christian faith can appear outdated or unfeasible.¹⁹⁴ At the same time, Percy demonstrates in his characters how theological and metaphysical questions operate as animating forces in the lives of characters both inside and outside of orthodox religious faith. Robinson and Berry may act as potential conductors for conversations about the nature of meaningful belief, or how questions of meaningful belief can animate the lives of fictive characters. Both are possible conversation partners with Percy’s fiction in the ongoing discussion about religious and non-religious faith in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Marcel, especially, can operate as a resource for finding what Hoogheem calls the common ground ‘between religious and secular imaginations’. In particular, Marcel can be explored in conjunction with Walker Percy, whose ‘Notes for A Novel About the End of

¹⁹⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007). Taylor asks, ‘why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?’ (25).

the World' bears interest in authors and works that are interested in questions of metaphysics—specifically the existence or non-existence of a Deity, the existence of absolute good and evil, and living a life informed by the species of belief one may adopt. Marcel has a place in providing the terminology for anatomizing the forms of belief present in any number of twentieth and twenty-first-century works, and placing questions of belief on the plane of immediate, concrete experience rather than theoretically oriented dogma and doctrine. This is not to say that Marcel eschews orthodox conceptions of religious experience, but that in terms of his articulated understanding of belief, he elevates the individual's felt experience.

Marcel's observations about belief, faith, providing testimony to a belief or individual, all cross the boundaries between the secular and the religious, and offer fruitful discussion points for dialogue about the nature of meaningful belief. Central to Marcel's thinking is his emphasis on concrete, lived experience, rather than reliance on abstraction and generalization. In *Being and Having*, Marcel provides a telling depiction of how detachment and self-abstraction can distance oneself from lend themselves to a objectified view of the world: 'I am not watching a show'—I will repeat these words to myself every day. A fundamental spiritual fact'. Marcel adds, 'I was just thinking a moment ago that the spectator-attitude corresponds to a form of lust; and more than that, it corresponds to the act by which the subject appropriates the world for himself' (*BH* 21).

For instance, both Binx and Will are spectators of the world, their families, their friends. Through images of the protagonists' physical distance and separation from the very events they provide commentary on, along with their commitments in the face of decisions, impressed upon them by the models of participative belief, Aunt Emily, Lonnie, Sutter, and Val, Percy communicates that both characters are watchers rather than participants in the surrounding world: Binx moves easily from one world-historical topic to the next, dissecting a scene where William Holden, the man, strolls down a New

Orleans street, encountering a newlywed couple on their honeymoon (15-17), and Will assumes a similar world-distancing tone as he relates his decision to ‘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’ (41). This trend of separating the self from the world, of diagnosing the artificiality of behaviors of friends, fellow commuters, and various others, persists through most of each novel until the influences of the passionate, religious-minded characters shake them loose from this abstracted state.¹⁹⁵ In many ways, they are treating others and the world as if ‘watching a show’ adopting the outlook of the ‘spectator-attitude’.

Sam Keen writes that for Marcel, ‘If, for instance, I am faced with questions about freedom, commitment, the meaning of life or the existence of God, there is no objective standpoint which I can adopt to answer such questions’. Such questions cannot be asked in a detached mode, since the very act of inquiry is fraught with ethical, theological, and metaphysical implications. Keen continues, ‘Whether I am free, or whether I am to believe in God, can never be decided on the basis of verifiable evidence which I can get apart from my willing, feeling, and deciding self’.¹⁹⁶ In other words, a self that encounters belief that is part of action and participation and, in Percy’s novels, embedded in practice.

A postsecular criticism may reach beyond what Everett Hammer calls the ‘warfare model’ of religion and secularism—a postsecular emphasis will recognize that religion and the secular are not the ‘stark, monolithic opposites they once appeared’.¹⁹⁷ As well, Magdalena Maczynska writes that, ‘In its most ambitious aspect, however, postsecular writing promises to develop new ways of thinking about the ineffable, beyond the

¹⁹⁵ Ralph Wood states that ‘The novel’s final irony is that Bolling can cast out the mote in everyone else’s eye but is powerless to remove the beam in his own’. *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 157.

¹⁹⁶ Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel* (London: Careys Kingsgate Press, 1966), 20.

¹⁹⁷ Everett Hammer, ‘Determined Agency: A Postsecular Proposal for Religion and Literature—And Science’ *Religion and Literature*, 41.3 (Autumn 2009), 91-98 (p. 94).

compromised structures of traditional religious belief and the limiting binary language of modern secularism'.¹⁹⁸ To challenge the audience not to conceive of such questions as theoretical games, but as issues of the utmost importance. Both Percy and Marcel are emphatic on this point, that questions of the transcendent realm—whether the conclusion is an affirmation or denial—are of the most central importance to the meaningful, lived experience of the individual. The novel provides a unique tool in dramatizing the struggle and journey that is meaningful belief.

To read Percy as a postsecular author means to conceive of Percy as a writer whose protagonists who are placed on the battlefield where the two warring forces, the secular and the religious, are entrenched and fail to offer the kind of meaningful life sought by the protagonists. For instance, Binx and the later Will Barrett make no decisive movement into Christianity, but both are also somewhere *on the way*. Percy's critics debate where this path is directed, although it is generally understood by critics that the protagonists are on their way to joining the Roman Catholic church (Lance is the clear exception here).

By understanding belief as something that is not inherent only to the life of the Christian, but also to the atheist, one opens the conversation up to—explorations of meaningful belief as lived by the atheist. By conceiving of participative belief as a way of meaning making that is not limited to the life of the orthodox Christian, but one that belongs to any individual who takes seriously the claims of his or her belief, one can examine the way that novels articulate meaningful belief, whether atheist, Christian, or any non-Western religion that has been absent in this study.¹⁹⁹

In response to McClure's taxonomy of postsecular works, Hoogheem writes that no single postsecular work 'will display these tendencies in the same way or to the same

¹⁹⁸ Magdalena Maczynska, 'Toward a Postsecular Literary Criticism: Examining Ritual Gestures in Zadie Smith's *Autograph Man*', *Religion and Literature*, 41.3 (Autumn 2009), 73-82 (p. 81).

¹⁹⁹ Percy's novels feature very little, if any, dialogue with Eastern religions, although he does occasionally mention Buddhism and Hinduism in *Lost in the Cosmos*.

degree', but they nevertheless 'all participate in a conversation dedicated to rethinking simplistic binaries between religion and the secular'.²⁰⁰ Percy rethinks these by challenging traditional notions of 'belief' and 'religious', although Percy's putative aim is to restore these words to a former efficacy that has since been lost. What Percy never explicitly acknowledges, but what I hope to demonstrate in this study, is that Percy's constructions of belief in his novels elevates the serious atheist above the unserious Christian, the latter of whom may have the 'correct' belief system, but whose belief is so disconnected from his or her life that it is rendered meaningless. In Percy's articulation of the evacuation of religious language, he never expands his exploration to include the word *belief*, but explores it implicitly in his novels.

Percy does not capitulate to a rendering of religious conversion, certainty in a life of faith, or proselytization—even though these trends emerge in his later novels---his protagonists remain the same abstracted individuals who must make sense of life in the twentieth-century, when it is an ordinary, malaise-soaked Wednesday afternoon that poses the greatest threat to life and happiness. The vision of meaningful belief that emerges in Percy's fiction, though it features a narrowing from both Catholic and non-Catholics to exclusively Catholic and/or Christian, nevertheless, is centrally concerned with the way in which belief is enacted in the world of everyday experience and decisions, and with it a persistent element of uncertainty, where questions of right belief are never entirely free from doubt or uncertainty. Percy's techniques in dramatizing belief do indeed shift over his career, but he captures a vision of belief resonant with that of Marcel. Participative belief is a journey, a struggle, and never a conventional or easy mode of being in the world and indifferently clinging to an idea or philosophy.

²⁰⁰ Hoogheem, 'None of the Above', 105-106.

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