

ALTERNATIVES TO ALIENATION  
IN THE NOVELS OF  
WALKER PERCY

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## INTRODUCTION

The prevalent concern with alienation and the existential dilemma which dominates contemporary literature and philosophy assumes a disordered society, a chaotic universe. In such a world, outward abstractions rather than inward concreteness form the basis of man's life; hence, he visualizes his life as futile and irrelevant. Yet existential literature and philosophy not only illustrate modern man's dilemma but also emphasize the need for an inner awakening in order to establish human purpose, meaning, and authenticity.

Like numerous other twentieth century novelists, Walker Percy has incorporated these concerns in his three novels: The Moviegoer (1960), The Last Gentleman (1966), and Love in the Ruins (1971). His works present the consequences of alienation; however, they also offer options for suppressing alienation. These options reflect his profound interest in Soren Kierkegaard's philosophical discourses, especially those concerning the three stages of existence. The purpose of this study is to examine the three levels of existence defined by Kierkegaard and incorporated into Percy's three novels. The validity of a comparison between Kierkegaard's philosophy and Percy's novels may be corroborated not only through Percy's pervasive use of Kierkegaard's terminology, but also through Percy's own acknowledgement of Kierkegaard's influence on his life and his works.

In an interview conducted by Ashley Brown, Percy relates the effects Kierkegaard as well as several other European philosophers and novelists had on his life: "In somewhat this order I have read Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, then Sartre and Camus. These writers were a revelation to me. They filled a tremendous gap in my view of the world; indeed they seemed to take it over at one time. In one way or another they all dealt with this important question: What is it like to be a man in a world transformed by science? They have put tremendous stress on the concrete predicament of man's life. How is this related to my novel writing? Perhaps a novel is the best way to render this concreteness."<sup>1</sup> In other words, these writers helped Percy to perceive the limitations of science, to understand that science is incapable of dealing with inward consciousness. Percy relates that it was Kierkegaard in particular who saw the consequences of basing existence on science: "He saw it most clearly . . . that science cannot utter one single sentence about what a man is himself as an individual."<sup>2</sup>

Percy's remarks offer substantial justification for a study that perceives his novels in relation to various

<sup>1</sup>Ashley Brown, "An Interview with Walker Percy," Shenandoah, 23 (1967), 6. Subsequent references will be cited as Brown Interview.

<sup>2</sup>John Carr, "An Interview with Walker Percy," Georgia Review, 25 (1971), 321. Subsequent references will be cited as Carr Interview.

philosophical concerns. Indeed no adequate literary critique of Walker Percy is complete without some consideration of the philosophical underpinnings of his works. The one recently published book on Percy's novels by Martin Luschei discusses the numerous philosophical influences prevalent in his works.<sup>3</sup> Most articles similarly allude to the Kierkegaardian overtones which prevail in his novels and philosophical treatises. However, no study has yet considered the precise relationship of Kierkegaard's three stages to Percy's works. These stages seem to be absolutely relevant (as Percy's own remarks indicate), and their relationship is the subject of this thesis.

Percy perceives the stages as offering alternatives to alienation which give his protagonists, as well as many minor characters, degrees of authenticity that range from the invalid equated with an aesthetic existence, to the increasingly or temporarily valid equated with an ethical existence, to permanently valid alternatives equated with a religious existence. This investigation, then, will examine the alternatives to alienation as Percy presents them in his novels, in terms of the stages of awareness that each protagonist experiences as he progresses to the religious stage.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luschei, The Sovereign Wayfarer (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1972).

In this study, Kierkegaard's philosophical treatises on the three stages of life will form a background to understanding Percy's three novels. Therefore, in addition to The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman, and Love in the Ruins, this examination will also rely upon Kierkegaard's Either/Or I, II, Repetition, Fear and Trembling, Sickness Unto Death, Concept of Dread, and Concluding Unscientific Postscript. References will also be made to the numerous philosophical essays published by Percy, such as "Man on the Train," "Message in the Bottle," and "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World."<sup>4</sup>

The thesis, then, is divided into five chapters. Chapter one will introduce Percy as a novelist, philosopher, and psychiatrist, and will provide pertinent biographical information which will include a discussion of Percy's debt to Kierkegaard. Chapters two, three, and four will examine The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman, and Love in the Ruins respectively in terms of the central characters' need for a conscious awareness of themselves in order to overcome the despair frequently associated with an aesthetic or alienated existence. Their progressions from an aesthetic and ethical

<sup>4</sup>Walker Percy, "Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes," Partisan Review, 23 (1956), 473-94; "Message in the Bottle," Thought, 34 (1959), 405-33; "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World," Katallagete (Journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, Nashville) (Winter 1967-68), 7-14. Subsequent references will be cited respectively as "Train," "Message," and "Notes."

to a religious existence will also be discussed. Included in these chapters will be a brief study of the effects of the past and tradition on the protagonists in the novels. Chapter five will consist of conclusions drawn from the preceding three chapters and will attempt to establish Percy's overview of contemporary man's dilemma and his understanding of the function of literature in a world transformed by science.



## CHAPTER I

### PERCY AND KIERKEGAARD

Although Walker Percy is an eminent novelist, writing and literature were not his original interests. Percy entered the University of North Carolina as a chemistry major; after receiving his B.A. in 1937 he went on to Columbia's College of Physicians where he received his medical degree in 1941. However, his medical career was cut short when, during his internship at Bellevue Hospital, he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis. While convalescing in the Adirondacks he became interested in the works of such existential writers and philosophers as Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger and Marcel. As a result Percy, who still maintains an interest in science and medicine, "became aware of its [science's] shortcomings . . . . [and admits that] Kierkegaard helped [him] to see them."<sup>1</sup> In explaining his change in interests, Percy recalls it as a breakthrough:

I remember at North Carolina that classical behaviorism in the psychology department was running very strong. And at Columbia, it was the idea of the mechanism of disease, which is very valuable, the idea that disease is a mechanism of response in the body to the disease agent. So I began to be interested in a view of man as such, man as man. And I saw one day . . . maybe it was something of a breakthrough, something of a turning of a corner, that science can say so much about things, objects

<sup>1</sup>Brown Interview, p. 4.

or people, but by its very definition, by its own self imposed limitation, the scientific method can only utter a statement about a single object, a glass or a frog or a dogfish--or a man only insofar as it resembles other things of its kind. . . . Well, I suddenly realized that when you apply this to man, you stop short at the very point where it matters to man. Science can say everything about a man except what he is in himself.<sup>2</sup>

After this breakthrough Percy began writing philosophical articles that have appeared in such journals as Thought, Psychiatry, Partisan Review, and Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. The question repeatedly posed by both Percy and his predecessor Kierkegaard is "What is it to be a man and to live and die?"<sup>3</sup> His novels and articles are an attempt to answer this question.

"Symbol as Need," Percy's first article, was published in Thought in 1954; it illustrates his indebtedness to Suzanne Langer. In her book Feeling and Form (1953), she attempts to establish the difference between sign and symbol.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Percy relates, "A symbol is the vehicle for the conception of an object and as such is a distinctly human product."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Percy suggests that signs are not

<sup>2</sup>Carr Interview, p. 320.

<sup>3</sup>Brown Interview, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1953). Langer's notions on sign and symbol were first set down in Philosophy in a New Key (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1942).

<sup>5</sup>Walker Percy, "Symbol as Need," Thought, 29 (1954), 386.

distinctly human conceptions; "Signs announce their objects. Thunder announces rain. The bell announces food to Pavlov's dog."<sup>6</sup> Consequently the difference between sign and symbol is a difference between objectivity and subjectivity. "Symbolization is the essential act of the mind . . . , and as such cannot be grasped by conventional biological concepts."<sup>7</sup> Hence in his first article Percy discusses the difference between scientific objectivity and individual subjectivity.

This attempt at distinction continues to permeate many of his articles as well as his novels. It is especially evident in "Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes" and "The Message in the Bottle"; these articles contain the seeds that germinate in his three novels The Moviegoer (1961), The Last Gentleman (1967), and Love in the Ruins (1971). Other articles exemplifying Percy's perceptions of the condition of modern man include "Symbol, Consciousness and Intersubjectivity," "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism," and "Naming and Being."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 385.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>8</sup>Walker Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity," The Journal of Philosophy, 55 (1958), 631-41; "Naming and Being," Personalist, 41 (1960), 148-57; "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism: A Possible Bridge from Empiricism," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 16 (1956), 522-30.

While writing these articles Percy made two attempts to write novels, but these attempts were failures. His first novel was read by Allen Tate, who remarked, "'This is dreadful--you've simply got to put some action in it.'"<sup>9</sup> As a result Percy abandoned it. He considered his second attempt "dreadful" and abandoned it too. Finally, his third effort and first published novel The Moviegoer won national acclaim as the winner of the 1962 National Book Award. This novel was followed by The Last Gentleman, a 1967 runner-up for the National Book Award, and lastly Love in the Ruins, published in 1971.

Each of Percy's novels presents the turmoil and despair associated with modern man's fragmented and alienated existence; their present popularity, however, especially results from the possible alternatives to alienation that Percy perceives. Alienation, defined in conventional terms by David Riesman in The Lonely Crowd,<sup>10</sup> and elaborated upon by Sidney Finkelstein in Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature, may be perceived as a decay or deterioration of the limbs that constitute the crowd. Basing his comments on Riesman, Finkelstein says that "In the 'lonely' crowd the individuals are estranged from one another, so that

<sup>9</sup>Brown Interview, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1950).

the links chafe like manacles, and communication and mutual understanding are replaced by estrangement and hostility. The estrangement intensifies as the bonds become tighter. . . . The individual becomes 'alienated,' that is, estranged not only from the others but from himself, from that part of his necessary life activity which creates and strengthens the very ties that appear so oppressive."<sup>11</sup> Percy defines alienation in his own way, rather than in the conventional sense, as "a reversal of the objective-empirical. . . . It is very simply illustrated in the case of the alienated commuter. This man--though he will have met every need which can be abstracted by the objective-empirical method: sexual needs, nutritional, emotional, in-group needs, needs for a productive orientation, creativity, community service--this man may nevertheless be alienated. Moreover he is apt to be alienated in proportion to his staking everything on the objective-empirical."<sup>12</sup> That is to say, alienation reverses the objective-empirical because the individual consciously tries to supplement objectivity with what he perceives as modern man's subjective needs, rather than attempting to discover his own individual needs in

<sup>11</sup> Sidney W. Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> Percy, "Train," p. 479.

order to counteract alienation. Alienation, then, is a form of estrangement which frequently results in despair over one's inability to function as a member of society; but more importantly, especially to Percy, it involves estrangement and despair over one's inability to function as an individual being in a society that emphasizes ends rather than means, objectivity rather than subjectivity, abstraction rather than concretion.

Percy's interpretations may be perceived more clearly through an explanation of each of Kierkegaard's stages. In the aesthetic stage man lives only for the outward pleasure of the moment, in other words in the realm of immediacy. According to Kierkegaard "the immediate man helps himself in a different way, he wishes to be another. . . . For the immediate man does not recognize himself, he recognizes himself only by his dress, he recognizes that he has a self only by externals . . . ." <sup>13</sup> Consequently, when the externals no longer provide fulfillment the aesthete experiences despair and alienation--despair over his inability to discern concretely his identity and alienation from his real self which has taken on multifarious forms in an effort to achieve immediate satisfaction. This despair, however, may be surmounted through an expansion of the inner consciousness

<sup>13</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 186. Kierkegaard's use of aesthetic in terms of a stage of existence does not carry the usual connotations of the term aesthetic. Subsequent references will be cited as Kierkegaard, Sickness.

which enables the individual to perceive how he may function in a fragmented society. Awareness of the invalidity of the aesthetic promotes a need to discern more authentic options.

The ethical stage, which in Percy's novels offers increasingly valid options, involves an effort on the individual's part to "divest himself of the inward determinants and express them in an outward way."<sup>14</sup> Discerning one's concrete existence is the problem the ethicist attempts to resolve. Although the ethical also concerns man's responsibility to laws and rules, Percy is primarily interested in that aspect which concerns one's reality; he insists with Kierkegaard that "the sole ethical interest is the interest in one's own reality."<sup>15</sup> For Percy's protagonists this involves, among various other options, repetition or recollection, "a backward movement" into the past in order to integrate one's past with the present in an endeavor to discern concrete actuality. The inadequacy of this stage rests in its impermanence; that is to say, although the ethical view offers a synthesis of the external and the internal or the universal and the particular, it will not

<sup>14</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 79.

<sup>15</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 288. Subsequent references will be cited as Unscientific.

endure through time. It is impermanent because it fails to suggest answers to the second of Percy's and Kierkegaard's most important questions, "How to die?" Ethics, as Kierkegaard states, "does not have the medium of being but the medium of becoming"; that is, the ethical stage is a transitional stage between the aesthetic and the religious view. According to Kierkegaard, ". . . it is an essential requirement that it [the religious view] should have passed through the ethical."<sup>16</sup>

The difference between the religious and the ethical is that the ethical is based on a relationship between the universal and the particular (i. e., the individual); whereas the religious view is based on a particular relation between God and man. With the achievement of a religious view, ethical principles are subordinated but are not necessarily annihilated. The religious sphere is a paradox involving complete resignation or surrender to God (i. e., forfeiting universal or ethical views) followed by the leap of faith through which the universal is returned not by man but by God. Faith as defined by Kierkegaard in Fear & Trembling "is the paradox that inwardness is higher than outwardness."<sup>17</sup> He elaborates on this in Concept of Dread where he states that "by turning inwardly man discovers freedom. Fate he

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>17</sup>Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 79.



does not fear, for he lays hold of no external task, and for him freedom is his bliss, not freedom to do this or that in the world, to become king and emperor, or the exponent of popular opinion, but freedom to know of himself that he is freedom."<sup>18</sup> Thus it is through this life view that Percy's protagonists attain valid alternatives to alienation which enable them to function in a fragmented and highly empirical society. They discover that the religious existence fuses existence in the finite world with spiritual transcendence to the infinite. Consequently the fragmented self exemplified in Binx of The Moviegoer, Will of The Last Gentleman and Dr. More of Love in the Ruins is reunified in varying degrees by the conclusions of the novels, enabling them to resolve subjectively the problem of "How to live and how to die."

As Percy's central characters develop they perceive the inadequacies of a society that bases existence on scientific advancement, materialistic objects, and technological development. They realize that this society abstracts man from an inward awareness of self and leads to alienation. The objectivity associated with science pervades the novels, and it serves to illuminate Percy's perceptions of the condition of modern man, who realizes that science destroys such subjective needs as hope, faith, purpose and meaning.

<sup>18</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 96.

Consequently, existence becomes futile and irrelevant. By denying the subjective inward search, such individuals deny the ethical and religious stages. Furthermore, because science is unable to resolve the problem of how a man should live and die, the problem is ignored. Living, consequently, becomes a product of momentary pleasure; hence man dwells in the aesthetic stage, an invalid alternative to alienation.

Science in Percy's three novels emerges as a form of abstraction since it suppresses subjectivity. Abstract thought, as Kierkegaard defines it, "is thought without a thinker. Abstract thought ignores everything but thought, and only the thought is, and is in its own medium. Existence is not devoid of thought, but in existence thought is in a foreign language."<sup>19</sup> By contrast concrete thought "is thought with a relation to a thinker and to a definite particular something which is thought, existence giving to the existing thinker thought, time and place."<sup>20</sup> The problem with abstract thinking and science is that they deal with external concerns in an objective manner which leads one away from a perception of himself; consequently, he becomes alienated.

<sup>19</sup>Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

The search for scientific knowledge, which Percy calls the vertical search, pervades his novels and Kierkegaard's treatises because it emphasizes objective scientific knowledge at the expense of subjective self knowledge, or the horizontal search. The scientist "has abstracted from his own predicament [i. e., inward search] in order to achieve objectivity. His objectivity is indeed nothing else than his removal from his own concrete situation. . . . The abstraction of the scientist from affairs of life may be so great that he even ignores news of the highest relevance for his own predicament."<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard also discusses the effects of stressing scientific knowledge rather than self-knowledge, "Science organizes the moments of subjectivity within a knowledge of them and this knowledge is assumed to be the highest stage, and all knowledge is an abstraction which annuls existence, a taking of knowledge out of existence. In existence, however, such a principle does not hold . . . . The task is not to exalt the one at the expense of the other but to give them equal status, to unify them in simultaneity; the medium in which they are unified is existence."<sup>22</sup>

Percy emphasizes the one-sidedness of science not to suggest annihilation of the scientific search, nor to recommend subordination of it for the subjective search, but to

<sup>21</sup> Percy, "Message," pp. 416-417.

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 311.

depict the primary source of modern man's alienated existence, and to suggest that through ascertaining valid alternatives to alienation science will necessarily become synthesized with the finite and the infinite, the objective and the subjective. Science then would become a servant to man, rather than a master who would deny the existence of his servant.

In explaining why he prefers literature to science, Percy relates that literature seems to be more complete than science, since it deals with man's awareness of his own reality, but he also admits that science has its value.

I think too often there is a feeling among artists, the creative people, that science represents the unpleasant, or the cold, the unemotional side of life, and that art represents the emotional or warm side. I think that is a mistake. In the first place we are living in a culture which is completely saturated by the whole scientific ethic, the whole scientific outlook, and anybody who pretends he is not affected by science and doesn't benefit by science is simply deceiving himself. I am convinced of the value of the scientific vocation, of the practice of the scientific method.

Now, in changing to writing, to creative work, I am equally convinced of the absolute seriousness of that in much the same way. I think that serious novel writing, that serious art, is just as important, and just as cognitive; it concerns areas of knowing, of discovering and knowing, just as much as any science. In fact, in art, particularly in the modern novel, you are dealing with areas of life which cannot be reached in any other way. . . . That's why my primary concern is not in telling a story and putting characters together so that something is going to happen, but in using the fictional situation, a man in a concrete situation, exploring reality in a way which cannot be done any other way. It cannot be done with science, a microscope, or with sociology or psychology, however refined it is. . . . What you are doing

is exploring the quality of a particular consciousness of a particular time when the contemporary consciousness is fragmented and imperiled.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, Percy turned from science to literature expecting literature to deal more fully with the human dilemma; his novels fulfill this expectation.

<sup>23</sup>Carlton Cremeens, "Walker Percy, The Man and the Novelist: An Interview," The Southern Review, 4 (1968), 282-83. Subsequent references will be cited as Cremeens Interview.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SAD LITTLE HAPPINESS OR THE BIG SEARCH FOR THE BIG HAPPINESS

In The Moviegoer, Walker Percy presents the situation of modern man whose fragmented existence can only be reunified through a search for authenticity. Percy's protagonist, Binx Bolling, and to a limited degree his cousin Kate Cutrer, illustrate this fragmented existence as well as the self-fulfillment attained through reunification. During the time span encompassed in The Moviegoer, Binx progresses from a purely aesthetic existence that provides no valid alternatives to alienation, to an ethical existence where options become increasingly valid, and finally to a religious existence where he establishes and maintains valid alternatives. This chapter will examine Binx's search to determine authentic options and his eventual discovery of them.

Binx launches his search as a result of perceiving the ineffectiveness of an everyday existence that stresses such finite entities as material possessions, professional achievement, traditional heritage, and social status. Such secular enjoyments, associated with the aesthetic modality, fail to alleviate alienation because such options hold him in the finite, therefore widening the gap existing between the finite and the infinite. Binx recognizes that "the search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in

the everydayness of his own life. . . . To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the search is impossible if one is "sunk in everydayness."

The movies imply the pattern for the search; they depict individuals seeking consciousness and coming to an awareness. However, as Binx perceives, "they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might as well be dead" (13). The movies present an idealized image of reality that individuals, including Binx, frequently identify with; but such identification is inauthentic since it is based on externals outside the self.

Binx, who is consciously searching for valid options, realizes that the movies distort reality, but he maintains an interest in the "peculiar reality" (17) of such actors as William Holden. The moviegoers do not perceive Holden's real identity since his screen image changes in each movie, never revealing his concrete self. Therefore, the search, for the viewers, aims only at the idealized existence of a

<sup>1</sup>Walker Percy, The Moviegoer (New York: Noonday Press, 1960), p. 13. Subsequent references will be inserted parenthetically following the quoted material.

film scenario. Awareness of Holden's idealized reality and his inability to be anonymous attracts Binx to Holden, since in contrast Binx must struggle to prevent his own anonymity and the everydayness afflicting his existence.<sup>2</sup>

The minor characters in the novels, like the movies and the actors, illustrate the inadequacy of impersonation and everydayness; however, they also accentuate the fragmentation engulfing modern man and exemplify the odds Binx struggles to surmount. Of the minor characters, Binx's aunt, Emily Cutrer, and his mother, Mrs. Smith, stand out not only because of their everyday existence but also because, to Binx, they represent two polar extremes rooted in the aesthetic sphere. Aunt Emily emphasizes the importance of tradition; Mrs. Smith reduces life to simplicities; and it is through their differing yet aesthetic responses that Binx encounters difficulty in maintaining his search. Consequently, he vacillates between an aesthetic or worldly existence and pursuit of the search. Nevertheless, the search eventually prevails. His cousin, Kate Cutrer, also emerges as an important figure, since she, like Binx, is conscious of the fragmentation afflicting modern man.

<sup>2</sup>Jerome Thale suggests that ". . . Binx knows that his movie-going is really a flight from engagement with the concrete, for the movies are but images of reality and the most grossly distorted images at that." ("Alienation on the American Plan", Forum, 6 (1968), 38. Thale, however, neglects to explain why Binx is attracted to the "peculiar reality" of movie actors.)



The other characters, although minor, are significant since they reestablish the despair resulting from an aesthetic existence. It is through his conversations with these individuals and his observations of them that Binx perceives the limitations of their existence and decides to continue his own search for authenticity. In Mercer, the Cutrers' butler, Binx perceives the consequences of role-playing. "It is not easy to say who he [Mercer] is anymore. . . . When he succeeds in seeing himself, it is as a remarkable sort of fellow, a man who keeps himself well informed in science and politics. This is why I am always uneasy when I talk to him. I hate it when his vision of himself dissolves and he sees himself as neither old retainer nor expert in current events. Then his eyes get muddy and his face runs together behind his mustache" (23). At these times, though, Mercer is aware of his nebulous identity, the result of constantly masking his real self. Mercer, then, represents the immediate man who in Kierkegaardian terms "wishes to be another." Consequently he "does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress, he recognizes that he has a self only by externals."<sup>3</sup>

When Binx meets his cousin, Eddie Lovell, he realizes that, like Mercer, Eddie's real self remains unacknowledged because he understands only externals. Eddie's life,

<sup>3</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 187.

consequently, requires no search. "He understands everything out there . . ."; his vision, nevertheless, incorporates only externals. Binx, although temporarily perplexed over such an understanding, eventually realizes that this type of an existence, as Kierkegaard explains, is despair; yet its victim is unable to perceive it.

It permits itself as it were to be defrauded by the others. By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself, forgets what his name is, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd. This form of despair is hardly ever noticed in the world. Such a man, precisely by losing his self in this way, has gained perfectability in adjusting himself to business, yea in making a success in the world.<sup>4</sup>

It is through his awareness of the self-anonymity associated with Eddie's life that Binx recognizes his "exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self deception . . ." (18), since conscious pursuit of anonymity relinquishes self-reality.

Walter, Kate's ex-fiance, reaffirms the insufficiency of the aesthetic view since he, like Eddie, measures self-worth in terms of outward success. More importantly, however, Walter's success requires certification through others rather than through himself. A houseboat adventure, undertaken by him and Binx after the Korean War, illustrates his need for approval; Walter's questions exemplify this need: "Goddam, this is all right, isn't it? Isn't this a terrific

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

set up, Binx?" (40). Certification, the need for others' approval of an experience as genuine, calls to mind Percy's comment in "Loss of the Creature"; in that article he states that such questions "do not necessarily refer to the sovereign encounter of the person with the sight that enlivens the mind and gladdens the heart. It means that now at last [he is] having the acceptable experience."<sup>5</sup> Walter must have his experiences confirmed as real by others rather than by himself.

In addition to his recognition of these invalid options, Binx also recognizes in Jules, Emily's husband and Kate's father, the distorted view of modern man's perception of the ideal Christian. "He [Jules] has made a great deal of money, he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic . . ." (31). Outwardly, then, his life seems ideal, but as Binx adds with an element of satire, ". . . it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in The City of Man is so pleasant that The City of God must hold little in store for him" (31).

Through these individuals Binx recognizes the ineffectiveness of such invalid alternatives as impersonation, certification, professional and social success. As Percy explains elsewhere, "The self, that which symbolizes, will if it perverts its native project of being conscious of something else and tries to grasp itself as a something,

<sup>5</sup>Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," Forum, 11 (1958), 10.

either fail and remain as the unformulable, a nothingness, the aching wound of self--or it will fall prey to miserable inauthentic transformations."<sup>6</sup> Hence, Binx recognizes that rather than exist in the despair of nothingness, these individuals have chosen an equally invalid alternative; they have chosen to impersonate others rather than exist as themselves. The result of inauthentic transformations is despair, but as Kierkegaard suggests, "In spite of the fact that a man is in despair he can perfectly well live in the temporal life. What is called worldliness is made up of just such men, who pawn themselves to the world. They use their talents, accumulate money, carry on worldly affairs, calculate shrewdly, etc. etc., are perhaps mentioned in history, but themselves they are not; spiritually understood they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything."<sup>7</sup>

Through his recognition of the worldliness of Mercer, Eddie, Walter, and Jules, Binx acknowledges that a secular existence denies self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. However, Aunt Emily's belief in the virtues of a traditional heritage as well as her power over him cause

<sup>6</sup>Walker Percy, "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism: A Possible Bridge from Empiricism," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 16 (1956), 527.

<sup>7</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 168.

Binx to question and frequently renounce the search. Her idealized belief in the importance of such a code results in the impersonation and transformation of others in order for them as well as for herself to fit the mold of her traditional code. Therefore, although she is sincere, her "Socratic manner," "Lorenzo posture" (32), and her ability to transform others to correspond to her traditional concept illustrates the falsity of her existence and her ideals, however noble. Consequently, she visualizes everyone in terms of roles which negate their real selves. Mercer she sees as "the old retainer" and Jules, her husband, as the "Creole Cato, the last of the heroes . . . . All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven, the noble. So strong is she, that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her, they become what she sees them to be" (49). Her ability to transfigure people extends to Binx, whom she imagines as a medical student rather than as a stockbroker because she believes he has a "keen mind and a natural scientific curiosity" (51).

Aunt Emily's belief stems from a previous interest that Binx demonstrated in scientific research, which he terms the vertical search. Yet, after reading The Chemistry of Life, he recognized the limitations of science. "When I finished it, it seemed to me that the main goals of my search were in principle reachable . . . . The only difficulty was that

though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next. But now I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search" (78). Binx realizes, as did Percy, that science is unable to deal with the human dilemma and that "The scientist . . . has abstracted from his own predicament in order to achieve objectivity. His objectivity is indeed nothing else than his removal from his own concrete situation."<sup>8</sup> Like Kierkegaard, Binx becomes aware that "The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an end to the mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it."<sup>9</sup> Emily, however, fails to comprehend this perception. Instead she emphasizes duty and responsibility in terms of one's profession and one's contributions. Hence, as Jim Van Cleave suggests, "The dangerous consequence of Aunt Emily's idealism is impersonation. Binx may take her ideal for what he ought to be or what is his truest if unrealized self. Her power is enough to drive Binx from consciousness."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Percy, "Train," p. 416.

<sup>9</sup>Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 302.

<sup>10</sup>Jim Van Cleave, "Versions of Percy," The Southern Review, 6 (1970), 1001.

Emily's idealism affects Binx precisely the way Van Cleave suggests; her unwavering belief in the virtues of a traditional heritage and her sincerity in promoting those virtues create a conflict within Binx between his heritage and his search. Accepting traditional codes is invalid because it forfeits understanding and results in conforming to the values of others rather than ascertaining what is of value to one's self. Consequently, belief in one's heritage leads to impersonation in order to live up to accepted standards of the past. Impersonation destroys individuality since it is based on the outward appearances of others, thus emphasizing the aesthetic modality. Likewise sensuality, because it stresses outward pleasure that endures only in the moment, is equally inauthentic. Neither option is valid since both deny inward consciousness. Although Binx is cognizant of the ineffectiveness of the aesthetic modality, the idealism of his aunt and his own desire for sensual pleasure frequently cause him to abandon the search for self-fulfillment. Consequently, he vacillates between the search on the one hand and sensual fulfillment on the other until he achieves an ultimate comprehension of inward consciousness. The way in which Percy juxtaposes Binx's relationships with his secretary, Sharon Kincaid, and his cousin, Kate Cutrer, exemplifies the fluctuating aspects of his personality.

It should be noted that his relationship with Sharon functions as rotation, an attempt to "experience the new

beyond the expectation of experiencing the new" (144). In his relationship with Sharon one recognizes that his awareness of the inadequacies of the aesthetic sphere, alternatives that provide only momentary pleasure, do not prevent him from deluding himself into thinking that occasionally such options suppress alienation. Role-playing and financial success are two important elements that exemplify his submission to aesthetic or immediate alternatives. He frequently assumes not only a "Gregory Peckish" manner towards Sharon but also devises schemes to seduce her. Additionally, the entire involvement will make money for him at the same time. Hence, he devises schemes "in the interest of money and love . . . . Everything depends on a close cooperation between business and love. If ever my business should suffer because of my admiration for Sharon, then my admiration for Sharon would suffer too. . . . The trick, the joy of it, is to prosper on all fronts, enlist money in the service of love and love in the service of money" (102). As Binx embraces worldliness, he abandons his prior perceptions of the inadequacy of aesthetic options. His concern with worldly matters illustrates Kierkegaard's influence on Percy's writing: "What is called worldliness is made up of just such men who pawn themselves to the world. They use their talents, accumulate money, carry on worldly affairs, calculate shrewdly etc., etc. . . . but themselves they are



not; . . . they have no self."<sup>11</sup>

Juxtaposed to his sensuous relationship with Sharon, then, is Binx's relationship with Kate, whose mental stability is tenuous. Yet here his search finds strength to persist. Kate, aware of the ineffectiveness of aesthetic choices, is unable to determine functional alternatives. Consequently her despair is a result of her inability to develop inwardly, her "failure to appreciate that man is spirit . . . ."<sup>12</sup> Aware of Kate's unstable nature, Binx moves out of the aesthetic realm, thus resisting impersonation and deception in his relationship with Kate. Unlike her step-mother, Emily, and her psychiatrist, Merle, who try to appease her to prevent mental despair, Binx is truthful and honest: "I tell her the truth because I have not the wit to tell her anything else" (176). Kate, in contrast to Sharon, is able to recognize an aesthetic existence, and it

<sup>11</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 168. The similarity between Binx's deceptive plan to seduce Sharon and that of Johannes in "Diary of a Seducer" from Either/Or, Vol. I, reasserts Kierkegaard's influence on Percy and reaffirms the sensual aspects of the aesthetic stage. ". . . the strategic principle, the law governing every move in this campaign, is always to work her into an interesting situation. The interesting is the field on which the battle must be waged; the potentialities of the interesting must be exhausted. . . . Everything depends on finding out what the individual can give and therefore what she must demand in return. For this reason my love affairs always have a reality for myself, they mark a factor in my life, a creative period, of which I am fully aware; often they are bound up with one or another acquired skill."

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

is for this reason Binx is honest. Therefore, it is the honesty Kate promotes in Binx that helps him eventually to relinquish aesthetic choices and maintain the search.

While Kate functions as a catalyst in this way, Sharon also modifies the aesthetic delusions perceived in Binx through the gradual demise of their relationship; and this modification is reaffirmed in Binx's remark, ". . . I do not love her so wildly as I loved her last night" (135). This recognition progresses until their relationship is entirely reduced to an everyday affair in which communication becomes increasingly difficult and the "malaise settles on [them] like fall-out" (166). Although a crisis situation removes the malaise, that solution is only temporary. Their car accident by its nature intensifies reality so that "By virtue of our misfortune we have become a thing to look at and witnesses gaze at us with heavy-lidded almost seductive expressions. But almost at once they are past and those who follow see nothing untoward . . . . We are restored to the anonymity of our little car space" (125). Binx perceives that ordeal and "rotation" are only temporary alternatives to alienation, since the despair of everydayness increases as the newness of the rotation diminishes.

Kate too recognizes the positive effects of ordeal evidenced in her remark that "only in time of illness or disaster or death are people real" (80). Both she and Binx have experienced crisis situations which heighten their perception

of reality. Percy expands on the effect of ordeal in one of his philosophical essays: "Only under condition of ordeal may I recover the sparrow. If I am lying wounded or in exile or in prison and a sparrow builds his nest at my window then I may see this sparrow."<sup>13</sup> Crisis situations, then, because they provide one with a perception of one's real self as well as an awareness of one's concrete surroundings, offer increasingly valid alternatives to alienation. However, the fallacy of such a perception is that alleviation of the anxiety associated with trauma removes certification. Nevertheless Binx and Kate recognize that "one's own existence becomes most acute in periods of extreme inner tension . . . . Only then does one fully realize what it really means to be."<sup>14</sup> This realization illustrates the progressively positive aspects of their development. Sharon, on the other hand, remains unaware of the nature of crisis situations.

Just as Percy juxtaposes Sharon and Kate to illustrate Binx's vacillation, he also juxtaposes Binx's mother, Mrs. Smith, with Aunt Emily to illustrate the various and encumbering aspects of the aesthetic sphere. That is to say, just as Binx's relationship with Sharon diminishes existence

<sup>13</sup>Walker Percy, "Naming and Being," Personalist, 41 (1960), 154.

<sup>14</sup>Henry D. Aiken, The Age of Ideology (New York: The New American Library, 1956), p. 228.

by emphasizing business and pleasure, similarly his mother reduces life to the ordinary, the simple and the commonplace. The difference is that she, unlike Sharon, consciously seeks simplicity. Binx's choice between the "sad little happiness" and "the big search for the big happiness" (136) illustrates his vacillation.

Binx consciously begins to make this choice by returning to the past, to his mother, in an effort to integrate the past with the present in order to derive a meaningful existence. It is through Mrs. Smith's allegiance to the ordinary that Binx reaches the penultimate decision to continue the search and to subordinate aesthetic existence to more valid options. He realizes the constant depreciation of her "election of the ordinary." She refuses to become involved in life's complexities; even God must be reduced to a simplicity.

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 the one enterprise she has any use for: the uncanny 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 wanted everything colloquial and easy, even God. (142)

Her adherence to the ordinary makes existence easy, but in actuality it diminishes it and diminishes her; for, as Kierkegaard asserts, "only that man's life is wasted who lived on so deceived by the joys of life or by its sorrows that he never became eternally and decisively conscious of himself as spirit."<sup>15</sup>

Occasionally Binx attempts "to shake her loose from her elected career of the commonplace. But her gyroscope always holds her on course" (152). Even her recollections of Binx's deceased father are diminished so that "It is not him she remembers but an old emblem of him" (152). It is this "emblem" that she tries to communicate to Binx, who requires a knowledge of his heredity as a basic ingredient in his search for self-knowledge. His father's existence was so absorbed in ideals that physical necessities, eating and sleeping, were impossible unless connected with the idea. One of these was war since it was a way for him to "do what he wanted to do and save old England doing it. And perhaps even carry off the grandest coup of all: to die" (157). Life, for Binx's father, was a constant quest for ideals that would give meaning to his existence. The loss of inward consciousness illustrates the flaw in ideals based on outward abstractions. The result is the need to discover new ideals as the old ones cease to be a source of satisfaction. It is for this reason that Binx refers to his father's death as

<sup>15</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 159.

"the grandest coup of all," since he no longer had to struggle in order to discover new ideals to live by.

Binx's interest in his father illustrates his need to understand his heritage. He is capable of comprehending Aunt Emily's stoicism and his mother's simplicities; consequently he rejects these options; they merely expand alienation and reduce inward consciousness. However, he must again return to the past in order to analyze his paternal heritage. "The return [or the repetition as Percy calls it] is a return to the past in search of self--a coming to terms with a haunted and guilt-laden world, a theme that abounds in southern fiction."<sup>16</sup> Repetition functions as an important aspect in Binx's development because only through returning to the past will Binx perceive the reality of the present and the necessity for the search. Therefore repetition becomes an increasingly valid alternative to alienation; ". . . gaining a history becomes the ethical victory of continuity over concealment, melancholy, illusory passion and despair."<sup>17</sup>

Because repetition and rotation are a consequence of an inward effort to perceive outward authenticity and to escape alienation and everydayness, they produce a more positive result. Rotation, however, frequently terminates in

<sup>16</sup>Richard Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," The Southern Review, 4 (1968), 312.

<sup>17</sup>Kierkegaard, Concept of Dread, p. 227.

boredom when the newness of an experience wears off, as it does in Binx's involvement with Sharon. In terms of Percy's interpretation of Kierkegaard's three modalities, repetition and rotation function as intermediary stages between the invalid and the valid, the aesthetic and the religious. Hence, such options parallel Kierkegaard's ethical stage in which the individual "sees that he himself is meanwhile in the process of becoming . . . ." <sup>18</sup> Percy himself suggests that "The moments of rotation and repetition are of such peculiar interest to the contemporary alienated consciousness because they represent the two obvious alternatives or deliverances from alienation." <sup>19</sup> That is to say, rotation and repetition are options frequently chosen by modern man in an effort to reclaim inward consciousness.

Martin Luschei seems to overlook Percy's essay and Kierkegaard's definition, as well as the effects rotation and repetition have on the revitalization of the search, when he suggests that Binx "vaults over the ethical stage

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>19</sup>Percy, "Train," p. 481. In "Man on the Train" Percy defines repetition in his own terms and admits that his definition is an alteration of Kierkegaard's. ". . . the rider . . . voyages into his own past in search for himself." Percy goes on to say that "we need not consider here Kierkegaard's distinction that true religious repetition has nothing to do with travel but is consciousness raised to the second power . . . ."

altogether and lands in a definite posture in the religious."<sup>20</sup> Although at times this seems to be the case, Binx's relationships, especially his honesty with Kate and his perceptions of the aesthetic sphere, illustrate a growing desire to discover valid alternatives. When Binx returns to the past he gains an ethical victory; consequently, the idea of the search becomes increasingly significant, and it becomes mandatory for Binx not only to break the grip of everydayness but also to move beyond a comprehension of the past, beyond the ethical stage, to seek permanently valid options in the religious stage. As a consequence of his return to the past and his understanding of it the search becomes more intense.

The best I can do is lie rigid as a stick under the cot, locked in a death grip with everydayness, sworn not to move a muscle until I advance another inch in my search. . . . At last the iron grip relaxes and I pull my pants off the chair, fish out a note book and scribble in the dark:

#### Remember Tomorrow

Starting point for search: It no longer avails to start with creatures and prove God. Yet it is impossible to rule God out. The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one's own invincible apathy--that if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed. Here is the strangest fact of all. Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the

<sup>20</sup>Martin Luschei, The Sovereign Wayfarer (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 106. Mr. Luschei seems to be concerned with the universal aspects of the ethical stage, that is, one's responsibility to laws and rules; however, Kierkegaard expands this definition to incorporate the necessity of gaining an ethical history, for "the sole ethical interest is the interest in one's own reality."



only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him. (146)<sup>21</sup>

This note illustrates that the objective empirical method, that is, starting "with creatures to prove God," is impossible; since there is no concrete verification of God's being, verification is contingent on what Kierkegaard terms the "leap of Faith." The reference to Abraham is an example Kierkegaard frequently uses to explain the leap.<sup>22</sup> Abraham was willing, through his unwavering faith, to sacrifice his son for God. Sacrifice and especially faith of this nature illustrate the trials frequently encountered in the religious view, which requires continual development since faith cannot exist in stasis. Yet, even Binx realizes that contemporary society lacks the inward development and faith associated with the religious view. It is for this reason he believes that "all the signs in the world make no difference." Yet even with his new understanding, Binx yields slightly to aesthetic alternatives, specifically sensual pleasure, to circumvent the

<sup>21</sup> A comparison of this note with that of Johannes in Kierkegaard's Repetition (119) again reaffirms, through the similarities, the influence Kierkegaard has on Percy. "Here I sit. . . . I know only this that I am sitting and that I have not budged from the spot. Here I stay--whether on my head or my heels I do not know; I know only this, that here I stay and that for a whole month I have remained suspenseo gradu without drawing my food toward me or making the least movement."

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard discusses Abraham's faith in depth in Repetition; hence Percy's knowledge of Kierkegaard's works is again apparent.

malaise which settles upon him and Sharon as they return to Gentilly. "Sorrowing, hoping against hope, I put my hand on the thickest and innermost part of Sharon's thigh" (166). Recognizing the deterioration of their relationship and perceiving his inability to communicate the nature of his search, Binx succumbs to his former fluctuating nature.

Nevertheless, as his relationship with Sharon declines, his association with Kate increases. It is through her dependency on Binx that Kate is eventually capable of suppressing despair in a successful manner and of discerning alternatives which, although not of a religious nature, offer her some degree of stability. However, when faced with the concrete reality of her own existence, when she is "aware of her own breathing," she seeks escape through barbiturates in order to "break out, or off dead center" (181). Her dilemma is that she fears self-development yet refuses to defraud her existence by reducing it to everydayness. Subsequently Kate rejects Binx's initial marriage proposal because she visualizes it as submission to an aesthetic alternative. "I'm not up to it. Having a little hubby--you would be hubby, dearest Binx, and that is ridiculous. . . . Seeing hubby off in the morning, having lunch with the girls, getting tight at Eddie's and Nell's house and having a little humbug with somebody else's hubby, wearing my little diaphragm and raising my two lovely boys and worrying for the next twenty years about whether they will make Princeton" (194).

Aesthetic interests stress external values, and Kate like Binx perceives the inadequacy of these options. Yet unlike Binx who occasionally must remind himself of the inauthentic nature of the aesthetic views, Kate rejects them altogether. Through the gradation of their relationship, Binx and Kate seek increasingly valid alternatives, such as repetition and rotation, that provide a temporary synthesis of the external and the internal, yet gradually both perceive the shortcomings of these options. The rotation they seek in Chicago is ineffective because the "five million personal rays of Chicagoans" (201) penetrating them minimize their existence by making them aware of their anonymity. Hence, to overcome it they seek Harold Grabner, Binx's friend; otherwise "we cannot be sure we are here at all . . . ." (206).

It should be noted that although Binx became aware of the inadequacy of both certification and rotation during his affair with Sharon, what seems to be submission to inadequate or semi-adequate alternatives on his part is not the case. His previous search was an individual endeavor, launched solely by himself. The present search is a joint effort to achieve an intersubjective relationship, which again parallels Kierkegaard's ethical stage. Both Binx and Kate must recognize the ineffectiveness and inauthentic aspects of their choices, which are based entirely on either external values or choices that fail to endure through time. Consequently Chicago is only "fit for a short rotation." Therefore,

although Binx vacillates between the two modalities, he does so with a definite purpose.

Sexual fulfillment, too, becomes an ineffective option for them, since it emphasizes awareness of reality only through a unification of the physical, neglecting the spiritual. Sex in the physical sense offers no permanent rescue from alienation. Consequently their desires are not fulfilled: "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 flesh), but until this moment seen through and cancelled, 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). As a result of their inability adequately to consummate their relationship, Binx and Kate perceive that sensual fulfillment must incorporate something more than physical sensations. It must, to be a valid alternative to alienation, synthesize flesh and spirit, the finite and the infinite, eternity rather than temporality.

Therefore, the trip to Chicago with Kate and the visit to Mrs. Smith's with Sharon are catalytic elements in re-viving the search. Through them Binx perceives the fallacies and the ineffectiveness of the aesthetic sphere; in addition, he recognizes the impermanence of such ethical options as repetition and rotation. However, all these perceptions are

unable to withstand the force of Emily's ideals and moral code.<sup>23</sup> Being a product of an essential heritage they cannot again be overlooked. Emily visualizes Binx's behavior with Kate as a violation of her trust, and an exploitation of Kate's mental instability. The key to the affirmation of her suspicion is to discover whether Binx and Kate were "intimate." The following reveals her reaction to Binx's answer "I suppose so, though intimate is not quite the word." Emily in despair replies:

All these years I have been assuming that between us words mean roughly the same thing, that among certain people, gentlefolk I don't mind calling them, there exists a set of meanings held in common, that a certain manner and a certain grace come as naturally as breathing. At the great moments of life--success, failure, marriage, death--our kind of folks have always possessed a native instinct for behavior, a natural piety, or grace, I don't mind calling it. Whatever else we did or failed to do, we always had that. I'll make a little confession. I am not ashamed to use the word class. I will also plead guilty to another charge. The charge is that people belonging to my class think they're better than other people. You're damn right we're better. We're better because we do not shrink from our obligations either to ourselves or to others. . . . Our civilization has achieved a distinction of sorts. It will be remembered not for its

<sup>23</sup> Similarly Lewis Lawson suggests, "An encounter with his aunt such as this has always left Binx in such a state of anxiety that he fairly lunges into fornication in an attempt to escape his consciousness of anxiety." However, Lawson asserts that the novel ends with Binx an "ethical man, in Kierkegaardian terms"; my contention is that he becomes a religious man in Kierkegaardian terms; see my conclusion to this chapter. Lewis Lawson, "Walker Percy's Southern Stoic," Southern Literary Journal, 1-3 (1968-1971), 19.

technology nor even its wars but for its novel ethics. Ours is the only civilization in history which has enshrined mediocrity as its national ideal. . . . I did my best for you, son, I gave you all I had. More than anything I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women--the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life. (223-224)<sup>24</sup>

Binx, unable to explain the fallacies he perceives in maintaining such a heritage, is thus unable to communicate his discoveries to Emily. Consequently he experiences despair which temporarily annuls the search.

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, the great shithouse of scientific

<sup>24</sup>In Lewis Lawson's article "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" he compares this speech by Aunt Emily, as well as others that are similar, to Percy's uncle William Alexander Percy, and especially to William Percy's book Lanterns on the Levy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941).

This calls to mind Percy's definition of tradition in his article "A Southern View": "There is a Southern heritage, and it has nothing to do with the colonel in the whiskey ad. It has to do with the conservative tradition of a predominantly agrarian society, a tradition which at its best enshrined the humane aspects of living for rich and poor, black and white. It gave first place to a stable family life, sensitivity and good manners between men, chivalry toward women, an honor code, and individual integrity." American, 97 (July 20, 1957), 428.

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 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)

Richard Lehan suggests that the question: "What if the bomb should not fall? . . . implies no hope of deliverance, no way of escaping what Percy calls 'everydayness,' no way out of the rat trap that the Bomb would bring so comfortably and so quickly [to an end]."<sup>25</sup> Thus, as Percy himself states, "The contingency 'what if the Bomb should fall?' is not only not a cause of anxiety in the alienated man but is one of his few remaining refuges from it."<sup>26</sup> Anxiety, then, results from the despair of an everyday existence, which immobilizes individuals and makes them "dead, dead, dead." Since crisis situations revitalize their existence, the bomb's falling acts as a deliverance from everydayness. Henry Aiken elucidates this significance of crisis situations in an essay concerning Kierkegaard's philosophical discourses; his comments are applicable to the idea of the bomb falling: ". . . only in states of extreme emotional crisis, when one faces not just the possibility but the fact of one's own imminent annihilation can one finally

<sup>25</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 310.

<sup>26</sup>Percy, "Train," p. 479.

grasp the significance of one's own existence. For it is only then that one at last decides to live or to die, to be or not to be."<sup>27</sup> Crisis situations, especially the idea of the bomb falling, are one of the major concerns of Percy's third novel Love in the Ruins; there, however, he focuses upon the approach of the end of the world.

Kate's appearance restores Binx's faith; and their subsequent marriage exemplifies their joint effort at achieving valid alternatives through intersubjectivity, ". . . That meeting of minds by which two selves take each other's meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common."<sup>28</sup> Intersubjectivity is a unification between two people, but faith can only be achieved on an individual basis since it requires a leap that denies communication.

Binx achieves this final religious view, which Kate neither recognizes nor understands. Several events exemplify his new understanding. Binx's honesty to his brothers and sisters concerning Lonnie's (their older brother's) pending death seems cruel and cold to Kate; yet Binx refuses to mask the truth from them or make any demands as to how they are to act as a consequence of Lonnie's death. Lonnie's death helps Binx obtain an answer to the question

<sup>27</sup>Aiken, The Age of Ideology, p. 229.

<sup>28</sup>Walker Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity," The Journal of Philosophy, 55 (1958) 631.



of how to die. Kate, however, has not achieved this understanding; for her the "way back from despair is through shared consciousness."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, faith, which can only be attained by the particular individual, is unattainable for her.

In addition, Binx's decision to go to medical school illustrates his resignation from worldly affairs. Although it may seem as though he has capitulated to Emily's aspirations, he has indeed achieved a harmonious balance, a synthesis which establishes his authenticity and eternal validity. Therefore, finite concerns no longer confuse him, and Binx "could willingly give it all up when it was required of him. He 'sat loosely' to the world--was in it, yet not of it."<sup>30</sup> The others, especially Kate and Emily, do not recognize the religious individual, for as Kierkegaard asserts, "One can discover nothing of that aloof and superior nature whereby one recognizes the knight of the infinite. He takes delight in everything and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things. He tends to his work. So when one looks at him one might suppose that he was a clerk who had lost his soul in an intricate

<sup>29</sup>Van Cleave, "Versions of Percy," p. 1002.

<sup>30</sup>George C. Bedell, Kierkegaard and Faulkner (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 237.

system of bookkeeping, so precise is he."<sup>31</sup> The final scene with Kate demonstrates this precision; although she neither comprehends nor recognizes Binx's faith, she realizes that he offers her stability. Part of what Binx deems as the job of a castaway like himself is to "listen to people, see how they stick themselves in the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along . . ." (233). This final scene shows Binx trying to hand Kate along on her journey, for he feels the necessity to help those along who may never attain the same passion, realizing that "for the man . . . who does not so much as reach faith life has tasks enough, and if one loves them sincerely, life will by no means be wasted, even though it is never comparable to the life of those who sensed and grasped the highest."<sup>32</sup>

This final scene, according to Lehan, is then "a moment of communion, more religious than the host, and the only way back for Kate; it is a communion through consciousness, the comfort that comes with the understanding of love, that overlapping of consciousness which Percy has described in a much different way in his learned philosophical essays."<sup>33</sup> Although this moment of intersubjectivity between Kate and

<sup>31</sup>Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>33</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 315.

Binx is a moment of communion, it cannot, however, be considered religious in the Kierkegaardian sense because faith can only be attained by the particular individual. Hence, this final scene illustrates what Percy calls the synthesis of two people through "intersubjectivity"; but it also presents Binx's religious faith through his resignation of worldly endeavors, his honesty and truthfulness and his persistent attempt to help Kate along in the world. It is through discovering his purpose in existence that he perceives for himself "how a man may live and die," for Binx knows he is a castaway, "a stranger who is in the world but who is not at home in the world."<sup>34</sup> As a castaway he must search for and listen to news from across the sea and "live in hope that such a message will come." Such hope requires faith. And as Percy claims, "The Christian faith, . . . the news from across the seas--is an embrace of the Absolute Paradox . . . a setting aside of reason, a credo quia absurdum est."<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, ". . . to the castaway who becomes a Christian it is not a paradox but news from across the seas, the very news he has been waiting for."<sup>36</sup> Binx's search, then, will continue on a religious plane because seeking a message from

<sup>34</sup>"Message," p. 428.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 429.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 431.

across the sea is living in faith, the only valid alternative to alienation. Through faith, living is no longer reduced to a routine, and so the idea of nothingness vanishes and living becomes a progression towards inward consciousness. Faith, then, provides one with a purpose in life and an understanding of death.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HAUNTED PAST

In The Last Gentleman, Percy's second novel, his characters continue to pursue alternatives to alienation. As in The Moviegoer, the choices made by the characters range from aesthetic, or external, to ethical and, in several cases, to religious alternatives. But in this novel attacks of amnesia and assaults of déjà vu complicate the existence of the central character. Such conditions not only intensify his alienation, but also exemplify his precarious mental balance; he may restore mental stability only if he discovers valid alternatives to alienation. Although many of the possible options appeared in The Moviegoer, their range is here condensed, allowing Percy to elucidate the choices in more depth.

Through the protagonist, Williston Bibb Barrett, Percy presents a highly complex vision of modern man's struggle to escape alienation, avoid everydayness, and achieve inner harmony. Barrett, or Will, suffers from amnesia, an affliction which Percy perceives as "the perfect device of rotation."<sup>1</sup> He also experiences moments of déjà vu, "the strongest sense that it had all happened before" (11), that is, a repetition. In addition, he frequently experiences a

<sup>1</sup>Percy, "Train," p. 486.

"strong feeling of dislocation,"<sup>2</sup> or alienation. It should be noted that Percy discussed rotation, repetition, and alienation previously in his philosophical article "Man on the Train"; in that article dislocation was spacial; in The Last Gentleman, however, it is essentially temporal.

Since rotation pertains to the future, repetition to the past, and alienation to the present, Percy illustrates the effect of each condition on Barrett. It is through these effects that Percy shows the need for Barrett to integrate the past and the future with the present in order to synthesize objectivity and subjectivity, the physical and the spiritual, the finite and the infinite. Unconscious that such integration would produce inner harmony, Barrett flounders temporarily in Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, remains for an extended time in the ethical stage, yet achieves what might be termed an ethical-religious modality, in which he perceives the necessity for establishing a meaningful relationship with other individuals; that is, he tries to achieve what Percy calls intersubjectivity. Such an achievement does not, however, complete the search for valid alternatives; and, consequently, Barrett realizes that he must continue to search and to wait, as Percy indicates modern man must, "for news from across the sea, . . . [and]

<sup>2</sup>Walker Percy, The Last Gentleman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 11. Subsequent references will be inserted parenthetically following the quoted material.

live in hope that such a message will come . . . ."3 This hope, however, does not refer to Barrett alone, but, as Percy indicates in his article, to modern man in general.

Although Will Barrett is the main character, Jamie Vaught, his companion and friend, is also important, since it is through the acquaintance with Jamie's family that Barrett is eventually able to perceive valid options, which in turn enable him to continue searching. In addition, Percy illustrates through Jamie, who has leukemia, not only the problem of how to live but also the problem of how to die. Hence, as in The Moviegoer, the attitudes and perceptions of the minor characters prove catalytic to the protagonist's development. In this case, Jamie Vaught and his family allow Will eventually to deal with himself as an individual.

Barrett is initially seen as "an amiable young man" who exists "in a state of pure possibility" (4), and who must "know everything before he . . . [can] do anything." This description calls to mind Kierkegaard's conclusion, that "as a result of knowing and being everything possible, one is in contradiction with oneself, i. e., nothing at all."<sup>4</sup> Yet the contradiction within Barrett is a consequence of his heritage. His great-grandfather "knew what was what and said

<sup>3</sup>Percy, "Message," p. 486.

<sup>4</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, The Present Age, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1962), p. 68.

so and acted accordingly" (10), but the succeeding generations became increasingly hesitant because they perceived the various possible consequences of their actions. His grandfather "seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure. He was brave but he gave much thought to the business of being brave. . . . The father was a brave man too and he said he didn't care what others thought but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and to be thought well of by other men" (10). Because he wanted to act with honor and to be respected, he, like his son, "did not know what to think" (10).<sup>5</sup> But the father committed suicide, while his son Will instead seeks valid alternatives. Through

<sup>5</sup>It is interesting to compare Barrett and his father with Rooney Lee and his father, Robert E. Lee. Both Rooney Lee and his father are frequently alluded to in the novel; Rooney like Barrett goes to a northern school--Rooney went to Harvard College, while Barrett went to Princeton. Both attempt to uphold their inherited tradition while in the North. Note the similarity in the following passage from The Education of Henry Adams, by Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961) p. 57-59: "Lee, known through life as 'Rooney,' was a Virginian of the eighteenth century . . . Tall, largely built, handsome, genial . . ." Barrett is introduced as "amiable." Adams continues "No one knew enough to know how ignorant he was; how childlike; how helpless before the complexity of a school . . . the southerner . . . was as little fit to succeed in the struggle of modern life as though he were still a maker of stone axes, living in caves . . ." Barrett too is helpless and ignorant in the North; he is capable only of impersonating the acquired mannerisms of northerners yet constantly slips back into his southern indigenous heritage. Both return to the South and neither completes school--Rooney Lee as Adams says "seized the chance of escape by accepting a commission offered by General Winfield Scott . . ." Barrett returns South seeking security within the confines of the Vaught family. Finally both their fathers faced defeat; however, their ways of accepting defeat differed.



tracing Will's family's inability to act without hesitation, Percy exemplifies the declining sense of purposiveness in the modern world.

Among the alternatives Will explores is psychoanalysis aimed primarily at establishing interpersonal relationships through group therapy. His five years of psychoanalysis fail, though, because Barrett uses such therapy for role-playing; that is, he assumes the traits of the others in the group. Although impersonation temporarily becomes an alternative to alienation, it merely expands the realm of possibilities, leading him further into contradiction with himself. When skiing with a group of Ohioans, "He hadn't been in their company a week before he became one of them: he called a girl named Carol Kerrell, said mear for mirror, tock for talk . . . In short, he became an Ohioan . . ." (21). As a former student at Princeton and a Southerner, he assumed the roles according to the situation. "When he was with Princetonians, he settled his chin in his throat and stuck his hands in his pockets in a certain way. Sometimes too he fell in with fellow Southerners and in an instant took on the amiable and slightly ironic air which Southerners find natural away from home" (22). The barrage of possible impersonations available reflects Kierkegaard's suggestion that when "Possibility . . . appears to the self ever greater and greater, more and more things become possible because nothing becomes actual. . . . At the instant something appears

possible, and then a new possibility makes its appearance, at last this phantasmagoria moves so rapidly that it is as if everything were possible--and this is precisely the last moment, when the individual becomes for himself a mirage."<sup>6</sup>

Barrett has indeed "become for himself a mirage," evidenced by his amnesia, déjà vu, and dislocation, as well as his problem of getting things backwards; yet he consciously searches for alternatives that will alleviate these problems. However, until he becomes aware that his existence must derive meaning from an inward search, he continues to dwell in the aesthetic stage. As Bedell suggests, "The person in the aesthetic modality . . . finds meaning for his existence outside himself. He is without sufficient internal resources and is consequently dependent on external stimuli for making any sense out of the apparent nonsense of his environment."<sup>7</sup> That is to say, Barrett's search must change directions; instead of a vertical search based on externals, it must, if he is to discover valid options, become a horizontal or inward search. Although he is dependent on external stimuli, as each external option fails to alleviate alienation, he tries others. Consequently when therapy fails Barrett purchases an \$1800 telescope "with the finest optical glasses and quartzes, ground, annealed, rubbed and rouged,

<sup>6</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 169.

<sup>7</sup>Bedell, Faulkner and Kierkegaard, p. 81.

tinted and corrected to a ten-thousandth millimeter . . ." (29). Because Barrett "sets great store by precision instruments like microscopes and chemical balances he couldn't help attributing magical properties to the telescope" (29). Therefore Barrett believes that by acquiring the same degree of precision, that is, scientific objectivity, he will be able to "engineer the future of [his] life according to the scientific principles and the self knowledge . . . gained from five years of analysis" (41). What he does not perceive and what his search must ultimately provide him with is the realization, as Kierkegaard states, that "By positing as a task the scientific process instead of the existential simultaneity, life is confused."<sup>8</sup> Barrett, then, must realize that "The scientist . . . has abstracted from his own predicament in order to achieve objectivity. His objectivity is indeed nothing else than his removal from his own concrete situation."<sup>9</sup>

Although the telescope fails to alleviate alienation, a subjective condition, in an objective manner, it illustrates Percy's hope for synthesizing objectivity and subjectivity, the abstract and the concrete. Hence, Barrett objectively observes things (items, objects and people, specifically the minor characters) through the telescope; yet his subjective

<sup>8</sup>Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 311.

<sup>9</sup>Percy, "Message," p. 416.

needs seem to pull him through the telescope. In other words, the empirical instrument serves in fact to fulfill Barrett's emotional needs. Ironically, it is the telescope which serves to acquaint him with the Vaught family, a Southern family presently in New York visiting their ailing son, Jamie. Initially Barrett wants to make the Vaughts' acquaintance because of his fondness for Kitty, their youngest daughter, and a fondness for Jamie, their youngest son, whom he recognizes as an "initiate of science" like himself. It is through Kitty and Jamie that Barrett's dependency on externals becomes more apparent not only to the reader but to Barrett himself. Through Kitty, Barrett experiences the desire for sensual pleasure; yet the traditional code of his forefathers prevents him from seeking such satisfaction outside marriage. Hence, in one instance he wants to experience "the coarsest possible relations with girls" (385), and in the next he wants to court in the "old style" (71).

On the other hand, through Jamie, Barrett's interest in science intensifies; it is expressed in the books both he and Jamie read: The Theory of Large Numbers and The Theory of Sets. Yet when Rita Vaught tells him that Jamie has leukemia and will eventually die, Barrett becomes aware of his own predicament. "Why is it that bad news is not so bad and good news not so good and what with the bad news being good, aye that is what makes her well and me sick?" (93). Rita

expected Barrett to "join her, stand beside her and celebrate the awfulness" (93). But bad news or crisis makes Barrett aware of himself as an individual; while others die he remains and must still deal with his everyday existence, which explains why he believes that "War is better than Monday morning" (94).

Because Jamie and Will share an interest in science, Mr. Vaught suggests that Will return to the South as tutor-companion to Jamie. Will's decision to return to the South is an effort to correct his dislocation. He believes that if he leads an everyday existence his mental instability will correct itself. Hence, he resolves to work for the Vaughts because

you do things by doing things, not by not doing them. No more crazy upsidedownness. . . . Good was better than bad. Good environments are better than bad environments. Back to the South, finish his education, make use of his connections, be a business or professional man, marry him a wife and live him a life. What was wrong with that? No more pressing against girls, rassling around in elevators and automobiles and other similar monkey business such as gives you stone pains and God knew what else. What was wrong with a good little house in a pretty green suburb in Atlanta or Birmingham or Memphis and a pretty little wife in a brand new kitchen with a red dress on at nine o'clock in the morning and a sweet good morning kiss and the little ones off to school and a good old nanny to take care of them? (88)

The question that he repeatedly asks himself about such a life pervades the novel, and he constantly asks other individuals in order to discover if an everyday existence will alleviate his present condition.

It is interesting to note that such everydayness is exactly what Kate in The Moviegoer refused to accept. An everyday existence emphasizes externals; Barrett seems to realize this, yet still hopes it can alleviate alienation, in order to avoid a self search. As Kierkegaard emphasizes, however, this type of existence

permits itself as it were to be defrauded by the others. By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself, forgets what his name is, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd. This form of despair is hardly ever noticed in the world. Such a man, precisely by losing his self in this way, has gained perfectability in adjusting himself to business, yea in making a success in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Barrett's initial decision to return to the South is based on an attempt to alleviate alienation through such invalid or aesthetic alternatives. Once he realizes that the return only intensifies dislocation, amnesia, and déjà vu, however, he seeks increasingly valid options so that the return eventually becomes a repetition, "a struggle to confront the haunted past to make the present a living condition."<sup>11</sup>

Will is temporarily hindered when the Vaughnts, believing that he prefers to remain in New York, leave without him.

<sup>10</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption In the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 308.

Nevertheless, in an effort to carry out his decision, Will hitchhikes to meet them in Williamsburg, Virginia. Although he has attempted to reduce possibilities by making a choice to return to an everyday existence in the South, his encounter with Forney Aiken, a photographer journeying South "to do a series on behind-the-scene life of the Negro" (130), interrupts his journey. Through his acquaintance with Forney and Mort Prince, Forney's scriptwriter in this project, Will perceives the ineffectiveness of such aesthetic or external choices as role-playing and financial assets. Forney has formulated this project not in the interests of the Negroes or their plight, but for the financial gains he will accumulate by publishing a book on the life of the Negro. Impersonation in Forney's case is not just a mental disguise of one's self, but a physical disguise involving professional skin coloring and speech imitation. Consequently, when he realizes that Barrett can help him improve his disguised speech, he offers Will a job at ten dollars a day plus "a piece of the royalties" (131).

It becomes clear as the novel progresses that Percy introduces individuals such as Forney and Mort to illustrate how the ideals Will's father firmly believed in have been destroyed. The assertions made by Mr. Barrett parallel the aesthetic attitudes of Forney and Mort. "They [the blacks] fornicate and the one who fornicates best is the preacher. . . . But they . . . [lower-middle-class whites]

fornicate too and in public and expect them back yonder somehow not to notice. Then they expect their women to be respected. . . . One will pick up the worst of the other and lose the best of himself" (100).<sup>12</sup> Mr. Barrett referred to the deterioration of moral values in the South, the loss of a traditional heritage. Forney and Mort illustrate such deterioration because they wish to exploit, not to ameliorate, a serious moral issue. In addition, Mort is willing to sell his house in Levittown, Pennsylvania, to a Negro not because he is upholding any principles, but rather to defy his neighbors, who fear depreciation in the value of their property. He threatens to sell in order to control others; hence his threat becomes a means of inflating his ego at the expense of his neighbors and any Negroes who might buy his house.

Interspersed in Will's acquaintance with Forney are assaults of déjà vu, that strong sense that "it had all happened before" (11). Forney and Mort represent the past, the loss of ideals, the decay of tradition, and the causes for Will's father's suicide, because their exploitation of individuals is like the exploitation Mr. Barrett witnessed in the South. Yet the incidents with Forney and Mort not only

<sup>12</sup>Will's recollections of his conversations with his father pervade the novel, but once they have all been read it becomes clear that he refers to "they", especially in this quotation, as respectively, the blacks and the lower-middle-class whites.



foreshadow Will's ultimate confrontation with the past, but also and more importantly, they help him discover that neither external pleasures nor ideals will at this point in time offer valid alternatives to alienation. But Percy is not criticizing ideals; he is demonstrating that ideals that demand respect and adherence from others will not alleviate alienation; only an inward search can offer valid options.

Will, however, has not yet realized that an unwavering belief in ideals abstracts one from existence; he does nevertheless realize through his association with Forney and Mort that alienation cannot be alleviated through the accumulation of external commodities, through impersonation or through sex. Both Forney and Mort devise plans, such as a study of the Southern Negro, in the interests of money rather than people. In addition, Mort distorts orthodox Christianity into a belief that sexual satisfaction is the only means of salvation. As a result of these varying experiences Will believes, as Mrs. Smith does in The Moviegoer, that by simplifying his existence, by reducing it to the ordinary, he may regain mental stability. Consequently he leaves Forney and Mort to meet the Vaughts in Williamsburg and to "seek [his] fortune and restore the good name of [his] family, perhaps even recover Hampton plantation from the cane brakers and live out [his] days as a just man and a little father to the faithful Negroes working in the field" (151). In his journey homeward Barrett, who has discovered the

ineffectiveness of externals as a means of alleviating alienation, must also discover that neither an everyday existence nor an idealistic existence are valid alternatives.

It should be noted that the assaults of déjà vu increase as Will journeys further south; and, because these momentary repetitions are always associated with the South and his father, they continue to assault him until he finally returns to the home of his parents. Amnesia, a rotation which blots out the past, enables Will to experience the old as the new, and frequently follows déjà vu. Hence, as Richard Lehan suggests in his examination of Percy's first two novels, "Perfect rotation can only be attained by a progressive amnesia in which the forgetting keeps pace with time so that every face is that of a stranger, every woman loved is a new affair."<sup>13</sup> In order for Will to overcome déjà vu he must face the past, a past which it seems he unconsciously wishes not to remember; for in his recollection, he can never determine the reason his father committed suicide, or specifically how he died. Hence, amnesia becomes a means of forgetting that which he unconsciously wills to be forgotten.

Déjà vu becomes more acute as Will journeys south, particularly when he meets individuals like Forney and Mort, who base their existence on external commodities and sensual

<sup>13</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 316.

pleasure. Because Forney and Mort are representatives of the aesthetic perspective and because Will is associated with them on the journey south, which brings on the déjà vu and consequent amnesia, Percy suggests a causal chain. Through this, it becomes increasingly clear that such aesthetic emphasis has contributed to a decay in moral standards; specifically, the traditional heritage that Mr. Barrett required of himself and other gentlemen is no longer operative.

Will's return to the South then is not what he expected it to be, for he too recognizes essentially the same changes that caused his father's suicide. "The South he came home to was different from the South he had left. It was happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican . . . . The happiness of the South was formidable. It was an almost invincible happiness. It defied you to call it anything else. Everyone was in fact happy. The women were beautiful and charming. The men were healthy and successful and funny; they knew how to tell stories" (186). The changes Barrett observed involved a change in values; previously the South felt the anguish of defeat, experienced poverty, and lacked allegiance; yet it maintained a cultural heritage. During the years of Will's absence, the South like the North began emphasizing external assets as a means of achieving happiness. His return consequently does not counter his dislocation; the repetition is ineffective and remains ineffective until

Barrett finally returns to the specific town of his childhood and "confronts the haunted past to make the present a living condition."<sup>14</sup>

The Vaught family exemplifies the changes Barrett recognizes in the South. Mr. Vaught, owner of a Chevrolet agency, "the second largest . . . in the world" (189), personifies the materialistic aspect of the South, visualized in his emphasis on outward success and financial assets. Rita, related only by marriage to the Vaught family, tries constantly to show concern for other people. Her concern, however, is not for their inward harmony, but for their outward success. She helps Kitty Vaught develop ballet skills, only that Kitty may secure trophies and awards. In addition, wanting Jamie to accumulate worldly experience before he dies, she enlists Will's aid to accomplish this. "Take Jamie and get the hell out of here. Go roam the byways and have a roistering fool time of it. Find yourselves a couple of chicks. You're two good-looking fellows, you know" (159).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 308.

<sup>15</sup>Michael T. Blouin compares the roles of Aunt Emily in The Moviegoer and Rita in The Last Gentleman. "To seek to discover the center of a malaise vitiating the life of the Southern family as Percy describes it in these novels is to turn in the direction of the pseudo-mothers such as Aunt Emily in the The Moviegoer or the pseudo-wives as Rita in The Last Gentleman. It is in their martinet and fake-intellectual, fake-righteous, fake-directive aspects that these two women most manifest their will for power and urge to control." Blouin, "The Novels of Walker Percy: An Attempt at Synthesis," Xavier University Studies, 6 (1967), 36.

Hence, she represents the worldiness Barrett now perceives in the South. In contrast, Val, Jamie's sister, who is a nun, tries to administer to his spiritual needs; and she, like Rita, enlists Barrett's aid. Val's endeavor is to have Jamie understand "the economy of salvation" (210) and the need for baptism. She bases her religion not on man's inner spiritual development, but on outward doctrines espoused by the Catholic Church. Although her efforts appear selfless, she fails to consider inward spirituality and hence deals with religion in terms of commodities. Mr. Vaught, Rita, and Val are personifications of the changes Barrett perceives in his return to the South.

Disconcerted and dislocated, Will strives for an orderly existence involving the same objective precision he previously sought with the telescope. School he believes offers such an option: ". . . their best hope lay in the books themselves, the orderly march of chapter and subheading, the tables, the summaries, the index, the fine fat page of type" (201). It becomes apparent that when Barrett becomes dislocated, confused, and alienated he returns to science as an option and is "content with a thin little volume, The Theory of Large Numbers, that and his slide rule . . ." (201). Yet such contentment lacks endurance; the orderly objective existence of school "disarmed him for what came later" (201);

hence, he begins to realize how irrelevant school is.

Because Will's immediate past suggests that neither role-playing, scientific objectivity, nor the return offers valid solutions to alienation, then dislocation, amnesia and déjà vu continue to plague him. In such a state, he wanders up to the attic of the Vaughnts' imagining that he discovers his father's body. It is his father's suicide and the reasons behind it that he must ultimately remember before he can discover valid alternatives to alienation; for he must rediscover the past in order to face the present. The past then becomes a vital element in Barrett's search, for the past haunts him; but as Kierkegaard relates, "One does not get the past as a thing for itself but in simple continuity with the future."<sup>16</sup> The past, when faced, will eventually become integrated with existence in the present and with the possibilities of the future.

Because Barrett is unaware of the precarious aspects of his condition and because he has discovered no valid alternatives, he seeks answers from Sutter Vaught, an ex-diagnostic physician. Unlike his family, who exist in despair yet are unconscious of it, Sutter recognizes that his despair is a consequence of his inability to discover valid alternatives to alienation. Sutter realizes that transcendence or abstraction from one's own existence causes modern man's alienated condition. Abstract thought itself is not at

<sup>16</sup>Kierkegaard, Dread, p. 81.

fault; it debilitates only when the individual emphasizes theory to the exclusion of his own concrete reality. Although he recognizes the fallacy of abstractions, Sutter is unable to unify abstract thought with concrete thought. As David Swenson states in Something About Kierkegaard, "Abstract thought solves all the difficulties of life by abstracting from them, whence arises its complacent disinterestedness; the concrete thinker, who faces the concrete problem of reality, . . . discovers that this problem brings his subjective interest to a climax, since it reveals a future presenting a critical and decisive alternative."<sup>17</sup> Sutter's treatment for the despair he recognizes in others is to force them to face "the concrete problem of reality." He therefore creates a crisis situation which, by its nature, removes external concerns, thereby forcing concrete reality upon the individual; and this reality involves an awareness of one's aesthetic existence. He relates one such treatment to Barrett, who is seeking to discover from Sutter the nature of his own illness. Sutter's example involves his patient's experiencing dislocation and alienation as a result of perceiving the everydayness of his existence. Relating this incident to Barrett, Sutter explains how by creating trauma the patient became aware of his own concrete reality.

<sup>17</sup>David Swenson, Something About Kierkegaard (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1956), p. 152.

One morning, . . . I got a call from a lady who said that her husband was having a nervous breakdown. I knew the fellow. . . . He was a Deke from Vanderbilt, president of Fairfield Coke and a very good fellow, cheerful and healthy and open-handed. It was nine o'clock in the morning, so I walked over from here. His wife let me in. There he stands in the living room dressed for work in his Haspel suit, shaved, showered, and in the pink, in fact still holding his attache case beside him. All in order except that he was screaming, his mouth forming a perfect O. . . . I prescribed the terminal ward for him and in two weeks he was right as rain. (268)

Sutter creates a crisis situation in order to make Scotty, his patient, realize that death is a possible alternative to alienation. However, Scotty chooses life and returns to an everyday existence as a preferable, although not necessarily valid, option. Upon hearing this incident, Barrett realizes that Scotty's screams occurred as a result of perceiving the ineffectiveness of an everyday existence which seeks fulfillment in external achievements; yet he wants Sutter to reenforce this perception. Therefore he repeatedly asks Sutter, "Why was that man screaming?" (270). Since his decision to return to the South was based on acceptance of everydayness, he is afraid that such an existence will eventually terminate with his own screaming.

Unlike Val and Rita, who offer baptism and worldly experience as alternatives, Sutter refuses to offer Jamie and Barrett solutions to alienation. Yet it is through his refusal to help them discover valid options that they become more attached to him. Barrett, especially, seeks answers from Sutter; as Richard Lehan recognizes, "he [Barrett] is



particularly drawn to Sutter for his own release, feeling that Sutter can give him the truths for which he is in search. What he wants more specifically is for Sutter to limit his sense of possibility, reduce the area of choice, tell him what to do."<sup>18</sup> Jamie, on the other hand, needs to learn how to live and what to believe so that he may through this learn how to die.

Aware of the nature of Jamie's illness and the conflict presented by the invalid options suggested by Val and Rita, Sutter removes Jamie from the situation and journeys westward to Santa Fe. Nevertheless, he realizes the nature of Barrett's condition; therefore, he leaves not only a detailed map directing Will to Santa Fe but also his diary, which elucidates the causes of Sutter's despair and explains the effects of despair; that is, it explains why Sutter's only suggestion to Will is "Fornicate if you want to and enjoy yourself but don't come looking to me for a merit badge certifying you as a Christian or a gentleman or whatever it is you cleave by" (225). For Sutter fornication is the only thing left: "There remains only relation of skin to skin and hand under dress" (279). But Will is unable to accept this alternative; he cleaves to nothing except the bits and pieces of the past that he is unable fully to recollect; déjà vu constantly summons up the past, but

<sup>18</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 317.

amnesia erases it. Assaults of déjà vu and attacks of amnesia pervade the novel, increasing as Will comes closer to the home of his parents, until he finally recalls the past and his father's suicide. His journey westward, then, becomes a journey toward self-knowledge that will ultimately enable him to discover valid alternatives to alienation.

Through the journey Barrett moves out of the aesthetic stage into the ethical; for as he gets closer to his home, he also gets closer to "gaining a history [which] becomes the ethical victory of continuity over concealment, melancholy, illusory passion, and despair."<sup>19</sup> David Swenson in his comments from Something About Kierkegaard clarifies the difference between the aesthetic and the ethical, especially as it relates to Will.

The most concrete general expression for the esthetic is that it finds the significance of life in the extraction from it of the maximum amount of enjoyment, thus identifying human happiness with enjoyment . . . The ethicist identifies human happiness with the realization of an obligatory task, so essentially related to the personality as to be immanent within it, being not more nor less than the realization of his true and given self--given, that is, in the form of a task and a possibility, dependent for its realization upon the individual's own free cooperation.<sup>20</sup>

Barrett's obligatory task in relation to the ethical level is to return home, free his defunct land from the canebrakers,

<sup>19</sup>Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 227.

<sup>20</sup>Swenson, Something About Kierkegaard, p. 166.

marry "him a wife," and be a father to the Negroes working in the fields. In essence, his task parallels the task his father sought to fulfill in regard to the Negroes; hence he wants to become an extension of his father. However, Will's real task begins with his journey westward, for in this journey he is trying to realize "his true and given self" rather than become an extension of his father. Hence, it is through his journey home and his journey toward Sutter that Barrett ascertains valid alternatives to alienation, for he begins moving beyond the ethical toward the religious, by continuing his search.

Sutter's diary, through its illustration of his despair in an aesthetic existence, offers Barrett clues in determining how to live and what to think; these reenforce the need for continuing the search. It is through these clues, as well as through Jamie's death, that Barrett finally discerns "how to live" and "what to think" (11). Sutter's despair, as perceived in his diary, is a consequence of discovering no valid alternatives, of discovering causes, not solutions. Sutter cannot give either Jamie or Barrett answers. Yet he, like Barrett, ascertains valid options through Jamie's death; for as Kierkegaard suggests, ". . . when one knows it [that he is in despair] a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or Vol. II, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 197.

Sutter's diary records and elucidates the causes of alienation as he perceives them, and it is through these entries that Barrett begins to understand the ineffectiveness of external options. Nevertheless, Will consciously tries to ignore the first entry since it is a discussion of the inability of science to deal with man as an individual. "Science, which dissolves concrete things and relations, leaves intact touch of skin to skin" (280). Subconsciously Barrett realizes that science does indeed "dissolve concrete things," but consciously he turns "with relief to the most practical matters" (282); however, in such a state he calculated "almost instantly and clairvoyantly the distance to Jackson, New Orleans and Shreveport" (282). That is, he subconsciously calculated the distance to his hometown, a geographic digression from his journey to Santa Fe.

Before Will follows Sutter to Santa Fe, he returns to the university to pick up his books and experiences another attack of amnesia after being knocked out in a student riot. The riot, which resulted from the admittance of a black student to the university, again reflects Percy's causal chain. It not only reemphasizes the changes Barrett recognizes in the South, but also, like the incident with Mort Prince and Forney, it illustrates man's failure to uphold principles and ideals. The riot, by reenforcing the changes Barrett perceived in the South, parallels the changes his father recognized. Mr. Barrett perceived the decay of

principles: "Once they were the fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribes and we were not and that was why they hated us" (330); but he realized that this was no longer true. Likewise, Will returns home to live by upholding his principles but encounters changes that thwart such endeavors. He cannot be a father to the Negroes not only because the whites would frown on it, but also because the blacks are no longer looking for a father but for equal rights, which include an equal education. Hence the attack of amnesia erases not only the riot which destroyed his goals, but also erases the past that destroyed his father.

Only when he meets Val at Phillips Academy, a school for retarded Negroes, is his memory partially restored; thereafter he is able to continue his journey, which now becomes a journey into the past in order "to make the present a living condition." Percy, in an interview with John Carr, explains the importance of this final repetition, "He [Will] goes back home . . . and there he stands in front of his father's house. . . . I think Kierkegaard says 'Every man has to stand in front of the house of his childhood in order to recover himself.'" <sup>22</sup> By doing exactly this Will recalls the circumstances leading to his father's suicide. As defender of the Negro cause, an idealistic man who sought honor and respect from others, Mr. Barrett discovered the loss of such a heritage in the South.

<sup>22</sup>Carr Interview, p. 328.

Consequently, after winning a legal case involving a Negro, and after those that threatened his life left town, Mr. Barrett realizes that he achieved no victory. He realizes that those who threatened his life won (Percy seems to suggest that "those" are people such as the members of the Ku Klux Klan); he tries to communicate this sense of loss to Will: "they don't have to stay. Because they found out that we are like them after all and so there was no reason for them to stay. . . . Once they were the fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribes and we were not and that was why they hated us. Now we are like them, so why should they stay? They know they don't have to kill me" (330). They, referring to the Ku Klux Klan, do not have to kill Mr. Barrett because the principles by which he lived no longer prevail; his victory then loses its meaning because principles or ideals are no longer respected by others; they are extinct.

His return to the home of his parents seems to alleviate Will's assaults of déjà vu and attacks of amnesia; but Will attempts to discern why the times changed to such a degree that suicide was the only alternative his father could discover. "I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place. It wasn't even his fault because that was the way he was and the way the times were, and there was no other place a man could look" (332). Yet it was not actually the times that were

wrong; rather, there were no options other than the system, whose failure left him no alternative but suicide. Because Mr. Barrett was unable to look elsewhere for valid alternatives, he despaired over man's present condition, and it was his despair that caused his suicide. Will, nevertheless, recognizes that his father's ideals removed him from concrete reality: "It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in solitariness and not in the old sad poetry but . . . here, under your nose. . ." (332). Barrett refers here to looking at one's own concrete existence.

The revelation of Will's past clarifies Percy's causal chain; it therefore becomes clear that Forney and Mort represent the types of people and the changes that destroyed Mr. Barrett's ideals. They have become the spokesmen, the fornicators and bribers that Mr. Barrett recognized in his town. Their names and actions signify the decay of the principles that Mr. Barrett lived by: Forney symbolizing fornication and Mort Prince the death of principles.

In contrast to Mr. Barrett's ideals, Fannin Barrett of Shut Off, his brother, leads a simple existence hunting quail with Merriam, his Negro servant, who is more friend than servant. Their relationship, although it seems ordinary, illustrates Percy's intersubjectivity: "that meeting of two minds by which two selves take each other's meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common."<sup>23</sup> However,

<sup>23</sup> Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity," p. 631.

because society would frown on a relationship between a black man and a white man, Fannin pretends that Merriam is merely his servant.

After supper they watched television. An old round eyed Zenith and two leatherette recliners, the kind that are advertised on the back page of the comic section, had been placed in a clearing . . . . The sentient engineer perceived immediately that the recliner he was given was Merriam's seat, but there was nothing he could do about it. Uncle Fannin pretended the recliner had been brought out for the engineer and Merriam pretended he always roosted high in the darkness. But when they, Uncle Fannin and Merriam, talked during the programs, sometimes the uncle, forgetting, would speak to the other recliner. . . . (342)

Will recognizes his uncle's pretentiousness; but he also recognizes the importance of the relationship between Fannin and Merriam. Although their existence appears outwardly simple, they share a sense of enjoyment and pleasure, illustrated in their joint reaction to Captain Kangaroo.

Uncle Fannin and Merriam cackled like maniacs at the doings of Captain K. and Mr. Greenjeans, and the engineer wondered, how is it that uncle and servant, who were solid 3-D persons, true denizens of this Misty Natchez Trace country, should be transported by these sad gags from Madison Avenue? But they were transported. They were merry as could be, and he, the engineer, guessed that was all right: more power to Captain K. (346)

Hence, in contrast to Mr. Barrett, Fannin is unaware of ideals and principles; he lives a simple life, yet in its simplicity he achieves self-fulfillment not by worshipping an idea, but by establishing an enriching relationship with



another human being.<sup>24</sup> Neither Fannin nor Merriam abstracts from their own existence in quest of the ideal, and therefore they are unaware of the despair occurring from the complex abstract existence experienced by Will, his father, and Sutter. Percy, however, is not promoting this type of existence since it is shut off from the mainstream of humanity; he portrays it to exemplify two extremes: a complex idealistic existence and a humble existence. Yet it is through this contrast that Percy is suggesting that modern man must attain a balance between the abstract and the concrete, the ideal and the real, and possibly a more valid alternative than suicide.

Mr. Barrett's reasons for suicide parallel not only Sutter's reason for despair, but also his reason for attempting suicide. Both recognize the deterioration of honor, ideals, and principles; yet neither is capable of ascertaining valid alternatives. Sutter denies religion as an alternative because he believes that current religious thought is hypocritical. Percy clarifies this perception through Mort Prince, since Mort uses religion as a basis for

<sup>24</sup>Michael T. Blouin also refers to this contrast stating that "In the long aftermath of defeat and death sometimes called the New South, two modes of negation continued to suggest themselves to the most sensitive of the privileged as pathological modes of avoidance and non-commitment; suicide or seclusion, suicide as a personal reaction to impersonal defeat and non-commitment as a personal reaction to social defection from the ideal." ("The Novels of Walker Percy: An Attempt at Synthesis.") However Fannin's involvement with Merriam illustrates that he is not as secluded as Mr. Barrett.

fornication. Sutter's perceptions concerning man's use of religion are recorded in his diary and are directed to Val:

But do you realize what you did . . . ? You reversed your dialectic and cancelled yourself. Instead of having the courage of your scandal giving, you began to speak of the glories of science, the beauty of art, and the dear lovely world around us! Worst of all, you even embraced, Jesus this is what tore it, the Southern businessman! The Southern businessman is the new Adam, you say, smart as a Yankee but a Christian withal and having the tragical sense, etc., etc., etc.--When the truth of it is, you were pleased because you talked the local Coca-Cola distributor into giving you a new gym.

But what you don't know is that you are cancelled. Suppose you did reconcile them all, the whites and the niggers, Yankees and K.K.K., scientists and Christians, where does that leave you and your Scandalous Thing? Why cancelled out! Because it doesn't mean anything anymore, God and religion and all the rest. It doesn't even mean anything to your fellow Christians. And you know this: that is why you are where you are, because it means something to your little Tyree dummies (and ten years from now it won't even mean anything to them; either they'll be Muslims and hate your guts or they'll be middle-class and buggered like everybody else). (308)

Sutter recognizes the hypocrisy and decay in religion just as Mr. Barrett recognized it in tradition. The cancellation that Sutter refers to is that Val, by using money from Southern businessmen, forfeits the basic principles upon which she functions. By emphasizing the "glories of science," the "beauty of art, and the dear lovely world," Val emphasizes external achievement rather than inner development; consequently, she has indeed reversed her "dialectic" and cancelled herself. Sutter is trying to make Val realize the hypocritical foundation of her beliefs. In addition, those

that she attempts to educate ("the little Tyree dummies") will, through education, either recognize hypocrisy and revolt or will accept middle class standards, an everyday existence. It should be noted that Percy takes up the idea of black revolt in his third novel Love in the Ruins; hence his reference to "ten years later they will hate your guts" alludes to one of the underlying themes in Love in the Ruins.

Because religion as Sutter perceives it offers no valid alternatives, and because science has abstracted from human existence, the only alternatives available are either suicide or sex. But neither helps answer the question of "how to live and how to die." To Sutter sex is a diversion from his own alienation; in reference to sex Kierkegaard suggests:

The sensuous first becomes significant for him [the aesthetic] only after he has lost an entire preceding world, but the consciousness of this loss is not erased, it is constantly present, and he seeks therefore in the sensuous not so much enjoyment as diversion of mind. His doubting soul finds nothing in which it can rest, and now he reaches after love, not because he believes it, but because it has a present element in which there is rest for a moment, and a striving which distracts and diverts his attention from the nothingness of doubt.<sup>25</sup>

When sex fails as a physical means of reentry, despair results, causing Sutter to attempt suicide. This reaction reflects J. Thompson's comments in The Lonely Labyrinth: "Despair . . . follows as a consequence of rendering absolute the principle

<sup>25</sup>Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Vol. II, 204.

of enjoyment."<sup>26</sup> Sutter realizes the causes of his despair exemplified previously in his examination of the bodies of four male suicides. He began his examination of these bodies in order to determine if suicide occurred as a result of failure on the physical level. Recorded in his diary are the reasons as well as the results of these examinations:

Man who falls victim to transcendence as the spirit of abstraction, i. e., elevates himself to posture over and against world which is pari passu demoted to immanence and seen as exemplar and specimen and coordinate, and who is not at some time compensated by beauty of motion of method of science, has no choice but to seek reentry into immanent world qua immanence. But since no avenue of reentry remains save genital and since reentry coterminus  $\bar{c}$  orgasm, post-orgasmic despair without remedy. Of my series of four suicides in scientists and technicians, 3 post-coital (spermatozoa at meatus), 2 in hotel room. Hotel room = site of intersection of transcendence and immanence . . . whore who comes up = pure immanence to be entered. But entry doesn't avail: one skids off into transcendence. There is no reentry from the orbit of transcendence. (345)<sup>27</sup>

The conclusion verifies Sutter's theory that the scientist who abstracts from his own existence seeks reentry into the

<sup>26</sup>Josiah Thompson, The Lonely Labyrinth (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1967), p. 84.

<sup>27</sup>Ellen Douglas suggests that Sutter "is a good doctor who first learns to transcend, to escape from, the enclosing world that will cannot support, through the discipline of science, and then found that this transcendence did not solve the problem of how to be a man and to live and to die. He sought to re-enter the world of immediate reality, of immanence, through sex . . . ." Her comment, although correct, seems simply to be a paraphrase of Sutter's remarks. Walker Percy's "The Last Gentleman: Introduction and Commentary" (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 15-16.

concrete through sex; when sex fails, as in these cases, suicide results. Suicide, then, is a result of man's inability to balance objectivity with subjectivity, the physical with the spiritual, transcendence with immanence, or abstraction with concretion. Sutter, like the four males he examined, believed that sexual intercourse was the "only reentry into the world which remains" (354).

Although Sutter's alternatives are invalid, being aesthetic or external solutions, he is aware of the nature of man's alienation; but he can find no valid way to alleviate such a condition. Consequently, as R. Thomte suggests in Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion, ". . . the aesthete finds his escape from reality in the bitter laughter of despair. By means of this laughter he soars above and beyond all demands of life."<sup>28</sup>

Although Sutter seeks to remove himself from the demands of life through sensuality, he is aware of his predicament and he is aware of Barrett's predicament; he refuses to choose for Will, but at the same time he wants to offer him options so that Will can choose himself. Sutter's perceptions concerning Barrett's dislocation and alienation reflect a seemingly universal situation. Through Sutter's record of Barrett, Percy seems to be exemplifying that his symptoms are not particular but universal.

<sup>28</sup>Thomte, Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion, p. 33.

Barrett: His trouble is he wants to know what his trouble is. His "trouble", he thinks, is a disorder of such a character that if only he can locate the right expert with the right psychology, the disorder can be set right and he can go about his business. That is to say: he wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcender (e. g. me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence in such a way that he will be happy. . . .

Yes, Barrett has caught a whiff of the transcendent trap and has got the wind up. But what can one tell him? What can you tell him, Val?

Even if you were right. Let us say you were right that a man is a wayfarer who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him and which he had better attend to. So you say to him: Look, Barrett, your trouble is due not to a disorder of your organism but to the human condition, that you do well to be afraid and you do well to forget everything which does not pertain to your salvation. That is to say, your amnesia is not a symptom. So you say: Here is the piece of news you have been waiting for, and you tell him. What does Barrett do? He attends in that eager flattering way of his and at the end of it he might even say yes! But he will receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better. (354)

Sutter recognizes the human dilemma; man is unable to attain a balance; he either totally worships the idea and hence abstracts from his own existence or, as in Sutter's case, he tries to alleviate alienation, which is a result of abstraction, by concrete physical touch. Sutter suggests that such a reliance upon the physical exemplifies Whitehead's "displacement of the Real" (280). This reference to Whitehead calls to mind Percy's article "The Loss of the Creature," in which he similarly elaborates on the displacement of the Real: "The dogfish, the tree, the seashell, the American Negro, the dream, [or in this case sex] is rendered invisible

by a shift of reality from concrete thing to theory which Whitehead has called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It is the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction for the real."<sup>29</sup> Percy's comments reflect Sutter's, Mr. Barrett's, and Will's mistakes; each focused upon a portion of reality, mistaking the part for the whole; abstracting the part from the whole, Sutter focused on immediacy, Mr. Barrett on ideals, and Will on scientific objectivity.

Although Will no longer experiences déjà vu or amnesia, he still feels dislocated; consequently, he continues to seek Sutter's approval. Because he has decided to marry Kitty, settle down in Alabama, and work for Mr. Vaught leading an everyday existence, he wants Sutter's approval. Barrett wants to convince himself that such existence may be authentic, but he constantly recalls Sutter's patient, Scotty, screaming, which seems to suggest that he is afraid he too may scream. In an effort to gain Sutter's approval he explains his plans: "Kitty and I are getting married. I am going to take a good position with your father, settle down on the South Ridge, and I hope, raise a family . . . . I think I'm going to be a pretty fair member of the community" (383-84). But because Will knows that everydayness will increase alienation, he wants Sutter to help him decide "What's wrong with that?" Yet finally still wavering he asks

<sup>29</sup>Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," p. 12.

Sutter, "Why was that man screaming?" (385). Sutter assures him that he will not scream; suggesting that because he understands the nature of his choice, and because he is in constant search for valid solutions, he is unlike Scotty, who suddenly realized the inadequacy of professional achievement and material assets.

Although Sutter is aware of the human condition, he discovers no valid alternatives; and when physical pleasure fails as the "only reentry into the world . . ." (354), he attempts suicide; his suicide is a result of the "breakdown of the sexual as a mode of reentry" (372); that is, physical pleasure no longer alleviated despair. His despair at the time he had attempted suicide was a consequence of realizing that Jamie, stricken with leukemia, "would not die well" (373). Sutter recorded the events which caused his attempted suicide in his diary:

Here is what happened. I became depressed last summer when I first saw Jamie's blood smear, depressed not because he was going to die but because I knew he would not die well, would be eased out in an oxygen tent, tranquilized and with no sweat to anyone not even know what he was doing. Don't misunderstand me: I wasn't thinking about baptism. . . . Afterwards spied a chunky blonde by the pool, appraised her eye, which was both lewd and merry. . . . We drank two glasses of straight whiskey. I spoke in her ear and invited her to her room. Afterwards very low. Went to ranch, shot myself, missed brain, carried away cheek. (373)

Sutter realizes that sexual satisfaction, immediacy, provides no solutions; yet he continues to exist in this aesthetic modality since he can perceive no other valid alternative.



Sex in Percy's novels, as he states, is "a symbol of failure on the existential level."<sup>30</sup> Sutter in particular in this novel reflects that symbolic use of sex. He can perceive no authentic options.

Nevertheless, realizing the pressure Jamie faces with Val and Rita, one stressing the importance of baptism, the other emphasizing worldly experience, he takes Jamie to Santa Fe expecting as Barrett perceives that he [Jamie] might "die better" (381). Jamie's gradual death, in the physical sense, does not improve; he dies as Sutter realized he would, his body decaying and "producing a foulness beyond the compass of smell. This could only be the dread ultimate rot of the molecules themselves, an abject surrender. It was the body's disgorgement of its most secret shame" (401). But in a spiritual sense Jamie did "die better." In the death scene Jamie accepts the sacrament of baptism; his acceptance, however, is not of form but of content; he accepts on faith the belief that "'God exists and that He made you and loves you and that he made the world so you might enjoy its beauty and that He himself is your final end and happiness, that He loved you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you and to found His Holy Catholic Church so that you may enter heaven and there see God face to face and be happy with Him forever'" (403). The religious faith

<sup>30</sup>Carr Interview, p. 330.

Jamie accepted reflects Kierkegaard's religious sphere, and particularly what Kierkegaard terms Religion B or Paradoxical religion, for Jamie does not accept the historical religious precepts of religion based on doctrines, as Val does; he accepts and believes that God exists in time. Such a belief is not necessarily based on acceptance of organized religious doctrines but on one's own faith; Sutter realizes what is occurring, but nevertheless he is outwardly rude to the priest, not because he still rejects this faith but because the priest performs the baptism in a mechanical and routine manner. "As he [the priest] waited he curled his lip absently against his teeth in a workday five-o'clock-in-the-afternoon expression" (406). Although Sutter is irritated by the priest, it is through Jamie's faith and his death that Sutter and Barrett perceive valid alternatives to alienation. Sutter understands and accepts Jamie's faith; but like Binx in The Moviegoer, he cannot communicate the nature of such faith. Barrett, however, misses it and seeks an explanation from Sutter. Percy himself claims that Barrett misses it; ". . . he [Will] is aware of something going on between the dying boy Jamie and Sutter there across the room and the priest. And he is aware that Sutter is taking this seriously. So after the boy dies, they leave and Barrett catches up with Sutter and he says, he asks Sutter, 'What happened there? Something happened. What happened?' And Sutter brushes him off, as usual. 'What do you think

happened? You were there.' Well, it ends, unlike The Moviegoer, with Barrett missing it, like Kate missed it. He misses it! He says something to Sutter like, 'Why don't you come back to a town in the South and make a contribution, however small?' So presumably, you see, Barrett, who existed in a religious mode of search, repetition, and going into the desert, which are all in Kierkegaard's religious mode, at the end misses it."<sup>31</sup> Barrett, then, does not attain the faith and belief that Sutter and Jamie have attained; but he does achieve, with Sutter's help, a valid alternative to alienation. The option he perceives is what Percy terms intersubjectivity: "That meeting of two minds by which two selves take each other's meaning's with reference to the same object held in common."<sup>32</sup> Through Sutter's understanding of Jamie's baptism and through Barrett's need for him, Sutter, like Binx, realizes that he must "listen to people, see how they stick themselves in the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along."<sup>33</sup> Consequently when Will yells after Sutter "wait, . . . I need you," Sutter realizes that suicide is no alternative, that intersubjectivity and faith offer valid options to alienation.

<sup>31</sup>Carr Interview, p. 329.

<sup>32</sup>Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness and Intersubjectivity," p. 631.

<sup>33</sup>Percy, The Moviegoer, p. 235.

Sutter emerges as Percy's castaway who does not "pretend to be at home on the island," for Sutter realizes that "to be a castaway is to be in a grave predicament and this is not a happy state of affairs. But it is very much happier than being a castaway and pretending one is not, this is despair. The worst of all despairs is to imagine one is at home when one is really homeless."<sup>34</sup> Barrett, however, is a castaway pretending to be at home, yet feeling homeless; he wants to be at home on the island. The knowledge he believes Sutter has and wants to listen to and understand is that he is a castaway. Sutter, however, cannot communicate such a message; Barrett must continue waiting to receive the message and hope that he, like Sutter, will be capable of understanding it.

<sup>34</sup>Percy, "Message," p. 428.

## CHAPTER 4

### "THINGS FALL APART; THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD"

W. B. Yeats "The Second Coming"

Percy's latest novel, Love in the Ruins, carries his perception of man's fragmented existence into the future; unlike his previous two novels, it is a parody set in future time, specifically the 1980's. Beyond this difference in time, there is also a difference in the degree of the central character's awareness of options and alternatives to alienation available to him. Even though this work shares with The Moviegoer the use of first person narration, here Dr. More, the protagonist, recognizes not only his own alienation, but also that of the other people he comes in contact with. Binx Bolling in The Moviegoer, by contrast, is initially unaware of his inward alienation. Also, while Barrett in The Last Gentleman was confused by the events in which he was involved, More perceives in his situation indications of an ultimate determination of valid options. The external events, then, take on more significance in this novel, especially for Dr. More.

Dr. Thomas More awaits the end of the world on July 4th, 1983. In order to explain how the world reached the point of obliteration, More recounts the events and changes both in his community Paradise Estates and in himself that led up to this day. More ends the book in 1988; therefore, it is apparent that the world did not end in 1983; yet substantial

portions of the book record flashbacks to situations which seemed to precipitate the end. It should be noted that in "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World" Percy explains that "the end of the world [is] the passing of one age and the beginning of another" and that the writer dealing with this topic "must reckon . . . with changes in man's consciousness which may be quite radical."<sup>1</sup>

These changes are initially reflected in Dr. More himself and parallel the changes occurring among the inhabitants of Paradise Estates. More is aware of the causes of alienation and fragmentation plaguing post-modern man; nevertheless, he knowingly permits himself to accept this condition. His existence, consequently, is what Percy in "Notes" terms "a monstrous bifurcation of angelic and bestial components."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, More exists in two modalities: inauthentic and authentic; he exists both in Kierkegaard's aesthetic or immediate level and in the ethical level. In one instance he is concerned only with pursuing his own selfish goals, and in the next he endeavors to bridge "the dread chasm between body and mind that has sundered the soul of Western man for

<sup>1</sup>Walker Percy, "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World," Katallagete (Journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, Nashville) (Winter, 1967-68), p. 12. Subsequent references to this article will be abbreviated as "Notes."

<sup>2</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 12.

five hundred years."<sup>3</sup> These two sides of his personality pervade the novel.

As a result of this dichotomy, when immediate pleasures dominate he asserts, "I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellow man hardly at all" (6). He bases existence on external pursuits, subordinating God and Christendom in the process. Through such subordination More admits that "The old Christ died for our sins and it didn't work, we were not reconciled. The new Christ shall reconcile man with his sins. The new Christ lies drunk in a ditch" (153). By acknowledging such an attitude More may be viewed as a personification of mankind; that is, man, especially in 1983, has subordinated God, Christ and Christendom for material commodities, empirical knowledge and physical pleasure.

The novel opens with More sitting in a pine grove "waiting for the end of the world" and contemplating his future with three females whom he is protecting from the impending disaster by keeping them in a ruined Howard Johnson motel. His thoughts produce a mental image of the three women, which illustrates the selfish or immediate aspect of his personality. "Even if worst comes to worst, is there any reason why the four of us cannot live happily together,

<sup>3</sup>Walker Percy, Love in the Ruins (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 90. Subsequent references will be inserted parenthetically within the text.

slip toddies, eat Campbell's soup, and spend the long summer evenings listening to Lola play the cello . . ." (8). Dr. More visualizes the three girls, Moira, Lola, and Ellen in terms of their outward appearance, that is, their external or physical selves. "[Moira] I always think of so, standing barefoot in her slip at the washstand, legs planted far apart and straight, even a bit past straight, so that the pad at the back of her knees stands out as firm as rubber; yellow eyes musing and unfocused as she puts her things to soak in Lux. Lola . . . I always see playing the Dvorak concerto, hissing the melody with her tongue against her teeth, straddling the cello with her splendid knees. Ellen Oglethorpe appears in my mind as . . . a stern but voluptuous Presbyterian nurse . . ." (14).

More's interest in Lola is stimulated by her musical abilities. But More's interest in music lies only in its ability to stimulate erotic impulses. This brings to mind Reidar Thomte's assertion in Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion that "Music . . . is the only medium that can express the sensuous erotic in its immediacy."<sup>4</sup> Like sensual pleasure, however, "music exists only in the moment of its performance."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Thomte, Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or Vol. I, trans, David F. Swenson and Lillian M. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 67.



Hence, the pleasure experienced in music and eroticism exists only momentarily. Lacking endurance, it fails to offer valid alternatives to alienation, for, as Kierkegaard contends, "Music has time as its element, but it gains no permanent place in it; its significance lies in its constant vanishing in time; it emits sound in time, but at once it vanishes and has no permanence."<sup>6</sup>

Beyond seeking pleasure, More also strives to achieve fame for scientific and highly empirical discoveries; consequently, he "keeps imagining the scene in the Director's office the day the Nobel Price is awarded [him]" (7). He further admits that the prayer of the scientist would be "Lord, grant that my discovery may increase knowledge and help other men. Failing that, Lord, grant that it will not lead to man's destruction. Failing that, Lord, grant that my article in Brain be published before the destruction takes place" (7-8). More's values, as he has admitted, emphasize sex, music and science; they are outward exploits that fail to offer inward development or harmony.

It becomes apparent that the cause for More's present condition, his interest in momentary pleasure and his neglect of inward development, is the passing of the "best of times . . . when Samantha [his dead daughter] and I would walk home in the violet dusk, we having received Communion

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

and 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). These best of times have been replaced by "the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world" (3). More perceives the Western world as on the brink of catastrophe because man is spiritually barren, or, as Kierkegaard claims, is unable "to appreciate that . . . [he] is spirit."<sup>7</sup> In "Notes" Percy questions what alternatives are available to a man experiencing such barrenness: "What does a Christian do with his God dead and his name erased? It is proposed that he give more time to the political party of his choice or perhaps to make a greater effort to be civil to salesladies and shoe clerks."<sup>8</sup> The inhabitants of Paradise Estates give time to political parties, material objects, and scientific pursuits; yet it is these abstractions that cause the dichotomy or "bifurcation" of man and thus precipitate the end of the world.

In 1983, especially in Paradise Estates, man exists in a state of spiritual barrenness. The population of the

<sup>7</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 12.

U.S.A. is half Knotheads who "fall victim to unseasonable rages, delusions of conspiracies, high blood pressures and large bowel complaints" (20), and half Leftpapasans who are "apt to contact sexual impotence, morning terror, and a feeling of abstraction of the self from itself" (29). Also within this society racial tension increases; the church celebrates Property Rites; Christ is no longer Savior but "the greatest Pro of them all"; euthanasia is encouraged as a means of exterminating "oldsters" who "suffer and cause suffering to other people" (22); and vaginal computers are used to measure sexual fulfillment. Those who reject such an existence are either reconditioned in the Skinner box or voluntarily become exiles in Honey Island Swamp, where Bantu guerillas, castoffs and "young white derelicts" (16) dwell.

All of these external conflicts are symptomatic of man's failure to develop inwardly, and the only person who recognizes this is Dr. More; he is the only one who notices the significance of the political splits, religious schisms, sexual impotence, racial tension, sprouting vines and increasing atrocities. "Americans have turned against each other; race against race; right against left, believer against heathen, San Francisco against Los Angeles, Chicago against Cicero" (17). But more importantly he recognizes the causes: "The center did not hold. However, the Gross National Product continues to rise" (18). Outward progress has replaced inward growth.

Because external success, especially empiricism and consumerism, has become the foundation of their existence, the inhabitants of Paradise Estates remain abstracted from their own concrete predicament; that is, they have rendered themselves and their fellow man invisible by what Percy terms "a shift of reality from concrete thing to theory which Whitehead has called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It is the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction for the real."<sup>9</sup> So abstracted by empiricism are the inhabitants of Paradise Estates that they not only ignore the racial problem but expand it by reducing the Negroes to categories: "The Negroes around here are generally held to be a bad lot. The older Negroes are mostly trifling and no-account, while the young Negroes have turned mean as yard dogs. Nearly all the latter have left town, mainly to join the Bantus in the swamps" (17). Alienation, oppression, and tension increase when individuals or races are reduced to categories. More, who recognizes signs of racial upheaval, exclaims: "The U.S.A. didn't work!" (56). He concludes that God said, ". . . here it is, the new Eden, and it is yours because you're the apple of my eye; because you the lordly Westerners, the fierce Caucasians-Gentile-Visigoths, believed in me and in the outlandish Jewish Event even though you were nowhere near it and had to hear the news of it from strangers. But you believed and so I gave it all to you, . . . And all

<sup>9</sup>Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," p. 12.

you had to do was pass one little test . . . One little test: here's a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. That's all. One little test: you flunk!" (57).<sup>10</sup> Yet the "fierce Caucasian-Gentile-Visigoths" are unaware that they flunked. Success, commodities, progress, and empiricism obsess them to such an extent that their attitude toward the Negro is one of indifference, neglect, or stereotyping. Percy also elucidates this situation in "Notes" where he asserts that "Americans have sinned against the Negro from the beginning, continue to do so, initially with cruelty and presently with an indifference which may be even more destructive."<sup>11</sup> It is because of this neglect and indifference that the Bantu guerillas eventually try to take over Paradise

<sup>10</sup>It is interesting to note the similarity between this passage and a longer one suggestive of this same point in section four of Faulkner's "The Bear." The following is an abbreviated segment of the passage: "He had created them, upon this land this South for which He had done so much . . . and saw no hope anywhere and looked beyond it where hope should have been, where to East North and West lay illimitable that whole hopeful continent dedicated as a refuge and sanctuary of liberty and freedom from what you called the old world's worthless evening and saw the rich descendants of slavers, females of both sexes, to whom the black they shrieked of was another specimen another example . . . until not only that old world from which He had rescued them but this new one too which He had revealed and led them to as a sanctuary and refuge were become the same worthless tideless rock cooling in the last crimson evening . . . so that He said and not in grief either who had made them and so could know no more of grief than He could of pride or hope: Apparently they can learn nothing save through suffering, remember nothing save when underlined in blood . . . ." (William Faulkner, Go Down Moses [New York: Modern Library, 1955], pp. 283-286.)

<sup>11</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 14.

Estates. Not only the young "mean as yard dog" blacks, but also many of the older "trifling and no account" blacks plan, under the leadership of Uru, a black militant from Michigan, to take over Paradise Estates. What the Bantu guerillas seek is an existence equal to that of the white citizens of Paradise Estates, but what they fail to realize is such an existence leads only to inward alienation and "abstraction of the self from itself" (20).

The minor characters, inhabitants of Paradise Estates, are unaware of the impending disaster, just as they are unaware of their spiritual alienation; yet the catastrophe is foreshadowed by such unnatural phenomena as vines sprouting in concrete slabs, flowers blooming on the sidewalk, and the return of the ivory-billed woodpecker. More, a perceptive psychiatrist, notices and mentions this peculiar development to several neighbors and colleagues, yet they prefer to ignore it: "The vines began to sprout in earnest a couple of months ago. People do not like to be told about it. For some reason they'd much rather talk about the atrocities that have been occurring ever more often: entire families murdered in their beds for no good reason" (9). What this indicates is that More once again perceives causes. Hence, the sprouting vines foreshadow the eventual break-up of Paradise Estates and its society; just as the concrete is broken by the vines, so the society's false foundation will be broken by its inevitable destruction. More is the only one,

again, who notices both the vines and societal decay, the only one who ultimately sees the weakness of empirical solutions to alleviate alienation.

In creating and applying his lapsometer, More becomes aware of the various levels of alienation; however, he can only diagnose them but cannot cure them. When a cure is found through the modification of the lapsometer, More is unable to cure his own alienation because he perceives the faults of an empirical solution; that is, he realizes that "Science can say everything about a man except what he is in himself."<sup>12</sup> As a result he foresees "an unprecedented fall-out of noxious particles" which "do not burn the skin and rot the marrow; rather do they inflame and worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself" (5). Obliteration, then, will not be from bombs, but from the destruction of man's spirit, and it is More who sees the process of this destruction.

With the noble effort of reuniting the mind and body of Western man, More's ethical polarity is evidenced. More is aware of the causes of alienation, particularly in Paradise Estates, whose citizens exist in a state of spiritual barrenness; nevertheless, More's authentic efforts fail to endure because he must cure himself first; he must complete the phrase "Physician heal thy\_\_\_\_" before he can guide others. Because he knowingly permits aesthetic or immediate desires

<sup>12</sup>Carr Interview, p. 320.

to dominate his existence, he experiences symptoms similar to his fellow citizens: "morning terror, elation, depression"; consequently, he is unable to suggest alternatives for his patients that will endure through time. Until he puts his own external desires into perspective, he is incapable of perceiving valid options for others and therefore can only discern temporary alternatives. With the aid of his lapsometer More is able to determine the causes of alienation, abstraction, and fragmentation; but he can only offer his patients, as well as himself, temporary solutions that lack endurance. Because the lapsometer is initially capable only of diagnosing not of curing the malaise, More, like other scientists, "has abstracted from his own predicament in order to achieve objectivity. His objectivity is indeed nothing else than his removal from his own concrete situation."<sup>13</sup> Hence More recognizes, objectively, the cause of man's illness, but cannot cure it. He is unable to offer his patients alternatives that will endure through time.

P.T. Bledsoe, a prominent and successful Paradise businessman, is "subject to seizures of rage and blinding headaches and is convinced of several conspiracies against him. . . . He was certain that the Negroes and Communists were after him . . . as well as a Jewish organization that he called 'Bildebergers' . . . . His ambition was to move to Australia" (30-31). He hoped to make this move because he

<sup>13</sup>Percy, "Message," p. 416.



believed that blacks were not allowed in Australia. Able to locate and measure the intensity of Bledsoe's headaches with his lapsometer, Dr. More is unable to cure it scientifically; he suggests, consequently, that P.T. move to Australia. Such a rotation offers an attempt to "experience the new beyond the expectation of experiencing the new."<sup>14</sup> But the newness of the experience is only temporary; hence, it produces no permanent solution. Dr. More, who recognizes the impermanence of this suggestion, prescribes it anyway; hence, it may be visualized not only as a rotation, but also as a capitulation. More, nevertheless, recommends this type of therapy because "most people nowadays are possessed, harboring as they do all manner of demonic hatred and terrors and lusts and envies, that principalities and powers are nearly everywhere victorious, and that therefore a doctor's first duty to his patient is to help him find breathing room and so keep him from going crazy. If P.T. can't stand blacks and Bildebergers, my experience is that there is not enough time to get him over it if I could" (31). Because there is insufficient time to cure P.T.'s prejudice, More capitulates to a semi-valid alternative.

Another patient, Ted Tennis, suffers from "massive free floating terror, identity crisis and sexual impotence . . . "; and his scientific mind enables him to recite "his symptoms with precision and objectivity . . ." (33). Although

<sup>14</sup>Percy, Moviegoer, p. 144.

experiencing an identity crisis, Ted shows his knowledge of psychiatric jargon. Ted's knowledgeability parallels the "assertory identity" Percy discusses in "The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process"; Percy states that a patient like Ted "is an educated layman, the sort who takes pride in being well informed in scientific matters, especially psychiatry, and in his use of psychiatric jargon."<sup>15</sup> In order to relieve sexual impotence Ted wants a Bayonne-rayon sex organ so that at least his wife Tanya may "achieve an adequate response" (33). Dr. More, however, seeks first to discover the causes for impotence. His lapsometer diagnoses the causes; Ted has "abstracted himself from himself and the world around him, seeing things as theories and himself as a shadow, that he cannot . . . reenter the lovely ordinary world" (34). Dr. More suggests "recovery of the self through ordeal" (37) as a possible remedy, explaining that "until we make a therapeutic breakthrough comparable to this diagnostic breakthrough . . . the only way to treat a disorder like this is by rough and ready empirical methods. [We rely on empiricism because] we don't know much about angelism [excessive abstraction]" (35). As James Hoggard in "Death of the Vicarious" said of Binx, "A sense of danger, then, is the only thing which . . . can restore vitality to life and

<sup>15</sup>Walker Percy, "The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process," Psychiatry: A Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes, 24 (Feb., 1961), 49.

cure the malaise."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, instead of driving to and from work Ted, following More's advice, hiked six miles home and "staggered up his back yard . . . half dead of fatigue, having been devoured by mosquitoes, leeches, vampire bats and tsetse flies, snapped at by alligators, moccasins, copperheads, chased by Bantu guerillas . . ."; and then he "fell into the arms of his good wife Tanya, and made lusty love to her the rest of the night" (37). More's cure, the ordeal, obliterates abstraction. Ted must become concerned with himself and how he is to overcome the obstacles encountered in his six mile hike; hence, theories, precision, objectivity are forfeited, and in an effort to survive Ted becomes concretely aware of himself as an individual and temporarily reenters the ordinary world. Ordeal and the remembrance of ordeal have throughout time emerged as a means of recovering oneself. Through crisis or ordeal "it is possible . . . to be dying and alive at Verdun and alive and dying as a booster of the Nittany Lions" (190).

Battleground experiences frequently illustrate life in death, and for clarification More cites such an example: "for fifty years following the battle of Verdun, French and German veterans used to return every summer to seek out the trench where they spent the summer of 1916. Why did they choose the very domicile of death? Was there life here?" (190) Percy suggests that there was "life here"; moreover, he

<sup>16</sup>Hoggard, "Death of the Vicarious," p. 368.

contends that there is also hope, for "what man finds in himself and in other people--is a new breed of person in whom the potential for catastrophe--and hope--has suddenly escalated."<sup>17</sup> Henry Aiken, in his discussion of Kierkegaard's philosophy, elaborates on this question and on Percy's answer: ". . . only in states of extreme emotional crisis, when one faces not just the possibility but the fact of one's own imminent annihilation can one finally grasp the significance of one's own existence. For it is only then that one at last decides to live or die, to be or not to be."<sup>18</sup> Ted Tennis, Dr. More, and the veterans of World War I seek crisis or ordeal in an effort to "grasp the significance of [their] existence." Ordeal, however, offers only temporary relief; it fails to endure through time and is consequently only temporarily valid. It is because of its failure that the veterans return to the battleground; they are seeking life there, and must return yearly for temporary hope and reassurance. Similarly, Ted's remedy works only temporarily; he too must seek an alternate method, and his suggestion is that Dr. More watch Tanya and him during intercourse, hoping that being spied on will help restore potency. Ordeal or crisis offers only immediate hope; and it is, consequently, an invalid

<sup>17</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 11.

<sup>18</sup>Aiken, The Age of Ideology, p. 228.

alternative.

Percy clarifies the frequent references to ordeal in his novels, saying that "the present-day novelist is more interested in catastrophe than he is in life among the flower people. Uncertain himself about what has gone wrong, he feels in his bones that the happy exurb stands both in danger of catastrophe--and somehow in need of it. Like Thomas More and St. Francis he is most cheerful with Brother Death in the neighborhood."<sup>19</sup> Man doesn't fear death; he fears life. That is to say, man doesn't fear the possibility of the bomb falling, but rather the possibility of it not falling; for, as Richard Lehan asserts, this "implies no hope of deliverance, no way of escaping what Percy calls 'everydayness,' no way out of the rat trap that the Bomb would bring so comfortably and so quickly."<sup>20</sup>

Repetition is another example of Dr. More's temporarily valid alternatives to alienation. He suggests such an option to Charley Parker, the Paradise golf pro and introducer of night golf, who experiences depression and is unable to determine the causes. "'Historical therapy' . . . a recapture of the past and one's self" is the solution More offers. In recapturing the past, Charley must face the fact that his

<sup>19</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 310.

son has rebelled not against a paternal relationship, but against Charley, as a representative of a dehumanized society, a member of a consumers' Paradise. If Charley is to exist in the present he must face the past, especially his son's self-imposed exile on Honey Island Swamp, and in accepting this he must forfeit his dreams of a college bound, success-oriented son. Charley personifies the type of businessman discussed by Percy in "Notes" as one who "feels that something has gone badly wrong in the everyday round of business activity, in his office routine, in the routine life at home, in his Sunday morning church going . . . . Even though by all objective criteria all is well with him, he knows that all is not well."<sup>21</sup> Charley experiences this type of depression and calls on Dr. More for a solution. By referring to Chuck's rebellion and exile, More attempts to explain Chuck's action as an attempt to avert everydayness, the form of despair Charley is experiencing.

Just as Charley constantly mentions his son's rebellious behavior and must face the past, Dr. More similarly refers to his ancestor, Sir Thomas More, and questions his own inability to follow in Sir Thomas More's footsteps: "Why can't I follow More's example, love myself less, God and my

<sup>21</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 10.

fellowman more, and leave whiskey and women alone" (23).<sup>22</sup>  
 Tom, like his neighbor Charley, and like Binx in The Movie-goer as well as Barrett in The Last Gentleman, must "confront . . . the past to make the present a living condition."<sup>23</sup>

Because the past haunts Tom, he seeks escape through immediate pleasures; but the past, as More experiences it, impinges on the present; for when in the midst of an affair with Moira at the Howard Johnson ruins, he exclaims, ". . . suddenly I am thinking not of Moira but of Samantha my dead daughter, and the times she and I and Doris used to travel in the Auto Age all over the U.S.A." (138).<sup>24</sup> Dr. More seeks distraction from the past in sensuous immediacy; that is, he seeks a rotation, "My life is a longing, longings for women, for the Nobel Prize, for the hot bosky bite of bourbon whiskey,

<sup>22</sup>Dr. More's ancestor, whom he refers to repeatedly and wishes he could imitate, was a 16th century Christian martyr. According to The Oxford Companion to English Literature Sir Thomas More swore allegiance to the new Act of Succession but "refused to take any oath that should impugn the Pope's authority, or assume the justice of the king's divorce from Queen Catherine, 1534; he was therefore committed to the Tower of London . . . . He was indicted of high treason, found guilty, and beheaded in 1535." (Paul Harvey, ed., The Oxford Companion to English Literature, 4th ed.) (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 558-59.

<sup>23</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 308.

<sup>24</sup>It is important to note the symbolism in the name Moira; according to George Bedell in Kierkegaard and Faulkner, p. 32, Moira or Fate is "The great symbol for the objectifying sensuousness of the ancient Greek world."

and other great heart-wrenching longings that have no name" (23). Such immediate longings parallel Kierkegaard's perception of the causes for individuals' seeking momentary pleasure:

The sensuous first becomes significant . . . only after he has lost an entire preceding world, but the consciousness of this loss is not crased, it is constantly present and he seeks therefore in the sensuous not so much enjoyment as a diversion of the mind. His doubting soul finds nothing in which it can rest, and now he reaches after love, not because he believes in it, but because it has a present element in which there is rest for a moment, and a striving which distracts and diverts his attention from the nothingness of doubt.<sup>25</sup>

The past More seeks diversion from is not only his saintly ancestor Sir Thomas More and his dead daughter Samantha, but also his wife who died shortly after leaving Tom for a misdirected inward search. Tom cannot understand why Doris deserted him for a heathen, pretentious Englishman who, "while swilling my scotch and eating three-dollar rib eye steaks . . ." would "speak of higher things, of the law of life--and of the financial needs of their handicraft retreat in Mexico. There in Cozumel, was the last hope of the Western world" (67). Tom recognized the speciousness of the Englishman, but was unable to convince Doris, who left him to join Alistair in Mexico. Tom also recognizes that Doris' search is also false since she does not seek inward knowledge but rather justification for Samantha's death. He offers no

<sup>25</sup>Kierkegaard, Either/Or I, p. 204.



justification; he merely offers distraction in the form of sensual pleasure.

Dr. More uses sex and whiskey as alternatives to alienation; but because they are invalid they are frequently countered by "attacks of elation and depression, as well as occasional seizures of morning terror" (11). Such attacks are a consequence of experiencing despair, and as Josiah Thompson suggests in The Lonely Labyrinth, "Despair . . . follows as a consequence of rendering absolute the principle of enjoyment."<sup>26</sup> Because the aesthetic modality offers only invalid options, and because the ethical offers impermanent options Tom must put these levels into perspective in his own life; that is, he must complete the incompleting statement that pervades the novel: "Physician heal thy \_\_\_\_\_" before he will be able to heal the soul of western man. Being aware of alienation and its causes is insufficient; valid alternatives must be discerned on an individual basis before it is resolved. More must recognize that "The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an end to the mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Thompson, The Lonely Labyrinth, p. 84.

<sup>27</sup>Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 302.

Unable to put his existence into perspective, unable to polarize the dichotomized self, that is, unable to recognize the ineffectiveness of pleasure and unable to face the past, More's mental stability is precarious. Yet even in this unstable condition he recognizes the outward signs of inward deterioration, exemplified by his constant awareness of "the encroaching vines" (179). This parallels More's increased awareness that "the center is not holding"; that is, the individual self is decaying.

More's increased awareness of such external phenomena as the "vines sprouting" symbolizes his alienation, for as Percy discussed previously in "Man on the Train," "the hearts desire of the alienated man is to see vines sprouting throughout the masonry."<sup>28</sup> The alienated man savors such unnatural occurrences because they make him concretely aware of his existence. But beyond this, the frequency of these occurrences parallels the decline in inward development or subjectivity. That is, only those who become conscious of man's increasingly alienated condition become cognizant of the vines.

Although Tom realizes that he and his fellow man are alienated, he is unable to determine options that endure; consequently, he and his patients must ultimately discover permanent options. More, unlike his colleagues, notices not

<sup>28</sup>Percy, "Train," p. 479.

only the increased disorders and splits in parties and races, but he also notices the self-decay which causes the center of the individual to fragment. This decay culminates in Tom and results in voluntary hospitalization. In "Notes" Percy suggests why the protagonist in this type of novel experiences such instability: "The subject of the post-modern novel is a man who has very nearly come to the end of the line. How very odd it is, when one comes to think of it, that the very moment he arrives at the threshold of his new city with all its hard-won relief from the sufferings of the past, happens to be the same moment he runs out of meaning."<sup>29</sup>

More's diagnosis of his illness, "perturbations of the soul," is considered by his medical colleagues as "rather metaphysical," implying that "depression, elation, and morning terror" must be diagnosed in accord with medical terminology which gives "Habitation and name" to his illness. Max Gottlieb, director of the hospital, therefore terms More's condition "mood swings." Percy elaborates on this need to name things in "Naming and Being" where he states, "Even in its most primitive form, naming is a kind of judgment. It is also a kind of primitive abstraction. If I am determined to dispose of you by formulation, I had better not look at you."<sup>30</sup> Max ignores Dr. More the individual;

<sup>29</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 12.

<sup>30</sup>Percy, "Naming and Being," p. 156.

he merely diagnoses a patient; hence he disposes of More through formulation, through objective empirical methods, ignoring the individual.

Similarly, Percy discusses the empirical attitude toward "perturbations of the soul" in "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism"; there he states, "In the empirical mind, existential categories are apt to be dismissed as emotional manifestations, that is a dramatic expression of a particular historical circumstance, or--what is worse--as exhortatory and deserving the same attention as any other pulpiteering, such notions as Dread, Dasein, boredom, and the dichotomies: authenticity--unauthenticity, freedom--falling prey to, esthetic--ethical will inevitable appear as reducibles--if they have any meaning at all. What ever significance they have will be assumed to yield itself in their objective correlatives."<sup>31</sup> By comparison, then, More's schizophrenic condition has been reduced to "mood swings." Subjectivity is viewed as a detriment to scientific empiricism; but such objectivity destroys man's inward subjective development and leads to disorders of the mind or soul, as More experiences. The external disorders are merely outward expression of inward turmoil; Percy recognizes this not only in himself, but also in his fellow man: "It's not the U.S.A., it's the soul of Western man that is in the very act of flying apart HERE

<sup>31</sup>Percy, "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism," p. 524.

AND NOW" (115).

The outward signs of internal disorder and of impending disaster not only include man's obsession with scientific goals and indifference toward racial tension, but also and more importantly the entire process of seeking cures to the ills of the soul through empirical methods. When the "oldsters" experience depression or "behave antisocially they're shocked into bliss . . . ." They are prevented from experiencing melancholy, depression, alienation and from behaving antisocially. The middle-aged citizens of Paradise Estates experiment with vaginal computers to measure sexual fulfillment; problems of potency are overcome by sensory equipment. Sex too has become a commodity reduced to methods and techniques of discovering stimulation.

When ordeal no longer serves as an option for Ted and Tanya they enter "Love Clinic" where sensory equipment is attached to the participants, and observers record data on the level of sexual potency, thus reducing sex to empirical terms. But in 1983 sex is no longer a physical, spiritual or emotional union; rather it is, as Sutter in The Last Gentleman suggests, "the only reentry into the world which remains."<sup>32</sup> At

<sup>32</sup>Percy, The Last Gentleman, p. 354.

"Love Clinic," which is in the experimental stages, "volunteers . . . get paid fifty a crack, which beats giving blood" (131). Sex has been reduced to a profitable commodity; such reductionism, however, results in despair. The despairing individual according to Kierkegaard seeks escape from despair; therefore "he will seek forgetfulness in sensuality, perhaps in debauchery, in desperation he wants to return to immediacy, but constantly with consciousness of the self, which he does not want to have."<sup>33</sup> Although More too seeks forgetfulness in sensuality, he is aware that his neighbors and colleagues do also; but more importantly he tries through his lapsometer to discover more valid alternatives.

Such an incredible desire to cure the ills of the soul is a misuse of scientific knowledge. Tom himself believes he cannot only diagnose but eventually cure alienation and the "perturbations of the soul" by discovering a therapeutic device to add to his lapsometer in order "to weld the broken self whole" (36), so that "Man can reenter paradise . . . and live there both as man and spirit, whole and intact man-spirit, as solid as a speckled trout, a dappled thing yet aware of itself as a self!" (36). Man is not aware of himself as spirit, however, and empirical devices cannot, by nature of their objectivity, achieve a balance between body

<sup>33</sup>Kierkegaard, Sickness, p. 199.

and mind, man flesh and man spirit. Problems of the spirit cannot be dealt with in abstract terms; as Swenson says concerning Kierkegaard's statement on abstract thought, ". . . it solves all the difficulties of life by abstracting from them whence arises its complacent disinterestedness; the concrete thinker, who faces the concrete problem of reality . . . discovers that this problem brings his subjective interest to a climax, since it reveals a future presenting a critical and decisive alternative."<sup>34</sup>

The citizens of Paradise Estates, however, attempt to disregard problems of the soul, or problems of subjective interest; they believe that scientific and empirical methods can solve such problems. They depend, therefore, on such inventions as vaginal computers, Skinner reconditioning boxes and other alternatives to treat "perturbations of the soul," so that they may remain in paradise. Paradise Estates, or allegorically the garden of Eden, is only paradise in terms of white upperclass affluence. It is a paradise based on one's social success, on the accumulation of material commodities and on one's outward objectivity. In an effort to maintain empirical objectivity the citizens of Paradise Estates yield to temptation; but temptation leads to the fall. Art Immelmann, who may, if the allegorical level is pursued, represent the devil, offers empirical temptation,

<sup>34</sup>Swenson, Something about Kierkegaard, p. 152.

that is, the temptation to acquire empirical knowledge about curing the ills of the soul. The inhabitants of Paradise Estates accept Immelmann's therapeutic device which, when attached to More's lapsometer, is supposed to cure the ills of the spirit. Paradise citizens fail to consider, as did Adam and Eve, the dangers produced through misuse of knowledge.

Art has discovered "the possibility of treating personality disorders with Heavy Sodium and Chloride " (211). But he ignores the fact that "sodium radiation is a two-edged sword" (211).

Dr. More is the first to experience the effects of the therapeutic device. After a brain massage More sees himself concretely for the first time; "I notice my hand clenched into a fist on my knee, I open it slowly, turning it this way and that, inspecting every pore and tendon. What a beautiful strong hand! The tendons! the bones! But the hand of a stranger! I have never seen it before" (212).

Similarly, in "Notes" Percy claims that "When the novelist writes of a man 'coming to himself' through some such catalyst as catastrophe or ordeal he may be offering obscure testimony to a gross disorder of consciousness and to the need of recovering oneself as neither angel or organism but



as intact creature somewhere in between."<sup>35</sup> More's constant references to the Verdun battlefield and to Stedmann's book entitled World War I support Percy's assertion that ordeal provides one means of recovering oneself. Additionally, his use of the modified lapsometer in order to "come to himself" reenforces Percy's claim. Yet after Dr. More experiences the new device for his lapsometer he realizes the dangers; "If one of these falls into the wrong hands it could produce a chain reaction in the Heavy Sodium deposits hereabouts or a political explosion between knotheads and Lefts" (217).

Although Tom realizes the dangers, he uses it for selfish purposes. During a debate between himself and Dr. Buddy Brown over the diagnoses of "oldster" Mr. Ives, More produces his machine to expose Buddy's real self to the audience. He does this by massaging the erotic area of Buddy's brain so that his concentration is no longer on the debate but on

<sup>35</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 12. In this discussion Percy suggests that the post-modern, success-oriented businessman living in a typical suburban consumer area will eventually, as a result of a crisis, "come to himself." Percy's elaboration on this topic should be noted, especially the similarity to Dr. More. "Such a businessman will on his way home have a severe heart attack and will be taken off the train at a commuter's station he has seen a thousand times but never visited. When he regains consciousness, he finds himself in a strange hospital surrounded by strangers. As he tries to recall what has happened, he catches sight of his own hand on the counterpane. It is as if he had never seen it before: he is astounded by its complexity, its functional beauty. He turns it this way and that. What has happened? Certainly a kind of natural revelation, which reminds one of the experiences induced by the psychedelic drugs. (. . . this kind of revelation . . . can only be called a revelation of being . . .")

female observers. Mr. Ives, whose antisocial behavior was not reduced by treatment in the Skinner box, should, according to Buddy, be sent to Happy Isles. Dr. More, however, suggests that Mr. Ives is capable of walking, talking and behaving according to social standards but refuses to. In an effort to achieve victory Dr. More uses the revised lapsometer on Buddy to "inhibit the inhibitory centers [erotic areas] and let Buddy be what he is" (226). While Buddy is distracted from the debate, More suggests the reasons why Mr. Ives refuses to speak or walk: "I can assure you [the audience] that speech and locomotion are no problem here. What is interesting is the structure of his selfhood as it relates to his fellow seniors in the Tampa settlement and to scientists here" (228). However, Max Gottlieb, the director, refuses to accept More's subjective analysis, "Spare us the metaphysics, Doctor, . . . the best proof that a man can talk is hearing him talk. And walk" (228). Because More cannot explain his analysis in objective terms and because he seeks victory, since victory may help him win the Nobel Prize, More uses the revised lapsometer on Mr. Ives, after which Ives walks, talks, and explains his behavior. Although Tom wins the debate, the dangers of the machine become actualized. Art distributes the machines to the audience during the debate, increasing ionization to increase the erotic--and chaos results.

The chaos, which ironically occurs on July 4th, takes the form not only of disorders among Paradise Estates citizens, but also among the Bantu guerillas who start, as planned, to take over Paradise Estates. But Dr. More's neighbors and colleagues remain abstracted and indifferent to the impending catastrophe. Their primary concern is that the Pro Am Golf tournament proceed as scheduled. Although the modified lapsometer can reduce alienation, Immelmann uses it to increase abstraction and, subsequently, alienation. Used either way the modified lapsometer relies on empirical methods similar to the Skinner box; but by doing so it destroys man's individual freedom, since when misused as Immelmann misuses it, it controls man's responses. By increasing ionization for the "pilot" test Immelman may, as More fears, render man "totally abstracted from himself, totally alienated from the concrete world, and in such a state of angelism that he will fall prey to the first abstract notion proposed to him and will kill anybody who gets in his way, torture, execute, wipe out entire populations, all with the best possible motives and the best possible intentions, in fact in the name of peace and freedom, etcetera" (328). While the inhabitants of Paradise remain abstracted due to the increased ionization, the Bantu guerillas move in from the swamp in an attempt to "build a new society" (300). Yet Paradise Estates citizens who have been treated by the lapsometer ignore the signs; they are more concerned with

the golf tournament, political issues, or religious debates.<sup>36</sup> Charley Parker fears the cancellation of the tournament because of the sodium radiation emerging like smoke from a hole in the golf course; at "Love Clinic" Father Kevin continues to sit "at the vaginal console reading Commonweal" (329). More too attempts to ignore the disaster; he returns to the Howard Johnson Ruins to his three female companions: Moira, Lola, and Ellen, his nurse, who attempts to stabilize More by reminding him of his lapsometer and his obligations to Paradise Estates. Lola's music, however, rescues More from ethical duty, restoring desire for aesthetic or immediate pleasure. "Music," More claims, "ransoms us from the past, declares amnesty, brackets and sets aside the old puzzles. Sing a new song. Start a new life, get a girl, look into her shadowy eyes, smile" (339). That is, music rescues More from the immediate past, Paradise Estates, his deceased wife and daughter, and from the distant past, his ancestor Sir Thomas More. But it is Ellen who interferes to bring More back to the present, to the catastrophe of July 4, 1983.

Although the catastrophe is minor, the effects illustrate the consequences of modern man's abstracted and fragmented existence. Charley Parker, the golf pro, futilely

<sup>36</sup>Percy's perception of Christ becoming the greatest Pro of them all, as well as post-modern man's obsession with golf, brings to mind T.S. Eliot's passage in The Rock; their perceptions seem similar: "Here were decent godless people:/ Their only monument the asphalt road/And a thousand lost golf balls." (T.S. Eliot, The Rock [London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1934], p. 30.)

tries to put out the fire in the sandtrap so the golf tournament may continue; Ted and Tanya continue experimenting at Love in order to overcome sterility; and Ken Stryker is adversely affected by the noxious vapors, while Chuck Parker (Charley's exiled son) comes out of exile to observe the catastrophe, calling the scientists "killers of subjectivity" (367). Dr. More is the only one who recognizes the danger signs, but more importantly he realizes the danger of being "abstractly all-sided" as Kierkegaard defines this individual who "imagines that he sees everything through the one-sidedness of the intellectual."<sup>37</sup>

More realizes the potential perils of the modified lapsometer; Art Immelmann, allegorically the devil, however, operates on "the cardinal principle" which states that "We facilitate social interaction in order to isolate factors. If people show a tendency to interact in a certain way, we facilitate the interaction in order to accumulate reliable data" (363). Under this principle, then, man is not an individual but a commodity; hence the data collected exemplifies the extremes modern man takes in pursuit of empirical knowledge, disregarding the spiritual or inward individual. For More, however, the catastrophe forces him to confront the past, and by doing this he recognizes the speciousness of the present and contemplates:

<sup>37</sup>Kierkegaard, Unscientific, p. 312.

I wonder: did it break my heart when Samantha died? Yes. There was even the knowledge and foreknowledge of it while she lived, knowledge that while she lived, life still had its same peculiar tentativeness, people living as usual by fits and starts, aiming and missing, while present time went humming, and foreknowledge that the second she died, remorse would come and give past time its bitter specious wholeness. If only--If only we hadn't been defeated by humdrum humming present time and missed it, missed ourselves, missed everything. I had the foreknowledge while she lived. Still, present time went humming. Then she died and here came the sweet remorse like a blade between the ribs (374).

The defeat More refers to is everydayness, the same affliction besieging Binx in The Moviegoer and Barrett in The Last Gentleman. His remorse is that even if he had foreknowledge of her death existence would still have been specious because man has been defeated by everydayness, and hence is unable to determine any valid options to his alienation. This revelation forces More to recognize the fallacy of such an existence for himself; in addition, he also realizes that, although Samantha suffered and died, "there [had] been times when [he] was not above enjoying it" (374). He enjoyed it because death momentarily destroyed the everydayness of his life. It is through "coming to himself" in this way that More recognizes the necessity of integrating the past with the present, man spirit with man flesh, objectivity and subjectivity, and of rejecting a consumers' paradise which emphasizes goods and objects rather than individuals.

Through the catastrophe, More recognizes that his own instability is a result of accepting a consumers' paradise, where people fall prey to goods and neglect themselves as individuals. But more importantly he recognizes the futility of his or anyone's efforts to help the Bantus or the Negroes. In trying to explain this futility to Uru, the Bantu leader, he confesses that he can't help them because "You got to get to where you're going or where you think you're going--although I hope you do better than that, because after all nothing comes easier than that, being against one thing and tearing down another thing and talking about peace and brotherhood--I never saw peace and brotherhood come from such talk and I hope you do better than that because there are better things and harder things to do. But, either way, you got to get to where you're going before I can help you. . . . You got to get to where we are or where you think we are and I'm not even sure you can do that" (372-73).

Percy could have (and probably should have) ended the book with this revelation as well as with the recognition and acceptance of the past; however, he chose not to and in choosing so he added a fourth section, an epilogue, entitled "five years later." In 1988 Dr. More is married to his nurse Ellen. The Bantus have gotten to where they think we are; "Paradise has gone 99 percent Bantu" (385); they won by "exercising their property rights" (385) on Honey Swamp Island which contained oil. They have achieved the same

economic, social and material level as their white peers; they live in a consumer paradise that emphasizes goods rather than individuals.<sup>38</sup>

Dr. More has also changed within the last five years, but the revelations of 1983 seemed to predict such a change. In 1988, More, who has reached Kierkegaard's religious state, not in terms of faith but in terms of inward development, reflects on the differences between the two ages, stating: "Now while you work, you also watch and listen and wait. In the last age we planned projects and cast ahead of ourselves. We set out to 'reach goals'" (381-382). More also continues working on his lapsometer; he asserts that "I still believe my lapsometer can save the world--if I can get it right. For the world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man" (382-383). More recognizes the changes in himself and admits "I can't

<sup>38</sup>This passage too seems suggestive of Faulkner's "The Bear"; the significant difference is that Faulkner, by never writing a novel of the future, never depicted the effect total equality would have on the Negroes. Percy, not only states that the Negroes "want to get to where we're going," but in this particular novel they get there. Faulkner in "The Bear" merely states that one day they will be on the same level as the whites. The similarity in ideas here should be noted: "The whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse onto the land; maybe for that reason their descendants alone can--not resist it, not combat it--maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted. Then your people's turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now. Not yet." Go Down Moses, p. 278.



say things have changed much. What has changed is my way of dealing with it" (384). Consciousness, not things, has changed.

It seems unnecessary, therefore, to include the epilogue; it merely prevents the reader from interpreting for himself (unlike Percy's two previous novels), since it actualizes the course of events occurring to More, Paradise Estates and its citizens which were predicted during the catastrophe of 1985. By including such an epilogue Percy contradicts his contention in "Notes" where he claims that "Whether or not catastrophe actually befalls us, or is deserved; whether reconciliation and renewal may yet take place, it is not for the novelist to say."<sup>39</sup> It seems to me that Percy takes the liberty, in the epilogue of Love in the Ruins, to say that the catastrophe was deserved and that a renewal, although limited, did take place especially for Dr. More, evidenced by his attendance and confession at Mass on Christmas, and reenforced by his hope that "some day a man will walk into my office as ghost or beast or ghost beast and walk out as a man, which is to say sovereign wanderer, lordly exile, worker and waiter and watcher" (383). That is, man will one day be an integrated, unified individual, rather than an alienated and fragmented member of a consumers' society.

<sup>39</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 14.

## CONCLUSION

Walker Percy's novels The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman and Love in the Ruins, as well as his philosophical essays, not only illuminate his perception of the human condition but also present the dilemma of post-modern man. He sees man as alienated and fragmented. Man's obsession with scientific empiricism negates subjectivity; his desire to accumulate commodities stresses consumerism; and the decay in Christian morality destroys tradition. These goals cause and increase alienation, fragmentation, and anxiety. Such conditions force man to search for more valid alternatives, which at times seem ambiguous and contradictory to a highly developed and technological society. Yet such alternatives, although not valid according to Percy, offer the individual options which provide temporary or immediate solutions. Through a gradual realization of the inadequacy of their choices, the protagonists in each novel are able ultimately to discern valid options to reduce alienation. These options parallel Kierkegaard's religious stage; yet they are slightly altered to meet the demands of the twentieth century, which differs significantly from Kierkegaard's nineteenth century. Hence, in his overview of contemporary man Percy assesses the various levels of existence as well as the options associated with each. Although many options, especially those associated with the aesthetic modality, are invalid or impermanent, they are, nevertheless, frequently selected by contemporary

and post-modern man. Percy recognizes the anxiety and alienation that force modern man to select these options.

One of the major causes of alienation, as Percy sees it, is "everydayness," an affliction which reduces existence to a routine causing man to lose himself as an individual. As Percy suggests, ". . . he feels that something has gone badly wrong in the everyday round of business activity, with the office routine, in the routine at home . . . . though by all objective criteria all is well with him he knows that all is not well with him."<sup>1</sup> Routinized patterns that mechanize man provide no inward development; and, consequently, the individual seeks escape from the rat trap of this existence. Numerous options are available, but few enable the individual to "come to himself." The options Percy's protagonists and his minor characters choose represent options chosen by modern man and at the same time parallel Kierkegaard's three stages of existence.

Although everydayness is one cause for modern man's dilemma, another is, as Percy asserts, "the absorption by the layman . . . [of] the magical aura of science whose credentials he accepts for all sectors of reality. Thus in the lay culture of a scientific society nothing is easier than to fall prey to a kind of seduction which sunders one's self from itself into an all-transcending 'objective' consciousness

<sup>1</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 10.

and a consumer-self with a list of 'needs' to be satisfied."<sup>2</sup> Percy terms this absorption a "monstrous bifurcation of man." This bifurcation is exemplified in Binx, Barrett, and Dr. More as well as a host of minor characters; however, the protagonists eventually realize that science abstracts from existence, that "Science can say everything about a man except what he is in himself."<sup>3</sup>

Although each of his protagonists eventually realizes that empiricism cannot teach a man "how to live and how to die," many of the minor characters never attain this revelation; that is, they never "come to themselves." Consequently, they choose such options as sex, certification, crisis, impersonation, rotation, and repetition, which fail to endure through time and eventually increase despair and alienation.

Throughout his novels sex, an aesthetic or immediate alternative, represents the common alternative to alienation; but as Kierkegaard perceived, sensuous pleasure exists in the moment and when the moment ends the pleasure does also. Percy elaborates on this option recognizing that for contemporary man sex is also "a mode of reentry from the posture of transcendence," for "Science, which dissolves concrete things and relation, leaves intact touch of skin to skin."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Carr interview, p. 320.

<sup>4</sup>Percy, The Last Gentleman, pp. 372, 280.

Many of Percy's minor characters continue to believe sex is a mode of reentry (Forney, Hort of The Last Gentleman, and numerous minor characters in Love in the Ruins, especially Ted and Tanya and those associated with the Love Clinic, do so); their increased number in the last novel exemplifies Percy's perception of post-modern man. But Percy's protagonists illustrate his hope for man. They temporarily flounder in immediacy, but gradually through the ineffectiveness of this alternative they realize that "flesh poor flesh . . . summoned . . . to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope--quails and fails."<sup>5</sup>

Crisis or ordeal, another option to alienation, offers the individual temporary deliverance. Percy's repeated use of this option illustrates the extremes contemporary man will seek in an attempt to "weld the broken self whole." Again Percy's protagonists perceive the effectiveness of trauma; yet as one catastrophe terminates, another is sought in order to maintain the effect of heightened reality. Binx, Barrett, Dr. More, as well as such minor characters as Sutter and Kate, realize that "only in time of illness or disaster or death are people real."<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Percy suggests that "perhaps it is only through the conjuring up of catastrophe,

<sup>5</sup>Percy, The Moviegoer, p. 200.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

the destruction of all Esso signs and the sprouting of vines in the church pews, that the novelist can make vicarious use of catastrophe in order that he and his reader may come to themselves."<sup>7</sup> Although man may come to himself, this self-revelation, when attained through ordeal, lacks endurance; modern man, consequently, like the veterans of World War I who return to the battleground at Verdun "every summer to seek out the trench where they spent the summer of 1916," seeks "recovery of the self through ordeal."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to sex and crisis, repetition and rotation emerge, as Percy himself admits, as "the two obvious alternatives or deliverances from alienation."<sup>9</sup> Yet even they fail to endure through time, so that contemporary man must realize that the constant quest for the new eventually increases alienation and fragmentation by virtue of its cyclic process. Repetition or déjà vu, the constant recollection of the past, is only valid when the individual faces the past in order "to make the present a living condition."<sup>10</sup> By doing so one gains his "historical validity," a characteristic of the ethical modality. Used in this way repetition functions as a catalyst to aid man in continuing his search

<sup>7</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 14.

<sup>8</sup>Percy, Love in the Ruins pp. 190, 37.

<sup>9</sup>Percy, "Man on the Train," p. 481.

<sup>10</sup>Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy," p. 308.

for authenticity.

One of the primary reasons for modern man's alienation and fragmentation, as Percy sees it, is that "Christendom [went] down the drain."<sup>11</sup> He sees this rejection of Christendom as especially prevalent in America.

It is significant that the failure of Christendom in the United States has not occurred in the sector of theology or metaphysics with which, also, the existentialists and new theologians are concerned, and toward which Americans have always been indifferent, but rather in the sector of everyday morality which has acutely concerned Americans since the Puritans. Americans take pride in doing right. . . . Americans have sinned against the Negro from the beginning, continue to do so, initially with cruelty and presently with an indifference which may be even more destructive.<sup>12</sup>

It is for this reason that Christianity seems to have gone down the drain for the protagonists in Percy's novels. Yet Percy, a Catholic novelist, does not view religion as dead; thus his protagonists attain or become cognizant of Kierkegaard's religious stage, for "the religious consists precisely in being religiously concerned about oneself infinitely."<sup>13</sup> Concern for oneself infinitely unites the individual, reunifies the fragmented self so that "man is a synthesis of soul and body sustained by spirit."<sup>14</sup> Percy

<sup>11</sup>Percy, Love in the Ruins, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup>Percy, "Notes," p. 8.

<sup>13</sup>Kierkegaard, Stages on Life's Way, p. 438.

<sup>14</sup>Kierkegaard, Concept of Dread, p. 79.

elaborates on this stage, altering it to meet what he deems as the specific needs of the twentieth-century man, for he believes "the world is much more fragmented, people don't understand themselves as well or what they are doing as well."<sup>15</sup> Each of his protagonists achieves an intersubjective relationship with another human being; intersubjectivity, defined by Percy, is "that meeting of minds by which two selves take each others' meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common."<sup>16</sup> Beyond this, however, two of his central characters, Binx and Thomas More, achieve a faith that will endure through time. This movement, Kierkegaard says, "I make by myself, and what I gain is myself in my eternal consciousness, in blissful agreement with my love for the Eternal Being. By faith I make renunciation of nothing, on the contrary, by faith I acquire everything, precisely in the sense in which it is said that he who has faith like a grain of mustard can remove mountains. A purely human courage is required to renounce the whole of the temporal to gain the eternal. . . ."<sup>17</sup> The faith that Binx and More as well as Sutter achieve is the belief that God exists in Time and that God is eternal.

<sup>15</sup>Creemeens Interview, p. 280.

<sup>16</sup>Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness and Intersubjectivity," p. 631.

<sup>17</sup>Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 59.



Few individuals attain the faith to make this movement, for man is a wayfarer, a castaway, a stranger, "For with the knowledge he achieves, all his art and philosophy, all the island news he pays attention to, something is missing."<sup>18</sup> And it is this something that the castaway, contemporary man, should search for. But this does not mean that he "throws over science, throws over art, pays no attention to island news, forgets to eat and sleep and love . . . it means that one searches nevertheless and that one lives in hope that such a message will come, and that one knows that the message will . . . [be] news from across the seas."<sup>19</sup> Percy here means that one should live in faith, that the message he hopes will arrive "is an embrace of the Absolute Paradox . . . a setting aside of reason, a credo qua absurdum est."<sup>20</sup> But only the man who knows he is a castaway, who recognizes that something is missing, is capable of hearing, receiving, and understanding this message. Of Percy's protagonists only Binx in The Moviegoer and Dr. More

<sup>18</sup>Percy, "Message," p. 427.

<sup>19</sup>This third category of Percy's directly parallels Kierkegaard's perception of men of faith: "They call themselves believers and mean by that that they are pilgrims, strangers and aliens in the world--moreover, a pilgrim is not so certainly recognized by his staff as the fact that he calls himself a believer in general bears witness to the fact that he is on a journey, for faith means just that; that what I seek is not here, which is precisely the reason I believe it. Faith signifies precisely the deep, strong, blessed unrest which urges on the believer, so that he cannot find rest in this world."

<sup>20</sup>Percy, "Message," p. 429.

in Love in the Ruins wait for news; however, Sutter rather than Darrott in The Last Gentleman understands the "news from across the sea." Percy sees contemporary man as dwelling in three categories and these categories are akin to Kierkegaard's stages. The first category is the man who is unaware that he is a castaway. Emily and Jules Cutrer, Kittie and Rita Vaught, Moira and Lola, and Ted and Tanya are just a few examples from his novels. Next is the individual who knows he is a castaway, realizes his predicament, searches but does not realize that he must wait and live in hope for a message. Kate, Barrett and Ellen Oglethorpe exemplify this category. Percy's final category consists of the individual who knows he is a stranger, yet who waits and lives in hope that such a message will come, and will listen and understand the message. Percy portrays Binx, Sutter and More as such individuals. These categories which parallel Kierkegaard's three stages clarify Percy's view of contemporary man.

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ALTERNATIVES TO ALIENATION  
IN THE NOVELS OF  
WALKER PERCY

by  
Janet H. Hobbs

(ABSTRACT)

Each of Walker Percy's three novels and many of his philosophical essays explore the alternatives to alienation chosen by modern man. These alternatives reflect Soren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, and hence illustrate the influence Kierkegaard had on Percy's writings. The options chosen by the central characters in Percy's novels demonstrate their attempts to suppress alienation and avoid an everyday existence. Many of the options fail because they depend on momentary pleasure, fail to provide permanent solutions, or are rooted in the past and tradition. Consequently, each protagonist, along with several important secondary characters, seeks increasingly valid alternatives that will endure through time.

This thesis examines the various options selected by Percy's major characters, their reasons for such selections and eventual rejections, as well as the gradual discovery of valid alternatives to alienation. The invalid, semi-valid, and valid options parallel Kierkegaard's aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence and the precise



interrelationship is the subject of this thesis.