THE CRITICAL RESPONSE TO PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS
IN WALKER PERCY'S NOVELS

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Walker Percy differs from other American novelists in that he started writing fiction relatively late in life, after being trained as a physician and after considerable reading and writing in philosophy. Although critics have appreciated Percy's skills as a writer, they have seen Percy above all as a novelist of ideas, and, accordingly, the majority of critical articles and books about Percy has dealt with his themes, especially his philosophical themes, as well as with his philosophical sources.

This study explores, therefore, the critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's five novels to date, as evidenced first by reviews, then by the later articles and books. The critical response developed gradually as critics became aware of Percy's aims and pointed out his use of Christian existentialism and his attacks upon Cartesianism, Stoicism, and modern secular gnosticism. These critical evaluations of Percy's philosophical concerns have sometimes overshadowed interest in his more purely artistic concerns. However, the more a reader understands the underlying philosophical concepts that inform Percy's
novels, the more he may understand what Percy is trying to say and the more he may appreciate Percy's accomplishment in expressing his philosophical ideas so skillfully in fictional form.

Critics and readers may enjoy Percy's novels without knowing much about his philosophical ideas, but they cannot fully understand them. Thus this study concludes that the critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's novels has done both Percy and Percy's readers a service.
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Since World War II the South has continued to produce fiction writers who have gained a national and even international following, writers such as Flannery O'Connor, William Styron, Peter Taylor, Eudora Welty, and Walker Percy, to name but a few. Percy differs from the others in that he started writing fiction relatively late in life, after being trained as a physician and after considerable reading and writing in philosophy (predominantly in the philosophy of language, in existentialism, and in phenomenology).

Percy was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916, into a prominent family with connections in various social, political, and cultural circles. Left an orphan after his father committed suicide in 1929 and his mother was killed in an automobile accident in 1931, Percy was adopted, along with his two younger brothers, by his father's bachelor cousin William Alexander Percy of Greenville, Mississippi. The years spent at his adoptive father's home were obviously important ones for Percy. William Alexander Percy was not only a prominent citizen but also a lawyer, plantation owner, and poet, with a large circle
of friends such as William Faulkner, Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes, and David Cohn. He attempted to inculcate in his adopted sons his own Stoic values of honor and decency, truth and compassion. Percy left Greenville to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating with a degree in chemistry. He then went on to Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he received his M.D. degree in 1941. The following year he began an internship at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, and as a result of performing autopsies he contracted tuberculosis, which brought his medical career to a halt. He went to Lake Saranac in the Adirondacks for two years to recuperate.

Released in 1944, he returned to New York City to teach pathology at Columbia, but soon suffered a mild relapse and was sent to Gaylord Farms Sanatorium in Connecticut for another convalescent stay. During these years of forced sedentary isolation, Percy turned to reading and, perhaps because in part of the serious nature of his illness, to an earlier interest in literature he added a new interest in philosophy. Under the influence of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel, Sartre, Camus, and others, Percy began to question seriously the limits of scientific knowledge and the scientific explanation of reality.

After his release from Gaylord Farms, he went back to Mississippi and then on to Santa Fe, New Mexico, with his good
friend Shelby Foote (who was to become a noted Civil War historian and novelist). Percy returned to Mississippi and in 1946 married Mary Bernice Townsend, whom he had met in a Greenville clinic, then moved to Sewanee, Tennessee. By this time, he had decided not to continue his medical career but rather to pursue his interests in philosophy and literature. While in the Episcopalian stronghold of Sewanee, the couple converted to Roman Catholicism and then moved to New Orleans. Perhaps because New Orleans had such an overwhelming identity as a place, after several years the Percys moved across Lake Ponchartrain to Covington, Louisiana, where they have lived ever since.

Meanwhile Percy continued reading and writing articles and novels. With the discovery that his second daughter was deaf, Percy became even more interested in the phenomenon of language. Gradually, his articles began to appear in various journals: "Symbol as Need" in Thought in 1954, "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism" in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research in 1956, and "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes" in The Partisan Review, also in 1956, were among the first. He was less successful with his novels. Neither one of his first two attempts found a publisher, and it was not until 1961 that his third novel--after several rewrites--appeared in print.
This third novel, which became *The Moviegoer*, brought him success. To date he has published five novels, approximately fifty essays, and a philosophical parody of a self-help book. In response to these works, newspapers, magazines, and journals have published nearly four hundred reviews; graduate students have written approximately sixteen master's theses and approximately forty doctoral dissertations; and critics have written some one hundred fifty essays. In addition, seven books have focused on Walker Percy alone, and at least three others have dealt with his work in connection with the work of one or two other writers. Jerome Klinkowitz has even given Percy (along with Flannery O'Connor) a sub-section in recent issues of *American Literary Scholarship*.

Despite all this activity, however, critics as a whole have not known precisely what to make of Percy. Although they agree generally that he is one of our most gifted writers, their responses to his individual novels are striking in their diversity. Nevertheless, certain patterns do exist in the corpus of critical articles and books on Percy's fiction.

From the beginning, critics have appreciated Percy's skills as a writer. They have praised his intelligence, his ability to depict nature, his fine eye for detail, his ear for dialect and dialogue, his skill in handling
irony and understatement, and his gifts as a humorist. Recognized as a very funny novelist (when he wants to be) and as one of our most perceptive satirists and observers of the American scene, he is also acknowledged as being a highly talented rhetorician, whose narrative strategies are complex and sophisticated. But above all, critics have seen Percy as a novelist of ideas, and, accordingly, the majority of critical articles and books has dealt with his themes, especially his philosophical themes, as well as with his philosophical sources.

This study explores, therefore, the critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's fiction. This study shows how this response developed (it took awhile for critics to begin to understand just what Percy was up to), what it consisted of (one can discern various stages in this response), and what effect it had on the overall critical response to Percy's fiction and, consequently, Percy's reputation as a writer. This growing focus on philosophical ideas in Percy's novels has had mixed effects. To the good, it has established Percy as one of our most intellectual novelists and certainly helped the serious reader understand better what Percy is saying. Less fortunately, it has tended to overshadow Percy's artistic skills as a novelist and, in some instances, to reduce the novels to mere conceptual dialogues.
In discussing these critical responses to philosophical ideas in Percy's novels, I follow a simple format. In Chapters II through VI, I detail the response (or lack of it) to philosophical ideas in each novel as evidenced first by the reviews, then by later articles and books. Chapter VII, a concluding chapter, not only summarizes the overall pattern of the critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's fiction but also evaluates this response in view of my own reaction to Percy's novels and discusses the general effect this emphasis has had on Percy's reputation as a contemporary novelist.

Obviously, I am using the term "philosophical" in a broad sense. By philosophical ideas, I mean ideas that are extremely general in scope and implication—ideas about the nature of man, the nature of his existence, the nature of his relationship to God, the nature of his communication with others, his means of gaining knowledge, the nature of the world in which he finds himself. Because Percy is so well-read, many of his philosophical ideas can be and have been traced to earlier philosophers, such as Plato, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Heidegger, Charles Sanders Peirce, Eric Voegelin, and Arnold Toynbee. (This list is by no means complete.) What I do not include in this study, except tangentially, are ideas that relate predominantly to social or cultural conditions in America or the so-called New
South, ideas that are more narrowly psychological, such as those pertaining to the treatment of personality disorders and complexes, and ideas that stem from a more literary than philosophical influence. Although there is a fine line between philosophy and psychology, as between philosophy and theology, or between philosophy and linguistics, and there are areas where overlapping occurs, not all psychology, theology, or linguistics is philosophical. Certainly applied psychology is much too narrowly focused to be described as philosophical. Similarly, details of dogma or ritual or interpretation of Biblical verses may be considered theological, but again these are too particular to be considered philosophical per se. Moreover, analyses of noun phrases, transitional words, and such obviously belong to linguistics but not to philosophy.

In preparation for this study, I have read, to my knowledge, all of the reviews of Percy's novels, except for a few reviews in local newspapers and routine trade announcements, all of the books on Percy, and almost all of the articles on his fiction up to May, 1985. In addition, I have read Percy's essays collected in The Message in the Bottle, a sampling of his other essays on various subjects in various journals, his most recent book, Lost in the Cosmos, most of his published interviews (including those recently published in Conversations with Walker Percy).
and assorted works by others relating to Percy's family and nonfiction writings, such as William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, Lewis Baker's *The Percys of Mississippi*, and Jay Tolson's 1984 article in *The Wilson Quarterly* entitled "The Education of Walker Percy." My research was made infinitely easier by Joe Weixlmann's and Daniel H. Cann's thorough and accurate bibliography first published in the Spring 1980 special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* on Walker Percy and reprinted in *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics*.

Since one of my original purposes was to determine what correlation, if any, exists between the patterns of critical response to Percy's fiction and the various approaches to literary criticism, I have also read various recent works dealing with post-structuralist and post-modern criticism. My own critical bias is eclectic. Although drawn to studies involving the history of ideas, on the one hand, and studies of structure, on the other, I believe that in many cases a combination of critical approaches is most elucidating.

Since the nature of this study obviously requires value judgments about the merits of the various articles and books, I intend that all judgments here be relatively free from bias stemming from critical approach and be based rather on the critic's quality of insight, originality,
and exhaustiveness. I do not attempt to discuss every critical reference to philosophical ideas in Percy's fiction; instead I give an overview of the critical response to such ideas in each novel and then focus on those articles or books which seem most perceptive or important. Preferring to praise rather than condemn, I simply do not mention some reviews and articles that seem poorly done, mistaken, or superficial, especially minor ones. This is not to say that all stated evaluations are positive—I trust that the reader will find a certain amount of contention in the pages that follow. But, in the interests of economy, the focus is primarily on what I see as valid contributions to the understanding of philosophical ideas in Percy's fiction.
CHAPTER II
THE MOVIEGOER

Walker Percy's entry into fiction in 1961 was inauspicious. When he was finally able to get The Moviegoer published by the major publisher Alfred A. Knopf, it was released almost reluctantly with little fanfare and almost no promotion. As a result, it sold poorly and attracted little attention. In fact, it received only about twenty reviews within a year of its publication (including routine trade announcements).

But critics could not continue to ignore it when in March of 1962, by one of those unexpected chains of circumstances, The Moviegoer won the National Book Award for fiction. A. J. Liebling, the husband of Jean Stafford, one of the three fiction judges, had read the novel because it was set in his beloved New Orleans. He had then given it to his wife to read, she had been taken with it, and she had obviously urged the other judges to read it.

Yet even after it won this prestigious prize, The Moviegoer was not praised wholeheartedly by everyone. Knopf's continued lack of enthusiasm was such that a month after the Awards ceremony, Douglas M. Davis in his April 1962 National Observer review stated that "It is widely..."
rumored . . . that . . . Alfred Knopf remains 'baffled and irritated' by The Moviegoer, despite the signal honor paid it" (8, p. 21). Although a few more reviews did appear, many critics, as Davis pointed out, held off "committing themselves" (p. 21).

Of the seventeen or so major reviews written within two years of The Moviegoer's publication, ten are favorable, one is unfavorable, and six are mixed. Interestingly enough in view of the subsequent critical response to the novel, reviewers especially single out for praise Percy's style and characterization, not his themes. Typically, these reviewers refer to Percy's understatement and his technical skill or brilliance as a writer. Most of these reviewers are also drawn to Binx, whom Robert Massie calls Percy's "bewildered but amiable hero" (31, p. 30). Several of the favorable reviewers also emphasize Percy's treatment of setting. Although some also mention in passing what they believe to be his theme--usually by making some reference to despair or the malaise--only two critics are especially enthusiastic about theme per se. Harold C. Gardiner obviously approves of the "unshouted statement running throughout the novel that to be a man, to be human, means to face responsibility" (12, p. 448). Brainard Cheney, even more laudatory, goes so far as to state that Percy has not only succeeded in portraying the action of
grace on Kate and Binx; he has "restored for us here the image of God that was fragmented by the humanists--his representation gives us again a sense of God's mysterious and unformulable way with men" (6, p. 700).

On the other hand, W. J. Igoe calls the theme (which he sees as Binx's remoteness from reality and finding reality in the movies) "taxing" and suggests that "perhaps only in a novelette--the length chosen by Camus--could it have been successfully unified" (16, p. 514). Stanley Edgar Hyman criticizes "occasional pretentious attempts to make Jack's search seem not neurotic but deeply spiritual, along the lines of Percy's unfortunate statement on receiving the National Book Award that his novel shows Judeo-Christian man as 'a wayfarer and a pilgrim'" (15, p. 24), while Mark Saxton obviously thinks that the theme of the "unreality of American life" lacks originality and is saved only by Percy's style and "ironic insights" (36, p. 6).

Similarly, Robert Taubman states that Binx's malaise "isn't deeply disturbing or even quite clearly conveyed" (39, p. 527), and the anonymous author of "The Sustaining Stream" in the 1 February 1963 issue of Time sees the novel's major shortcoming as Percy's failure to give the significance of the characters' "demonstration of emptiness" (38, p. 84). Finally, another anonymous reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement deplores Percy's passing treatment of moviegoing:
"It is a pity the theme implicit in the title is not more seriously pursued" (37, p. 221).

Judging by the later criticism of the novel--hindsight is a wonderful thing--these reviewers would appear to be off the mark. Igoe stands alone in his judgment, while Hyman's comments turn out to be "unfortunate" for the reputation of his critical acumen--although a few subsequent critics would agree with him, as they would with Saxton. Taubman and the anonymous author of "The Sustaining Stream" do not appreciate the deliberate indirection and ambiguity intricately wound up with Percy's theme, which most subsequent critics praise, and the reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement would find that others do indeed believe that Percy has "seriously pursued" the theme of moviegoing.

Thus, in the light of the subsequent critical response to the novel and to Percy, most of the reviews of The Moviegoer appear superficial, if not mistaken. Despite the generally favorable tone of the reviews, most reviewers do not appear to appreciate fully what Percy is trying to do, especially in regard to theme, and more especially in regard to theme on a philosophical level. Of course, given the purpose of reviews and the space and time restrictions placed upon reviewers, it is too much to expect that reviewers discuss in detail the underlying themes (or the development of character or the complexities of style, for
that matter) of any given novel. But, generally speaking, the initial reviews of *The Moviegoer* do miss a great deal of what the novel is about by their failure to appreciate the ideas, especially the philosophical ideas, that inform the novel. Igoe (16), for example, states that Binx finds reality in the movies, but he fails to explain in what way, or to show the deeper implications of Binx's moviegoing, or of his giving moviegoing up when he begins to face reality (this latter development is not even mentioned). Certainly Taubman's statement that Binx's malaise resembles "the one Sartre described in *La Nausée*" (39, p. 527) indicates an awareness of Percy's existential concerns, but he does not pursue these at all. Hyman (15), in a generally favorable review that shows perception in many areas, seems imprisoned in a psychological worldview. In addition to his comments cited above, his mention of search, repetition, and rotation, coupled with his evaluation of these as mere features of "a sizable mystique" erected upon neurosis and the absence of any reference by him to Kierkegaard, might be interpreted as a refusal on Hyman's part to see existential or Christian overtones, an adamant preference to see the search, repetition, and rotation in terms of neurosis only. The reviewer in "Self-Sacrifice" (37) misses the philosophical point of the novel's ending entirely when he calls Binx's statement "As for reality, I
have not the inclination to say much on the subject" no more than "a too logical conclusion." Later it will be commonly seen as a reflection—a major reflection—of Percy's desire not to preach and his use of Kierkegaardian indirection, which certainly forms part of his idea of reality and the idea that communication from the religious plane to lower planes is not possible. In short, for a thorough depiction of the important themes in the novel, especially the religious and philosophical themes, one has to look at later critical writings, not at the initial reviews.

These later critical writings (by this term I mean articles and books, and these did not begin to appear until the mid-sixties) rectify the superficiality of the reviews almost with a vengeance, one might say. Not only have many critics centered their attention on the various philosophical themes in The Moviegoer; they have collectively pored over Percy's nonfictional writings—interviews and essays on everything from Stoicism in the South to triadic symbolization in semiotics—and returned to Percy's acknowledged intellectual sources in order to explicate every philosophical or theological idea in the novel. Of the fifty-plus articles and books that deal with The Moviegoer after 1963, no fewer than forty-five stress theme and, of these, thirty-five stress philosophical theme.
The first discernible development in this growing emphasis on *The Moviegoer's* themes entails the recognition of the novel's existentialist bent. In fact, at least twenty-seven of the books and articles that deal with *The Moviegoer* involve some discussion of existentialism. From the mid-sixties on, more and more critics pinpoint the various concepts and tenets of existentialism found in the novel until it quickly becomes an accepted commonplace to call *The Moviegoer* an American existentialist novel. One of the first commentators to address the novel's existential themes was Robert Maxwell (32), who in 1967 briefly detailed Percy's borrowings from Kierkegaard while praising Percy as a Renaissance man, capable of working in various fields. Unfortunately, although he mentions Percy's use of Kierkegaard's three planes (or spheres) of existence and the refuges of rotation and repetition, his remarks are brief and his understanding of rotation and repetition appears confused. Michel T. Blouin (2), also in 1967, mentions Percy's borrowings from Gabriel Marcel, but again does not go into detail. In 1968, Jerome Thale (41) discusses the peculiarly American version of existential alienation that Percy presents in this novel. According to Thale, Percy shows that "the great pall of despair that covers American life" (41, p. 37) consists of a rather pleasant shallowness which comes in many forms. These forms are
quickly detected by Percy's sensitive hero-narrator Binx, who is saved from such shallowness by his recognition of the shortcomings of any search for meaning through abstraction, as well as by his recognition that, while he is enjoying making money, going to the movies, and seducing his secretaries, he, too, is in despair. He realizes that he must look for meaning in experience, in the concrete world around him. Indeed, Thale sees the common seed of despair in *The Moviegoer* in people's failures to relate to the concrete and lays the blame for these failures upon humanism. In another 1968 article Anselm Atkins (1) adds to Thale's discussion of despair an elaboration of Binx's search in which he points out how much this search owes to Kierkegaard's concepts of despair, rotation, and repetition, Heidegger's concept of everydayness, and Gabriel Marcel's *homo viator*. Richard Lehan also underscores Percy's use of existential themes and calls *The Moviegoer* "a brilliant analysis of alienation" (27, p. 312). Although he keeps relating Binx's search to the romantic journey, he also sees the ending of the novel, when Binx sends Kate on an errand, as a moment of communion through consciousness, "that overlapping of consciousness which Percy has described in much different terms in his learned philosophical essays" (p. 315).
The most interesting early attempt to discuss Percy's use of Kierkegaard in *The Moviegoer* appears in Lewis A. Lawson's "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" (24), in which Lawson discusses not only Binx's search and his attempt to overcome everydayness, but also Percy's use of Kierkegaard's three stages of life and Kierkegaard's indirect method "to attack illusions of those who think themselves Christians" (24, p. 870). Lawson believes that "the reader's appreciation of the artistry of the novel must rest upon an understanding of Dr. Percy's success in filtering through Binx's consciousness a considerable amount of existentialist (usually Kierkegaardian) statement" (p. 874), an assertion I would certainly support.

The growing public awareness of Percy's existential themes reached a peak of sorts with the publication in 1972 of the first book-length study of Walker Percy and his work, *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise* by Martin Luschei (30). In this work Luschei offers not only a detailed analysis of Percy's first three novels from an existentialist point of view, but also explains the various concepts that Percy uses and compares and contrasts Percy's definitions of these concepts with those of his major existentialist mentors: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Marcel. First, Luschei points out that Binx's malaise, everydayness, is a term that Percy borrowed
from Heidegger (Alltäglichkeit); then Luschei elucidates Binx's description of his malaise by reference to the specific writings of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Marcel that influenced the development of Percy's own thought. Binx also falls into inauthenticity, and here Luschei underscores the difference between Percy's definition of inauthenticity, which entails a surrender of personal sovereignty (30, p. 25), and the definitions of his mentors, especially Kierkegaard. Luschei next shows that to escape everydayness, Binx uses three of Kierkegaard's avenues of egress— ordeal, rotation, and repetition: ordeal, for example, when he was wounded in Korea; rotation, when he goes off to Chicago with Kate or to the Gulf Coast with Sharon; repetition, when he sees a film that he has seen before. After elaborating upon the implications of ordeal and rotation both in The Moviegoer and in Kierkegaard's writings, Luschei distinguishes Percy's and Binx's understanding of the term repetition from that of Kierkegaard, for Percy really modifies the existentialist's concept for his own ends. Nevertheless, as Binx finds out, ordeal, rotation, and repetition have their limitations; to really escape everydayness and attain authenticity, he must attain what Marcel calls intersubjectivity, a state of shared consciousness with another, which Binx approaches when he stops treating Kate as an object and sees her as a person to share his life
with. Finally, Luschei shows that the search which Binx makes such frequent reference to stems from Kierkegaard's concept of the infinite passion: "to find the ideas for which I can live and die" (30, p. 57, quoting Kierkegaard), and involves Marcel's abhorrence of abstraction (abstraction which entails contempt for the concrete and results in the objectification of the individual), as well as Kierkegaard's three stages of life—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—and Kierkegaard's concept of the knight of faith. As Luschei explains, Binx's first search, the vertical search, is really an ascent into abstraction, and once Binx finds himself "left over," he shifts to a horizontal search which focuses on concrete existence. When we meet Binx, he lives in the aesthetic stage; when he decides to marry Kate after his confrontation with his aunt, "we can watch him becoming a knight of faith" (p. 106). Luschei agrees with Percy that Binx leaps from the aesthetic straight across the ethical to the religious; indeed, it is his omission of the ethical that puzzles his aunt and makes it impossible for her to understand him.*

*Some controversy exists as to whether Binx succeeds in making the leap to the religious stage. Lawson, for one, states in (24) that he makes it only to the ethical. Coles (7) agrees. Obviously the ending is open and ambiguous. See also Zeugner's comments on page 22 of this chapter.
speak any more of his search can be elucidated, according to Luschei, by reference to Kierkegaard's statements in Fear and Trembling about the inability of such a message to "pass through the barrier separating the religious realm from the ethical" (30, p. 108).

Luschei's explication of The Moviegoer in terms of existential thought is thorough and perceptive. Sad to say, many subsequent treatments of the subject merely go over ground already covered by Luschei, but without Luschei's depth.

Nevertheless, several subsequent articles do add to our understanding of the existentialist implications and underpinnings of The Moviegoer. An annotated interview with Walker Percy by Bradley R. Dewey (9) in The Journal of Religion in 1974 persuades us that Percy has a firm grasp of Kierkegaard's complexities and that Kierkegaard has indeed deeply influenced Percy. Moreover, by interspersing his questions and Percy's answers with his own comments about Kierkegaard, the difficulties involved in grasping what Kierkegaard is trying to say, and his interpretations of Percy's first three novels, Dewey continues Luschei's efforts to educate Percy's readers regarding Percy's underlying philosophical concerns. Turning from Kierkegaard to Marcel and the latter's influence on Percy, John F. Zeugner (51) addresses in his 1974-75 article the
major concepts of Marcel reflected in Percy's works and in particular Percy's use of Marcel's concept of intersubjectivity. For Marcel and Percy, intersubjectivity offers a path to an experiential transcendence which leads to Being and ultimately to God, and in the process the man previously trapped in immanence, the castaway, becomes a wayfarer journeying out of alienation into authenticity.

Focusing more on Percy's first novels per se than Dewey, Zeugner gives a Marcelian interpretation of Binx's growth, and also addresses the ambiguity of this interpretation judged by the novel alone:

Clearly Binx Bolling, the protagonist of The Moviegoer, is the castaway who, as the epigraph from Kierkegaard suggests, does not recognize his own alienation. . . . The Moviegoer is the journal of Bolling's burgeoning awareness of his own existence, his turn toward authenticity through intersubjectivity with Kate and others, and finally his salvation so apparently linked with the call Binx's brothers and sisters issue to him at the very end of the book.

All of the above assertions about Bolling seem clear enough in the light of Percy's non-fiction, though they are not so clearly derivable from The Moviegoer alone. In fact, it is possible to feel that Binx's salvation at the end of the book, his commitment to Kate, his decision for medical school, is only a final, ironic twist--a collapse into the everydayness that Bolling has striven to avoid (51, pp. 31-32).

This last interpretation owes its plausibility to Percy's "deliberate undercutting" of any so-called message, which, Zeugner points out, is supported by Percy's choice of words, which offers the eclectic the "possibility that
Bolling himself would not have faith" (p. 32). Nevertheless, Zeugner asserts that "The Moviegoer seems to have been composed in joy—a muted celebration of Bolling's departure from despair" (p. 34).

Zeugner's comment that various interpretations of The Moviegoer can be made is quite important. How much is a reader expected to bring to the reading of a novel? Must he know Kierkegaard and Marcel, for example, in order to appreciate fully The Moviegoer? Must he see the Christian existentialist progress of Binx in order to avoid being called a fool, or can he validly come away from reading the novel with the interpretation that Binx has merely begun to accept responsibility? Percy has said himself in various interviews that he does not want to limit the possible interpretations of his novels.* He has also said, however, that Binx does leap from the Kierkegaardian aesthetic stage to the religious stage. Does the reader have to agree with the author regarding the meaning of the novel? There are many possible responses to these questions. Nevertheless, while I am grateful to Zeugner for pointing out the ambiguity of The Moviegoer's ending and raising the question of the relationship of Percy's nonfiction to

*Ellen Douglas, for example, quotes him at the end of her pamphlet on The Last Gentleman (10) as saying that "You could just as easily read TLG as a simple story of a young Southern man who goes North and comes home."
his fiction (a question I will have more to say about later), I agree with him that the book is affirmative, that Binx does attain some sort of intersubjectivity, and that he seems to reach salvation as well.

Janet Hobbs offers another interesting discussion of Percy's use of Kierkegaard's philosophy in *The Moviegoer* in her 1979 article "Binx Bolling and the Stages of Life's Way" (14). She, too, sees the novel as "the protagonist's struggle to rise above the aesthetic to the ethical and to pass through the ethical to the religious mode of existence" (14, p. 37), and, having thus focused her treatment of the novel on these stages, she proceeds to show how Binx passes from one to the other. Obviously conversant with Kierkegaard's writings, as well as with what other critics have said regarding existentialism in the novel, she provides an intelligent analysis of Binx's progress and of Percy's use of this Kierkegaardian frame.

Gradually, as critics have underscored in *The Moviegoer* existentialist themes such as Kierkegaard's stages in life and Marcel's intersubjectivity, many of them have also begun to see the Christian nature of Percy's existentialism in the novel. If Luschei glosses over the Christian aspects of Kierkegaard's and Marcel's existentialism that Percy uses in *The Moviegoer*, Zeugner, as we have seen, does not dodge the Christian implications, although he admits
such implications are ambiguous. By the late seventies, various critics affirm emphatically that *The Moviegoer* is an excellent affirmation of **Christian** existentialism. Susan Kissel (19), for example, argues in a 1977 article that we should accept all of Percy's first three novels as expressions of "Percy's Catholic existential faith," and Tracy Kenyon Lischer (28) in her 1978 article points out that the Christian content of Kierkegaard's philosophy reflected in *The Moviegoer* has not been as fully treated as it should have been: "Attracted by this comedy [of the universe], and by Percy's narrative appeal, entertaining dialogue, likeable heroes, and the vast intellectual contexts of his novels including existentialism, critics have largely ignored the ends for the means" (28, p. 10). She goes on to give a Kierkegaardian reading of *The Moviegoer*, focusing on Binx's search and emphasizing its religious significance as a Search for the Way. And Jac Tharpe in his 1983 book on Percy for the Twayne series (43) states that "The most important misapprehension of *The Moviegoer* was the failure to see that the novel was by a Roman Catholic novelist writing about immorality" (43, Preface). Admitting that "some of the best discussion of Percy's work" has come from considering him as an existentialist and phenomenologist, Tharpe nevertheless believes that "whatever Percy's hopes in dramatizing ordeal, he really
presents in Binx a staged search and staged conversion" (Preface).

In marked constrast to the various studies that emphasize the presence of existentialist themes and motifs in Percy's novels, especially in *The Moviegoer*, an occasional critic disputes the significance of such a presence. Robert Maxwell (32), for example, makes the puzzling statement that Percy's fondness for Kierkegaard is not really helpful except "insofar as one of Kierkegaard's central lessons--an insistance that the unawareness of despair and the inauthentic attempts to deny it is the very shift of our alienation--characterizes a certain mood of the novels in question, and as Kierkegaard's irony and dialectic prove compulsive" (32, p. 233). Defending the novel's Americanness, David L. Vanderwerken (45) takes exception to the judgment that *The Moviegoer* is only "an intimation rather than a statement" (45, p. 41)--a judgment that reflects various critics' linking of the novel's tone to Kierkegaard's indirect method. He shows that Binx's "clear and ringing assessment of our culture as a dungheap near the end of the novel" (p. 41), as well as *The Moviegoer*'s "scrutiny of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the somnolent Eisenhower Fifties" (p. 41), is as judgmental as what other characters say in novels by more strident American authors such as Twain and Dos Passos.
Furthermore, Binx is a typical American hero insofar as he represents Emersonian individualism and engages in a "solitary and undefined quest." Throughout the novel, Percy, like most recent American novelists, analyzes the loss of thought in the nation, the growth of conformity, and "modern man's abysmal passionlessness" (45, p. 47). In short, regardless of what European philosophical influences emerge in The Moviegoer, the novel is typically American in that it presents a "sweeping moral judgment" of contemporary society, regardless of its European-influenced understatement and indirection.

Closely related to the appreciation of existentialist themes in The Moviegoer are the various articles concerning Percy's use of his theory of symbolization in the novel. In 1968 Sarah Henisey (13) looks at alienation in the novel and emphasizes the role that communication plays in such displacement. She reviews Percy's theory of symbolization as he presents it in several of his philosophical articles,* and then applies this theory to the novel.

Thus, Kate's early failures in communication and her consequent alienation stem from the fact that "her father's simplicity gave her no symbols and therefore no way to understand the complex world around her" (13, p. 210), while her stepmother's criticism made her distrust her sincerity so that she could not accept her stepmother's symbolization as authoritative. Accordingly, Kate gets lost in objective symbolization, in which "the names one uses soon overwhelm the meanings" (p. 209), an objective symbolization which results in alienation. Binx, unable to find meaning in his aunt's abstractions, and also locked in objective symbolization, nevertheless is more aware of his problem and embarks on what he calls a search. He succeeds in overcoming his alienation and in helping Kate overcome hers because he learns to use symbolization subjectively--he and Kate discover "how much they are alike through communication, through a symbolization which achieves intersubjectivity" (p. 214).

In his 1970 article entitled "Versions of Percy" Jim Van Cleave (44) elaborates on this intersubjectivity and the role of consciousness in the novel. He argues that Binx escapes from impersonation (and inauthenticity) via his consciousness, which he shares not only with Kate but with the posited reader:

What Binx does, and his presentation reflects this, is to make even the role Aunt Emily urges him to
play authentic by being conscious now that it is a role, and, most important, by being conscious with the posited reader that it is a role. Intersubjectivity is possible with a real or a posited other person; philosophically, Binx's act of narration to a posited reader (with whom he even occasionally engages in conversation) is an affirmation of being through shared consciousness--his (and Walker Percy's) and the reader's. The whole book is an act of shared consciousness (44, p. 996).

Van Cleave then supports his thesis by showing how Binx's consciousness is evident "not just in specific comments he makes . . . but also in the manner of his description of the whole scene" (p. 996). Unfortunately, the emergence of consciousness is "almost accidental" and is prone to lapse back into everydayness. There is, moreover, the danger that "the specific recognition it does come to can easily become labels" (p. 1000). Thus, we share Binx's week of awakened consciousness and his one day of awakened consciousness about a year later, but, as Van Cleave concludes, the intervening year "only exists in Binx's consciousness in the way that his years in Gentilly before this awakening into consciousness do" (p. 1010), and thus "there is no indication that his awakened consciousness continued during that year, or that it will continue after the day of the 'Epilogue'" (p. 1010).

Philosophies of existentialism and theories of consciousness obviously involve theories of time, and thus the problem of time enters into various critics' discussions of, for example, Binx's rotations and repetitions.
Two critics, however, treat the problem of time per se in *The Moviegoer* at length. Simone Vauthier, a French specialist in American literature who has done excellent and perceptive work on Percy, first emphasizes in her 1971 article "Le Temps et la mort dans *The Moviegoer*" (47) the importance of time to Binx. She stresses the fact that Binx has chosen to live in a fragmented time, a succession of instants, which is always being reborn. Binx tries to efface duration because he believes that the passing of time is linked to destruction and death. Duration haunts him, however, and in order to live meaningfully, he must come to terms with it, which, as the Epilogue shows, he does, at least temporarily. In 1982 Lewis A. Lawson, in a more traditional, though certainly as learned attempt at philosophical explanation of time entitled "Time and Eternity in *The Moviegoer*" (23), agrees that how to deal with time is Binx's major problem, but he undertakes an examination of the causes of this problem. Binx, according to Lawson, tells time according to "two different timepieces, which are not merely set at different points but travel at different speeds" (23, p. 129). The first of these timepieces measures "the time of time-and-place, of the concrete here and now" (p. 129)--the time of the stockbroker. The second measures "the time of time-and-space, of the universal and eternal; time freezes into
timelessness" (p. 129)—the time of the moviegoer. Moreover, while Binx usually lives in "controlled" time (in his attempts to escape the present via controlled rotations and repetitions), he sometimes experiences "uncontrolled" time (in unbidden thoughts of "an enormous, absolutely unknown and unknowable future" and in unexpected returns of the past, a past which comes "like a bill-collector" [p. 130]). Lawson elaborates on Binx's various understandings of time in philosophical terms, showing how he passes from one understanding to another. As a moviegoer he becomes engulfed in Platonic time. Reminding the reader that Binx has read The Republic, and alluding to Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the account of the creation of the world in the Timaeus, Lawson argues that the theater becomes, for Binx, the world of the Sensibles, while the Reality glimpsed in the theater is the world of the Intelligibles:

The Actors are the Forms. The movie film, which places the Forms in specific, limited contexts, i.e., plot, is "the moving image of eternity." Thus when Binx watches a movie, he is in fact revealing his preoccupation with time, his continual awareness that the film illustrates the sheer demarcation between the immanent and the transcendent (23, p. 135).

However, his moviegoing, like his vertical search—which also involves an exploration of reality and time in Platonist guises (for objective empirical science is but another form of Platonism)—fails, and Binx gradually becomes aware of the particular again as well as of the Ideal.
This awareness that time is not eternal, that time is not the "moving image of Eternity" as Plato would have it be, forces Binx to face the existence of duration, "a Bergsonian duration that is immeasurably richer than structured time" (23, p. 138). Like Vauthier, Lawson emphasizes Binx's difficulty in accepting duration, but Lawson argues that Binx succeeds in the end by taking as his model Saint Augustine, who shows how the City of Man and the Realm of the Sensible are joined in the Incarnation to the City of God and the Realm of the Intelligible. Following Augustine's belief that time is "an individual experience which occurs within the soul" (23, p. 140), Binx is finally able to create his own sense of time that integrates his earlier understandings.

The emphasis on existentialism in The Moviegoer has also sparked the search for other philosophical themes. Jared Bradley in his 1973 article "Walker Percy and the Search for Wisdom" (3) states that Percy has been influenced not only by Kierkegaard and Marcel but also by Henri Bergson and Ortega y Gasset. In a more detailed, worthwhile but rather difficult study entitled "Walker Percy's The Moviegoer: The Cinema as Cave" (26) published in 1980, Lawson argues that Percy draws upon both Bergson and Arnold Toynbee. He sees Percy's use of moviegoing ("an extended simile for the exploration of visible
"reality" (26, p. 338) as a response to a famous footnote by Toynbee linking the Platonic simile of the Cave to the cinema. Furthermore, he argues that Percy's presentation of Binx's unsuccessful vertical search owes a good deal to Percy's rejection of the Platonic hierarchy of sciences espoused by Toynbee. Lawson also believes that Binx's comments about endurance offer "a strong argument that Percy is responding to Bergson's Creative Evolution for at least part of his attack upon Toynbee" (26, p. 347). Moreover, Lawson suggests parallels between Bergson's model of the thinking process, "the cinematographical mechanism of thought" (26, p. 349, citing Creative Evolution) and Binx's suspicion that "modern science is not different from, but dependent on Idealist thinking" (p. 350). In his easier-to-follow talk on the same topic delivered at the 1980 Modern Language Association national convention, later published in The South Carolina Review, Lawson also mentions that in the Epilogue Binx makes reference to the Confessions of Saint Augustine, and, after pointing out the resemblance between The Moviegoer and the Confessions insofar as they both reach from Plato to Christ, adds that Percy wanted to entitle the novel The Confessions of a Moviegoer.

As late as 1979, J. P. Telotte (40) remarked that, despite the publication in 1975 of The Message in the
Bottle, throughout which Percy refers to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, critics have not investigated Peirce's influence on Percy. While Peirce's main influence stems from his theory of language—he was the father of the modern discipline of semiotics and an early formulator of pragmatism—Telotte reveals how Peirce's ideas are often exemplified in Percy's novels. Peirce, for example, believed that human knowledge proceeds via abduction, which is to say that a man starts from certain observed facts or experiences, which he then "fleshes out, giving them life and meaning" (40, p. 221) by a process of questioning. To this belief Peirce added the pragmatic convictions that "we can never be absolutely sure of anything" and that "all knowledge is based on experience" (40, p. 222, citing Philosophical Writings). Both the questioning and the experiential uncertainty emerge in Percy's protagonists: "Lacking a sense of direction, unsure if anything can even be meaningful any more, his characters postulate numerous possibilities for life and then proceed to test these hypotheses in hopes of finding one which might restore a sense of purpose" (p. 222). In particular, in The Moviegoer, Binx constantly asks questions, while attempting to answer the major question posed by his Aunt Emily about what he is to do with his life, and the novel ends "with a further series of questions being
posed by his fiancée Kate" (p. 225). If Kate's questions tend to be rhetorical, Binx's questions are his way of gaining knowledge—a good example of abduction and accordingly another instance of Percy's use of philosophical ideas in the novel.

All this discussion of philosophical ideas and sources in *The Moviegoer* obviously reflects the critics' belief that this novel has philosophical significance. But not all have applauded this philosophical dissection of the novel. Ben Yagoda, for example, in a review of Robert Coles's *Walker Percy: An American Search*, suggests that "despite the extensive philosophical subtext of his fiction, perhaps the reader does best to confront it unencumbered by theory or explication" (50, p. R12). Reacting more specifically to the use of Percy's own philosophical articles in criticism of the novels, James Walter (48) laments that "commentators on Percy's fiction . . . particularly on *The Moviegoer*, have been slow to acknowledge the important separateness of his essays and novels, chiefly because the earlier work seems to provide a convenient handle for grasping the later fiction" (48, p. 574). Walter believes that this dependence on Percy's articles has caused "a neglect of the artistic integrity of his novels in efforts to read them primarily as illustrations of concepts more schematically presented in the essays" (p. 574).
Nevertheless, despite such a reaction on the part of a few critics such as Walter, the growing awareness of Percy's philosophical sources and of his own philosophical theories set forth in his articles has continued to influence critics' treatments of *The Moviegoer*, even as they discuss other themes that would not at first glance appear to be philosophical.

The first of such themes is that of moviegoing. If the anonymous review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (37) lamented Percy's failure to pursue the theme of moviegoing more "seriously," various commentators and critics have since perceived enough about moviegoing in the novel to speak of its role there. While several have addressed only one facet or possible implication of moviegoing,* at least two have focused on moviegoing as a major theme in the novel. Lawson, in his 1980 article entitled "Moviegoing in *The Moviegoer*" (22), takes various references to movies, actors, and actresses, and relying primarily on Percy's nonfiction articles and on his own knowledge of Percy's intellectual and philosophical influences, especially Sartre and Heidegger, astutely discloses the philosophical implications of many of these references. For example, the movie that Binx sees immediately after he completes his

*See Scott Byrd (5), Mary Thale (42), Anselm Atkins (1), Martin Luschei (29), and Jack Tharpe (43, pp. 51-56).
vertical search, *It Happened One Night*, carries a double significance: "The 'it' of the 'I/It' dichotomy, the overwhelming *en-soi*, did happen that night, when Binx concluded that the material world was all and that he was nothing" (22, p. 29). Secondly, Percy has used this very movie in his essay "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes" to illustrate rotation or zone-crossing--the kind of wandering that Binx will now embark upon, in which "he will apprehend his world as he views a movie" (p. 30). Thus moviegoing in the novel "characterizes the alienated man's fascinated gaze at a distant reality, stresses the sense of apartness that he feels" (p. 31). As he goes about "certifying" people and places, Binx is quite aware of moviegoing as "a symbolic action that illustrates his relationship to the objective-empirical world" (p. 31). But even more important, Binx uses the movies to help himself escape everydayness via rotation; more specifically, he seeks in movies "patterns of rotational behavior that he might emulate" (p. 31), most usually patterns that involve sexual novelty. Binx also likes Western movies, such as *Fort Dobbs*, because the Western hero represents "the locus of pure possibility" (p. 32) and gives him a mirrored image of himself, a presentation of his own life "as a stylized performance," in short, a role to assume. Lawson also points out how Binx uses films to achieve what he
calls repetition, but that Binx's repetitions thus achieved are merely aesthetic, not existential (p. 37). Only when Binx is able to give up his role as a "locus of pure possibility" and to chance a genuine repetition by going to medical school and thereby assuming a life that drove his father to despair does he make any real progress; and once he does, he neither mentions any movies nor impersonates any movie stars. Thus Lawson shows that moviegoing is inauthentic and that Binx must cease to be a moviegoer if he wishes to escape alienation and achieve authenticity.

Rather than viewing movies primarily as a source of "patterns of rotational behavior" for Binx, Pamela Freshney (11) sees them as "literary symbols to reveal language as a way of seeing" (11, p. 718). In her 1982 article on The Moviegoer and Lancelot, she points out how Binx uses the movies as metaphors for himself and others and that "Binx's narrative of movie images and ironic observations closely parallels the language studies in Percy's essays" (p. 721).

A second theme in The Moviegoer that certainly has philosophical implications is that of Stoicism. In his 1970 article "Versions of Percy" (44), Jim Van Cleave both points out the relationship between Percy's adoptive father William Alexander Percy, as the latter portrayed himself in Lanterns on the Levee, and Percy's
characterization of Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* and discusses Binx's response to Aunt Emily's idealistic inauthenticity. More thorough, Lawson, also in 1970, offers in his article "Walker Percy's Southern Stoic" (25) a sympathetic study of William Alexander Percy, who rejected the Stoical resignation of Seneca in favor of the more active and practical Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius and thus believed that man should gradually attempt to make the world better—all the while realizing how little he can accomplish. Lawson concludes that "offered with such obvious earnestness and eloquence as William Alexander Percy gave it, the Stoic attitude must have been vivid and enticing to his adoptive sons who would have had an intimate opportunity to observe the attitude embodied in the daily behavior of a good man" (25, pp. 12-13). Adding that one of Walker Percy's first public utterances was an analysis of Southern Stoicism, Lawson goes on to detail how Walker Percy has gently but firmly rejected his adoptive father's belief in favor of the Christian alternative. In *The Moviegoer* the obvious representative of William Alexander Percy's stoic attitude is Aunt Emily—indeed, Walker Percy borrows some of the former's own words in his portrait of her—and Binx's rejection of Emily's beliefs reflects Percy's rejection of his adoptive father's credo.
In a later article entitled "The Moviegoer and the Stoic Heritage" (21), Lawson gives a more detailed historical account of the southern inheritance of Stoicism, referring to Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee, before discussing William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, Walker Percy's "Stoicism in the South," and *The Moviegoer*. In addition to reemphasizing Aunt Emily's similarity to William Alexander, he points out that Binx, up until his experience in the Korean War, has apparently accepted his aunt's example. But "he discovers, through the intrusion of fear, that he is condemned to be an individual, not an idealized manikin in a gallant historical series" (21, p. 189). Thus Binx embarks on his search and eventually turns to the Christian tradition in his commitment to Kate. As in his earlier article, Lawson does not believe that Walker Percy rejects the Stoic heritage entirely: "The Moviegoer exists, then, because there was a force so impressive to inspire it; its dedication to 'W.A.P.' stands as testimony to the continuing vitality of stoicism in the South" (21, p. 191).

As various discussions of Binx's search and his gradual steps toward intersubjectivity and salvation, as well as essays underscoring Aunt Emily's Stoic beliefs, have already made clear, Percy's preoccupation with philosophy carries over into characterization in *The Moviegoer*. 
Lawson, in an earlier mentioned 1980 article (22), emphasizes the Marcelian and Sartrean nature of Binx's character. He sees Binx after his realization of the failure of his vertical search becoming what Marcel calls a spectator, a person who is curious about "the 'cinematographic representation' imposed on the universe by the scientific technique" (22, pp. 30-31), whose moviegoing represents symbolically his alienated relation to the world. Moreover, like Sartre's waiter whose excessive gestures reveal a contempt for his own role, Binx in his daylight behavior is engaged in "a pattern of bad faith" (p. 33). When the book opens, Lawson argues, "Binx wants to live, then, as a consumer of new products and sensory experiences, but never to chance an authentic emotion" (p. 33). True, the morning of the opening of the novel Binx experiences an awakening to concrete experience, "an apprehension of being-in-the-world," the "Sartrean 'upsurge' of reflection" (p. 35). But, according to Lawson, he continues to act in bad faith by continuing his daytime impersonations, even while he begins "a rather halfhearted search for a meaning for his life" (p. 36). Through Kate's acceptance of "him in his reduced humanity" after his failure at sex, and her caring for him, he comes to relinquish his roles, commit himself to another, to leave the movies "to chance acting himself" (p. 40).
Seeing Binx as a narrator who dabbles in philosophy rather than as an embodiment of existential philosophical concepts, James Walter (48) offers an interesting alternative to Lawson. He emphasizes the need to pay attention to what Binx actually says in order to understand the novel. He then analyzes Binx's character. Binx is "not the type to find satisfaction in an ordinary mode of living; the heroic spirit . . . continues to live deep in his psyche where it is the root of his repeated assertions that he is different from other people" (48, p. 576), and it is the "essential motive" (p. 576) for his search. Binx's "sharp, analytical mind" endows him well for this complicated search for "an integrated conception of life" and "a unity of being" (p. 576). Nevertheless, his abstracting habit also causes "numerous oversights as he interprets experience and people according to self-projected stereotypical images" (p. 577). Walter finds Binx's confidence in his initial assumptions "astounding" and revelatory of his willful blindness to anything mysterious. Binx plays various games to "maintain the illusion that he really is in the world" (p. 579). Walter convincingly details the gradual awakening in Binx of the need for a spiritual solution to his problems, his gradual realization of the failures of a life lived according to humanistic myth or a "secular myth of the mass man" (p. 575) who
is fulfilled by creature comforts, his recognition of the nature of his own despair, his final religious conversion.

Richard Pindell (34)—in 1975 one of the first critics to appreciate fully the role that language plays in Percy's novels—also sees Binx as divided. On the one hand, Binx embarks on a search and becomes "a man like Kierkegaard's knight of faith" (34, p. 219), but on the other hand, he seems to enjoy his alienation along the way. A nihilist, Binx "cannot remember in any clear, attractive, or compelling way what he has lost" (p. 220); rather he calls the loss the loss of his ability to be "in the world" and lives by virtue of verbal tricks, especially by the tricks involved in naming:

Words themselves are tricks played on reality. The inchoate, undifferentiated stuff of life is ordered by words into ideas or images which can be entertained or turned away, and, vis-à-vis the thing named, a namer moves from the relationship of a guest unsure of his ground to that of a host. To apply this here, the very act of naming the loss recovers a portion, however miniscule, of what was lost—"the world and you in it"—the universe. It is a type of what Percy calls the "esthetic reversal" (34, p. 221).

The very name that Binx gives to the loss, the "malaise," is "a recognition of loss that helps Binx to ignore it with astonishing zest" (p. 221). Understanding that the world he is in is "bottomed on the principle not of fulfillment but of performance" (p. 222), not of action, but of transaction, a world that "hangs together only by some
tacit mutual consent to accept each other's acting as action" (p. 222), Binx controls his "enjoyment of the old metaphysical and apocalyptic longings and hungers" (p. 223) in such a way that "incipient anguish or anxiety" is turned into a therapeutic "sadness" that allows him to be inspired but not crippled by anxiety. Pindell agrees with Mary Thale that Binx keeps his aesthetic distance primarily through irony, which often takes the form of mockery. Indeed, his mockery serves as a means both of assuming and disavowing the world. Yet Binx's ironic attitude makes "aesthetic distance possible" (p. 226). It provides Binx with "a space in which the beautiful can most safely appear" (p. 226). Pindell goes on to state that Binx's style "makes his world visible to him" (p. 227) and enables him to recover the universe. He concludes that it is through his style that Binx becomes a pilgrim, that he "establishes with his audience a fellowship of embarrassment" (p. 228) regarding our society, that he reminds us of our need for spirituality and makes us "feel at a loss but not lost" (p. 229).

Although practically no article, except Pindell's, addresses style per se in The Moviegoer, several critics do focus on narrative strategies and the significance of certain stylistic choices. One in particular makes use of contemporary French philosophy to examine the
philosophical implications of Binx's exile. In his 1981 article Claude Richard (35) asserts that *The Moviegoer* is a novel of exile in several ways. First, Binx, in his complex relationship with reality is prey both to what is real and to its absence; he experiences an ontological exile. The real is able to manifest itself to Binx only in its anteriority, its loss. Moreover, in his association between what really happens and the movies, Binx often gives to the movies--to the simulacrum--a certain solidity that one usually lends to the real (35, p. 29). Indeed, according to Richard, reality for Binx depends on its image, its representation. "The simulacrum comes to the aid of the real in order to guarantee, temporarily, its existence" (p. 30, my translation). Binx's conscious exile in Gentilly, where he "defaults," also involves a simulation of a lack and an awareness of the other signified by the other's absence. Richard sees further illustrations of exile in the present tense narration:

Always narration will state its exile from that which it evokes and even the present tense will be haunted by the phantoms of a past. . . . A narration in the present tense, *The Moviegoer* is riddled with reminiscences in the preterit tense that contest the so-called unity of speech and give it an inevitable nostalgia (35, p. 33, my translation).*

[*"... toujours la narration dira son exil à ce qu'elle évoque ou convoque et même le temps du présent sera hanté par les fantômes d'un antérieur. . . . narration au présent, *The Moviegoer* est troué de reminiscences*"*]
Binx is further removed from the real by his habit of always using like and as, which, while purporting to identify, really underscores that which is different between two persons or things. In short, Binx's language asserts unceasingly "the approaching death of language" (p. 36). Addressing the significance of Binx's mother, father, and aunt in terms of his exile, Richard links Aunt Emily via her use of language to Tennessee Williams's Blanche Dubois, analyzing the former as a victim of the terror of absence who feels obliged to construct a world via her speech, whose constructions Binx cannot accept and from which he must exile himself once again. The final example of exile in the novel involves the role of the accidental, which Richard sees as guaranteeing the authenticity of the real.

If later critics as a group, in some contrast to earlier reviewers, devote little attention to style and narrative strategy in The Moviegoer, they focus less on the setting of the novel, and even less on the philosophical aspects of Percy's presentation of such, despite the fact that Percy has been called "our most acute commentator" of the so-called New South by no less a critic than Cleanth Brooks (4, p. 34) and the fact that, according to Max Webb, this novel "has been widely recognized as the best of this
century about New Orleans" (49, p. 2).* Only Martin Luschei (30) and Mark Johnson (17) emphasize Percy's treatment of setting in The Moviegoer in philosophical terms; both discuss Percy's use in the novel of Kierkegaard's house metaphor in which, in the words of Johnson, Kierkegaard "likens the levels of existence (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) to the levels of a house (basement, ground floor, and attic" [17, p. 58]). Binx, of course, begins in the basement of his landlady's house (that is, he begins on Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage); his Aunt Emily is always found on the first floor of her house (representing the ethical stage, according to Johnson); and, as Johnson also points out, Kate lurks in the shadows of the mezzanine, where Binx and Kate find the beginnings of intersubjectivity.

In the Epilogue, as Luschei points out, Binx and Kate inhabit a full house (symbolizing their attainment of full human life), although this attainment might appear tentative,

*Webb points out that Percy has succeeded in controlling the "overabundance of rich, absorbing detail" which New Orleans offers and that in Binx's portrait of New Orleans, which depicts the city as a "jumble of unrelated sets of behavior" (49, p. 14) which have lost their "ethical underpinnings," Percy "has reclaimed New Orleans as a valid subject for the imagination" (p. 14). Alfred Kazin (18) sees The Moviegoer as a clear depiction of the truth that "it is the South itself that today makes outsiders of its people" (14, p. 63), while Jac Tharpe (43) states simply that Percy's "fondness for descriptions of physical nature produces excellent passages without exception and constitutes his very best writing" (43, p. 37), of which Tharpe offers several examples from The Moviegoer. See also Vaughn (46, pp. 51-56).
since the house they inhabit has been remodeled by Binx's "dead" cousin Nell Lovell.

In summary, when we look back on the critical response to philosophical ideas in *The Moviegoer*, we see that critical awareness of Percy's philosophical concerns in this novel did not appear immediately. Reviewers hardly noticed them. But by the late 1960s, an appreciation of *The Moviegoer*’s existential themes began to emerge, culminating in 1972 in the appearance of the first book-length study of Percy by Luschei, which was nothing less than an existential critique of Percy's first three novels that showed conclusively how much Percy owed to Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Heidegger. As critics generally grew to appreciate Percy's existential slant in *The Moviegoer*, many also began to see that his slant was Christian as well. Finally, various critics began to analyze the philosophical concepts of language that informed the novel, and also to search for additional philosophical sources that the well-read Percy had drawn upon. Throughout this three-stage growth of critical response to philosophical ideas in *The Moviegoer*, critics also turned more and more to Percy's own nonfiction writings in search for help.

While it is certainly true, as Luschei states, that "we need to understand what he is attempting before we can praise the attempt" (30, p. vii), and thus the later
critics' emphasis on Percy's philosophical ideas in *The Moviegoer* is justified, such an emphasis nevertheless has had certain effects that are not entirely good. In the first place, the emphasis on *The Moviegoer* as a novel of ideas imbued with Kierkegaardian and French existentialism led many to expect more of the same from Percy in his subsequent novels and thus contributed to many readers' disappointment when these novels did not measure up. Jack Tharpe gives an example:

Readers expected more Franco-American agonizing, whereas in fact Percy has been remarkably consistent in his now almost too frequent iteration of the moral failure of Christendom. Disappointment with his latest novel, *The Second Coming*, derives for the most part from the failure to realize that Percy's subjects were never rebellion and philosophy or epistemology but religion and moral decline (43, Preface).

In the second place, the emphasis on philosophical ideas in *The Moviegoer* has somewhat overshadowed the novel's artistic merits. The temptation to explicate the novel merely in terms of Percy's earlier essays has proved too strong for many. Whereas some have pointed out that the novel's philosophical significance is matched by the novel's rhetorical complexity, or that Percy has meshed his philosophical themes, his characterization, and his multi-layered narrative technique with great skill, not enough has been said about these nonphilosophical facets. An appreciation of the novel's humor especially seems to
be missing. If the reviewers, generally speaking, missed the deeper themes of the novel, it appears that the later critics find it difficult, if not impossible, to see Percy's comic playfulness—other than irony—in the midst of all the serious philosophical ideas.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


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CHAPTER III

THE LAST GENTLEMAN

When Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman, was published in June 1966, five years after The Moviegoer, it attracted greater attention than its predecessor, but a more or less similar initial critical response. Of some twenty-seven major reviews, eleven are completely favorable, four are mostly favorable, six are mixed, one is noncommittal, four are mostly negative, and one is completely negative. Many reviewers affirm that The Last Gentleman is better than The Moviegoer; this second novel, in fact, brought Percy a second nomination for the National Book Award, though not the award itself. Even those who are disappointed in The Last Gentleman, with one exception, praise Percy the writer and hope for better results in his next novel.

Once again, as in the case of the initial critical response to The Moviegoer, among the favorable reviews Percy's characterization and style win the most acclaim, although theme draws more initial attention than theme in The Moviegoer did. However, there are many themes in The Last Gentleman in addition to the philosophical, and, accordingly, much of the attention to theme in reviews has
nothing to do with Percy's use of philosophical ideas. The novel's thematic complexity, of course, results in part from its plot. In The Last Gentleman the hero travels all over the United States, searching not only for his own identity but also for the answer to the question of how he should live his life. In the course of his quest, he comes into contact with many individuals who represent various segments of the population, various lifestyles and attitudes. Furthermore, as even Percy's early essays attest, he has many absorbing interests--science and its influence on the layman, psychoanalysis, Christian theology and faith, the people and landscapes of the various areas of the United States, existentialism, and semiotics, to mention a few--and in this novel, because of its plot, he has ample opportunity to pursue these interests. The thematic variety of The Last Gentleman is further complicated by Percy's synthetic worldview; not only is he interested in many phenomena, but also he sees all these phenomena as interrelated parts of a whole, so that when he talks (or has his characters talk) about any given subject, what he says (or has his characters say) involves other subjects as well. Thus the reviewer who wishes to address theme in a few words has his work cut out for him.

The reviewers' comments about theme and subject matter in The Last Gentleman include stress on cultural themes,
specifically Percy's portrayal of the New South or modern America; stress on psychological themes, such as identity crises, displacement, the inability to act; attention to moral themes, such as sexual behavior; and emphasis on metaphysical and theological themes, such as the opposition of immanence and transcendence and the awakening of faith. However, there is much overlapping. Even though reviewers of The Last Gentleman do emphasize certain themes, the vast majority will either stress a theme that defies categorization, such as the malaise of modern man (which can be moral, psychological, philosophical, and cultural all at the same time), or they will comment on several themes, with one of them being cultural, another psychological, another moral and/or theological.

This overlapping notwithstanding, a composite summary of the initial critical response to the themes and subject matter of The Last Gentleman indicates that certain themes do appear to attract a good deal of attention. Many reviewers single out Percy's picture of America, its regions, its peoples, and its landscapes. Just as frequently mentioned is the psychological theme of displacement, with its accompanying quest for identity. (Thirteen of the twenty-four reviewers who talk about theme make at least passing mention of Barrett’s "search for self and identity [30, p. cxxxvi] or his search for "some clue as to how to live"
[19, p. 108], or his discovery that "nobody can tell him who he is or what he must do, but that he must live as he can" [6, p. 5].

About half of the reviewers who address theme mention a philosophical theme, but of these, only a few stress the philosophical theme above others. Usually the reviewers just make a passing reference, such as "Barrett's progress . . . is . . . a preparation that allows . . . a possibility for giving measure and form to time itself" (35, p. 138), and go on to other matters. Several mention the Christian overtones in the novel, but again, the importance of the Christian overtones is questioned. Brainard Cheney, for example, who is so aware of the Christian theme in The Moviegoer, seems to downplay its importance in The Last Gentleman throughout most of his review. "For while Valentine, Sutter, and Rita are ostensibly fighting over Jamie's body and soul, their real business, to be sure, is the instruction of behaviorism's hero" (8, p. 348), and again, "Val, the representative of Roman Catholic celibacy, serves the argument largely as a foil for Sutter's apocalyptic nihilism, even though she succeeds in her heavenly aims" (p. 349). Cheney does mention Sutter's metaphysics but immediately goes back to emphasizing Percy's satiric attack on "the whole position of a secular psychiatry on the function of sex" (p. 350). He does, however, give Jamie's
deathbed conversion its due--more than its due, in the opinion of many critics, as regards Sutter and Will:

It is extreme unction indeed; yet Jamie gains it, since he agrees to ask God for faith. And through the masked appearances, more gets to the reader eventually. Even though their participation was reluctant, Billy and Sutter implicitly admit to a sort of faith, too. It is called hope . . . (8, p. 350).

Unfortunately, Cheney offers no support for this statement about Will's and Sutter's sort of faith, a faith which will be questioned vehemently by many other interpreters.

The anonymous author of "Guidebook for Lost Pilgrims" points out an underlying "restless rustling of faith" and a "groping toward God" (17, p. 104), but he, too, offers no support for his statement and furthermore stresses the picture of the South versus the North and Percy's satire in the novel. R. G. G. Price, more critical, recognizes that religion is touched upon in the novel, but states that this is done "lightly, and, to me, unconvincingly" (29, p. 210). Obviously, Percy's use of Kierkegaardian indirection in this novel does not reach him. Joyce Carol Oates, who, I believe, misses the deeper levels of the novel, is even less sympathetic: "... but it is to be hoped that Percy is not advancing Dr. Vaught's verbose Laurentian theology with any more seriousness than he is advancing the novel's other fragmentary concerns" (26, p. 130). Of course Percy is advancing Dr. Vaught's beliefs
as a serious, though mistaken, alternative to his own Christian beliefs, which are advanced even more seriously, albeit indirectly.

As Price's and Oates's statements illustrate, many of the reviewers who see philosophical ideas in the novel do not approve of Percy's handling of them. In fact, they share a markedly negative reaction to Percy's use of philosophical ideas in this novel. Walter Goodman adds to Price's and Oates's comments the observation that philosophical ideas such as the "aspiration to transcend the world, through faith or ideology" are "worthy matters every one--but they are presented so elusively that the reader may be afflicted by a sense of déjà vu" (15, p. 20). Moreover, Percy "gives us ideas without taking time to give us people. Some minor characters are sharply drawn; the major ones are overpowered by the weight of argument imposed on them" (p. 20). Frederick C. Crews criticizes Percy for mistakenly believing psychological themes to be metaphysical (a mistake Crews finds also in Dostoevsky, who "had the same predilection for seeing the decisions of his driven heroes as metaphysical imperatives" [10, p. 101]) and asserts that, though Percy has philosophical or spiritual intentions, his novel fails to be thematically convincing in good part because he "does not seem aware that the moral extremes to which Barrett and Sutter are
drawn—lewdness versus saintliness, suicide versus salesmanship—are appropriate only to a particular adolescent crisis" (p. 101), a statement many people would take exception to.

Marcus Klein is even more biting. Although he recognizes Barrett's problem as metaphysical—"when he is aroused he adopts paradoxical strategies to spring reality from time" (21, p. 62)—and that "the basis of perception in all of this might be either Platonic or Existential, though one would choose the latter" (p. 62), like Price and Crews, he thinks that Percy falls short. Barrett is not allowed "to seek so far"; the movement of the novel "depends on all climaxes and confrontations being evaded" (p. 62); and "despite much talk . . . about Reality and God, there is finally little attempt at any grappling with either" (p. 62).

On the other hand, Douglas M. Davis sees The Last Gentleman as evidence of Percy's "deepening metaphysical concerns" and calls Percy "one of the more ambitious of the Black Humorists, at least on the thematic level" (11, p. 22). For Davis, the book is "a continual exchange between the floundering Barrett and the moody Vaught on the meaning of life itself" (p. 22). Brian Wilkie would agree. He asserts that the novel is about "the plight of modern man, post-modern sensibility, the spiritual
crisis of our time, the decline of the west, and so forth" (36, p. 38), and then goes on to emphasize that Percy "sees through" all of these "clichés" he has just mentioned. Stephen Donadio not only states that the "opposition between 'immanence' and 'transcendence' is the book's major theme" (13, p. 452), but that Percy handles this theme well. Because there is "no reconciliation possible between immanence and transcendence, between being a fornicator and being a gentleman" (p. 452), the engineer cannot decide whether to marry Kitty or not, and the book "ends as it ends, quite literally in suspended animation, at precisely that point beyond which any further action is unthinkable" (p. 452).

By far the most appreciative reviewer of Percy's use of philosophical ideas in The Last Gentleman is Peter Wolfe, who begins by saying that Percy's fiction can be described as "an exploration of the generic structure of reality" (37, p. 182) and then goes on to examine The Last Gentleman as "an anti-metaphysical joke in the spirit of Hume and Wittgenstein" (p. 183) that "fixes the working limits of man's intelligence" (p. 183). According to Wolfe, Percy "dramatizes relentlessly Hume's statement that the reason must always subserve the passions: life's incomprehensible flux traps the searcher for terminal answers in a morass of 'ravenous particles'" (pp. 183-84).
Accordingly, Barrett's need to know everything before doing anything is doomed to fail; only when he stops "substituting mental categories for personal engagement" (p. 183), when he acts, is he able to progress morally.

Unfortunately, Wolfe seems totally unaware of Percy's Christian beliefs that are broached in the novel—he mentions neither the crucial baptism scene, for example, nor Sutter's notebook dialogue with Val about salvation and sex. Rather, Wolfe sees Percy as an agnostic concerning any "encompassing mythical structure," and because Percy attacks abstraction, he compares Percy to Wittgenstein and Hume, who attacked attempts to know the noumenon (the thing in itself) as stupid, even harmful. Such a comparison is not really accurate; Wolfe would have been much better off citing Kierkegaard and Marcel, who attacked abstraction, but who believed that one could know the noumenon through faith.

Obviously, more reviewers of The Last Gentleman address the question of philosophical themes than do reviewers of The Moviegoer. This apparent increase of attention to theme notwithstanding, reviewers of The Last Gentleman generally agree with those of The Moviegoer that characterization and style are the most fetching features of the novel at hand, and they spend much of their time regarding theme stating what they see as the themes rather
than probing these themes and Percy's treatment of them in depth.

As in the case of *The Moviegoer*, the critical articles and books that discuss *The Last Gentleman* treat theme much more profoundly than the reviews do. Like the articles and books that concern *The Moviegoer*, they also make reference to Percy's nonfictional writings and his acknowledged intellectual sources. However, unlike the later critical response to *The Moviegoer*, the later critical response to *The Last Gentleman* sees two major thematic areas instead of one: much attention is paid to Percy's use of philosophical ideas in the novel, but the later response also emphasizes Percy's portrait of America in the novel. Despite this divided focus, however, of some twenty-eight major articles and books that discuss Percy's second novel, at least sixteen address philosophical themes.

Among these books and articles, about two-thirds discuss Percy's use of existentialism, usually Christian existentialism.* Robert Maxwell (25) and Michel T. Blouin (2) are once again the first to do so. The former sees Will as an example of man existing on Kierkegaard's aesthetical plane and states that "he practices both

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*In addition to those books and articles discussed below, the following concern existential themes to varying degrees: Jared W. Bradley (3), Jack Hicks (18), Ellen Douglas (14), Ashley Brown (5), John Carr (7), Zoltán Abádi-Nagy (1), Bradley R. Dewey (12), and Jan Nordby Gretlund (16).
rotation and repetition"—indeed he is led to "rotational squirming"—but Maxwell is primarily concerned with accentuating Percy as a Renaissance man and thus does not develop any of his comments about Percy's use of Kierkegaard in The Last Gentleman. Blouin sees Will as another example of Marcel's homo viator and links his suffering from "dichotomization and syncretism" to Marcel's discussion of the "will without intelligence" (2, p. 33). After discussing other themes in the novel, such as the role of the family and Percy's depiction of the South, Blouin returns to Percy's use of Marcel's philosophy in Jamie's death scene, which Blouin calls "an allegorical representation of cooperation in time and eternity for the illumination of both Bill Barrett and Sutter Vaught uniting them in the 'secret,' as Gabriel Marcel would call it" (2, p. 40), which binds them in an intersubjective relationship that brings Barrett his "first self-identification in togetherness" (p. 40) and grace. Blouin, furthermore, states that the end of the novel shows Barrett rising to the "level of selfhood" on his way to obtaining faith as Marcel describes the process. Not all critics share Blouin's optimism about Barrett, however. Even Percy says that Will fails to grasp what is happening at Jamie's death and thereby fails to progress.
If Richard Lehan sees *The Moviegoer* as a "brilliant analysis of alienation" (23, p. 312), *The Last Gentleman* represents for him "an ambitious attempt to describe the process of rotation and return" (p. 312). The attempt, however, is not entirely successful. Because "Percy raises problems more complex than his solutions, putting a trust in a salvation through love which is both highly idealistic and totally undramatized" (p. 319), and because the return is perhaps more complex than Percy realizes, Percy "has not found the narrative means to make the 'return' convincing" (p. 319). While many critics would agree with Lehan that the ending of *The Last Gentleman* is unsatisfactory and/or ambiguous,* Lehan himself offers a partial refutation of his own conclusion when he points out that Percy's "implied resolution" is more convincing "implied than narrated" (p. 319). Percy, of course, following Kierkegaard's indirect method, may very well have wished to imply a resolution rather than to state it neatly in his narrative, and, if so, Lehan would seem to be saying that he succeeded, even if Lehan himself is not satisfied with mere implication.

Lewis A. Lawson's 1969 article "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" (22), mentioned in Chapter II in

*For a discussion of this, see Panthea Reid Broughton (4, p. 112) and Jac Tharpe (33, p. 77).
connection with Percy's use of Kierkegaard in *The Moviegoer*, also underscores Percy's use of Kierkegaard in *The Last Gentleman*. In contrast to Blouin, Lawson places Will in Kierkegaard's religious mode, and, after pointing out the problems involved in representing such Kierkegaardian interior states as alienation, rotation, and repetition in a novel, Lawson becomes the first to emphasize the Kierkegaardian identity of Sutter Vaught: "With Kierkegaard, he deals with the either/or. Either be a Christian and seek the juncture of transcendence and immanence through faith or be a fornicator and seek the juncture through genital sexuality" (22, p. 896). Sutter, of course, chooses the latter, but Lawson believes that Will, by willing to accept Sutter's world where one must either be fornicator or be Christian, "creates freedom for himself." Moreover, "in willing one thing, Will, according to Kierkegaard, is showing purity of heart. In so identifying himself and the purity of his intentions, Will Barrett has leaped from Kierkegaard's Religion A, the religion of immanence, to Religion B, the religion of transcendence" (p. 899).* As for the mixed reaction to the novel's ending,

*In other words, Will, according to Kierkegaard, is prepared to renounce his understanding as a means of complete knowledge and stake his life on the absurd. Kierkegaard would also say that Religion or Religiousness B is Christianity (see Niels Thulstrup [34, pp. 107, 368]), and if Lawson sees Will as becoming Christian, many would disagree with him. Certainly the ending is very ambiguous.*
Lawson sees it as testimony "to the success of Dr. Percy's intended ambiguity" (p. 899), which results from Percy's use of Kierkegaard's indirect communication. Throughout this long, amply footnoted article, Lawson gives invaluable guides to how Percy uses Kierkegaard's various works and ideas. If Lawson's article seems condensed and even cryptic at times—Lawson does not explain what Kierkegaard means by Religion A and Religion B, for example—it is doubtless because Lawson has read Kierkegaard more carefully than most of Percy's literary critics and readers.

Maxwell's, Blouin's, Lehan's, and Lawson's emphasis on existentialism in The Last Gentleman is extended by Martin Luschei's 1972 book The Sovereign Wayfarer (24), in which Luschei shows how existentialism informs Percy's work as a whole to that date—his essays as well as his first three novels. Having given in an earlier chapter an explanation of the major existential concepts that Percy borrows and then having stressed Percy's use of the existential concepts of malaise, inauthenticity, ordeal, rotation, repetition, and intersubjectivity in The Moviegoer, Luschei begins his discussion of The Last Gentleman by signaling that its scope is much wider than that of its predecessor and that its emphasis shifts from The Moviegoer's probing of the malaise to exploring the fact of
death, "the uniquely personal 'I and my death' of the existentialists" (24, p. 112). Above all, Luschei analyzes The Last Gentleman as the story of a postmodern pilgrim's trip both back to the past and forward to a confrontation with faith. This journey begins with Will's recurring hallucination in Nedick's, which Luschei interprets as a vision of "modern life" seen from "a postmodern vantage point in time" (p. 129). He adds that Percy has linked Will's disorientation about time to a theory of Eric Voegelin's in Order and History. Will, according to Luschei, will travel from the "hallucinatory postmodern world, which in fact is the present world shorn of illusion, back through the modern world to the South, both new and old, in search of roots and meaning" (p. 130).

Moreover, he will return via the Trav-L-Aire, the perfect vehicle for rotation, and so his return "amounts to an existential repetition with rotational dividends" (24, p. 142). Throughout his journey, Jamie's approaching death and Jamie's reaction to it subject the everyday lives of those around him to "a searching existentialist light" (p. 146).

After Will successfully faces in front of his childhood home the ramifications of his father's suicide, he frees himself to move forward and sets off for Santa Fe (Holy Faith). Whether faith is attained, however, is
debateable. Regarding the efficacy of Jamie's baptism and the ending of the novel, Luschei is not as positive as Blouin, but he does not rule out Jamie's salvation entirely: "The possibility can only be accepted by faith, as Kierkegaard defined it, as a movement by virtue of the absurd" (24, p. 165). As if to increase the odds in favor of Jamie's salvation, Luschei reminds himself and his readers of Kierkegaard's insistence that "the sphere of religious transcendence cannot be grasped from the sphere of immanence" (pp. 165-66). Sutter and Will do not fare so well. Although the former is aware of what is going on at Jamie's baptism and death, he remains "locked into his own egocentrism, as Marcel calls it" (p. 162), and the latter, who does not understand what is happening "because as a good postmodern he has eliminated Christianity from consideration" (p. 166), still suffers from his veneration of the experts. Indeed, Will's attempts to view himself objectively, to be a scientist, have resulted in his living in "a state without grace" (p. 114). Drawing upon Kierkegaard and Marcel to define grace as subjectivity or inwardness, Luschei attributes this denial of grace to Will's abdication of himself: "He lives not in the infinite passion but in a shadowy objective remove that denies him access to his own inwardness" (p. 114).
Nevertheless, there is some hope for both Sutter and Will at the end of the novel. Sutter at least waits for Will, indicating that he may be able to respond to Will's call for some sort of intersubjective relationship. Will, even though he does not get the Christian message, has been shaken out of his pure possibility and has indicated his willingness to shoulder "the burden of his existence," which may be the first step toward receiving inwardness. Thus, though *The Last Gentleman* is the story of an incapacitated postmodern pilgrim who fails to hear the message, he does make some progress and there is at least hope.

Also in 1972, Ted R. Spivey addresses *The Last Gentleman* in the light of both Percy's use of existentialist thinkers and modern comparative studies of myth and ritual. Emphasizing Will's quest for reintegration, he—like Luschei—sees Will making limited progress: "Barrett, though threatened by hell and death every step of his quest, is shown growing in psychic health, though remaining throughout the book quite sick both physically and psychically" (31, p. 69). Because Barrett participates in Jamie's baptism, "a ritual that serves to reintegrate Jamie with God" (p. 77), Spivey believes that Barrett "receives the gift of love that makes possible not the final victory over the forces of destruction inside himself..."
and Sutter, but an initial victory on the path of pilgrimage" (p. 77).

John F. Zeugner, one of the most perceptive critics concerning Percy's use of existential philosophy to succeed Luschei, in his 1974-75 article on Percy and Marcel (38) emphasizes--like Luschei--the centrality of death to the novel, and like Lawson, seems more interested in Sutter as an existential figure than in Will. Zeugner details Sutter's theory of dichotomy between transcendence and immanence and his belief in sex as a means of man's re-entry into immanence. Zeugner also cites Sutter's summation of the alternative to his theory, namely the belief, represented in the novel by Valentine Vaught, that man is neither transcending being nor immanent being but wayfarer who "stands in the way of hearing a piece of news" (38, p. 39), that is, salvation. What Sutter needs, Zeugner believes, is for "someone in Marcel's terms to show him that transcendence must be a purer more saturated form of immanence, that the failure of sex to be a be-all and end-all need not lead to a collapse of the will to live" (p. 40). However, he has reservations about Percy's presentation of the alternative to Sutter's theory. Valentine is a neurotic, and the priest who baptizes Jamie is

*See also Spivey's later article (32) in which he discusses Will as a Kierkegaardian knight of faith.
unesthetic and mundane. If Lawson, in the words of Zeugner, sees Percy's "snapping at the core of his own convictions as a very sacred kind of preparatory humor--a laughter close to the religious mode" (p. 41)--Zeugner wonders if Percy is "no longer entirely happy with his Christian existential convictions" (p. 41). He wonders why Percy has made Sutter fail to understand Marcel's concept of transcendence as a more saturated form of experience rather than pure thought; he wonders if Percy has shown a dissatisfaction with "the 'various data' of Marcel" by making Sutter such a strong character.

Thus Zeugner underscores, as he did with *The Moviegoer*, the ambiguity of Percy's rendering of his Christian existential beliefs, especially those which echo Marcel's philosophy.

The second book on Percy, Robert Coles's *Walker Percy: An American Search* (9), was published in 1978, after appearing in installments in *The New Yorker*. Coles, a respected and prolific psychiatrist, proves to be more an admirer of Percy than an insightful literary critic. Nevertheless, he furthers the understanding of Percy's use of existential ideas in *The Last Gentleman* in the following ways. First, he links Barrett to Marcel, both as a "continuing presence, literally and in Marcel's sense of the word, to Kitty's brother Jamie . . . and to her other, older,
brother, Sutter" (9, p. 172) and as "another version of Marcel's homo spectans" (p. 173), although he does not really develop these associations. He also adds that the character of Barrett owes much to existential "insistence upon the extraordinary, almost defiant complexity of each individual" (p. 186) and that the novel's emphasis on "Jamie as a dying patient and Sutter as a likely suicide" (p. 186) reflects the omnipresent existential obsession with death. Like Blouin and others, Coles sees the ending as a moment of Marcelian intersubjectivity for Sutter and Barrett, and he directly links Sutter's notebook to existential literature that has become "the endless self-avowals directed, it seems, to the speaker's or writer's mirror image" (p. 189). But his enthusiasm for Percy overwhelms his critical acumen when he states that in The Last Gentleman Percy "envelops his readers in a carefully conceived atmosphere of existentialist ideas—which . . . never become obtrusive or pedantic" (p. 174). Certainly, Sutter's notebook, in the eyes of most readers and critics, is at least the former if not the latter.

Among the spinoffs from the critical response to Percy's use of existentialist ideas in The Last Gentleman is Mark Johnson's 1975 article (20) which, starting from Percy's concern with "alienated homelessness" (20, p. 55), emphasizes the existential role of place in Percy's novels.
Percy obviously uses Kierkegaard's house metaphor for the levels of existence in The Last Gentleman when he has Will work in the basement of Macy's (which represents the aesthetic level of existence) and later has Will confront his father's suicide in his father's attic (which represents the religious level). Percy also uses, according to Johnson, Kierkegaard's concept of the need for a man to stand in front of his childhood home in order to recover himself, when he has Will return to Ithaca to stand in front of his childhood home, pondering his father's life and death while fingerling the cold metal and bark of the hitching post. Will appears to be on the verge of some revelation about what his father has missed, but, in Johnson's view, Will's achievement of such a revelation is doubtful, due in good part to Percy's "metaphysics and his Kierkegaardian assumptions preempting 'novelistic' fiction" (p. 61). Percy also uses places to illustrate artificial as opposed to authentic environments. In The Last Gentleman, Johnson believes, Barrett's "abstracted condition" at the beginning of the novel is "at least partly due to his environment" (p. 64)--his living in an anonymous and artificial room at the Y by day and working down in a basement by night. Johnson also stresses Percy's description of Rita's cottage in a mews, filled with Indian decorations and costumes, as an illustration of Rita's
dislocation. Percy's depiction of Val's school, moreover, hints that Val's mission with the Negroes may be as limited and inauthentic as Rita's Indian project. Johnson's discussion of place in *The Last Gentleman* ends with his appreciation of Percy's use of the Trav-L-Aire as "an analog for living between immanence and transcendence, to use Sutter's words, or, in Barrett's, between the zone of the possible and the zone of the realized" (p. 68), a use which represents for Johnson, Percy's "first attempt in two novels at presenting an authentic environment" (p. 69).

Richard Pindell, in his 1979 article (27) in Panthea Reid Broughton's important collection of studies entitled *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, also addresses place in *The Last Gentleman*, but not so much in terms of Kierkegaardian metaphor or inauthentic environments as in terms of the struggle between a "stagnant mentality of entropy and an imaginative expectancy of news" (27, p. 50). Dialectically linking place with language and death within "an imagination of home," Pindell emphasizes that Will's journey, starting in Central Park at "ground zero," begins in entropy, defined as "the measure of disorder consequent to postmodern leveling" (p. 51). A victim of contemporary "self-absence," Will is unable to locate himself, much as he may try: the Central Park love scene between Will and Kitty shows Will
"substituting a preoccupation with place for any real oc-
cupation of space" (p. 52). Will's desperate need to
locate himself, reflected in the cluster of space-control
designations Percy gives him, such as proprietor, leads
Pindell to a discussion of the role of language in the
novel. He sees in the scene at Val's school a "landscape,
a vision of the world after the Bomb, logically succeeding
ground zero" that "stages a confrontation between the word
and pure space, which asserts language's first and im-
memorial task: the provision of an order within and a
shelter from space" (p. 53). Val's description of her
pupils' breakthroughs into the world of language presents
language in its highest form, naming, which "confers
reality not only on the thing named but on the namer" (p.
54). Language also can act as a "giving and receiving of
news" (p. 54); as a mode of placement, moreover, it helps
the namer in his attempt to "wrest himself free from what
around him conduces to inertia" (p. 54). But Will is
unable to establish spatio-temporal lordship via his use
of language, just as he is unable to possess place, him-
self, or the other. Thus "utterance" between Will and
Kitty in the Central Park love scene is "reduced to a
form of existential absence. Despoiled of their sover-
eignty, the two remain vacancies in a void" (p. 55).
Pindell sees in this "paradigm of postmodern man's
increasing inability to take place" (p. 56) the "two principal shapers of the entropic landscape: history and science" (p. 56), both of which prevent Will from exercising sovereignty, from hearing news, from even knowing who he is. Misnaming himself as "an organism adapting to an environment" (p. 60) instead of naming himself as a pilgrim-stranger, failing to recognize man's first fall, Will remains for the greater part of the novel historically superfluous (most of the places he visits are "already occupied by the dead" [p. 56]) and lost in admiration for science and technology--exactly "what separates him from experience" (p. 57). Even Jamie's death does not help him discover his true identity, although it enacts what Pindell sees as the novel's major explicit premise: "The certain availability of death is the very condition of recovering oneself" (27, p. 61, citing The Last Gentleman). Indeed, by "reducing the mystery of death to a problem in manners, turning news, as ever, into knowledge, astonishment into inertia, Will, not death, appears at last as the great leveler" (p. 64). However, Pindell, like many critics before him, sees the possibility of growth. The "carefully wrought underwork of the novel, articulating the opposed imagination of news" (p. 67), admits the chance that Will will be able in that home he and Kitty will live in, which formerly belonged to Cap'n Andy--who
is for Pindell the embodiment of the definition of entropy as "energy unavailable for work during a natural process" (p. 67)—to hold place, language, and death "in regenerative unity" (p. 67) and thus discover his true identity "as a pilgrim and a participant" (p. 68). Will's last word, "Wait," may suggest an orientation toward news, a "nascent vulnerability to the grace to continue" (p. 68).

If the major thrust of the critical response to philosophical themes in The Last Gentleman concerns Percy's use of existentialism, a few critics, nevertheless, also introduce into the discussion another philosophical issue that appears in The Last Gentleman and will become central to Percy's third novel, namely, Cartesianism, especially in its epistemological tenets that lead to valuing abstraction and so-called objective reason (also called the scientific-empirical approach to knowledge) and in its ontological dualism involving the mind/body split. Not that Percy subscribes to Cartesianism—far from it. In all his writings he mounts an attack against it, pointing out the dangers of abstraction, the limitations of the scientific-empirical approach to knowledge, and the consequences of Descartes' mind/body dualism. His major means of attack in The Last Gentleman are his characterization of Will Barrett, in which he shows how Will's efforts to "engineer" his life, to look at himself and others
objectively, are doomed, and Sutter's notebook, which is a discussion of the mind/body split as well as immanence versus transcendence.

Two critics, Pamela Lewis Poteat and Panthea Reid Broughton, address Percy's handling of his attack against Cartesianism at length. Poteat, however, dedicates her recent book, *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age: Reflections on Language, Argument, and the Telling of Stories* (28) more to a comparative study of method--how Percy attacks Cartesianism in his essays versus how he attacks Cartesianism as a storyteller--than to content. She argues convincingly that Percy is more successful in getting his message across in his storytelling than in his essays because the stories are rooted in persons in predicaments and therefore link reason with experience, whereas his essays are rooted in abstraction and are undermined by his use of the conceptual tools and language of Cartesianism, which, even as he attacks the tradition, make him sound like part of it. As far as discussing the philosophical ideas in the novels, however, she really does not go into any depth. Regarding *The Last Gentleman*, for example, she focuses on the Metropolitan Museum scene in which the workman falls. Will, until then "scientifically" detached and objective, can finally see the Velázquez for the first time because the accident has
caused him to lose his detachment and become involved with those around him. And she certainly appreciates Will as an embodiment of the mind/body split:

Priding himself on being "scientifically minded," Will confuses an appropriate detachment from old perspectives and old conceptual tools with the inappropriate and godlike detachment of the Cartesian philosopher-observer. . . . Almost everything about him . . . attests to his fundamental ontological state as one who watches and listens and sees but who never commits himself through speech and action to another person (28, p. 55).

But these observations are the extent of her discussion of the novel's philosophical themes.

Panthea Reid Broughton (4), on the other hand, sees *The Last Gentleman* as informed by "Percy's conception of a bisected reality" (4, p. 96), which is another way of saying that Percy has not yet escaped, in this novel at least, the philosophical tradition he so opposes. She details how the novel exemplifies the mind/body split in, for example, the juxtaposition of the North and the South, in Will's "books of 'great particularity' . . . in Barrett's two guides for finding Sutter and Jamie--the reassuring Esso map 'with its intersecting lines and tiny airplanes and crossed daggers marking battlefields' . . . and Sutter's difficult and disturbingly abstruse casebook" (p. 97), in characterization--"the minor characters tend to exemplify bestialism while the major characters are afflicted with angelism" (p. 97), and above all, in matters
sexual--to be a gentleman or a fornicator. Even the ending, when Will indicates a need for both Kitty (representing immanence, the body, responsibility) and Sutter (representing theory, transcendence), shows Percy's "conceptualizing in terms of that very mind/body split he and his characters deplore" (p. 114). She goes even further than Zeugner's wondering (see page 73) when she states that Percy's concept of transcendence is mental and that immanence for him is bestial--merely the body (p. 113). Thus, she would say to Zeugner that Percy does not share Marcel's view of transcendence--at least in this novel--and she carries Poteat's concern for Percy's vision in his essays over to his second novel. For Broughton, Percy's dualistic vision in this novel "threatens the coherence and solidity of his otherwise very beautiful and sound work" (p. 114).

Thus we see in the critical response to philosophical themes in The Last Gentleman less diversity than in the case of The Moviegoer, but more negativism, too. Basically, the critics focus mostly on Percy's use of existentialism in his second novel, with some attention given to Percy's attack on Cartesianism, whereas in the case of The Moviegoer, they found theories of symbolization and consciousness, critiques of Platonism, suggestions of Bergsonian duration, Peirce's abduction, and Stoicism, as well as existentialism. Moreover, if the Christian overtones of Percy's
existentialism are accepted as being present by most critics of *The Last Gentlemen*, there is a growing doubt about just what they entail. If anything, the question of salvation, especially for the protagonist, remains even more problematical at the end of this novel than it did at the end of *The Moviegoer*. A growing awareness of Percy's limitations in handling philosophical ideas also appears: several reviewers (Oates [26], Price [29], and Goodman [15], for example) indicate that Percy's presentation of theology or aspirations to transcend the world is too quick, fragmentary, or light. Other critics express discontent in their articles. Lehan (23) criticizes Percy's handling of repetition or the return, for example, and Johnson (20) finds the crucial scene before Will's childhood home marred by Percy's metaphysics preempting his fictional concerns.

But not all interpreters are negative about Percy's use of philosophical ideas in this novel. Many, in fact, believe that *The Last Gentleman*, though flawed, is a much more ambitious novel than *The Moviegoer*, and certainly a worthy successor.


Another interval of five years separates The Last Gentleman from Percy's next novel, Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World. This third novel, most often described as a futuristic satire, received even more attention than The Last Gentleman, but the initial critical response was somewhat divided. Of some thirty serious reviews, twenty-three are favorable or mostly favorable, but six are basically negative, and only one is truly mixed (as opposed to fifteen favorable, five negative, and six mixed for The Last Gentleman). In other words, Love in the Ruins receives a greater percentage of favorable reviews than The Last Gentleman, about the same percentage of negative reviews, but almost no mixed reviews. Moreover, unlike the initial critical response to The Moviegoer and The Last Gentleman, reviewers for the first time single out theme for comment rather than style or characterization. Generally speaking, however, they do not focus their attention on philosophical theme: only about half of the reviewers even mention philosophical theme in the novel, and of these, only about two-fifths offer any
extended remarks on the subject. Given how much subsequent interpreters make of Percy's use of existentialism, his attack upon Cartesianism, and his illustration of gnosticism, and given the growing awareness of Percy's philosophical concerns from the mid-sixties onward, that fifty percent of the reviewers fail to mention any philosophical theme at all seems surprising. His protagonist's explicit references to the spiritual and ontological purpose and function of the lapsometer notwithstanding, L. E. Sissman, for example, calls it "an instrument that can analyze the psychosomatic complaints of both left . . . and right" (28, p. 121), and Phoebe Pettingell reduces More's spiritual concepts of angelism and bestialism to mere pathological conditions (22, p. 12), with no mention of Cartesianism, the Fall, or the human soul.

A few reviewers make passing reference to philosophical themes by relating the split self back to the Fall (25, p. 283) or by briefly alluding to either "the Cartesian dichotomy between body and soul" (26, p. 617) or to the Church as a possible means of mending the rift (7, pp. 70-71 and 24, p. 15), and then go on to discuss other themes, such as the role of technology or the polarization of America. (Of course, the role of technology and the polarization of society are subjects of interest to various philosophers, but these reviewers are describing
what goes on in the novel rather than responding to philosophical ideas per se.) Only six out of thirty reviewers make philosophical themes in the novel and/or Percy's handling of them the focal point of their reviews, either emphasizing the Christian theological overtones, as does Joseph Hynes (9), or "the Cartesian split between matter and mind, body and soul" (4, p. 42), as does Joseph Catinella. The latter also correctly, it seems to me, analyzes Percy's protagonist Dr. Thomas More as an example of angelism insofar as More believes that his lapsometer, a machine, "can cure the ills caused by mechanistic visions of life" (4, p. 43). Martha Duffy sees both the theme of Cartesian split and Christian overtones as she describes More as "a latter-day Descartes focusing on the pineal gland as seat of the human soul" (6, p. 94) and quotes More's hope that "Someday 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" (p. 94). Beneath the satire in the novel Duffy perceives a "rueful equanimity and a lingering hope" (p. 94), which she links to Catholics and Southerners, that such working and waiting will end in "a kingdom for the exile" (p. 94).

Percy's manner of handling such ontological themes also draws comment. Thomas McGuane, who recognizes that
the book is about "the detachment of the soul, and dead or
dying religion" (21, p. 7), points out that Percy's
"fascination with Catholic ontology" is "here given full-
throttle" (p. 37), but he does not like the results.
Percy's attempt to fictionalize such a motif "doesn't
quite come alive; and Aquinas never does look right along-
side lawnmowers or golf clubs" (p. 37). Melvin E. Brad-
ford blames Percy's Christian existentialism for the
formal problems he sees in the novel. He does not like
Percy's handling of the future; he believes--mistakenly, I
think--that Percy's handling shows that he is neither
interested in "the warning of evil to come" or "a mere
caricature of the present shape of things" (1, p. 840),
but rather in both as only "stimuli for movement from
. . . the 'aesthetic' into the 'religious mode'" (p. 841).
Furthermore, Percy's interest in existentialism produces
a tension in Love in the Ruins that mars its design: "It
is both via and broad social comedy with no persuasive
juncture of the impulses behind its pull in these two
directions" (p. 841). Basing his analysis on Northrop
Frye's category of Menippean satire, Bradford sees addi-
tional formal disunity in More's "direct confrontation
with spiritual aridity" (p. 842), which does not fit
Frye's definition of satire. Moreover, other aspects
of More's characterization jar:
This focus upon Cartesian modernism worked all the way down into the fundament of a character is not according to the ordinary nature of the distopia: not according to the disposition of satire to confront easily recognizable errors on the assumption of a widely accepted code of values. It implies loving the world not as a property which can and should be preserved but as an arena for self. And that is too perilous a blunder for simple satire to confound (1, p. 842).

Nevertheless, Bradford concludes, the conflict between Percy's philosophical concerns and the form he has chosen to illustrate them is not deadly. The "total" work has "a genuine authority, despite its structural imperfections; power, even in the starkness of its theological insistence" (1, p. 844).

Wilfrid Sheed would agree with Bradford's last statement and marvels at Percy's success in developing his personal Southern, Catholic philosophy. "He has written a blatantly theological novel, with a Southern agrarian bias, set in a future so close it's already happened" (27, p. 2). Yet, Sheed reminds us, modern readers tend to overlook any theological overtones. So "there is a danger his book may seem frothy and aimlessly crotchety if the heavy religious motif is overlooked" (p. 2). He, too, sees a technical problem involved in Percy's presentation of his theme, but rather than the overall form, it is Percy's overworking of Christian symbols, which Sheed concludes is a no-win situation. If Percy did not use the symbols, many would fail to get his message, but
after getting the message, readers often find the symbols redundant.

Thus, the reviewers' critical response to philosophical themes in *Love in the Ruins* is both limited and mixed. If Hynes, Catinella, Duffy, and Sheed like Percy's philosophical themes, McGuane and Bradford certainly believe that such themes, as they are presented, mar the book, and even Sheed sees a problem in Percy's use of Christian symbols.

However, the critical response to philosophical themes shifts dramatically in the ensemble of book chapters and articles devoted to *Love in the Ruins*. Of some twenty-seven such essays, eighteen at least refer to philosophical themes; most emphasize them. As might be expected after the response to Percy's first two novels, the most frequently perceived themes are existential and/or theological--themes that were by the 1970s commonly perceived in Percy's work. But a few critics also find much to say about Cartesianism and gnosticism, and even vitalism and Toynbee's theories regarding the growth and decline of civilizations draw comment.

As he did with *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, Martin Luschei approaches Percy's third novel in terms of existentialism. For him *Love in the Ruins* is "a comic synthesis of modern thought" (20, p. 169), Percy's "most
comprehensive diagnosis of the malaise" (p. 169), a major cause of which is what Percy calls "consensus anthropology," in Percy's words "the Western democratic-technological humanist view of man as higher organism invested in certain traditional trappings of a more or less nominal Judaeo-Christianity" (20, p. 172). Luschei also perceives chronic angelism-bestialism as a major condition of the malaise, but this rift "involves more than the traditional mind-body split" (p. 173); it stems from the new Fall in which man "has become lost to himself, even to his sins" (p. 178). Indeed, the end of the world referred to in the novel's subtitle consists, in Luschei's opinion, of "this end of the world in one's consciousness" (p. 188), that is to say, man's loss of his own being, of "his access to his own inwardness" (p. 189).

In the course of describing Percy's diagnosis of the malaise in the novel, Luschei shows how Paradise Estates is "a haven for the despair which is unaware of itself" (20, p. 177)--Kierkegaard's category of deepest despair. Moreover, Tom More's humorous response to what he sees around him places him in the "comic religious mode" of Kierkegaard. Luschei points out that More's advice to Ted Tennis reflects Kierkegaard's belief in ordeal as a means of overcoming despair; that in More's description of Verdun, the horrors of Verdun are the horrors of
abstraction (p. 190); and that More, while thinking of his lost wife Doris, is "the perfect model of Kierkegaard's man whose house is without a beloved" (p. 195). Tom's condition, furthermore, is the Kierkegaardian state where man "will not understand" what is right and "will not do it" (p. 200); the love couple's naivety in desiring to be converted after reading a Confederate bible is a reflection of Kierkegaard's wondering about how to introduce Christianity into Danish Christendom (p. 210), and the scene in which Art Immelmann stimulates the musical-erotic area of More's brain is a direct reflection of Kierkegaard's musical-erotic, "a term . . . that represents the highest achievement of the aesthetic sphere" (p. 215). Luschei does, however, prefer to underplay the theological implications of "the grace of inwardness," which he analyzes on a secular level. Nor does he see the novel as "a defense of the Christian life" (p. 230), as many readers do. Rather he believes that Percy's "comic synthesis will stand on either religious or secular premises" (p. 231).

As usual, Luschei's perceptions and interpretations are well argued, although many critics (myself included) would disagree with his secular emphasis. Thomas LeClair, for example, sees More's life in the epilogue as a clear reflection of Kierkegaard's description of Christian life
in *Training in Christianity* (18, p. 163). He also states that the terms **angelism** and **bestialism** are derived from Jacques Maritain's *The Dream of Descartes*, and that Immelmann's call to "happiness, joy, music, spontaneity" is really a call to the Kierkegaardian despair that is being unaware of despair. Above all, LeClair shows how much Percy owes to Kierkegaard's essay "Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle." Immelmann's exhortation "Develop your genius" is a direct allusion to this essay, and More certainly fits Kierkegaard's description of the genius. More's life is marked by "'modest resignation' from the decorum of the medical profession and by 'proud elevation' above his fellow geniuses in the novel" (p. 160). He introduces himself as a genius, believes that the lapsometer is physical proof of his talents, and bases his authority on intelligence. Yet others do not perceive his authority because authority based on intelligence is limited, in Kierkegaardian terms, to the immanent. It is Father Smith who represents the Kierkegaardian apostle and whose authority, since it comes from God, is recognized.

Despite Percy's existential motifs, however, LeClair considers *Love in the Ruins* the weakest of Percy's first three novels, because in it Percy does not follow the existentially influenced aesthetic he has espoused.
elsewhere, an aesthetic that calls for the novelist to place his protagonist in a concrete situation and to avoid abstractions and edification. In *Love in the Ruins*, according to LeClair, More becomes "less a meditative consciousness than a stimulus-response creature who tramps back and forth through the novel's four days" (18, p. 165), and "many of the minor characters become the abstractions Percy warned himself against" (p. 166). Furthermore, the novel is more "dogmatic" than his first two, and the "action becomes plotted and predictable, and thus at odds with Percy's notion of fiction as exploration and discovery" (p. 165). Simply put, although the novel is good entertainment and Christian satire, it fails as an existential novel. LeClair makes a good case.

In his 1978 book *Walker Percy: An American Search* (5), Robert Coles also discusses existential themes in *Love in the Ruins*, emphasizing the role that Sartre's notion of estrangement plays, underscoring the examples of existential inauthenticity that abound, and describing More as a mixture of the messianic twentieth-century scientist and the self-critical, lonely man dear to Percy and other existentialists. The ending of the novel is triply existential; it is another example of both Marcel's theme of concreteness and Heidegger's "own most,"* while at the same

*Coles explains Heidegger's "own most" or "eigentlich" as that which the seeker, when faced with an existential
time it offers, in Coles's opinion, the possibility that More has made a Kierkegaardian leap of faith by moving toward Ellen and beginning a new life with her. Not as methodological as Luschei or LeClair, Coles spends a good part of his discussion of Love in the Ruins on description and plot summary.

The only other detailed discussion* of existential themes in Love in the Ruins is Mark Johnson's article "The Search for Place in Percy's Novels" (10), in which he attributes Percy's success in handling the philosophical theme of man's abstraction from himself at least in part to "his tying the concepts of abstraction and angelism-bestialism to a sense of place" (10, p. 72). He shows how Percy's use of place in the novel furthers his depiction of this theme as he discusses the artificial environments of Tom More's house (especially Tom's "hunt room" and crisis such as death, pulls out of the everydayness (Alltäglichkeit) of his life ("the pressures, the boredom, the fearful ingratiations, the surrender of more and more personal territory in the interests of 'success' or 'adjustment' or practicality, or simply out of exhaustion if not despair" [5, p. 204]) and recognizes as his own authentic self, his "own most."

*Richard Lehan (19) mentions More as a typical existential hero—"a secular saint who refuses to become the victim of the absurd or to accept the madness that others impose upon him" (19, p. 145), just as Jared W. Bradley (2) briefly links Love in the Ruins to the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, and Thomas LeClair (16) makes a passing reference to More's daughter's death and his reaction to it as an illustration of Percy's use of death as a "... litmus test: to see which sphere of existence each protagonist lived in" (16, p. 22).
Doris's room), the Howard Johnson motel (which he links with Moira and all her inauthentic views), and Lola Rhoades's house Tara (the Tara of movie fame and setting for Lola's artificial would-be return to agrarianism). Percy also uses places, according to Johnson, as an integral part of his existential aesthetic, to describe "accurately how a man feels in a given situation" (p. 77), and, in Johnson's opinion, he does this more successfully in *Love in the Ruins* than in his earlier novels; in this third novel metaphor and philosophy are "more fully incorporated into the development of the novel" (p. 80), in good part via Percy's treatment of place.

Closely linked to an appreciation of existential themes in *Love in the Ruins* is an appreciation of Percy's theological themes in the novel. As early as 1974, Thomas LeClair in "The Eschatological Vision of Walker Percy" (17) attempts a synthesis of existential and Christian themes, and Susan S. Kissel argues in her 1977 article "Walker Percy's 'Conversions'" (12) that the novel's conclusion, like the conclusions of his earlier novels, is "designed to reveal, finally, what Walker Percy calls the 'true existential reversal, the discovery of the pearl of great price at the very heart of the objective-empirical disaster" (12, p. 136), namely, faith. The most detailed analysis of Christian theme in the novel is offered by
W. L. Godshalk in his 1974 article "Walker Percy's Christian Vision" (8). He sees the central theme of Love in the Ruins as spiritual pride, and he argues that in this novel, rather than working "as an existentialist philosopher," Percy is working "as a Christian commentator on the modern scene" (8, p. 131). The first indication of More's spiritual pride that Godshalk cites is More's looking at his own reflection in the bar mirror and seeing it as that of the new Christ, the maculate, sinful Christ, who shall reconcile man with his sins. Godshalk adds that More's narration of his escape from St. Michael's rectory via expulsion from the air conditioning duct to the sound of Christmas songs implies that More sees himself "reborn as the new savior with Christmas music celebrating his advent" (p. 131). While admitting that both the revelation of the new Christ and the rebirth are inherently ironic, Godshalk insists that More is "too puffed-up with his own self-esteem to be aware of the comic potential" (p. 131). The third (and most convincing, in my opinion) piece of evidence for More seeing himself as the new Christ is his oftstated mission to save the world with his lapsometer.

In addition to his self-asserted role as the new Christ, More appears to readers in his relationship to Art Immelmann as a modern Faustus. Godshalk concludes, however, that it is really as a modern Everyman that More should be
viewed. More "seems to stand between the political extremes of the novel"; he is "both patient and doctor"; he "partakes of all sides" (8, p. 135). Like Everyman, he "is tempted, falls (into the Inferno-like Pit), and finally recovers when he gains knowledge of his true role in the Christian universe" (p. 135). Tempted by Moira, who represents sex to Godshalk, by Lola, who represents music, by Art Immelmann's promises of fame, unlimited love, and power, More's desire to perfect the lapsometer and his belief that he can cure souls best illustrate his hubris, "his longing . . . for infinitude, for equality with Godhead" (p. 138), and form the immediate cause of his fall.

It is only when Immelmann demonstrates his power without using the lapsometer that More "knows that his lapsometer is not all-powerful, that he is not the neo-Christ, that he is vulnerable, fallible, and that he must seek for help in other quarters" (p. 139). He prays to his sainted ancestor Sir Thomas More to intercede with God for him and Ellen and to drive the devil away, at which point Immelmann disappears. Five years later we see More leading a new life, but, Godshalk reminds us, he is still "the fallible human, an Everyman," with the difference that he is now able to attempt to lead an ordinary Christian life. He is reintegrated into the Church and into society.
Thus, for Godshalk, *Love in the Ruins* is primarily about "man's Faustian pride, his fall from grace, his call for spiritual aid, and his final return to the common life of Christendom" (p. 140). Godshalk's major thesis is sound, and his argument, with the exception of his premise that More sees himself as a new Christ, is convincing.

J. Gerald Kennedy also responds to the Christian theme in *Love in the Ruins*, although his article (11) focuses primarily on Percy's attack upon Cartesianism. He points out that More's lapsometer "demonstrates that the split recognized by Descartes derives ultimately from Adam's mythic misdeed and that the problem of the sundered self is more properly a spiritual than a psychophysical phenomenon" (11, p. 123). Kennedy also sees, correctly I think, that Paradise Estates is "a technological parody of Eden, an ironic symbol of human longing for prelapsarian happiness" (p. 124). Moreover, Kennedy discusses other illustrations of Percy's theological concerns in the novel: More as an American Adam, More's figurative death and rebirth in his expulsion from the deserted church (which Kennedy interprets "as a reminder [since the church is dead, without members] perhaps of Kierkegaard's persistent struggle with established Christendom" [p. 126]), his taking Communion in the epilogue as an instance of his
touching the vital thread in the labyrinth that can bring the sundered self together—for the mass, in Kierkegaardian terms, becomes a repetition, "a moment of spiritual awareness occasioned by a sudden recovery of past experience" (p. 127).

A very interesting and provocative probing of the relationship between Percy's Catholicism and his Christian humanism appears in Ralph C. Wood's 1980 article about Walker Percy as a satirist (30). After carefully showing how Percy's conversion to Roman Catholicism has involved an attempt to redirect his uncle's ethical humanism to Christian humanism, Wood states that Percy has retained a certain esteem for ethical humanism while reserving his spleen for scientific humanism, "that rough consensus of both humanistic and technical thought that has seeped into every corner of American life, convincing us that we are creatures adjusting to a habitat, fulfilling ourselves from resources latent within the environment" (30, p. 1123). According to Wood, Percy's strongest attack against this "vapid secular substitute" appears in Love in the Ruins, in which Percy demonstrates how pervasive is this bogus humanism. He shows that leftists and rightists, secularist and churchgoer, liberal and conservative, all "accept that beastly humanism which regards our species as anthropoids" (p. 1125).
Starkly opposing Wood's pro-Christian and anti-humanist response to philosophical themes in *Love in the Ruins* is Mary C. Land, who argues in her 1983 article about the mechanist-vitalist controversy in literature (13) that Percy's characterization of Max Gottlieb (originally the name of a character in Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* who was modeled after Jacques Loeb, the noted and influential mechanist biologist of the 1920s) shows a typical literary anti-mechanist stance: "Percy's game becomes clear. Under the guise of satire, he is arguing for original sin and vitalism" (13, p. 327), both of which Land rejects. Furthermore, if Percy's attitude toward mechanism is to be considered "representative" of the literary community, it is "no wonder," then, that pro-mechanist authors, such as Lewis and Dreiser, "never seem to attain a permanent resuscitation" (p. 328), which clearly she would like them to attain.

Not all authors of articles and book chapters on *Love in the Ruins* react primarily to existential or theological themes in the novel. J. Gerald Kennedy, for example, argues in his article mentioned above (11) that the Cartesian split "constitutes the philosophical crux of *Love in the Ruins* and forms the controlling metaphor of Tom More's vision of experience" (11, p. 116). Both More's "syndrome" or chronic angelism-bestialism and the
political polarization of America are a manifestation of
"the subject-object split which has been central to Western
experience since the philosophy of Descartes and the be-
ginning of the modern age" (p. 116). After briefly tracing
the history of the problem of the divided self in Western
thought from Jewish tradition and Greek tradition, Kennedy
underscores the impact of Descartes: "Identifying the act
of thinking as the central proof of one's existence,
Descartes argued in his Meditations: 'It is certain that
I [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am] is entirely
and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without
it' . . . and thus reduced physical man to an automaton"
(p. 117). Kennedy emphasizes that Percy in various of his
writings has attributed man's malaise in the twentieth
century in major part to the effects of this divorce be-
tween mind and body, subject and object. By accepting
the Cartesian view of man "as an object to be understood
and explained empirically," modern man has ignored "the
mystery of being" and has "sunder[ed] the individual into
a 'mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man''
(p. 118). He has also impoverished daily human experience,
which further contributes to his alienation and despair.
Love in the Ruins, according to Kennedy, is Percy's "most
complex and extensive diagnosis of the sundered self"
(p. 119) and its consequences.
To begin with, More's belief in his lapsometer, especially in view of his satiric remarks regarding the various behaviorist/empirical research facilities at Fedville (e.g., the Love Clinic and the Geriatric Rehabilitation Center) is no small ironic attack on the scientific consequences of Cartesianism. More "unwittingly adopts an objective-empirical procedure to heal the Cartesian split" (11, p. 120), and his failure is inevitable, although Kennedy sees More's continued hope in the lapsometer in the epilogue as evidence of Percy's "own ambivalence toward scientific technology" (p. 121). Here Kennedy, I believe, misinterprets, as he sees More's remark that the problem with science is "not so much the fault of the scientist as it is the layman's canonization of the scientists" as an absolution on Percy's part of the scientist from "moral responsibility for his endeavors" (p. 121), a conclusion which seems to be unfounded. Kennedy also wonders how the reader is to take More's continued faith in his lapsometer as a cure for the Cartesian split, and suggests that perhaps the reader should believe that his faith is "a serious endorsement of the scientific vocation" (p. 122) or that the perfection of the machine is possible. I again disagree. Rather—and Kennedy, to his credit, offers this evaluation as an alternative—More's faith must be seen as "an ironic indication of his own
limited vision" (p. 122). In addition, Percy has More qualify his faith in the lapsometer by remarking "if I can get it right," which indicates, I think, that More's faith in his invention has lessened considerably.

Kennedy also does not like Percy's choice of metaphor for More. The references to angelism and bestialism are too frequent and More is too complex to be understood in such terms. In fact, Percy's characterization of More in Cartesian terms indicates to Kennedy that Percy remains afflicted with the same disorder: Kennedy concludes that Percy's revelation regarding modern man "comes to us finally not as the confession of a fellow sufferer but as the clinical diagnosis of an angel orbiting the earth" (p. 136).

Although I do not agree with this evaluation--I view Percy's characterization of More simply as an instrument of his satire--Kennedy's analysis of Percy's attack on Cartesianism in the novel is generally very perceptive and on the mark.

As I have said in Chapter III, Patricia Lewis Poteat devotes her entire book Walter Percy and the Old Modern Age: Reflections on Language, Argument, and the Telling of Stories (23) to Percy's attack on Cartesianism, contending that Percy is more successful in his storytelling than in his essays because in the latter he is more abstract and
undermines his argument by using Cartesian rhetoric, which makes him sound like a Cartesian to some extent even as he attacks the tradition. While she does not have much to say directly about *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, she does discuss Percy's treatment of Cartesianism in *Love in the Ruins* with more depth. She would doubtless agree with Kennedy that Cartesianism is central to the novel and that More, seduced by modern science, falls prey to Cartesianism not only in his alternating bouts with angelism and bestialism (exemplified by his abstract manner of thinking versus his lust and alcoholism) but also in his belief that a machine, his lapsometer, can measure and cure a spiritual disease. But she would disagree with Kennedy about More's reflecting Percy's own ambivalence toward science and Percy's own abstraction. In her words, "Percy is well aware of More's weakness and confusion and is, by implication, fully in control of his material" (23, p. 71). And she would disagree with Kennedy about the implications of More's qualified faith in his lapsometer in the epilogue:

Even his lingering aspiration to do that which he probably cannot do reflects this change from Faust/Don Juan to wayfarer/castaway. To go from the lust to know and love abstractly to the relatively modest business of figuring out what one has "hit upon" and using that discovery to heal is to make an important change indeed. It is one which anchors More and his invention in the mundane and concrete world of actors and speakers (23, p. 75).
The third critic to address Cartesianism in the novel at length is Lewis A. Lawson, who, in his 1981 article "Tom More: Cartesian Physician" (14), like LeClair (18) links More's relationship to Cartesianism to Maritain's The Dream of Descartes. Lawson sees this relationship, however, as two-sided. If More uses the same ideas and terms as Maritain's to attack Cartesian intellectualism, he also lapses into a dream (like Descartes, who attributed his entire system to a dream on November 10, 1619) at the point when he is "daydreaming of using his lapsometer to undo the Cartesian split" (14, p. 72). More's dream, moreover, is "Maritain's Cartesian dream, that man can, through sheer thought, become an angel" (p. 75). Tom is also Cartesian in his desire to "observe x copies of . . . the consciousness, in order to construct THE COGNITO" (p. 78). But above all, according to Lawson, Tom shows his deep commitment to Cartesianism by his "willingness to base his methodology for his work with the lapsometer upon a universally discredited Cartesian doctrine" (p. 72), namely, Descartes' belief that the pineal is the home of the soul.

In this article, Lawson also focuses on Percy's use of Eric Voegelin's concept of modern secular gnosticism.*

*Voegelin in The New Science of Politics (29) describes modern secular gnosticism as accepting the model of history as a sequence of three ages, the third occurring after an apocalypse of sorts and representing a new order. Gnostics also look for a great leader to preside over the emergence
Instead of being a Christian, More is a "thoroughgoing gnostic," who sees the apocalypse as secular, identifies himself as the great leader who will emerge to create the millennial state, and frequently talks about history in terms of three-part sequences (a gnostic predilection). Lawson gives as an example the sequence of July 4, 1776; July 4, 1863 (when the United States "forced both the Confederate surrender at Vicksburg and the retreat at Gettysburg and thus maintained the union" [p. 68]); and Tom's July 4, the day More believes he will save the union with his lapsometer. Lawson also points out More's habit of thinking about sequences that are personified by great men; in his daydream about the day he wins the Nobel prize, for example, More has the director toasting him as the local Pasteur, the new Copernicus, and the latter-day Archimedes. At another point, More wonders "Where are the Catholic Einsteins, Salks, Oppenheimers?" (14, p. 69, quoting Love in the Ruins), implying that he will transcend them all. He also believes that his discovery will be recognized as "one of the three great breakthroughs of the Christian era, the others being Newton hitting on his principles and Einstein on his field of this third age, a prophet (who may or may not be the leader) to see the new order struggling to emerge beneath the appearance of secular history, and brotherhoods of autonomous persons who have attained spiritual perfection through their own efforts to assist the leader."
theory, perhaps even the greatest of all because my dis-
covery alone gives promise of bridging the dread chasm
between body and mind that has sundered the soul of Western
man for five hundred years" (14, p. 69, quoting Love in
the Ruins). As if this were not enough to indicate More's
gnostic view of himself, Lawson gives additional instances
of More comparing himself to great men and states that his
emphasis on positioning himself at the cloverleaf alludes
to Harvey Cox's The Secular City, in which Cox offers "a
gnostic, tripartite plan of History" (p. 69). Furthermore,
More's Cartesianism is a form of gnosticism in that it
glorifies science and reason as a form of gnosis, and
insofar as More is seen as a modern Faustus or Don Juan,
he is again gnostic. Referring to Jean Brun's essay "Two
Gnostic Precursors of Scientific Humanism: Faust and Don
Juan," Lawson points out that "the core of each myth is
the story of a man who believes that salvation can be
gained through knowledge" (14, pp. 75-76). Thus even
More's interest in Moira betrays his gnostic nature; with
her typical good looks, her lack of being situated in
time or place, her romanticism, she "represents that kind
of idealizing romanticism that is so similar to univer-
salizing science," and Tom's love for her is really a love
for "the tiny aspect of Woman that she as woman reflects"
(p. 78).
Tom finally realizes his folly, starts a more modest and realistic life with Ellen, and exchanges his gnosticism for Christian faith. As usual, Lawson writes an intelligent and informative essay; the only point I might quibble with is the absence of any discussion of More's qualified statement of continued belief in the lapsometer in the epilogue, the statement that so troubles J. Gerald Kennedy.

Lawson also addresses gnosticism in *Love in the Ruins* in another article entitled "William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and the Apocalypse" (15). In this broader article, he discusses Will Percy's *Enzio's Kingdom* and *Lanterns on the Levee*—as well as the legends surrounding Frederick of Sicily (the subject of *Enzio's Kingdom*) and Voegelin's views about gnosticism—in addition to discussing Walker Percy's first four novels, so his comments about *Love in the Ruins* are limited to a rather brief description of Tom More as a gnostic seer. Although the article discussed above (14) is more helpful than this one for *Love in the Ruins*, this article does provide additional background information regarding gnosticism and the views of William Alexander Percy, who, as Walker's adoptive father, obviously influenced him.

The only other critic to focus on the philosophical theme of gnosticism in *Love in the Ruins* is Cleanth Brooks,
who in 1977, as Lawson points out, was the first to link Percy's novels and essays to Voegelin's works. His essay, "Walker Percy and Modern Gnosticism" (3), which he calls "notes for an essay to be written" (3, p. 266), offers a telling comparison of Voegelin's treatment of modern secular gnosticism with various of Percy's writings about the condition of modern man. If Brooks does not see Tom More as the "thoroughgoing gnostic" of Lawson, he nevertheless sees gnostic allusions in More's talk and conversations with others, and he identifies More's concept of angelism, which as he interprets it, "arises from the human being's impatience with the limitations of the mortal mind--impatience with perceptions mediated through the senses, the progress of thought from the known to the unknown, and dependence upon common sense and reason" (pp. 269-70) as "essentially gnostic" (p. 270).

Thus various critics have responded to Percy's use of existentialism, Christian theology, Cartesianism, and gnosticism in his third novel. One other philosophical theme remains. Both Lewis A. Lawson and J. Gerald Kennedy also focus on Percy's use of Toynbeean theory. Lawson ties More's gnosticism to his interest in Arnold Toynbee's A Study of History, especially the third volume, The Growth of Civilizations, in which Toynbee sets forth his pattern of "Withdrawal-and-Return." More actually states that his
own history of silence and decline fits this Toynbeean pattern "of the man who fails and goes away, is exiled, takes counsel with himself, hits on something, sees daylight--and returns to triumph" (14, p. 68, citing *Love in the Ruins*). Obviously More believes that his future will fit this pattern as well; he will be recognized for his invention and emerge as a great leader. Lawson also thinks that More's positioning of himself at the elevated cloverleaf, besides alluding to Harvey Cox's technopolitan phase of history and thus illustrating More's gnosticism, reflects More's identification with Toynbee's hero, who withdraws frequently to a mountain to experience his vision.

Kennedy (11) adds Toynbee's concept of cyclical history as a third interpretation of More's understanding of the problem of the sundered self (the other two involve Cartesianism and Christian theology). The portrait of America in *Love in the Ruins* owes much, Kennedy argues, to Toynbee's description of a dying civilization, just as More's actions illustrate "the polarities of Toynbee's 'schism in the soul'" (11, p. 130), and the attention to apocalypse reflects Toynbee's assertion that such may "usher in a new age of creativity, growth, and spiritual renewal" (p. 133). Contrary to Lawson, who sees More's turnaround near the end of the novel in terms of Christian
atone ment, Kennedy sees More's recovery of self not so much as a reflection of Kierkegaard's and Marcel's writings but of Toynbee's theory of palingenesis, his theory of withdrawal and return, which, as he points out, More refers to specifically early in the novel. I would agree with Lawson.

The four major responses to Love in the Ruins discussed above are all valid. The novel obviously illustrates Percy's appropriation of existentialism, his traditional Catholic ontology, his attack upon Cartesianism, and his awareness of modern secular gnosticism. Nevertheless, of all these approaches, the most helpful seem to be the analyses of Christian ontological themes and modern secular gnosticism. Despite the fact that Percy has linked Love in the Ruins to his first two novels, calling the three a sort of existential trilogy that reflects his response to Kierkegaard, I agree with Thomas LeClair (18) and W. L. Godshalk (8) that this novel is not primarily an existentialist one. Moreover, readers do not need a course in Cartesian philosophy and its ramifications to understand what is going on in Love in the Ruins--we live in a Cartesian world. But, as Wilfrid Sheed points out, if readers miss Percy's incorporation of Catholic ontology, the novel will not make sense entirely, so articles such as Godshalk's (8) are very helpful to many. And to see
Tom More as a modern gnostic who believes he can save the world by his scientific invention both underscores his fallen religious state (for gnosticism is an old Christian heresy) and emphasizes the consequences of his acceptance of Cartesianism (for scientists are modern gnostics to the extent that they believe science or reason has all the answers). Thus, of all the articles and portions of books about Love in the Ruins, the outstanding articles seem to me to be LeClair's "Walker Percy's Devil" (18), Godshalk's "Walker Percy's Christian Vision" (8), J. Gerald Kennedy's "The Sundered Self and the Riven World: Love in the Ruins" (11), and Lewis A. Lawson's "Tom More: Cartesian Physician" (14).

The works discussed in this chapter also underscore indirectly a certain parallelism and continuity in Percy’s fiction. Just as Will Barrett of The Last Gentleman, in his desire to see himself objectively and engineer his life according to scientific principles, prefigures Tom More, with his desire to use a technological gadget to save the world from technology—both are Cartesian to some extent—so Tom, as a gnostic hero who regards himself as the great genius who will save mankind and lead them past the apocalypse into a new world, foreshadows Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, who will carry gnosticism to its extreme in Percy’s fourth novel.


CHAPTER V

LANCELOT

Love in the Ruins seemingly completes Percy's study of the affable, displaced, alienated American. With Lancelot, Percy embarks on a slightly new tack. Instead of describing an amiable but lost protagonist searching for a way to live his life, Percy directs his attention to an apparent madman who thinks that he knows exactly what he is doing, and whose search is not so much for a way to live as a bitter and vengeful quest for the meaning of the world, which he seeks in evil. Furthermore, save for thirteen monosyllabic responses at the end, Lancelot consists entirely of the protagonist's telling of his story to a silent listener; on the surface, it is a dramatic monologue, a récit similar to Gide's The Immortalist and Camus' The Fall. Thus we may very well expect many of the initial reviews to address either character or form. This they do, but to complicate matters Percy has Lancelot, in stating his motives for his crime, indict the modern world, especially America, and therefore many critics focus on theme and tone as well. John Egerton in his June 1977 review underscores the complexities involved in assessing Percy's fourth novel.
It is possible to speculate on the particulars of Lancelot's story at several levels. Is this a philosophical novel, an allegory, a commentary on the times, a satirical spoof, or a straightforward tale of decadence and woe? It may be all of those. In any event, it is hard to classify--Percy's novels always are--and for that reason there will be no consensus among its readers on its quality or its meaning (11, p. 41).

Generally speaking, however, one is safe in stating that a central issue for the initial response of many reviewers to this novel is their reaction to Lancelot, as well as to Percy's handling of his character and his ideas. In other words, reviewers tend to be favorable to the novel if they find Percy's protagonist compelling and if they are not angered by what Lancelot says or how he says it; they tend to be unfavorable if they find Lancelot unconvincing or unnecessarily repulsive, or if they judge Percy's handling of Lancelot and his ideas unsuccessful. For many reviewers, then, everything hinges on Lancelot, what he says, and to a lesser degree on the relationship the reviewer perceives between Lancelot and his silent listener Percival.

The initial critical response is basically favorable; of some thirty-seven major reviews, twenty-seven are favorable or mostly favorable, four are mixed, and six are negative or mostly negative. Thus, insofar as the reviewers' degree of appreciation is concerned, Lancelot receives more or less the same initial critical response
as Love in the Ruins. And the two novels elicit attention in similar areas: reviewers of both novels focus on theme as well as on character and form. But the nature of the reviewers' response to theme in the two novels differs greatly. Whereas only about one-half of the reviewers of Love in the Ruins even mention philosophical themes in the novel, about three-fourths of the reviewers of Lancelot at least refer in passing to the quest for Evil in the novel, and of these two-thirds have more to say about philosophical themes. Once again, theological concerns stand out. Reviewers of Lancelot perceive philosophical themes almost entirely in terms of theology and ethics, usually combining the two in reference to Percy's presentation of the problem of the existence of good or evil, the nature of damnation and salvation, and the possibility of faith in the modern world.

Many, if not most, reviewers* indicate awareness of Lancelot's quest for Evil as a possible means of proving God's existence. In John Gardner's words, "Lancelot turns his wife's sexual betrayal into a central philosophical mystery. Question: Is all good mere illusion?—in which case, seemingly, there can be no God—or can we at least affirm that evil exists, so that . . . we see God by His

*See, for example, Harry Goldgar (17), John Yount (47), and Peter S. Prescott (35).
shadow?" (16, pp. 1, 16). Many reviewers also affirm that Lancelot's quest to find meaning in evil fails. But they do disagree somewhat over whether Percy offers an alternative to Lancelot's would-be solution to the failure of his quest, that is, his plans for a third revolution to be followed by a new order in Virginia. Some, such as Eugene Chesnik (5), Irving Mailn (28), Reynolds Price (36), and Bob Brinkmeyer (2), state that Percy offers faith as a possible solution through the priest-psychiatrist Percival's final "Yesses" to Lancelot's questions. Price goes so far as to see a "gradually implied complete outline for the priest's reply" (36, p. E10), as does Laurence Smith (38), who reconstructs Percival's life and character and links him explicitly to Percy and Percy's Christian viewpoint. Others, such as Edmund Fuller (15) and Lewis A. Coser (7), see no resolution offered, or a very limited one at best. Gardner admits the possibility of a resolution, but he finds the resolution unacceptable:

He [Lancelot] would like to be answered by his priest-confessor, though faith, we're told, has never been sufficient to answer reason. Percy is content to leave it at that. He suggests in his final line that some answer is possible, but he doesn't risk giving it to Percival. Certainly no answer can be deduced from the novel except Kierkegaard's consciously unreasonable "leap of faith"--a blind, existential affirmation of the logically insensible Christian faith. But surely everyone must know by now that Kierkegaard's answer is stupid and dangerous. Why Abraham's leap of faith and not Hitler's? Lancelot himself makes that point (16, p. 16).
Obviously Gardner is unhappy with Percy's possible use of Kierkegaard.

On a more positive note, Price praises Percy for succeeding at something new for him--"not an ignoring of God or a chart of the vertigo induced by His absence but a sustained and ferocious attack upon Him for that absence" (36, p. E7). Ralph C. Wood praises the theme of damnation in the novel: "Percy is to be commended for what he has attempted, namely, to confront us mercilessly with the nature of damnation in our time" (45, p. 634). And Robert D. Daniel, in his detailed discussion of Lancelot's disease of "full-fledged secularism, left unchecked by his refusal to accept the adulterated vaccine of contemporary religion" (9, p. 187), defends Percy's use of philosophical theme: "Most importantly, Walker Percy ranks with Swift as that rare accomplished acrobat, the novelist who can balance interesting fiction with serious ideas" (9, p. 194).

Wood also posits the conflict between faith and "the infinitude of sex" and he stresses Lancelot's perception of "the metaphysical abyss he finds beneath the religion of 'living for love'" (45, p. 635). But he emphasizes that Lancelot's "proposal of a new ethical absolute" serves to "confirm Lance's damnation" (p. 635). Wood, however, agrees that Lancelot may listen to Percival at the end, that "having experienced his own damnation, Lance is capable of hearing the gospel" (pp. 635-36).
More than a few reviewers, while admitting the presence of the themes of salvation, evil, and such, find fault with Percy's presentation of these theological themes, usually on the grounds of Lancelot's insanity, the nature of the ideas themselves, or the effect of the ideas on the novel as a novel. Richard Locke (27), Susan Lardner (20), and John Egerton (11) find it difficult to take Lancelot seriously when he "ruminates philosophically on sex and sin and violence and evil and the craziness of the age" (11, p. 41) because of his insanity. Joyce Carol Oates calls what others call Lance's philosophical ideas "empty rhetoric that fills page after page of the novel" (30, p. 33). Locke exhibits a similar distaste for Percy's use of philosophical theme: "There's much blather about a quest for the 'Unholy Grail,' a search for sin as a proof of God's existence" (27, p. 52). Seymour Epstein simply condemns the novel's triviality: "In all his novels Percy seems to take a serious approach to the moral dilemma of our time. His ends seem to be ontological, but his means have become more and more trivial. Sad to say, Lancelot is the most trivial of the lot" (13, p. 98).

Not far from such an evaluation are statements by several reviewers* to the effect that Percy's use of

*See also Richard Ford (14), Pico Iyer (18), and John Yount (47).
philosophical ideas in *Lancelot* lacks originality. The most forceful belongs to John Gardner:

> Everybody, these days, is thinking and feeling what Walker Percy is thinking and feeling. . . . Over and over, film after film, novel after novel, people keep whining about the black abyss and turning in their ignorance to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, as if no one had ever answered them (George Sedgwick, Brand Blanshard, Roman Ingarten, Paul Weiss, dozens more).

> Fiction, at its best, is a means of discovery, a philosophical method. By that standard, Walker Percy is not a very good novelist; in fact "Lancelot," for all its dramatic and philosophical intensity, is bad art, and what's worse, typical bad art (16, p. 20).

Robert Towers also deplores Percy's handling of philosophical ideas in *Lancelot* because Percy's interest in philosophy interferes with his presentation of what Towers perceives as his true theme:

> It is too bad that Percy is not content to be a "mere" novelist--and a gifted one at that. His apparent desire to be a philosopher-novelist in the Continental mode leads him, in *Lancelot*, to chase a dozen thematic butterflies at once while his real subject--the haunting of the Sunbelt by atavistic, even pathological, remnants of the old dispensation--lies half-formed and neglected in the mud (41, p. 8).

Thus, while the reviewers' response to *Lancelot* is generally favorable, the response to Percy's use of philosophical ideas in the novel is sharply divided. But when we turn to articles and books that address *Lancelot*, the response to philosophical theme appears more positive, although there are certainly differences of opinion regarding what Percy means. Of some thirty-seven articles
and book chapters that discuss the novel, no fewer than twenty-six discuss at least in part philosophical themes—almost, but not quite, all implying that the themes and Percy's handling of them are worthwhile. Most of these articles and books focus on existential and theological themes in the novel, often in connection with Percy's narrative strategy (which owes much to Christian existentialism and his views on language).

In "The Fall of the House of Lamar" (21), Lewis A. Lawson (who has published no fewer than five articles on Lancelot) points out various concepts of Sartre, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard that he finds in Percy's novel. Generally speaking, Percival exemplifies Kierkegaardian concepts, whereas Lancelot owes more to Sartre and Heidegger. Lawson affirms that Percival's earlier, sudden conversion and decision to enter the priesthood constitute a Kierkegaardian leap into faith (21, p. 222), just as his future role as a parish priest in rural Alabama represents the "difficult task of fighting everydayness in Kierkegaard's Christendom" (p. 241). Lance, on the other hand, exemplifies various existential pitfalls. Lawson sees him "dominated by public time" before he met Margot—"almost literally displaying Heidegger's Neugier, a greed for the new, an obsession for the merely interesting, for Gerede/Geschreibe, the shallow commentary of the mass media" (21, p. 226). Lawson
also links Lancelot's ambiguity about what has happened to him over the past twenty years to another Heideggerian condition, "a being disowning itself by immersion into the world of 'them'" (21, p. 226).

Furthermore, Lawson sees in Lance's detailed description of his desire for Margot an echo of Sartre's description of desire as "an attempt to incarnate the Other's body" (21, p. 229, citing Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*):

Thus what he wants to achieve is, through the reduction of himself to flesh, to caress Margot so that she experiences herself as incarnated flesh: then he, as Subject, can throw off his reduction to flesh and enjoy his appropriation of her not merely as object, but as subject trapped under his hand (21, p. 229).

Later, in his actions toward Raine and Margot on the night of the murders, Lance's desire turns into clear sadism, which, Lawson states, reflects "Sartre's scheme of 'concrete relations with Others'" (p. 235) and Sartre's explanation of sadism in *Being and Nothingness*. Finally, Lance's description of the explosion--"I was wheeling slowly up into the night like Lucifer blown out of hell, great wings spread against the starlight" (21, p. 237, citing Lancelot) appears to Lawson as one more example of Lance's Sartrean outlook: Lance "is so Sartrean that he thinks of the presence of Others as hell" (p. 237) and thereby shows once more how fundamentally cut off from any intersubjective relationship he is. Because of this isolation and its accompanying
insanity, Lawson, unlike most other critics, believes that the "bond between the two childhood friends is sundered at the book's end" (p. 242) and he offers no hope for Lance's salvation.

Although I agree with Lawson that Lance is insane and that hope for his salvation is dim, I do not think that all these references to Heidegger and Sartre are especially helpful for an understanding of the novel. They almost complicate matters, even though Lawson's references to these existential philosophers are doubtless accurate and Percy has acknowledged on various occasions his debt to the two. More to the point, in my opinion, is Lawson's attribution of Percy's use of silence in the novel at least in part to Kierkegaard's distinction between talkativeness and silence in A Literary Review and Heidegger's long defense of silence as an authoritative mode of discourse in Being and Time. Lawson makes this attribution in a second article on Lancelot entitled "Walker Percy's Silent Character" (24), in which he studies the role of silence as a structural element in the novel, emphasizing among other things the importance of the gaps in the narration between Lancelot's and Percival's meetings. Like Deborah J. Barrett (1), Lawson affirms that Percival renews his faith at least partially because of Lance's questions, attacks, and descriptions of past events that show the
priest just how fallen his friend is, and Lawson also sees
the priest's silence as an eloquent silent invitation to
hear the Christian message.

For many critics, narrative strategy constitutes a key
element in *Lancelot*. Closely linked to the response to
narrative strategy is the critics' awareness of Percy's
oftstated views of the role of the novelist and his rela-
tion to his audience, which reflect Percy's use of Christian
existentialism. But not all critics who discuss narrative
strategy in *Lancelot* respond to it wholly on a philosophi-
cal level. Bill Oliver, for example, in his excellent
article "A Manner of Speaking: Percy's *Lancelot*" (32)
focuses primarily on Lancelot's dualistic voice (univocal
and equivocal) as a reflection of Lancelot's distorted
view of himself and others and the world around him. He
makes occasional observations regarding intersubjectivity,
Lance's view of himself as his own sovereign, and alienation
that could be discussed on a philosophical level (Percy's
concept of intersubjectivity stems primarily from Marcel's;
Lance's self-appraisal is surely a proof of his gnosticism
and/or insanity; and alienation is one of the most common
existential concepts), but they are not. Only in his
conclusion does Oliver explicitly link Percy's use of
narrative strategy to philosophical ideas--here, to Mar-
cel's definition of man, as he states that Lancelot's
rejection of his dualistic voice for "an invitation to further dialogue" (32, p. 16) and Percival's direct response illustrate Percy's and Marcel's views that man, incomplete in himself, must seek fulfillment in relation with others; true dialogue, moreover, is a major means of achieving this relation. Also the renewed faith of Percival suggests that "the process of self-transcendence entailed in dialogue leads ultimately to God" (p. 17). Oliver is obviously familiar with Percy's use of Marcel's Christian existentialism, but, except for the last part of his article, he prefers to focus on nonphilosophical elements of Percy's narrative strategy.

J. P. Telotte (39) also emphasizes the role of existential philosophy in narrative strategy, as he sets out to show the influence of Percy's linguistic theories in his novels, especially in Lancelot and Love in the Ruins. He first points out the parallels between Percy's view of the modern novelist's role "to speak to alienated modern man and, by so doing, to effect 'an aesthetic reversal'" (39, p. 229) and Percy's existential theory of language, which begins with his concept of man as the "symbol-monger," the namer, who "knows his world and indeed himself through the intercession of language" (p. 229). Language for Percy, moreover, always involves an intended listener for every speaker. Indebted to Marcel's theory
of intersubjectivity, Percy sees language properly functioning "to assert a definitive relationship between people" (p. 231). Thus one of the major causes of modern man's alienation is his failure to use language to achieve this relationship. Telotte goes on to explicate Lance's attempts to reach Anna by knocking on the wall as an example of Percy's triadic linguistic pattern:

![Triadic Linguistic Pattern](image)

(39, p. 231)

Furthermore, in diametric opposition to Lawson (21), Wood (45), and William James O'Brien (31), he sees Lancelot's and Percival's communication as illustrating this same triadic pattern.

Also emphasizing the importance of dialogue as a Marcelian "knowing of others" is Michael Pearson (33). Rather than addressing the dialogue between Lancelot and Percival, however, he stresses Percy's use of dialogue as a means of showing the reader "that consciousness and intersubjectivity are inevitably linked" (33, p. 60). In Lancelot Pearson sees Percy pushing the reader "even more forcibly [than in his earlier novels] into the symbolic process" (p. 62). Forced to respond to Lancelot's views by Percival's silence, the reader, like Percival, "is
a participant in the narrative" who "must become an aggressive listener, one who will examine and challenge Lancelot's method and motive" (p. 62). Pearson argues, moreover, that Percy's decision not to present his own Christian viewpoint in Lancelot is an attempt to create an intersubjective moment, "one in which the reader must take action, a symbolic action that is" (p. 63). In short, Pearson sees Percy using existential philosophy in Lancelot as the very basis for his narrative strategy in his attempt to lead the reader indirectly to experience his own point of view—that of Percival.

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., likewise focuses on Percy's narrative strategies to reach the reader, but he emphasizes Percy's Christian message more so than does Pearson. Rather than discussing Percy's use of dialogue as a means of the reader and author achieving Marcelian intersubjectivity, he focuses on Percy's use of the "fictional techniques of shock and insult to reveal to his readers the gaps in their understanding of the world" (3, p. 81). After pointing out that Percy sees his audience as more or less content in their scientific-humanistic view of the world and, in any case, hostile to his Christian message, Brinkmeyer looks to the novels to show how Percy's perceptions of his audience have affected their composition. Lancelot, in Brinkmeyer's opinion, is "Percy's boldest attempt to jar
the complacent reader" (p. 85). He sees Lance representing the complacent reader who is suddenly "shot into a new realm of freedom and action" (p. 85) by some unexpected discovery or event. Because Lance is like this reader, his actions "take on a grand importance for the reader, for they represent one way to pass through this uncharted realm" (p. 86).

In his rendering of Lance's actions, Percy deliberately "smears their [the readers'] faces in the real ugliness of evil, hoping thereby to make them start looking around for its alternative" (3, p. 86). Christianity, represented by Percival. In short, as Brinkmeyer sees it, "we can either follow the way of a murderer who sees himself as a new and innocent Adam, or we can go God's way" (p. 88). Thus Percy uses the strategies of shock and insult reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor to force the reader "into a situation where he must choose between Lancelot and Percival, but only after he has revealed the ugliness at the heart of Lancelot's approach" (p. 88). Obviously, Brinkmeyer, like Pearson, believes that Percy does emphasize a theological theme--the Christian message of a man's need for God and God's grace.

Whether the reader will fully comprehend the ugliness of evil and see his own need to choose its alternative--that is to say, whether Percy's Christian existential narrative strategy works--is questioned by a few critics
such as William James O'Brien (31). He certainly agrees that Lancelot is damned and that the reader should identify at the end with Percival, but he doubts whether the reader will. Because of Percy's skill and power in portraying Lancelot and his outrage, O'Brien believes that "except for those who bring to Mr. Percy's novel a familiarity with the special religious and cultural heritage it masterfully evokes, Lancelot seems more likely than most works to feed the fires of self-righteousness, hatred, and vanity that it is attempting to diminish" (p. 163).

O'Brien's fears are confirmed by Susan S. Kissel's "Voices in the Wilderness" (19) and Phillip H. Rhein's "Camus and Percy: An Acknowledged Influence" (37). In his quest for evil and his determination to "know and obliterate the wickedness and sinfulness of his own wife, her friends, and the modern world they represent" (19, pp. 91-92), Kissel likens Lance to Flannery O'Connor's protagonists Hazel Motes in Wise Blood and Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away. She denies that Lance is vindictive; rather his murders are the first steps of his subsequent, grandiose plan to start his revolution. In Lance's isolation from human society at the Center for Aberrant Behavior--she believes that he communicates only with Anna and Percival--he also resembles J. F. Powers' protagonist Father Urban in Morte d'Urban, who ultimately rejects the
secular and clerical worlds. Indeed, she states that Lance is no less than a Christian prophet who undergoes the central Christian experience of "dying to the world" in the course of the novel (p. 93), and who will go forth to live a life "of simplicity and moral decency" (p. 98).

As if this misreading of the novel were not enough, Kissel then argues that through Lancelot Percy reveals "a belief that the modern Catholic Church must return to its more formidable, uncompromising, violent past" (p. 96, italics mine). Although Percy has forcefully criticized contemporary Catholicism and Christianity, he has certainly not proposed anywhere that Catholicism or Christianity should return to "the sword" or its violent past.

Rhein is also taken in by Lance's seductive narration and questioning. In his comparison of Percy's novel to Camus' The Fall, he relies heavily on Robert Coles's interpretation of the novel (6), calling Lance, as Coles does, "a contemporary 'knight of faith'" who is "within the sight of the Annunciation" (37, p. 261). Coles clearly believes Lance's philosophical questioning to be genuine and sees Lance participating fully in Marcel's "fidelity," which Coles defines as "a commitment of one person to another, out of a shared commitment to a search for life's meaning" (6, p. 230), but he is well aware of Lance's reluctance "to see himself as he was" (6, p. 219) and of Lance's
"determination to exact murderous vengeance" (6, p. 222). Rhein, however, extends Coles's interpretation of Lancelot to conclude that "Lancelot is released from the meaninglessness of his past actions, off to begin life anew in the edenic Shenandoah Valley" (37, p. 261). If calling Lance a pilgrim and a religious knight who stands "within sight of the Annunciation" seems to miss the point of Lance's insanity and self-centered arrogance, to go even further and assure him a happy new life is a gross misreading of the text.

There are other critics who address existential or theological themes in the novel, several focusing on the roles of sexuality and sin.* Among these, Tracy Kenyon Lischer (26) appears the most philosophically oriented, as she suggests a Christian reading based on Kierkegaard and Dante's rendering of Saint Augustine's definition of sin and evil. Because he is aware of sin--indeed, obsessed with it--Lancelot is in the Kierkegaardian realm of the embryo Christian (26, pp. 34-35). His quest for evil in love, moreover, reflects the Augustinian premise that "evil is of itself nothing and can give birth to nothing, not even sin" (p. 36). Evil stems instead from distorted love. Furthermore, according to Lischer, because

*See, for example, Corinne Dale (8), William J. Dowie (10), and Ann-Janine Morey-Gaines (29).
"sin illuminates faith in that faith is its opposite," Lance's preoccupation with sin "indirectly pays homage to the possibility of faith, even as his trivializing of sin (fornication and murder hold no moral consequence for Lance) signifies the remoteness of that possibility for him" (p. 40). Although she does not have much hope for Lance, she does see his involvement with Anna as a prefiguring of a move into Kierkegaard's ethical sphere (p. 40), and she reminds the reader that Lancelot's journey is only partially over. After the novel ends, Lance will have to listen to Percival's Christian message, which may reach him.

If Lischer appears favorably inclined to Percy's presentation of Christian existential theology in Lancelot, Ralph Wood (46) and Jac Tharpe (40) are not. Wood attributes the decline in Percy's theological thinking evident in Lancelot to the dormant humanism that his conversion to Roman Catholicism did not overcome. Although with his conversion he transposed his old secular values into Christian humanism, the latter still rests "on the conviction that theology has validity only if it can be rooted in an appropriate anthropology" (46, p. 1123). In short, it begins with "the human quest for the divine rather than with God's own self-manifestation" (p. 1122), and when the quest is unsuccessful, the seeker may despair, as Wood believes
Percy does in *Lancelot*. The vision of life in this novel, according to Wood, "amounts to a moral rage that is nearly misanthropic" (p. 1122). Tharpe believes that "the theological and ontological matters such as sin and the search for the unholy grail are only comparatively important if they are significant at all" (40, p. 93). Rather they conceal the "original and extraordinary" theme of what sex is and how it relates "to the rest of existence, especially its relationship to the mystery of life" (p. 95). Whether or not the reader agrees with Tharpe that sex is the central theme, he has to be impressed with the depth of Tharpe's argument.

Existential and theological themes are not the only philosophical themes perceived in *Lancelot*. Two other themes remain: modern secular gnosticism and Cartesianism (which may be linked to what has begun to develop in recent years into a branch of social philosophy called, for lack of a better name, philosophy of technology). As in the case of *Love in the Ruins*, both Cleanth Brooks (4) and Lewis A. Lawson (22, 23, 25) focus on gnosticism; likewise, Patricia Lewis Poteat (34) addresses Percy's attack upon Cartesianism. The only newcomer to the discussion of these themes is Glenn H. Utter (42), who sees *Lancelot* as an examplar of the individual in a technological society.
Basing his interpretation on Eric Voegelin's discussion of modern secular gnosticism in *Order and History*, Cleanth Brooks pointed out in 1977 that Lancelot has all the characteristics of Voegelin's modern gnostic. To begin with, Lance's assumption that "Original Sin is not something man did to God but something God did to man" (4, p. 270, citing *Lancelot*) illustrates both the gnostic's repudiation of the doctrine of the Fall and his belief that a cruel demiurge placed man in an imperfect world full of sexuality, wickedness, and mutability. In addition, Lance's actions and tirades reflect the gnostic's belief that he must extricate himself from this evil world in part by liberating himself from the bonds of his physical body (which is evil) in order to return to the true god and fulfill his potentiality to be perfect (p. 264). Like the gnostic, however, Lance believes that he must save himself. Rather than rely on God's grace, he and others like him who share the knowledge of the world's evil nature and believe that they can establish a new order will effect their own salvation.

Similar to other critics who see Lance as damned (45, 31), Brooks believes that the ending of the novel, with its juxtaposition of the gnostic Lance and the Christian Percival, places the reader in an either/or situation:

*Either* we accept alienation as our necessary condition--acknowledging the world's evil condition
and helping to ameliorate it, but never presuming to believe that we can eliminate it—and live in faith, or we will find our own theories inviting and condoning the Hitlers, the Idi Amins, and the Lancelots of the world (4, p. 271).

Lawson amplifies Brooks's identification of Lance as a modern gnostic in his three articles dealing with gnosticism in Lancelot. In "The Gnostic Vision in Lancelot" (23), Lawson begins by citing a reference by Percy in a 1967 interview to Voegelin's theory of time in The New Science of Politics. Since the latter half of this work contains Voegelin's discussion of modern gnosticism, it is at least probable that Percy is familiar with this discussion and might have drawn upon it for his portrayal of Lance. After listing Voegelin's characteristics of modern secular gnosticism (see Chapter IV, pages 109 and 110), Lawson shows how Lance believes in his own dreams, his own vision (as a gnostic prophet does), and, more significantly, how he fashions history into a three-part sequence reminiscent of the three gnostic ages. Moreover, his history is based on sex, the sexual age following the romantic—or in gnostic terms, the material/dark period following the spiritual/light—to be ended by an apocalypse/revolution, after which a new Eden will flourish. Furthermore, as Brooks also points out, Lance—like other gnostic visionaries—believes that he will be assisted in the revolution and the creation of the third age by a brotherhood of autonomous
persons who share a gnosis and are able by this gnosis to save themselves. Finally, Lawson, like Brooks, underscores Lance's rejection of the Fall and Lance's belief that God has put man in an evil world.

Lawson's second article that deals with Lancelot's gnosticism (25), published in 1980, concerns gnosticism in Percy's adoptive father's poem Enzio's Kingdom, as well as in Percy's first four novels. According to Lawson, Lancelot reveals Percy's continued concern with "the fatal ease with which the Southern ideal becomes a gnostic nightmare" (25, p. 404) and emphasizes the gnostic apocalypse. Again in this 1980 article, Lawson points out Lance's projection of a third age, his self-identification as a seer and a leader, and his belief in a brotherhood that will help him. Here, as in his other articles, Lawson is careful to point out in his conclusion that Percy rejects Lancelot's vision.

Pursuing his interest in gnosticism further, Lawson next turns in 1983 to Henri-Charles Puech's "Gnosis and Time" to elucidate Lancelot's response to time, the "trait that most clearly reveals his Gnostic psychology" (22, p. 72). Basically, Lance's concept of time coincides with the gnostic formulation of time as a broken line or as a series of unconnected bits of time. Lance, for instance, fails to find his confinement "all that
extraordinary" because "the Gnostic mind regards life as a prison of unconnected instants" (22, p. 74). Lance's habit of specifying the exact moment of his discovery of Margot's infidelity also reflects the gnostic's concept of time's "discontinuous nature" (p. 76). Lawson also draws attention to other acts of Lance that fit gnostic beliefs and patterns. Most obviously, his unholy quest for evil and desire to know illustrate the gnostic obsession with knowledge. His moment of awakening while walking along the levee the night after the discovery of Margot's infidelity typifies epignosis, the gnostic "revelation of oneself to oneself, a sudden, gratuitous act" (p. 78 note, citing Puech), just as his discovery of his freedom typifies the gnostic eleutheria, "the freedom from domination by this world and the freedom to do anything in order to achieve and maintain total independence" (p. 79). In addition, Lance's experience of the visit of "Our Lady of the Camellias" represents Lance coming close to the sweet secret of evil personified in sex, which reflects the gnostic's belief that his entry into the evil world comes through woman's sexuality. Finally, Lawson discusses once again Lancelot's vision of history as a three-part sexual sequence. his plans for the third revolution, as well as his view of himself as a leader able to save the country and establish a new order. All these beliefs
are typical gnostic ideas and show "how totally detached from time he is and just how caught up in myth he has become" (22, p. 86). Having blown time to bits, Lance has destroyed any sense of placement and at the end is portrayed as a gnostic "sick in mind and soul, spurning any intercession" (p. 86).

This last article by Lawson suffers from the fact that Lawson cannot offer any proof that Percy has read Puech or that he has consciously used Puech's ideas in Lancelot. If there were not evidence that Percy is familiar with gnosticism, at least Voegelin's discussion of the phenomenon, I would not have included this article in this study.*

Whereas Brooks and Lawson make a case for Lance as a modern secular gnostic, Patricia Lewis Poteat and Glenn H. Utter see Lance as an exemplar of Cartesianism and technological man, respectively. These interpretations

*Simone Vauthier brings in an even less related philosophical theory to interpret Lancelot. In two articles, "Mimesis and Violence in Lancelot" (43) and "Story, Story-Teller and Listener: Notes on Lancelot" (44), she attempts to elucidate the problem of violence and the teller-listener situation in the novel by using René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. Since she makes no claim for Percy's conscious knowledge of Girard's theory, and since to my knowledge Percy has never mentioned Girard, her articles are not, properly speaking, part of the critical response to philosophical ideas in Lancelot and are therefore beyond the scope of this study.
are not really in opposition to one another, for the man who acts as a technician, who molds his perception of other men and the world around him in terms of technique, and who believes that technology has all the answers--such a man, whether he knows it or not, exemplifies Cartesianism in that he abstracts mind from body, attempts to view the body and the rest of the world objectively and rationalistically, and puts his faith in scientific abstractions. Such a man also tends to intellectualize everything, to value knowledge above all else, and may very well believe that he and others like him can perfect the world via technology or science. At this point, the technological man (who is also Cartesian) becomes a type of modern secular gnostic, although he will not fill all the requirements of Voegelin's definition, for example, until he develops a political philosophy based on his beliefs. Loosely speaking, even the full-fledged secular humanist can be seen as a type of modern gnostic in that he rejects any idea of the Fall or man's responsibility for evil and believes that man without God's help can perfect himself and the world via knowledge to bring about a new order.

Patricia Lewis Poteat focuses on the Cartesian elements in Lance's character in her 1985 book on Percy's attack upon Cartesianism (34). She emphasizes Lance's reaction to Margot's infidelity as Cartesian: rather than
feeling anger or hurt, Lance's reaction is one of interest. "He compares it to that of an astronomer who finds a dot out of place on one of his photographic plates: 'Hold on. Hm. Whoa. What's this? Something is wrong. Let's have a look!'" (34, p. 154). Such a reaction reveals just how abstracted from himself Lance is. In Poteat's view, Lance also resembles the movie actors he criticizes in that he "stands over against the world and its inhabitants as one who has abstracted himself out of his predicament and is ontologically 'blown about'" (p. 155). His subsequent actions are "the actions of a man whose posture in the world is identical with that of the scientist intent upon solving an abstract problem and giving no thought to his own predicament" (pp. 155-56). She stresses his obsession with knowing, the fact that this knowing is "abstracted from action" (p. 156), and that his obsession has "the effect of reducing all and sundry to electrons, molecules, data" (p. 156). For proof, she offers Lance's use of equations to solve the "problem" of Slobhan's blood type, his description of Elgin's films of the bedroom activities, his description of Margot and Jacoby in bed, and his description of his murdering Jacoby: "Not even the knife at his throat seemed to make any difference. All it came down to was steel molecules entering skin molecules, artery molecules, blood cells" (34, p. 158, citing Lancelot).
Lance, moreover, when he is not reducing event or actions to mere data, is obsessed "with the boundless and the absolute" (p. 159), which appears above all in his quest for evil and his plans for a new society. Nowhere is Lance able to conceive of human ambiguities. He is therefore doubly Cartesian: "Thus to sunder self and world is logically homogeneous with Descartes' division of the self into thinking thing and extended thing and his reduction of the world to the status of mere object" (p. 160).

And, in keeping with Percy's attack upon Cartesianism, all Lance feels at the end of the novel is a certain coldness.

In his earlier article (42), Glenn H. Utter sees Lancelot as an individual trapped in a technological society. Taking as his point of departure the French philosopher Jacques Ellul's critique of technology and its dehumanizing effects upon modern man (12), Utter analyzes Lance as an example of an individual who attempts to "awaken from a somnambulistic life" (42, p. 120) but who is trapped by technique. After underscoring how Lance acts as a scientist/technician—Utter offers a very detailed and convincing analysis that is more thorough than Poteat's subsequent one—Utter states that Lance's search for the meaning of sin fails primarily because he is still trapped by his rationalistic, technological way
of viewing reality: "He is Ellul's technologist who, in trying to bring a mystery into the light of rational analysis, discovers that it has vanished. There can be neither the sacred nor the profane in the presence of technique" (p. 123). Although Lance's search fails, however, Utter sees a glimmer of hope for him: "He is on the way to choosing an alternate path, and therefore to being a 'sovereign wayfarer'" (p. 125). Despite this overly optimistic conclusion, in my opinion, Utter's article brings an illuminating, interdisciplinary viewpoint to Lancelot and there is no doubt in my mind that Utter has a firm understanding of what Percy is trying to do in his fiction.

Thus with Lancelot we see attention to philosophical themes overwhelming the critical response to the novel. Much of this emphasis is good; much is bad. An understanding of Percy's use of Christian ontology may help readers to realize that Lance is an object of satire for Percy and why he is this object, for at the end of the novel he is still damned (even if the reader puts great hope in the effect of Percival's future arguments or message). Also, a knowledge of Percy's Christian existential views of language and the role of the novelist may increase the reader's appreciation of Percy's narrative strategies in the novel. In addition, a realization of the richness
of Percy's characterization of Lance—after all, he is all at once a secularist, gnostic, Cartesian individual trapped in a technological society, an exemplar of technological consciousness—may increase the reader's awareness of Percy's learned concerns and his appreciation of Percy's skill in embodying all these concerns in one character. Nevertheless, articles that explicate the novel according to some external philosophical theory tell us more about that theory—Puech's concept of gnosticism and Girard's theory of mimetic desire, for example—than they do about the novel. And going through the novel picking out possible illustrations of Percy's use of Sartre and Heidegger can quickly become an erudite game that tells the reader more about the critic's knowledge than about what is happening in the novel. Finally, such overwhelming attention to Percy's use of philosophical ideas in Lancelot crowds out attention to other areas. It would be nice, for example, to see more studies of Percy's use of rhetoric in Lancelot and more focus on the humor—black though it is—that informs many of the scenes and much of Lance's narration, even some of his tirades.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND COMING

Percy's fifth novel appears somewhat more quickly than his earlier ones—in 1980, only three years after Lancelot. It marks another turning point, however, for in contrast to the bitter ranting of Lancelot, his tale of betrayal, revenge, madness, and plan for revolution, The Second Coming is basically a love story and Percy's least overtly philosophical novel. It is not that Percy fails to satirize certain aspects of modern American culture or that the question of faith no longer concerns him. But the overriding interest of The Second Coming is how an older Will Barrett (of The Last Gentleman) and the young psychotic daughter of his former sweetheart meet, help each other, fall in love, and find in each other the hope for a new authentic life. Obviously, this fifth novel is more positive than its predecessor and, something new for Percy, it is a sequel. Nevertheless, perhaps because of the negative criticism of Lancelot, The Second Coming receives far fewer reviews than one would expect—only fifteen major ones (excluding trade notices) to Lancelot's thirty-seven or so. The degree of appreciation accorded Percy's fifth novel, however, approaches that given to the earlier novels:

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of these fifteen reviews, ten are favorable, four are mixed, and only one is negative. In fact, several reviewers (Richard Gilman [6], John Romano [14], and Robert Towers [19]) think that it is Percy's best novel since The Moviegoer.

As in the case of Lancelot, the principal issue in the initial critical response is character, specifically, how the reviewers react to Will Barrett and Allison Hunnicutt Huger and to their love. Most react very favorably, linking Will to Percy's other existential characters full of "unfocused religious yearnings" (10, p. 157) and finding Allison charming and appealing, "surely Percy's finest female creation" (6, p. 30). Most reviewers also find Will and Allison's love story appealing, Richard Gilman being the most enthusiastic:

The sequences in the book when they are together are enormously affecting, funny, exhilarating, full of surprise. I don't know of any depiction of sexual love in recent American fiction that surpasses this for simplicity, painful but liberating truthfulness, splendor, and depth of feeling (6, p. 31).

As far as theme is concerned, not surprisingly most reviewers focus on love, also commenting on death and suicide as it appears in Will's relationship to his father and on the question of the existence of God, particularly as it relates to Will's cave experiment.
Some reviewers link the theme of love to more philosophical concerns. Benjamin DeMott, for instance, states that "by falling in love they [Will and Allison] save—or at least freshen—their souls" (4, p. 81). Gerard Reedy sees Percy exploring "states in which human beings may live together with authenticity" (13, p. 471), and he links Will and Allison's story to Percy's belief in Marcelian intersubjectivity: "In Percy, salvation only occurs with the advent of the other, the right person, the friend or lover" (p. 472). Moreover, it is through Allie that Will at last begins to find God's incarnational presence: "Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading himself behind this simple, holy face?" (13, p. 472, citing The Second Coming). Tracy Kenyon Lischer and Patrick H. Samway also link love and faith, the former seeing Will move "from absolute loneliness to rediscovery of commitment, from dread of catastrophe to hope of community" (9, p. 980), the latter stressing Will's exploration of the mysteries of life as he searches for a sign of God's existence while falling in love with Allison.

John Romano also ties together these themes of love, the possibility of faith, and the possibility of living authentically:

... He is testing certain concepts, traditional ones, such as the concept that one person might come to know and love another, and that language might actually assist rather than deter that
process; or the concept that a life might be lived in some authentic relation to its own chief events, such as a father's suicide or a marriage, without the need to distort or repress or deny; or the concept that there are impulses, casual and shaping, that lie outside whatever scientific account we can take of ourselves, and that if we bring ourselves to consciousness of such impulses, it is possible that we can be delivered, "hoisted," from the trivia and tawdriness that clutter personal existence in daily life--the concept, in short, of God, and the prospects for transcendence, here, now, in America (14, p. 28).

A few reviewers go beyond merely commenting on Will's cave experiment to emphasize its theological implications and Will's search for God in general. Reedy points out that Will's experiment (when he retreats to a cave to await a sign from God or else starve) in its demand for empirical proof "parallels, on the religious level, the scientific reductionism that recurs in the novels and that is a major theme of Percy's collected essays" (13, p. 472). Such an experiment fails, of course, for God will not give such a sign "in response to abstract demands placed upon him--a human strategy called 'angelism' in Love in the Ruins" (p. 472). Instead, the novel shows Will's awareness of God growing through his love for Allie. Lischer offers an alternative explanation of the outcome of Will's cave experiment: interpreting God's silence as an answer in itself, she quotes a statement made by Percy in "The Message in the Bottle": "When everyone is saying 'Come!' when radio and television say nothing but 'Come!'
it may be that the best way to say 'Come!' is to remain silent. Sometimes silence itself is a 'Come!'" (9, p. 980). Paul Gray underscores the "sanity" of Will's list of explanations for why he enters the cave, which Gray considers "a case against mankind that is hard to refute" (7, pp. 51, 54), while J. O. Tate points out that "Percy's interest in the pathological is ultimately metaphysical; he is a technician of the sacred" (17, p. 1339). Finally, Samway adds that as Will makes his decision to descend into the cave, he "begins to reason that if God exists as a totally other Person, then any attempt to understand and comprehend His existence can only be done indirectly" (16, p. 18).

Several reviewers do not like Percy's presentation of theological ideas in the novel. Whitney Balliett of The New Yorker and Walter Clemons of Newsweek are obviously hostile, the former, for example, referring to Father Weatherbee (who might be called the Kierkegaardian "apostle" in this novel) as an "addled minister" who mouths "sociological frothings" (1, p. 88), the latter stating that preaching has overwhelmed tale telling (2, p. 66). John Romano, generally more sympathetic, also admits to some reservations about the "theological burden" under which "this author has no choice but to labor" (14, p. 29). He laments Percy's disdain for the quotidian in favor of the
transcendent, because the everyday world "is, after all, the only place we can hope to find 'the other'" (p. 29), and he emphasizes that Allison, Will's other, is not "among others, but desperately apart from them" (p. 29).

In short, Romano, does not like Percy's giving society "no more real pertinence to the making of self and soul than any of our nineteenth-century Yankees" (p. 29).

Furthermore, Romano wonders whether "a transcendental religious conviction and an ultimate attachment to other people are not finally incompatible" (p. 29), a question he believes that Percy has not yet addressed.

In addition to the focus on Percy's theological ideas in *The Second Coming*, some reviewers perceive Allison's rather strange speech as an illustration of Percy's philosophy of language. Reedy thinks that "Percy integrates his philosophical interest in language more successfully here than he has been able to do before; Allie's re-creation of the world through language is stunning in conception and execution" (13, p. 472), while Lischer points out that through her Percy "introduces the reader to his theory of language" and that "as she learns to name and communicate, we recognize language as human beings' unique chance to participate in creation" (9, p. 979). Benjamin DeMott adds that Allison's recovery of her grasp of the nature of language provides "a number of the most striking
chapters" (4, p. 82), which dramatize, for him, "the truth that learning depends on connectedness" (p. 83), but which, he fears, will provoke "sermons on Noam Chomsky and language acquisition" (p. 83). Such sermons, DeMott affirms, will "obscure the real source of Percy's ability to please people resistant . . . to mindlessness," namely, "Percy's power of rousing unbelief to a sense of the interest--the emotional and intellectual challenge--of belief" (p. 83).

If DeMott deplores the possible scholarly distortion of Percy's accomplishment in The Second Coming, Wyatt Prunty, in a review of the novel's reviewers, deplores the conflicting opinions about the best and worst passages in the novel, and, more importantly, the frequent refusal of reviewers "to admit anything other than the probabilities of a materially understood world" (12, p. 161) in the face of Percy's "pursuit of the possibilities offered by a metaphysically understood world" (p. 160). As examples of this latter tendency he cites the reviews by Balliett (1), Lyons (10), Clemons (2), and even Towers (19), who, Prunty believes, "trusts Percy's noematic experience but apparently distrusts his noetic experience" (p. 162). All these reviewers, according to Prunty, also share a preference for "a sort of nominalistic writing in which specificity is the main virtue" (p. 162). Prunty also
disagrees with Romano's reservations—he believes that Percy's fiction does not disdain the quotidian—but he respects Romano's thoughtfulness. Prunty concludes:

The real question with Percy is neither Faulknerisms nor descriptive writing. It is whether his readers can crack the shells of the restricting modes of thought in which they operate and enter the serious free play by which Percy posits metaphysical and moral alternatives (12, p. 166).

There are very few articles or portions of books about The Second Coming, perhaps because of its relatively recent publication. Of the nine that exist (in addition to Prunty's), two—Frederick Karl's American Fictions 1940/1980 and Philip H. Vaughan's Perceptions of Time and Place—do not address philosophical themes, and two others—Patricia Lewis Poteat's (11) and J. Gerald Kennedy's (8)—just mention them in passing.* The remaining five articles and books, insofar as they concern

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*Poteat sees The Second Coming primarily as a love story and limits her response to philosophical ideas in the novel to pointing out that at the novel's end Will's search for God becomes more realistically "grounded in ordinary love, ordinary work, and an ordinary confusion of faith and waywardness" (11, p. 168). She adds that Percy's theory of man is "most clearly and persuasively argued" (p. 169) in the presentation of "the Time Being" in the novel. J. Gerald Kennedy's article (8) offers a sound semiotic analysis of the novel which focuses primarily on Will's memory. It is only in the last pages that Kennedy broaches theological ideas in the novel, as he states: "In regarding Allie as a sign, Will implicitly exchanges the semiotics of memory for the semiotics of grace. He has at last perceived the sign he hoped to find in Lost Cove Cave and through this insight arrives at the stage of belief" (8, p. 123).
philosophical ideas in the novel, focus on theological themes. Jac Tharpe (18) perceives elements of Christian existentialism (Percy's attack against Christendom, for example, reflects Kierkegaard's earlier attack, and Father Weatherbee represents Kierkegaard's apostle), but he sees The Second Coming as a mixture of philosophical and non-philosophical themes:

The Second Coming is actually a collection of interlinked symbols rather than simply a narrative revelation of events making up a plot. Language and communication, the relationship between body and soul, and the two kinds of love [human love and divine love] are major themes. And at the heart of the collection are the integrated themes of love-death and time-place (18, p. 113).

On the other hand, Patrick H. Samway contends that Percy's vision in The Second Coming "reflects a contemporary American and Catholic view of man that one could easily find in numerous religious books, articles, and sermons without much difficulty" (15, p. 129). Using the theological writings of Karl Rahner, S.J., as an illustration of recent Catholic philosophy, Samway underscores the parallels between Rahner and Percy, showing that among Percy's "typical" Catholic theological views expressed in The Second Coming are the beliefs that "the Infinite cannot enter the human mind as an objective content; it can only be known indirectly by the knowing subject as the term of its quest for perfection and truth" (p. 133), that man
"attains his own spiritual identity through his encounter with people and objects in the dynamic world about him" (p. 135), that "it is in the everyday experiences that finite man encounters mystery" (p. 138), and that "man's life is rooted in and constituted by the awareness of mystery" (p. 138).

Gloria Cronin prefers to stress Percy's success at illustrating the Christian existential idea that "full religious knowledge comes only to the quester who reaches past alienation and social withdrawal into vital social complicity" (3, p. 113). After pointing up the flaws in the religious beliefs of Will's deceased wife (an old time Episcopalian), his daughter (a new ecstatic evangelical type of Christian), and the Episcopal priest Jack Curl, and then dismissing unbelievers such as Lewis Packham and Ewell McBee as "even more estranged from truth than the 'believers'" (p. 114), she interprets Allie as a contemporary Eve who "must rediscover both authentic language and authentic relation to the 'garden'" (p. 116) and states that Will's "recovery of self is not completed until he can help redeem society as well" (p. 119). For her, The Second Coming "embodies in a comic plot the traditional truths of Christianity and attests that... the possibility of restoration in this twice-fallen society is ever present" (p. 121).
In contrast to Cronin, who calls *The Second Coming* "a very important twentieth century novel by a first-rate religious writer" (3, p. 121), both Ralph C. Wood (20) and Doreen Fowler (5) have serious doubts about Percy's persuasiveness in arguing for salvation within society. Lamenting Percy's "romantic hopefulness" in the novel that is "almost sloppily sentimental" (20, p. 1122), Wood accuses Percy of becoming "romantically more enamored with the journey [the search for God] than the destination" (p. 1122). Moreover, Will's newfound happiness is not related to the ordinary world but rather smacks of gnosticism "in his determination to transcend both species of contemporary 'assholes'--the Christians who blandly believe everything and the atheists who fatuously believe nothing" (p. 1126). Such a decline in Percy's vision--Wood is a great admirer of Percy's first three novels--is attributed to Percy's Christian humanism, which has become dominant in *Lancelot* and *The Second Coming* and which is "susceptible to misdirection" because it "begins with the human quest for the divine rather than with God's own self-manifestation" (p. 1122).

Fowler sees a fundamental ambiguity in Percy's fiction that stems, in her opinion, from Percy's attempt to make "his art stretch to straddle two widely disparate views of life--a heroic, idealistic attitude and a more practical,
empirical position" (5, pp. 13-14). In *The Second Coming* she admits that Percy rejects escape--whether by suicide or passive abdication--as a means for dealing with living, and she admits that Will and Allie resolve to marry and reenter society. But she points out that the society that Percy depicts in "an inferno of sordid passions and discontent" (p. 16) and she doubts if Will and Allie have a chance of achieving their lives via commitment to such a society. Accordingly, "Percy's answer of commitment lacks persuasiveness" (p. 17). She also echoes Romano in pointing out that in *The Second Coming*, "the only characters who seem to possess some measure of vitality are those who are least enmeshed in society" (p. 17).

Fowler also sees ambiguity in Percy's attitude toward knowledge and epistemology. She sees a conflict between Will's need to know, his will to understand, and the novel's lesson that "man need not know all to act; all he needs to know is what to do" (5, p. 20), in short, the lesson of "acceptance of man's limited knowledge" (p. 17).

Both reservations represent a refusal or inability on Fowler's part to perceive or accept the paradox of human existence seen from a Christian viewpoint. Her first reservation regarding commitment to a flawed society fails to take into account the Christian directive to be in the world but not of the world. The second objection fails to
take into account the Christian ontological view of man as flawed since the Fall. As many Christian philosophers have said, man's need to search for knowledge, despite his limitations, is merely a condition of his existence and can lead, in the sincere seeker, to the search for knowledge of God.

Furthermore, Fowler accuses Percy of attempting to reconcile immanence and transcendence, which, she agrees with Sutter Vaught of The Last Gentleman, cannot be reconciled. Perhaps again this apparent conflict, seen from a Christian viewpoint, is inherent in man's existential condition. Perhaps Fowler is like those reviewers Prunty indicts for not being able to admit the possibility of a metaphysically understood world. Of course there is ambiguity in Percy's novel, just as there is in his Christian existential ontology and epistemology. For the Christian, such ambiguity cannot be avoided.

The level of quality of the critical response to philosophical ideas in The Second Coming taken as a whole is not up to par with the response to philosophical themes in the earlier novels. For one thing, sectarian religious bias is more evident than before (as in Samway, Wood, and Cronin). Also, Samway's article really tells us more about Rahner than about Percy; Tharpe's best analysis deals with non-philosophical themes; Cronin, Fowler, and Wood really offer nothing new—although Wood's comments about Percy's
Christian humanism are at least interesting. Among the articles, probably the best treatment of Percy's philosophical ideas in the novel is Prunty's review of the reviewers, limited though it may be.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

As the preceding chapters have shown, the critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's fiction has been considerable, but not universal or homogeneous. Reviewers, especially of the earlier works, have tended to be less responsive to philosophical themes than authors of articles and books, and when they have addressed philosophical themes, they have also as a group tended to be more negative than the latter. In the case of The Moviegoer (1961), out of seventeen reviews, only one praises Percy's philosophical ideas (specifically his portrayal of the action of grace and his representation of God's mysterious way with man), whereas several find fault with his "pretentiousness" in calling Binx's search spiritual instead of neurotic, or his vagueness regarding his presentation of his characters' malaise. More attention to philosophical themes appears in the reviews of Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman, published in 1966, especially in regard to the theological matters of grace, faith, and salvation, but again several accuse Percy of superficiality and elusiveness in his handling of these themes or lament the burden of ideas on his characters. However, the
initial response to philosophical themes in *The Last Gentleman* is not quite as negative as the response to such themes in *The Moviegoer*. Several reviewers praise the deepening of Percy's metaphysical concerns, his skillful handling of the opposition between immanence and transcendence, his presentation of the limitations of man's intelligence, and his attack upon metaphysical abstraction.

Reviewers of *Love in the Ruins* (1971) for the first time single out theme for comment rather than style or characterization, but only about one half of the thirty reviewers mention philosophical themes, and of these, only six emphasize them. The themes discussed are either Christian ontology or Percy's attack upon Cartesianism. And once more, several critics are unhappy with Percy's handling of these themes; they either believe his interest in Christian existentialism and Cartesianism hurts the novel's form, or they state that the theme of Catholic ontology does not quite come alive. What is really surprising is that despite the novel's explicit references to Christian and Cartesian themes, one half of the reviewers fail to mention these at all.

Interest in philosophical themes increases in the reviews of Percy's fourth novel, *Lancelot* (1977), as about three-fourths of the thirty-seven reviewers refer at least in passing to Lancelot's quest for the meaning of
evil, and eighteen reviewers focus their attention on Percy's presentation of the problem of the existence of good and evil, the nature of damnation and salvation, and the possibility of faith in the modern world. Still, more than a few reviewers do not like Percy's handling of these themes, usually because of Lancelot's character (the novel is almost entirely his monologue), his probable insanity, his tone in expressing his views, and/or the radical nature of his views themselves. Several reviewers state that Percy lacks originality, and at least one reviewer believes that Percy's philosophical interests push his true theme, "the haunting of the Sunbelt by atavistic, even pathological remnants of the old dispensation" (46, p. 8) into the background.

Percy's fifth novel, The Second Coming (1980), receives remarkably fewer reviews than Lancelot. Since this novel is basically a love story, understandably the reviews in general do not emphasize philosophical themes, although a few link love to salvation, the possibility of faith, and Marcellian intersubjectivity. A few reviewers even emphasize the theological implications of Barrett's attempt to prove the existence of God insofar as this attempt illustrates Percy's Christian existentialism and his attack upon Cartesianism. Other reviewers mention Percy's philosophy of language in relation to Allison's recovery of speech.
Doubtless the most significant response to the reviewers' acceptance or perception of philosophical theme in *The Second Coming* is Wyatt Prunty's review of the reviewers, in which he indicts the refusal of many reviewers to admit any philosophical theme at all: faced with "Percy's continued pursuit of the possibilities offered by a metaphysically understood world" (39, p. 160), Percy's critics frequently refuse "to admit anything other than the probabilities of a materially understood world" (p. 161). Many of the authors of later articles and books on Percy would agree with him.

Articles on *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* began to appear in 1967. Critics quickly turned to Percy's published nonfiction writings and to his interviews in order to elucidate the existential themes and concepts in these novels. Almost immediately attention was focused by critics such as Blouin (3), Maxwell (33), Lehan (30), Atkins (2), Thale (43), and Henisey (17) on Percy's use of Kierkegaard's concepts of alienation, rotation, and repetition; Heidegger's concept of everydayness (*Alltäglichkeit*); and Marcel's concept of intersubjectivity. In 1969, Lawson's masterful article "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" (26) addressed not only Percy's use of these themes and concepts in his first two novels but also his use of Kierkegaard's stages of life and indirect method. Henisey's
earlier study of Percy's use of his theories of symbolization in *The Moviegoer* was complemented by Van Cleave's 1970 study of consciousness (47) in the novel, and Lawson, also in 1970 (27), brought the theme of Stoicism to the readers' attention. The emphasis on Percy's use of various existential concepts and themes in his novels culminated in 1972 with the publication of the first book-length study of Percy, Luschei's *The Sovereign Wayfarer* (32), which discussed in detail the various existential themes and concepts in Percy's first three novels--his third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, having appeared in 1971.

Although critics continued to bring out additional existential themes in Percy's novels--Coles's 1978 book (10) and Lawson's 1979 article "The Fall of the House of Lamar" (19) are two examples--by the mid 1970s critics were also focusing on the theological themes in Percy's novels as well. Kissel (18), Lischer (31), Bradley (4), and Godshalk (15)--to name only a few--underscored Percy's use of Catholic ontology in various articles, and if anyone remained unaware of Percy's theological themes, the appearance in 1977 of his fourth novel, *Lancelot*, made it impossible to ignore them. A veritable deluge of articles and books appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s covering numerous philosophical and theological themes in the novels. Percy's attacks on Cartesianism and on the
use of objective empirical scientific criteria as the sole means of gaining knowledge and assessing reality received more attention, as did his use of Toynbee's theory of palingenesis and his attack against modern secular gnosticism. Critics such as Brinkmeyer (5), Pearson (35), Oliver (34), and Telotte (42) also addressed Percy's use of existentialism and Christian existentialism, as well as his use of his own theories of language and symbolization in his narrative strategies, especially in Lancelot. Even Bergson's attack upon Platonism was seen to be a theme in The Moviegoer.

Very little, however, has been said about philosophical themes in Percy's fifth novel, The Second Coming, which was published in 1980, other than to discuss its obvious theological themes. Perhaps the critics are tired of Percy, or they believe that they have said all they have to say. Perhaps when Percy's next novel appears--the editors of The Southern Review have announced that Percy is working on a sequel to Love in the Ruins about the later adventures of Tom More, provisionally entitled "The Thanatos Syndrome"--another flurry of articles will appear. Judging by its provisional title, this next novel will surely have at least one philosophical theme.

Obviously not all the reviews, articles, and books written about Percy's fiction are well done or perceptive.
Some are superficial—such as the "typical" review in a weekly magazine, or articles such as Kissel's "Walker Percy's 'Conversions'" (18) that merely state a thesis and do not go beyond illustrating it, or even books such as Vaughan's (48), which is an appreciative reading of Percy's novels, but nothing more. Other responses are mistaken—sometimes laughably so, when the author obviously has not carefully read the novel in question; sometimes seriously so, when the author seems to have read attentively but somehow misses an important nuance or statement and so arrives at a conclusion that is, in my opinion, false.

What are the major philosophical themes in Percy's novels?

To be sure, he is a Christian existentialist; the various philosophical concepts and beliefs of many of the European existentialists, especially Kierkegaard, suffuse his personal worldview as well as his novels. Many of his characters are caught in everydayness, that "generalized loss of awareness that walls a person off from his surroundings and diminishes his vitality" (32, p. 21). They are alienated—from themselves, the world, and God. To overcome everydayness and alienation, they engage in ordeal, rotation, and repetition, although such Kierkegaardian strategies ultimately fail. Many lead inauthentic
lives in that they have surrendered their personal sovereignty to the experts, or they have bought the objective empirical belief in science and technology as cure-alls. They need to escape abstraction and focus on concrete experience. Instead of attempting to view themselves objectively or to lead their lives according to a scientific (and therefore abstract) outlook, they need to realize that life is a process, that it involves the individual in a particular time and place in the world. Finally, they must come to grips with the past so that they can forget it and live in the present, and they must face the problem of death.

Percy's novels also reflect his Christian philosophy. Percy converted to Roman Catholicism as a young man—in great part because of the influence of Kierkegaard and Marcel—and since then he has pursued his religious beliefs by examining and questioning the beliefs and ideas of serious Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Buber, in addition to Kierkegaard and Marcel. His encounters with the beliefs of such thinkers are reflected in the theological and ontological themes of his novels, especially the matters of grace, the existence of God, the nature of faith, and the possibility of salvation. His protagonists are all spiritual searchers, although their searches are not identical and their progress differs.
Many undergo a conversion of sorts—Binx, Jamie Vaught, Tom More, Percival, and the older Will Barrett, for example—but some do not. The younger Will Barrett misses the significance of Jamie's baptism and conversion, and Lancelot goes mad in a kind of gnostic frenzy.

The philosophical themes and concepts of Kierkegaard and Marcel also appear in Percy's narrative strategies. As Lawson (26) has made clear, Percy agrees with Kierkegaard's belief that certain religious experiences and beliefs cannot be communicated directly; thus he deliberately leaves his novels' endings open or ambiguous in some way, whether it be a major question as to what happens to a novel's protagonist, such as Will Barrett in The Last Gentleman or Lancelot in Percy's fourth novel, or whether it be a more subtle ambiguity as to what changes have occurred in a character's spiritual progress. Percy's protagonists who undergo some sort of conversion also do not talk about it. Binx refuses to discuss what has happened to him, for example, and Percival remains silent until the end of Lancelot. Percy has also been strongly influenced by Marcel's concept of intersubjectivity—that people become open to being (as well as inwardness and grace) by entering into a close relationship with another person. This concept of intersubjectivity appears not only in the relationships between Percy's main characters
such as Binx and Kate, Will and Sutter, and later Will and Allison, but also in Percy's handling of narration in which he attempts to establish an intersubjective relationship between a character and the reader, or the narrator and the reader, or even the author's persona and the reader. The *Moviegoer*, for instance, can be seen as an act of shared consciousness: "Philosophically, Binx's act of narration to a posited reader (with whom he even occasionally engages in conversation) is an affirmation of being through shared consciousness--his (and Walker Percy's) and the reader's" (47, p. 996). In *Lancelot*, moreover, Percy forces the reader by Percival's silence to respond to Lancelot; he attempts to lead the reader indirectly to experience an intersubjective moment in which he identifies with the unstated point of view--that of Percival (and Percy).

Such a refusal to state his Christian existentialist message directly is risky. It has brought Percy accusations by some critics--Gardner (14) comes immediately to mind--of evading the issues and of not giving answers, but Percy apparently believes that such direct statement, especially about the Christian elements of his philosophy, will have undesirable consequences, whereas indirect communication of his message may reach some of his readers. Moreover, Percy's indirect method can invite
misinterpretation. Percival's silence in *Lancelot*, coupled with Percy's success in giving Lancelot such a powerful voice, has led a few critics (and doubtless more readers) to think that Lancelot's vision represents Percy's views and that Percy is advocating some violent purge of Catholicism and American society, which, of course, he is not. On the other hand, his indirect method—which also involves his use of humor—is why many readers who do not share his Christian beliefs enjoy reading his novels.

Percy's theories about the nature of man and the role of language also appear as philosophical themes in his novels. Percy elaborates on these theories in his interviews, in his various essays collected in *The Message in the Bottle* (37), as well as in his most recent book, *Lost in the Cosmos* (36). Although much of Percy's theory of man involves his Christian existentialism—man is alienated; he is a wayfarer who hopefully will stand in the way of hearing "news" about God and his personal need for Him—Percy also bases his theory of man on man's singular use of language. A symbol-monger, man determines his humanness by his use of language. It is only through using language to achieve an intersubjective relationship with another that man progresses. If he gets trapped in objective symbolization, as Kate in *The Moviegoer* does, "the names one uses soon overwhelm the meanings" (17, p. 209), and
alienation results. What man does at the moment he uses language, how this relates to consciousness, how man knows through symbolization, especially metaphor, are all philosophical concerns that fascinate Percy, and certainly one important part of his characterization is how a particular character uses language. Although this interest in language appears in Percy's earlier novels—for instance in Val's description of her pupils' breakthroughs—it seems to be gaining in importance in Percy's later novels and taking over his earlier interests in more obviously existential themes, especially as witnessed by the characterization of Allison in *The Second Coming*.

Closely linked to Percy's other existential beliefs is his attack upon Cartesianism, whether it appears as idealistic abstraction or scientific reductionism. In all his novels, he illustrates the limits of attempting to know reality by abstraction. Binx's vertical search fails, as do Will Barrett's attempt to engineer his life, Lancelot's quest to verify evil via films and diagrams, and the older Will Barrett's attempt to prove God's existence by his cave experiment. Similarly, Percy attacks scientific reductionism, especially as it sees man as an organism in an environment governed by stimulus-response mechanisms. The most complete indictment of both abstraction and reductionism appears, of course, in *Love in the*
Ruins, where the protagonist alternates between angelism and bestialism, concocting scientific theories of man's malaise and inventing a gadget that he believes can cure man's spiritual ills on the one hand, and lusting after women and drinking too many gin fizzes on the other. In addition, this protagonist himself satirizes all the people and institutions around him that attempt to deal with man via abstraction and/or reductionism.

These are the major philosophical themes in Percy's novels. While Percy also illustrates Stoicism in Aunt Emily and Will Barrett's father, refers to Toynbee's theory of palingenesis in Love in the Ruins and Lancelot, and attacks modern secular gnosticism in these last mentioned novels, such themes are not nearly so important as his illustrations of his Christian existential beliefs, his views on the nature of man and his use of language, and his attack upon Cartesianism.

Of all the critics who have discussed philosophical themes in Percy's novels, the most influential is Lewis A. Lawson, who has published no less than thirteen articles on everything from Percy's use of existentialism and Stoicism to his attacks on Cartesianism and gnosticism. He has even analyzed Percy's use of Plato's allegory of the cave and his attack on Toynbee for accepting Plato's hierarchy of knowledge. Of course, not all his articles
are equally enlightening. "The Fall of the House of Lamar" (19), in which Lawson points out various concepts of Sartre, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard that he believes Percy uses in Lancelot, seems somehow almost piecemeal when compared to an article such as "Moviegoing in The Moviegoer" (23), in which he relates Percy's allusions to existential themes and concepts precisely to Binx's moviegoing, arriving at a complete and unified explanation of the philosophical implications of moviegoing in the novel. Nevertheless, he has given the definitive account of Percy's portrayal of Stoicism in The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman, and Lancelot (see 22, 27, and 28), and has expanded Cleanth Brooks's remarks about Percy and modern gnosticism (6) to give a detailed explanation of how Percy illustrates modern theories of gnosticism, especially Voegelin's, in Love in the Ruins and Lancelot (see 20, 25, 21, and 28). He has also added to our understanding of Percy's attack upon Cartesianism in Love in the Ruins (see 24) and has been one of the very few critics to address Percy's treatment of time on a philosophical level (see 20 and 24). Above all, he has been a major interpreter of Percy's use of the existential philosophies of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. His 1969 article, "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" (26), mentioned earlier in this chapter, can be matched only by Luschei's book-length study of Percy's
existentialism for its detailed and perceptive account of Percy's use of Kierkegaard's concepts.

There are other reviews, articles, and books, of course, that stand out. Robert Towers (46), Wilfrid Sheed (40), and Robert D. Daniel (12) and John Gardner (14) have written especially interesting reviews, even when they do not like what Percy is doing. Luschei's book (32) is almost indispensable for an understanding of existentialism in Percy's first three novels. Tharpe's book for Twayne (44) is provocative and thoughtful, even if he does not always like Percy's use of philosophical themes or think that they are as important as other critics do. And both Tharpe's (45) and Broughton's (7) collections of essays on Percy are excellent. Percy has also been blessed with many thoughtful and perceptive articles (except in the case of The Second Coming), which are too numerous to mention here but which have been singled out in the previous chapters. Finally, at least ten interviews with Percy focus helpfully on his philosophical themes. Especially cogent are Dewey (13), Brown (8), Carr (9), Cremeens (11), Abádi-Nagy (1), Gretlund (16), and Percy's interview with himself published in Esquire (38). Fortunately, these have been collected recently by Lawson and Victor A. Kramer and are available in Conversations with Walker Percy (29).
The critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's novels has certainly colored Percy's reputation as a contemporary novelist. As I have already pointed out, especially in the concluding remarks to Chapters II and V, the effects of this response are mixed. Broughton is certainly correct in emphasizing the complexity of Percy's novels:

A great part of Percy's appeal to others is that they can at once know that they are "on to" what he's saying and that he is more complicated than they know. . . . Percy's work, then, by tempting readers to identify with his people and to recognize his ideas, creates a large and enthusiastic public following. Nevertheless, that work defies whatever attempts readers may make to see it as transparent. It is always "more complicated than that"; for Percy's fiction and nonfiction have a curious baffling quality that eludes all but the most scrupulously thoughtful and sensitive of readers (7, pp. xiv-xv).

Accordingly, these studies of Percy's use of existentialism, Catholic ontology, theories of language, and the like, as well as studies of his attacks upon Cartesianism, gnosticism, and their concomitant abstractions and reductions, help the reader to see what Percy is really up to.

But, especially in the cases of The Moviegoer and Lancelot, the emphasis on philosophical ideas has obscured other features of the novels worthy of comment and has led to disappointment on the part of some critics and readers with his other novels, especially The Second Coming, that are not quite so full of philosophical ideas.
Perhaps there has been too much emphasis on Percy's philosophical ideas in his novels. Surely some of the response has been unnecessary. Explicating a Percy novel by showing how it lends itself to some philosophical theory or concept that Percy may or may not be aware of obviously does not really add to our knowledge of that novel so much as to our knowledge of that theory or concept. Similarly, picking out minor isolated examples of one of Percy's acknowledged influences in one of Percy's novels, or treating Percy's use of some philosopher's ideas in a very superficial manner—which has happened more than once—adds very little, if anything, to our understanding and appreciation. Critics might have better spent their time exploring other features in Percy's novels. Few are the articles such as John W. Stevenson's "Walker Percy: The Novelist as Poet" (41), that emphasizes Percy's celebratory style and that sees the success and importance of Percy's novels not only in what he says but in how he says it. And aside from Tharpe (44) and a very few others, where are the studies of Percy's marvelous humor?

Nevertheless, Percy is a novelist of ideas. While he carefully integrates his ideas with more literary elements of the novel such as characterization, plot, and style, and while his novels are not mere illustrations
of philosophical ideas by any means, the more a critic or reader understands the underlying philosophical concepts that inform Percy's worldview and his novels, the more he may understand what Percy is trying to say and the more he may appreciate Percy's accomplishment in rendering his philosophical ideas so skilfully in fictional form. Critics and readers may enjoy Percy's novels without knowing much about his philosophical ideas, but they cannot really understand them. Thus the critical response to philosophical ideas in Percy's fiction, taken as a whole, has done both Percy and Percy's readers a service.


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